

Robert Indiana, 89, Who Turned ‘Love’ Into Enduring Art, Is Dead

By [Jori Finkel](#)

- Robert Indiana, the Pop artist whose bold rendering of the word “love” became one of the most recognizable artworks of the 20th century, gracing hundreds of prints, paintings and sculptures, some 330 million postage stamps that he authorized and countless tchotchkes that he did not, died on Saturday at his home in Vinalhaven, Me. He was 89.

His lawyer, James W. Brannan, said the cause was respiratory failure.

Mr. Indiana’s famous image features the word L-O-V-E rendered in colorful capital letters, with the first two letters stacked on top of the other two, and the letter “O” tilted as if it were being swept off its feet. Since he designed the earliest versions, in the 1960s, the logo has acquired a life of its own, appearing on everything from posters and album covers to T-shirts and jewelry.

Mr. Indiana called it the 20th century’s “most plagiarized work of art,” and he kept a collection of knockoffs in his home, a historic Victorian building, to prove it.

To be sure, he had a hand in spreading the word, creating many artworks in different mediums based on the motif. And he designed the red, blue and green version that was originally issued as an eight-cent stamp by the United States Postal Service for Valentine’s Day 1973. It has since become one of the most popular holiday stamps in the United States.

But Mr. Indiana often pointed out that he received a flat fee of only \$1,000 for his stamp design. And he frequently complained that the runaway success of “Love” ruined his reputation in the New York art world.

“He was an artist of consequence who gets mistaken for a one-hit wonder,” Maxwell Anderson, the former director of the Indianapolis Museum of Art and the Dallas Museum of Art, said in an interview for this obituary in 2008.

Barbara Haskell, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art who organized the 2013 retrospective “Robert Indiana: Beyond Love,” said, “There’s a new wave of critics today who are reappraising Indiana in the context of Pop Art, seeing how he inflects it with the darker side of the American dream.”

She added: “The work he did in the ’60s in particular is very powerful, both dark and celebratory, with layers of autobiographical and cultural references. It’s not this superficial, optimistic, clichéd work that some people associate with his monumental sculpture.”

Questions of authenticity continued to swirl around Mr. Indiana at the very end. The day before he died, a company that said it was Mr. Indiana’s longtime agent and had the rights to some of his important works [sued a New York art publisher](#) and a man who had become his caretaker, accusing them of forging Indiana pieces and selling them. The publisher said all the works were authorized, and the caretaker did not respond to a request for comment.

Mr. Indiana, who retreated to Vinalhaven, a remote island, decades ago to escape the New York art scene, had grown reclusive in his final years. Some longtime friends and business associates said their efforts to contact him had been unavailing, or had been put off by his caretaker, who said Mr. Indiana was not able to see them.

Born in New Castle, Ind., on Sept. 13, 1928, Robert Indiana was the only child of Earl Clark and Carmen Watters and grew up as Robert Clark. He often described his early life as hardscrabble, noting that he had moved 21 times within the state of Indiana by the age of 17. His mother “couldn’t bear to live in one house longer than a year,” he said in an interview for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

His family’s financial struggles, shaped by the Depression, also contributed. After losing his job at Western Oil, his father managed a gas station and also pumped gas before finding another administrative job at Phillips 66. His parents divorced before he was a teenager.

Prized for his drawing skills as early as the first grade, Mr. Indiana was not especially interested in the oil industry, but he later said that he had been mesmerized by the bold neon signs at gas stations. He graduated from Arsenal Technical High School in Indianapolis as valedictorian of his class and attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on the G.I. Bill after three years in the Air Force (known as the Army Air Forces when he began his service).

In 1954 he moved to New York to start his career as an artist. He worked at an art supply store on West 57th Street, where he was putting a Matisse postcard in the window when the painter Ellsworth Kelly came in and asked about it. They began talking and later became lovers. Mr. Kelly helped him find a loft on Coenties Slip in Lower Manhattan, which, when it was still receiving ships, rated a mention on the first page of “Moby-Dick.”

The seaport figured heavily in Mr. Indiana’s early sculptures. He used repurposed wood masts from ships, beams from old waterfront buildings and 19th-century stencils found in his loft to make a series of enigmatic assemblages that he called herms, after the classical figures. Most had human dimensions, rising to heights exceeding five feet. Some also had priapic pegs in front. (A fan of Herman Melville, he stenciled “Ahab” on one.)

It was on Coenties Slip that he met neighboring artists like Jack Youngerman, Agnes Martin and Cy Twombly, with whom he shared his studio for a time. And it was there that he adopted Indiana as a sort of stage name, widely read as a celebration of his ties to the American heartland.

A particular sort of peppy, Midwestern-seeming earnestness soon became a central theme in his work, as in his 1961 oil painting “The American Dream #1,” in which four flat, colorful discs contain signs like “tilt” and “take all.” Alfred Barr Jr., who acquired that work for the Museum of Modern Art, called it “spellbinding” but admitted, “I don’t understand why I like it so much.”

Mr. Indiana himself called it “a comment on the superficiality of American life.” The critic Lawrence Alloway called it “Pop poetry of the highway.” Ms. Haskell, at the Whitney, described his use of language as one of his most important contributions, anticipating the many artists who manipulate words today.

“It’s very different than, say, Johns, who embedded words in gestural brush strokes,” she said, referring to the artist Jasper Johns. “Here words are the content.”

Several of Mr. Indiana’s paintings revolve around monosyllabic action words like “eat,” “hug” or “die,” a rather direct, bare-bones alternative to the sophisticated exhortations of Madison Avenue. In 1964, at the New York World’s Fair, he installed a flashing 20-foot electric sign that read “Eat”; it was unplugged almost immediately because it drew too many tourists looking for a bite.

That year he also starred in the Andy Warhol film of the same name, which featured Mr. Indiana very slowly and languorously eating a mushroom. Then came “love.”

Although few fans seem familiar with the background, the art historian Susan Elizabeth Ryan revealed in her monograph on Mr. Indiana that the first version of his most famous work was markedly different. Completed “within complex circumstances” at the end of 1964, after Mr. Indiana and Mr. Kelly had broken up, Ms. Ryan wrote, it had a cruder four-letter word in place of “love,” in a similar composition with a tilted “u.”

Mr. Indiana never fully discussed, at least not in public, why he made the transition to the G-rated version, which he used as his Christmas card that year. The next year, he turned it into a Christmas card for the Museum of Modern Art in New York. By 1966 he had done enough variations on the theme to have a show of “Love” prints, paintings and sculptures at Stable Gallery in New York.

By 1970, when he built a 12-foot-tall steel version for the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the image was famous enough to be invoked — some would say stolen — by the book jacket design for Erich Segal’s best-selling novel “Love Story.” (This was long before Mr. Indiana’s dealers started chasing after any copyright infringements.)

Mr. Indiana believed the piracy of the image harmed his reputation in the New York art world, and he retreated to Maine in 1978. But many critics countered that he had appropriated his own work shamelessly for decades. He created dozens of versions of “Love” in different mediums, planted “Love” sculptures in cities from Indianapolis to Tokyo, and cast it into different languages, including Hebrew (“Ahava”) and Spanish (“Amor”).

He also revamped the slogan for political ends. In 1976, he recast “Love” as “Vote” for a poster commissioned by the Democratic National Committee. In 2008, he built a sculpture for the Democratic National Convention using the word “Hope” and authorized the image’s reproduction on T-shirts, buttons and limited-edition prints sold by Barack Obama’s presidential campaign.

Mr. Anderson, the former Indianapolis and Dallas museum director, said that “Love,” too, should be remembered in a broader political context, as a product of the 1960s. “To be true to the artist’s intentions,” he said, “we should see ‘Love’ in relation to the antiwar moment, and not as a decal on a baby boomer’s Volvo.”