

ELLSWORTH KELLY  
**AUSTIN**  
BLANTON MUSEUM OF ART

**1: Welcome to *Austin***

Hello, this is Simone Wicha, Director of the Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas at Austin.

Welcome to *Austin* by Ellsworth Kelly, a work of art in the Blanton's permanent collection.

Ellsworth Kelly was an important American artist whose career spanned seventy years. He gifted the design concept for *Austin* to the Blanton, and he oversaw all building design decisions before he passed away in 2015. The 2,715-square foot structure is the only building Kelly designed and is the only time he worked in glass and in marble.

This work of art and architecture integrates four main motifs he explored throughout his career: Spectrum, Color Grid, Black and White, and Totems. Kelly was greatly inspired by the art and the architecture of European churches, but the building serves no religious function. Rather, he envisioned *Austin* as a site for joy and a site for contemplation.

Since opening in February 2018, *Austin* has welcomed hundreds of thousands of visitors each year, from students and people in our community to people who've traveled across the world to experience this majestic work of art. We hope that you are inspired as you walk through *Austin* by Ellsworth Kelly and that you will come back often.

And to make sure that you and other art lovers can enjoy its beauty in the future, please don't touch the wood totem or the marble inside. Even if you have really clean hands, natural oils on your skin can damage any work of art. Thank you for helping us protect this cultural treasure for generations to come, and please enjoy your visit.

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## 2: *Austin* Comes to Austin

Hello, this is Simone Wicha, Director of the Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas at Austin.

Ellsworth Kelly first conceived of the building that would become *Austin* in 1987, when a patron in California asked the artist to design a chapel for his vineyard. The structure was never realized, but Kelly had conceptualized the work extensively through drawings and plans, and the structure you see now remains true to his original vision.

Kelly felt strongly that this major, unprecedented artistic statement must be stewarded, cared for, and available to a wide public. In the city of Austin, at the Blanton, Kelly found his site. He often titled his works after places to which they are connected, and this last great artwork is named for the city in which it stands.

Kelly's relationship with the Blanton began in 2012, when we started an in-depth exploration of the project. Over the course of two years and countless phone calls and visits to his studio in Spencertown, New York, we worked through the design with him. Though Kelly had drawings and two handmade models for the original commission from 30 years prior, his architectural renderings needed to be converted into construction documents. The process required resolving technical challenges inherent in creating a public building while remaining true to his artistic vision for all elements of the artwork—including how to fabricate the first-ever Ellsworth Kelly windows and where to source the marble for his black and white panels. It took a large team of collaborators to navigate this, key among them Jack Shear, president of the Ellsworth Kelly Foundation.

Ultimately, Ellsworth made every aesthetic decision, from the scale, proportions, and orientation of the building to the type of exterior stone. On December 18, 2015, I called him to confirm the final details for the concept documents, which captured all of his decisions—in essence, it was our road map for what to build. I let him know that, with enthusiastic support from UT leadership—most especially former President Bill Powers—and several significant funders, construction for *Austin* was starting. Nine days later, Ellsworth passed away. Although Kelly never had the opportunity to walk through his masterpiece he knew, with certainty, that it would be realized and that it was being built exactly as he envisioned.

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### 3: About Ellsworth Kelly

Hello, this is Carter E. Foster, Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs at the Blanton Museum of Art.

Ellsworth Kelly was born in Newburgh, New York in 1923 and grew up in Pittsburgh and suburban New Jersey. After serving in the army during World War II, he studied studio art in Boston and then Paris, spending seven formative years in France—supported by the GI Bill.

In France, Kelly began to develop his artistic reputation, and when he returned to America in 1954, he moved to downtown Manhattan—settling in a place called Coenties Slip with an important group of fellow artists. Soon after, he began exhibiting at galleries and museums.

Today, Kelly is best known for his large-scale abstract painting and sculpture typified by expansive geometric forms. His paintings often feature extraordinarily vibrant colors, either on their own or in striking combinations.

Although he is widely considered a pioneering abstract artist, Kelly's work is deeply rooted in nature and the observable world. Learning to birdwatch as a child helped him develop his keen sense of close looking.

An artistic breakthrough came to him as a young man in France, when he realized the fragments and details of things he noticed around him—even seemingly mundane ones—could become the subjects of his art. Thus, the shape of a window frame, the shadows cast on a wall, might inspire his composition for a painting or drawing.

Similarly, his building *Austin*—the only structure Kelly ever designed—is his distillation of his experiences visiting many chapels and churches in Europe, especially ones built in Romanesque and Gothic architectural styles.

Although Kelly was not religious, he did believe in the spiritual power of art. *Austin* embodies this interest in art and spirituality and is the culmination of his exploration of form and color over the course of his seven-decade-long career.

After collaborating with the Blanton for several years and finalizing the design for *Austin*, Ellsworth Kelly passed away in December 2015.

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#### 4: Ellsworth Kelly in Paris

Hello, I'm Christian Wurst, Curatorial Assistant to the Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs at the Blanton Museum of Art.

I'd like to tell you about Ellsworth Kelly's time in France, which influenced the creation of *Austin*.

In 1944, while serving in the U.S. Army, Ellsworth Kelly was deployed to Europe and visited Paris for the first time. Before the onset of World War II, the celebrated and historic capitol city had been home to a thriving array of innovative artists, and to many—including Kelly—it remained a cultural center and magnet when the war ended.

As a former soldier, the young artist was eligible for the financial support of the GI Bill, and he used this funding to return to Paris in 1948. He ended up staying in France nearly six years, enrolling in art school, but, more significantly, immersing himself in the rich culture the country offered, and educating himself about art and architectural history.

Kelly made lists of sites and monuments that interested him and especially sought out Romanesque architecture. He frequently visited libraries and museums and met prominent living artists such as Alexander Calder and Constantin Brâncuși.

In November 1949, Kelly noticed the shape of a window in its frame at a museum. He realized he could turn the shape into a work of art. It was a revelation he described like this—quote: *"From then on, painting as I had known, it was finished for me. The new works were to be painting slash objects—unsigned, anonymous. Everywhere I looked, everything I saw became something to be made... It was a new freedom; there was no longer the need to compose."* End quote.

Kelly found his own artistic voice in France, and his experiences there, in which modern art crossed paths with history, stayed with him the rest of his life—culminating in the creation of *Austin*.

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## 5: Planning and Constructing *Austin*

Hello, this is Kimberly Theel, Deputy Director of Operations at the Blanton Museum of Art.

*Austin* is unique in Ellsworth Kelly's body of work: it's his only building, and the only time in his career that he played the role of architect. His original designs for the structure—now in the collection of the Blanton—are meticulous pencil drawings with detailed notes about proportions and dimensions. These had been translated into blueprints by architects back in the 1980s when the project was originally conceived. However, interpreting the artist's vision on a public university campus more than thirty years later required problem-solving and adjustments using current technology.

The Blanton hired Overland Partners, an architectural firm in San Antonio, to work with Kelly so that his ideas could be translated into a functional structure without compromising his art. In his original concept, he envisioned relatively thin walls of poured concrete and possibly a whitewashed, stucco exterior. However, in order to follow building code and accommodate for central Texas weather, the building needed systems for climate control, lighting, and security as well as a more durable exterior.

The solution was to create thicker walls and a light raft on the ceiling to both contain and conceal these systems. This meant that the height of the building changed from 25 feet to just over 28, a change that pleased the artist because it gave the front windows more space. He also decided to increase the structure's length from 25 to 33 feet, because he wanted a longer central aisle. In consultation with Overland, Kelly also decided he wanted a stone exterior, taking inspiration from the Romanesque buildings in France that he had visited in his youth.

In October 2015, the Blanton broke ground for *Austin*, which was built by the Texas-based Linbeck Group. The building opened to the public on February 18, 2018. Kelly had literally signed off on every detail and material, and though he did not live to see *Austin* completed, he knew exactly what it would look like.

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## 6: Exterior Stone

Hello, this is Ray Williams, Director of Education at the Blanton Museum of Art.

When Ellsworth Kelly was thinking about how to create an exterior for *Austin* that would work in the Texas climate, he turned to books on Romanesque and Medieval stone architecture from his personal library for inspiration. One quality he admired in these structures was the nonregularity of the stone—the somewhat random, organic quality of individual placement created because numerous anonymous masons worked on these buildings over many decades.

To achieve the aesthetic that Kelly desired, the architects of Overland Partners designed individual stone panels with nine different widths and three different heights. A computer program determined random sequencing for each stone so that every piece would have a unique placement in the overall coursing.

Kelly had used chance as a compositional tool early on in his career, and he loved the effect it created for the stone courses of *Austin*. For the stones themselves, Kelly chose a grey limestone from the Bateig quarry in Alicante, Spain. Each stone had to be individually cut, numbered, and precisely finished in order to fit together within the metal framework that would hold them all in place. The cutting was especially tricky for the curved surfaces of the barrel vaults. In all, 1,569 stone panels make up the exterior of *Austin*.

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## 7: Totems

Hello, I'm Veronica Roberts, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Blanton Museum of Art.

When you enter *Austin* by Ellsworth Kelly, your eyes are drawn to a soaring, emphatically vertical, eighteen-foot-high sculpture made of California redwood.

The artist first explored this type of shape in 1974, calling the series “Curves,” but he later began referring to these sculptures as “Totems.” All of them reflect two segments of an imaginary circle deployed to create a tapering form that either swells outward or gently compresses inward.

*Austin's* Totem curves inward in a concave fashion, and were we to measure the imaginary circle whose segments form the work, it would have a radius of about 257 feet. For Kelly, using curves allows—quote: “the eye to move fast over the sculpture, to experience a sensation of speed.” Unquote. He loved the idea of the speed of looking at the form combined with the slowness suggested by the very old age of the wood itself. Likely hundreds of years old, the tree's age is revealed in the beautiful lines of its dense woodgrain.

The sculpture was fabricated from a huge redwood log salvaged from the bottom of a Northern California riverbed. The log had been cut down in the nineteenth century at the height of the timber industry. Kelly worked with the same fabricator, Peter Carlson, for many years, and Carlson's company oversaw the milling of the wood into its current shape, which was done on a gantry mill—a robust machine capable of working on a large scale with precision within thousandths of an inch.

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## 8: Windows and Stained Glass

Hello, this is Carlotta Stankiewicz, Director of Marketing and Communications at the Blanton Museum of Art.

The three stained-glass window compositions on the front and side façades of *Austin* are among its most impressive technical feats. Ellsworth Kelly had never worked in glass before, but the windows were integral to the building's concept from the beginning and are one of its strongest links to art history, since stained glass is closely associated with Medieval European architecture.

To create the windows, Kelly worked with a company that specializes in architectural glass, Franz Mayer of Munich, Germany. Ellsworth and Michael Mayer, the head of the company, both knew that hand-blown glass was the right material because of its historical associations and the beautiful textures inherent to the process of creating it.

Master glass blowers literally blow a tube from a blob of molten glass, which they must constantly rotate in order to create the shape. The tube is then cut and flattened in a kiln to create a single sheet of glass. The size of the sheet is limited, literally, by how much weight the glassblower can bear as they turn the molten material.

Colors are created through complex chemical reactions using metal oxides added to the molten glass. The process of refining the colors for each window was a long one with Ellsworth, who was sent dozens of samples. He would line up and layer the samples in one of his garage windows, in essence mixing the colors himself through the layering of different hues.

Because of the thickness of the walls of *Austin*, Ellsworth wanted the glass panes to be flush with both the interior and exterior walls. As a result, Mayer created two sandwiches of glass for each side of the wall, with space in between filled with inert gas. Thus, each individual color you see when looking at one of the windows is actually made of four slightly different hues of that color that combine when light passes through them.

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## 9: The Marble Panels

Hello, this is Claire Howard, Assistant Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Blanton Museum of Art.

As you look around you can see fourteen black and white marble panels lining the walls of *Austin* by Ellsworth Kelly. He conceived of them as a series called “Stations of the Cross.” Like the building itself, these artworks reference past traditions while using Kelly’s thoroughly modern vocabulary of form.

The Stations of the Cross have been a popular subject for art in the context of the Catholic religion and can be found in churches and cathedrals throughout the world. The stations represent a set series of events that depict what happened to Jesus Christ leading up to his crucifixion. Kelly followed the set order closely and although his panels are abstract, he did reference the visual traditions of this subject, which often featured the cross itself as a strong diagonal element whose position changes throughout the story.

The marble panels were created under the supervision of Kelly's longtime fabricator, Carlson Arts LLC, who also fabricated the redwood Totem. It was important to the artist that the panels retain the feel of stone when transformed into works of art, and he chose marble specifically because it has an extremely rich history in art and architecture.

In fact, the white marble was taken from a famous quarry in Carrara, Italy that was the source for many buildings and statues by Renaissance artists, including Michelangelo. The black marble comes from a small quarry in Namur, Belgium. Kelly had made precise pencil drawings for each panel, showing the exact measurements and proportions of the black and white areas, and each one is a perfect square measuring 40 by 40 inches.