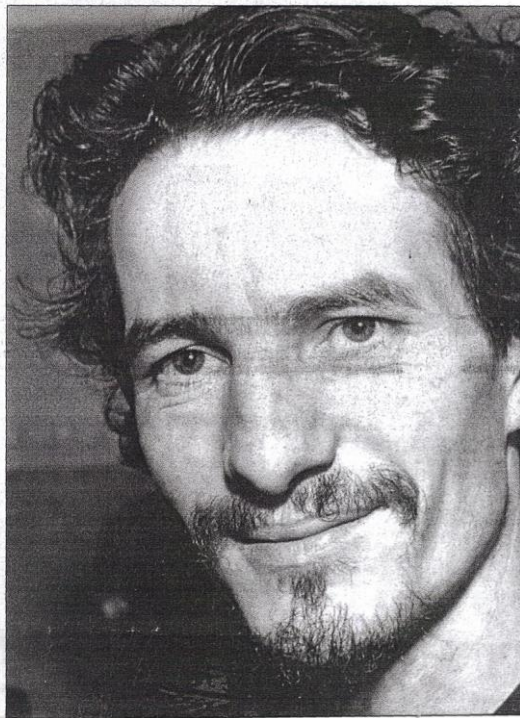


John Kelly



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Painter and printmaker who made work of enduring quality

John Kelly, who has died aged 74, was a painter, printmaker and teacher. A member of the Royal Hibernian Academy, he participated in numerous national and international exhibitions, and in 1977, representing Ireland, won the first prize at Cagnes-sur-Mer.

He was previously awarded prizes in the Dante Graphic Exhibition, sponsored by the Italian Cultural Institute, in 1965, and in the competition held as part of the official celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Rising. He received the Oireachtas Waterford Glass Award in 1975, the Oireachtas Douglas Hyde Gold Medal in 1992 and the Irish Exhibition of Living Art's Carroll's Award in 1980. Born in January 1932, at Mountjoy Square, Dublin, he was one of the five children of Thomas and Sarah Kelly. He attended the Central Model School, Marlborough Street, and left at the age of 13. Having worked at a variety of jobs, he served his time as a painter and decorator.

He studied sign-writing at Bolton Street College of Technology and later attended night classes at what was then the National College of Art, where Terence Gayer was a major influence. Gerard Dillon was another later influence.

He began exhibiting in 1957 at the David Hendriks Gallery Dublin.

He later held exhibitions at the Project Arts centre, of which he was a founder member, the Davis Gallery and other galleries in Dublin, Limerick and Sligo. Associated with Independent Artists from the group's early years, he was more recently a regular exhibitor with the RHA.

His Arts Council touring exhibition in 1985, *An Artist's Notebook*, revealed a natural feeling for texture. Using such materials as tissue paper, he created a variety of different effects. The exhibition also included some fine examples of his draughtsmanship. He chose the "notebook" device to develop a less formal, more personal relationship with the work.

The *Images of the French Revolution* exhibition in 1989 brought all his usual motifs into play – scribbled calligraphy like the half-decipherable lettering on some old parchment, half-suggested figures, vague chiaroscuro. All his skill as a printmaker was on display, combined with a bold, poster-like quality entirely appropriate to the subject.

In a review of his 1996 exhibition on the Icarus theme, *The Irish Times* critic, Brian Fallon noted a "Chagall-like vein of fantasy, and as well a delicate, understated, almost fairyland quality".

Kelly's considered approach to his painting derived both from his experience as a printmaker and his training as a craftsman. He could not just walk up to a canvas and "have a quick bash at it", he said; he had to think about it in the same way as an etching. He knew early on whether a painting was going to work. "Sometimes they come very quickly, and then it stops. When something works very well for you ... I don't think anyone looking at it will ever get the same pleasure out of a painting as the painter when it has really worked for them."

He was director of the Graphic Studio in Dublin for more than a decade and was a founding member of the Black Church Print Studio. He taught in the Fine Art department of the National College of Art and Design for 20 years, retiring in 1997.

He also wrote for the stage. John Molloy in 1961 produced his play, *The Third Day*, at the Gate Theatre, which was preceded by a one-act experimental mime play, *Shapes*. Other theatre work included designing Jim and Peter Sheridan's production of the stage adaptation of *Down All the Days* by Christy Brown in 1982, as well as posters and set designs for the Abbey and Gate theatres.

Mary Cloake, director of the Arts Council, this week described Kelly as a skilled printmaker who did a great deal to advance the art of printmaking in Ireland both by example and by his teaching.

"He made work of enduring quality. A gentle and learned man, he was also a gifted and loved teacher." Remembering his friend, fellow artist Michael Kane recalled "images of his indomitable courage drawn while he sat up in bed, unable to sleep and waiting for death ... self-portraits of an astonishing intensity".

His work is held in public collections, including the Arts Council, Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, Bank of Ireland, Dublin City University and the Gordon Lambert Collection. He was elected to Aosdána, the affiliation of creative artists in Ireland, in March 1996.

He is survived by his wife, Maireád, and daughters Niamh, Fiona, Róisín, Sorcha, Caitríona and Lara.

John Kelly: born January 27th; died March 26th, 2006

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