Robert Indiana’s LOVE “is one of the most recognizable icons of contemporary art.” 1

The work has been Indiana’s blessing and curse, launching his fame and fueling criticism but ultimately accounding him a reputation for insightful artistic commentary.

Born Robert Clark, he changed his surname to that of his native state in 1958, when he was part of the New York art scene. As a teenager working at the Indianapolis Star, he had become fascinated by type, and in the former marine warehouse that served as his lower Manhattan studio he experimented with stencils the former occupants had left behind. Indiana created the first LOVE in the form of crayon rubbings for Christmas cards in 1964. The following year, the Museum of Modern Art invited him to design holiday cards, selecting a red-green-blue version. And in 1966, the Stable Gallery in New York presented a one-person exhibition of LOVE paintings in various color schemes. Unfortunately, the show’s poster lacked a copyright symbol—losing a torrent of rip-offs. While seeking to copyright the image after the fact, Indiana saw cheap imitations, in the form of paperweights, rings, key chains, and other trinkets, suffuse the market. The U.S. Postal Service spread its fame further in 1973 by issuing the authorized LOVE stamp, more than three hundred thirty million of which were sold. The ubiquity of tawdry unauthorized versions damaged Indiana’s standing, as most assumed he had sold out.

Layers of reference, interpretation, and cultural relevance exist for this complex work. Indiana traces its origin to the Christian Science Sunday services of his youth. Most churches in this denomination, he explained, “have no decoration whatsoever . . . only one thing appears in a Christian Science church, and that’s a small, very tasteful inscription . . . God is Love.” 2 A member of New York’s gay subculture in the late 1950s and 1960s, Indiana conceived LOVE to signal covertly this aspect of his identity. 3 Adding to personal memory and context, he also appealed to the tenor of the times, when the country was bitterly divided over the Vietnam War, and the slogan “Make Love, Not War” captured the popular sentiment of a burgeoning youth culture. The first love-in was held in Los Angeles in 1967, and so-called love beads and free love were other signature expressions of the day.

Ever attuned to current social issues, Indiana created The Confederacy series (1965–66) of paintings and prints in support of the civil-rights movement. His advocacy of peace and tolerance has informed much of his art. In recent years, he produced the Peace painting series in response to the September 11, 2001, attacks, and reconfigured the LOVE design as a HOPE sculpture for Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign.

Patricia McDonnell

Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by
Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,
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