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Robert Indiana 1928-2018

Maverick American Artist, Overlooked in Plain Sight



Robert Indiana poses in his home on Vinalhaven Island, Maine in 2009. Photo credit: Associated Press/Pat Wellenbach

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Born Robert Clark in 1928, the maverick artist now known by his “nom de brush” changed the course of art in ways that are only now beginning to be grasped. The importance of his work has long been misunderstood, in part because he isolated himself from the world, and in part because of the ubiquitous fame of the LOVE image he created.

A retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2013-14, pointedly titled “[Robert Indiana: Beyond Love](#)” and

organized by the curator Barbara Haskell, convincingly asserted Indiana's brilliance and importance. It argued that his work explored not only the optimism and expansive generosity of America, but also its dark side.

An exhibition opening next week at Albright-Knox, "Robert Indiana: A Sculpture Retrospective" (until 23 September) aims to "reveal the breadth and consistency of a career spanning 60 years" by staging a [thorough survey](#) of Indiana's vision and the symbols—letters, numbers, stars, circles, and wheels—he used to realize it.



Robert Indiana, *Love* (conceived 1966, executed 1999) at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art © Morgan Art Foundation Ltd/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Overlooked in plain sight for so long, time will prove to be on Indiana's side, wrote the late, great art historian Robert Pincus-Witten in an essay for the 2006 catalogue "Robert Indiana". The artist was, he said, as much a source for Pop's letters, numbers and words as Jasper Johns but his reception suffered from the "indifference bred of familiarity" arising from the fame of *LOVE* (a work originally conceived as *F-U-C-K*, until Indiana failed to find a formal solution).

Tough start

Indiana's personality and art were colored by a truculent melancholy borne from his hardscrabble beginnings, lived in the long shadows of the Great Depression. His adoptive parents Earl Clark and Carmen Watters "were lost and they got there fast on wheels", he would later write in an [essay](#) accompanying the 1963 painting *Mother and Father*. In the work, he depicts his parents in separate panels, each leaning on a beloved automobile: his father smartly dressed but rendered in gray ("he was as colorless as his name and the grays I have used to depict him"); his mother in bright hues, her left breast bared.



Robert Indiana, *USA 666 (The Sixth American Dream)* (1964-1966). Private Collection © Morgan Art Foundation Ltd./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In many ways they embodied the distance between the American Dream and its reality; like characters in an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel, they chased their “gasoline-gorging” freedom with little heed to the consequences. Indiana’s childhood was a roadside existence, peppered by pinball and slot machines, and views from rear windows. He moved 21 times before joining the US Air Force, aged 17.

His father abandoned the family when his mother “became fat and middle-aged”, Indiana would later write. “He ditched her for a new model; obsolescence Yankee-style: new wives, new cars, new art (regularly).”

New York beginnings

Indiana had determined to be an artist aged seven, after a first-grade teacher recognized his abilities. Following his three-year stint in the military, he attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on the GI Bill. After graduation he studied and travelled around Europe before moving to New York in 1954.

He was experimenting with expressionist, figurative work while working in an art supply store part-time, which is where he met Ellsworth Kelly in 1956. The two became friends and lovers and Kelly helped find Indiana a loft in the former wharf district of Coenties Slip in Lower Manhattan.



Robert Indiana, *NINE* (conceived 1980, executed 2001) on Park Avenue © Morgan Art Foundation Ltd/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

It was to Kelly that Indiana wrote a postcard with the original four-letter word, and the artist had a profound impact on Indiana's work—as did the burgeoning art scene of Coenties Slip, which was also home to artists including Agnes Martin and Jack Youngerman. Indiana would [later describe this](#) as “one of the most fascinating and important chapters in my life” . It was during this period, in 1958, that Indiana decided to change his name, reflecting his birthplace and his commitment to creating American subject matter.

Pop pioneer

His career began to gain momentum in the early 1960s, which is around the time he started to make single-word paintings, many of which issued short commands in sans-serif: eat, die, err, love.

In 1961, Alfred Barr, the director of the Museum of Modern Art, bought Indiana's painting *The American Dream, I* (1961) for the museum's permanent collection, launching his career. It was the first piece of Pop art to enter the museum's collection.



Installation view of 2013 exhibition "Robert Indiana: Beyond LOVE" at the Whitney © Morgan Art Foundation Ltd./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Photo courtesy Tom Powell Images

MoMA would exhibit a different work by Indiana that same year, a "herm" work (a sculpture made using wooden remnants from old buildings in the Slip, and based on the herma posts of antiquity) called *Moon* (1960) in the exhibition "The Art of Assemblage" (which it then acquired).

In 1965, MoMA commissioned *LOVE* as a holiday card and its stacked letters—the O askew—have been endlessly revisited around the world. (Indiana himself oversaw the design for a postage stamp commissioned by the US Postal Service for Valentine's Day in 1973: more than 300 million copies have since been sold around the world, making it one of the most popular holiday stamps in American history.)

By 1966, *LOVE* was the featured image in a solo show at the Stable Gallery. Indiana was by now one of the most well known artists in the US.



Robert Indiana, *AMOR* (1998) in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art © Morgan Art Foundation Ltd/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo courtesy Tom Powell

The work would be repeated in myriad forms over the years, though many LOVE designs were not official (Indiana only received \$1,000 for his copyright). Ultimately, the word overtook the work. During an interview on National Public Radio in 2014, Indiana said: "LOVE bit me. It was a marvelous idea, but it was also a terrible mistake."

Shifting legacy

By the end of the 1960s, the tide had turned. Indiana was left out of the landmark exhibition "New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970" organized by Henry Geldzahler in 1969 at the Metropolitan Museum. He would later say in an interview with The Art Newspaper that he had been "blackballed" by the New York art world and, from 1978, lived in self-imposed exile in Vinalhaven, a remote island off the coast of Maine.

Now, a new generation of critics, historians, curators and collectors are beginning to rediscover Indiana's work and understand the importance of his legacy and innovations. His death last month aged 89 marks the further closing of a chapter of American art making.