

Red Orange White Green Blue, 1968
Ellsworth Kelly (American, 1923–2015)
Oil on canvas
120 x 120-3/8 in. (304.8 x 305.7 cm)

Ellsworth Kelly grew up in New Jersey, where he spent much of his time on his own, observing nature. His grandmother introduced him to birdwatching, an activity that trained his eye to notice details that others often missed. This skill would eventually serve him well in his career as an artist. In 1943, Kelly enlisted in the Army, ending up in a special camouflage unit called “[the Ghost Army](#),” staffed largely by young artists who were encouraged to use their creativity and artistic skills to mislead and deceive enemy troops. After the war, Kelly used the G.I. Bill, a government program that provides educational assistance to veterans, to study first at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and then at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. In Europe, he learned from the work of such artists as Joan Miró, [Constantin Brancusi](#), [Henri Matisse](#), [Jean Arp](#), and Piet Mondrian. Under their influence and away from the **Abstract Expressionism** movement, which was dominating the New York art world at that time, Kelly developed his own style. In his works, the shapes and forms of his physical surroundings became increasingly simplified. He started noticing the architectural features around him and creating his own **abstracted** versions of what he saw.

Kelly’s early work derived from patterns found in sidewalk grates or pipes along the side of a building, or shadows cast by trees and the spaces between buildings in Paris. His drawings based on these observations formed the foundation of all his work. From his drawings, Kelly would sometimes create collages and then wait to see how his perception of these **compositions** changed over time. Sometimes he followed the original sketch exactly, but most often he made adjustments, transforming what he observed around him into **abstracted** forms and colors. He stayed true to this process, even after his 1954 return to New York, when his style became more geometric. Kelly avoided restricting himself to any particular artistic movement; instead, he kept examples of his work from every decade of his career. He returned to them continually for inspiration, looking for a way to move forward while staying true to his unique vision.

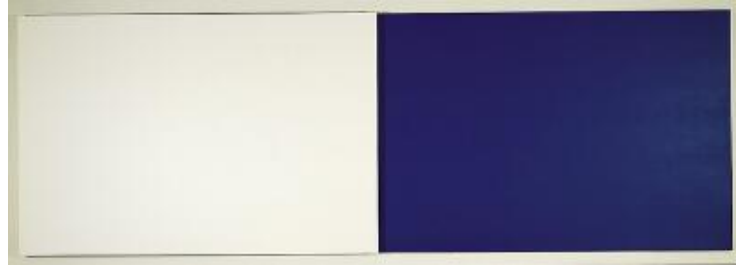
Modern Icon

In the 1950s Kelly moved from Paris to New York, where the art movement known as **Abstract Expressionism** was developing. While Kelly adopted the

monumental scale of **Abstract**

Expressionist paintings, he was not interested in painting as an act of

personal expression. He “wanted something more subdued, less conscious... [he] didn’t want his personality in [his work].” He was interested in the role that intuition could play in art, and he relied on it when making final choices about whether to hang a painting horizontally or vertically, which colors to use, and how to arrange multiple panels together in his paintings.



White over Blue, 1967, Ellsworth Kelly (American, 1923–2015), Acrylic on canvas, 114 x 342 x 18 in. (289.6 x 870 x 45.7 cm)

Key Concepts

White over Blue consists of two separate rectangular canvases, one white and one blue, hung together, one overlapping the other and projecting off of the wall into the viewer’s space. This format builds on the precedent of multi-panel altarpieces in medieval and Renaissance churches.

Kelly was more interested in the space between the viewer and the painting than the surface of the painting itself. This led him to create a new kind of painting that consists of separate panels that may be rearranged to produce alternate **compositions**, as well as multi-panel paintings in which each canvas is painted a single color.

By eliminating any expressive marks from the surface of the canvas and by defining the shape of the panel with color, Kelly brought his paintings into the realm of objects in space and away from the surface-focused, illusionistic realm of paintings. In this way, the painting itself became the figure, and the wall on which it was hanging became the background.

A Closer Look at *White over Blue*

- Inspired by blinds drawn over a window, this painting was originally hung vertically, with the white panel acting as a shade projecting slightly over the blue window. However, due to space limitations in the galleries of the Norton Simon Museum, Kelly approved a horizontal arrangement for the panels.
- *White over Blue* was originally made for **Expo 67**, an international exposition held in Montreal. It was displayed in the [Montreal Biosphere](#) along with works by [Roy Lichtenstein](#) and [Robert Rauschenberg](#), both of which are now in the Norton Simon Museum’s collections. The theme of the exhibition was “Man and His World.”
- Unlike some 20th-century artists, Kelly always painted his panels himself, rather than directing assistants to execute his ideas. Thus, despite Kelly’s insistence on avoiding the personal in his work, his paintings always remained his own, made by his own hand.

Discussion Questions

- How does turning the canvas to hang horizontally instead of vertically change the way you read the painting? Does it make a substantial difference in its meaning or overall effect?
- In the 1950s, Kelly became close friends with his neighbor, the artist Agnes Martin, and they exchanged ideas about their work. What similarities and differences do you see between Kelly's *White over Blue* and Martin's *Leaf in the Wind* from 1963 (shown to the right)?

Activity

- Kelly once said, "My eyes are always searching outside for clues...I keep investigating how the sun hits a building and the shadow that appears with it or the look of a field of bright green, the curve of green. I'm constantly investigating nature—nature, meaning everything." Try out Kelly's process. Sketch or photograph architectural details like shadows and lines and shapes that you notice on your way to school. Then, choose one of your drawings or photographs to use as the basis for an abstract painting. Begin by removing that detail from its original context and simplify it to its most basic shapes by creating a series of progressively more **abstract** drawings. Then create several versions of your simplified drawing, experimenting with various **abstract** color combinations until you find one that you like. Finally, create a much larger painted version of your **composition**. Can you still recognize your original observation in the final painting? How did this activity affect the way you look at the world around you and what you notice as a part of your daily routine?

Vocabulary

- **Abstract art:** works of art that may have form, but have little or no attempt at pictorial representation.
- **Abstract Expressionism:** a movement or style of painting that originated in the United States in the 1950s using the physical action of painting to express the artist's innermost feelings spontaneously
- **Composition:** the overall arrangement of the different parts and elements of an artwork.
- **Expo 67:** The 1967 International and Universal Exposition—or *Expo 67*, as it was commonly known—was a World's Fair held in Montreal, Canada, in 1967. It is considered to be the most successful World's Fair of the 20th century, with 62 nations participating and more than half a million visitors in a single day. It featured 90 pavilions representing the theme "Man and His World." The U.S. pavilion was housed in a geodesic dome designed by Buckminster Fuller, known as the Montreal Biosphere.

Revealing Possibilities

Like many artists of his generation, Ellsworth Kelly took up printmaking in the 1960s and continued making prints throughout his career. He began in 1964 with two series: *Suite of Plant Lithographs* and *Suite of Twenty-Seven Color Lithographs*. For him, printmaking offered a quick, small-scale means of trying out new combinations of shapes and colors.

Key Concepts

The *Suite of Twenty-Seven Color Lithographs* features several sequences of bold and colorful forms that also appear in his paintings from this period.

As a result of the minimalist designs of Kelly's abstract prints, **negative space**, or the space between forms, takes on added significance. In his words, "I have learned that **negative space** is just as powerful as the space of the object, that you have to always think about it."

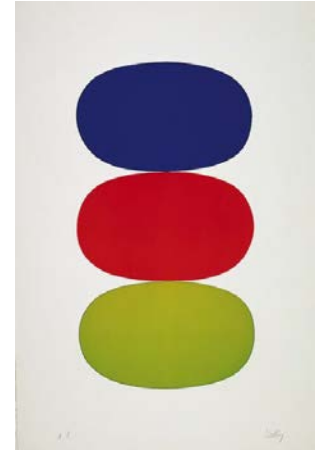
Kelly's abstract prints show the influence of [Henri Matisse's cut-outs](#), created by the artist near the end of his career in the late 1940s. For these works, Matisse cut painted sheets into forms of varied shapes and sizes that he then arranged into lively compositions. These are striking for their color and contrast as well as for their simplicity.

A Closer Look at *Blue and Orange and Green* and *Orange over Green*

- Kelly's seemingly simple **geometric** designs were notoriously difficult to print. Because of the complete lack of embellishment or distraction, they required exactitude and clean edges, with no room for error.
- The recurring use of the arrow in Kelly's work evokes Paul Klee's arrows in [Possibilities at Sea](#) as well as Kelly's early study of bird shapes in the naturalist [John James Audubon's iconic watercolors of birds](#).
- Kelly deeply admired the sculptures of Alexander Calder, especially those that resembled cut-out shapes floating in space. The two artists were friends who supported each other's work, and Kelly saw Calder as a father figure whose influence was evident in Kelly's panel paintings and prints.

Discussion Questions

- Make a drawing of one of Kelly's prints, emphasizing negative space by coloring the space around the primary forms black or dark gray and leaving the primary forms white so that the space around the form becomes the primary form. How does this change affect the way you look at the work?



Blue and Orange and Green, 1964, *Suite of Twenty-Seven Color Lithographs*, Ellsworth Kelly (American, 1923–2015), Lithograph on Rives BFK paper, 35-3/8 x 23-7/8 in. (89.9 x 60.6 cm)



Orange over Green, 1964, *Suite of Twenty-Seven Color Lithographs*, Ellsworth Kelly (American, 1923–2015), Lithograph on Rives BFK paper, 35-1/4 x 23-3/4 in. (89.5 x 60.3 cm)

- Kelly admired [Alexander Calder's mobiles](#), which resembled single-color, cut-out shapes like Kelly's, hanging in space. Imagine that the shapes in these prints were cut out and freed from the paper. How do you think they would move? What kind of energy would they have?

Activity

- Make your own abstract print using cardstock, a sheet of cardboard, a piece of paper, scissors, glue, a paintbrush, and several colors of paint (tempera or acrylic). Begin by cutting out up to three geometric shapes from the cardstock. Arrange the shapes into a composition of your choice on the piece of cardboard, and then glue them into place. Once the glue has dried, paint each shape a different color, avoiding getting any paint on the cardboard backing. Before the paint dries, place a piece of paper the same size as the piece of cardboard over your composition, carefully matching the edges of the piece of paper to the edges of the cardboard. Press the paper down onto the painted shapes, rubbing but not shifting the paper. Finally, peel the paper off of the cardboard to reveal your abstract print. Then create a second print with a colored background by painting the cardboard backing around your shapes and then repeating the printing process. How does adding color to the background of your print change the overall appearance and effect of the composition? Which print do you prefer and why?

Vocabulary

- **Geometric:** based on simple shapes (such as straight lines, circles, or squares)
- **Lithograph:** a print made by drawing on a block of limestone with wax crayon, applying ink to the stone, and pressing the image onto paper to print it
- **Negative space:** the space around and between images

Harmonies

Ellsworth Kelly began to draw plant forms early in his career, beginning in 1949, when he drew seaweed during a summer stay at an island off the coast of Brittany. Back in Paris, he drew the hyacinths he had brought into his studio to cheer himself up in midwinter. He continued to draw plants in the same style throughout his career, even after his paintings became more geometric.

Key Concepts

Kelly was not interested in just illustrating the plants or depicting what he saw; he wanted to use lines to search for what was ultimately abstract in them. In his words, “I think that if you can turn off the mind and look only with the eyes, ultimately everything becomes abstract.”

For his plant drawings, he focused solely on outline. He rendered the plants two-dimensionally, depriving them of weight so that they float out of context like phantoms on the page. By stripping them down in this way, he both captured the essence of the plants and stripped them of their original meaning.

Despite the apparent contrast between his plant drawings and his geometric works, Kelly stressed that his plant drawings should not be considered separately from his paintings but taken as a whole with his other work.

A Closer Look at *Pear I* and *Fig Branch*

- Kelly’s depictions of plants are very **frontal** and **linear**, with no sense of background, **perspective**, or depth. He was interested in the relationships between shapes and the resulting patterns.
- According to Kelly, his plant drawings usually took no more than five minutes to complete. He was drawn to plants because of their form, and he worked primarily in black and white in order to focus on line and form without the distraction of color.
- The artist grew plants in his studio and on the roof of his building after he moved to New York. He felt that there was a direct link between the curves of the leaves in his drawings and his celebrated shape-based panel paintings.

Discussion Questions

- If Kelly had added colors to his plant drawings, as in his geometric prints, how would this have changed the way you perceive them? What would you have noticed in the colored version of the prints?



Pear I, 1965–66, *Suite of Plant Lithographs*, Ellsworth Kelly (American, 1923–2015), Transfer lithograph on Rives BFK paper, 34-5/8 x 23-3/8 in. (90.5 x 59.4 cm)



Fig Branch, 1965–66, *Suite of Plant Lithographs*, Ellsworth Kelly (American, 1923–2015), Transfer lithograph on Rives BFK paper, 34-1/2 x 24 in. (87.6 x 61.0 cm)

- The *Suite of Twenty-Seven Color Lithographs* and *Suite of Plant Lithographs* were printed the same year, in 1964. What connections do you see between the two series? How does comparing prints from the two series inform how you view them overall?

Activities

- Re-create one of Kelly's plant prints using flexible wire for the lines of the drawing, and then transform the two-dimensional work into a sculpture. How does transforming the drawing in this way change the way you think about Kelly's plants?
- Create a naturalistic drawing of a plant still life, using shading to give the illusion of depth and weight. Then create a **contour** drawing of the same still life using one continuous line for the **contours** of the whole piece, keeping your eyes on the still life rather than the paper as you draw. Looking at the resulting drawings, how would you describe the relative advantages and disadvantages of each method? Which drawing do you prefer? How does each approach change the way you looked at the still life?

Vocabulary

- **Contour:** an outline, especially one representing an object's general shape or form
- **Frontal:** showing the front of an object
- **Linear:** formed using lines or outlines
- **Perspective:** the technique of drawing solid objects on a two-dimensional surface so as to give the impression of their height, width, depth, and position in relation to each other when viewed from a particular point