

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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NATIONAL GALLERY PRESENTS PIVOTAL ART

FROM ELLSWORTH KELLY'S EARLY YEARS IN FRANCE, 1948 - 1954

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- The first exhibition devoted to the body of art created by leading abstract artist Ellsworth Kelly during his developmental years in France will be presented in the National Gallery of Art's West Building, November 1, 1992 through January 24, 1993. Approximately forty rarely seen paintings and reliefs, sixty drawings and collages, and twenty photographs trace Kelly's dramatic shift from figurative art to his distinctive invention of multi-colored panel paintings, the latter his primary and lasting contribution to contemporary abstract art of the last four decades.

Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948 - 1954, which is co-organized by the National Gallery and the Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, was one of the opening exhibitions in the newly reconfigured Paris museum and will be on view this summer at the Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster, before coming to Washington in the fall.

"This exhibition illuminates a seminal period in the career of one of America's most respected and influential abstract

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ellsworth kelly . . . page 2

artists," said J. Carter Brown, director, National Gallery of Art. "During the six years he lived in Paris and traveled through France, Kelly's work evolved from representation to the very sophisticated, colorful, and abstract style for which he is still known today."

Ellsworth Kelly was born on May 31, 1923 in Newburgh, New York. In 1941 - 1942 he studied at the Pratt Art Institute, Brooklyn, and enlisted in the U.S. Army. His unit participated in the operations in Normandy and Brittany in 1944. While his battalion was stationed at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Kelly visited Paris for the first time.

Upon his return home to the States, Kelly continued to study painting and trained as a realist painter at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In October 1948 he took advantage of the G.I. Bill to return to France, where he stayed for six years. Kelly responded quickly to the influence of Europe's vanguard artists and the very different character of European architecture and space. He became familiar with the classics of Romanesque art in places like Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe and Tavant. Through visits to Paris' museums he became interested in Byzantine art.

Kelly rapidly matured, basing his increasingly non-representational art on observed natural and architectural shapes. The beginning of this shift can be detected in works such as Plant II, Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris, and Face

of Stones, all from 1949.

Kelly filled sketchbooks with hundreds of vignettes of encountered fragments of Paris, such as patterns of sidewalk repairs, the chance arrangement of posters in the Metro subway, and the gridlike traces left on the walls of buildings after attached floors, walls, and ceilings were pulled down. A group of important works from 1950 based on everyday objects includes Cutout in Wood, White Relief, Relief with Blue, and La Combe II, inspired by the patterns created by shadows on a staircase.

"Instead of creating an interpretive picture of a thing I'd seen or of an imaginary subject matter - I took an object and 'presented' it simply as itself. Everywhere I looked, everything I saw became something to create. It was a new freedom," said Kelly.

In the early 1950s, Kelly began to focus on grid and checkerboard compositions arranged by "chance" selection. Works such as Cité and Meschers of 1951 were developed from collages of drawings that he cut up and randomly rearranged. Shadows and images reflected in water provided him with two other major themes, seen in the black-and-white gridded composition of Seine.

In 1951, Kelly had his first one-person show at the Galerie Arnaud. In 1952-1953, he created Red Yellow Blue White, Painting for a White Wall, Train Landscape, and Tiger, which reveal his important move away from the checkerboard and grid compositions to multi-colored panel paintings.

ellsworth kelly . . . page 4

The exhibition is co-curated by Jack Cowart, curator of twentieth-century art, National Gallery of Art, and Alfred Pacquement, director of the Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume. The 200-page exhibition catalogue published by the National Gallery of Art, with 91 color illustrations, is the most complete record of this period in Kelly's world-renowned career. The catalogue includes essays by Yve-Alain Bois, professor of fine arts, Harvard University, Boston, as well as Cowart and Pacquement, among others.

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