

# SEAN KELLY

McMahon, Katherine. "Habitat: Obsessions – A Look at Sean Kelly's James Joyce Collection." *Art News*, September 19, 2016.

## ARTNEWS

HABITAT: OBSESSIONS—A LOOK AT SEAN KELLY'S JAMES JOYCE COLLECTION



Sean Kelly in his library.

"When I was about 13 years old, I picked up a copy of *Ulysses* because of course it was a sort of notorious, forbidden book," Sean Kelly told me on a recent afternoon. "But I think I also picked it up because I knew that it was difficult. I'm attracted to complicated things." James Joyce left his native Dublin in 1904, moving to Zurich. Sean Kelly left England to move to New York to open the first location of his namesake gallery in 1991 and has lived there ever since. "Joyce had to leave Ireland to become known," Kelly said. "I think *Ulysses*, more than any other book, is a remarkable book in that it's like a mirror. In subsequent readings, I found a lot of curious parallels. I was always very attracted to the book emotionally." Since his first reading as a 13 year old growing up in England, Kelly has read the novel, which he described as a "bawdy piece of literature" about 11 times. The novel also happens to be set on Kelly's birthday, June 16.

When *Ulysses* was first published in 1922 by the Shakespeare and Company, there were 1,000 copies: 100 on oversized paper, all signed by Joyce; 150 copies on large paper, not signed by Joyce; and 750 copies on smaller paper, also not signed by Joyce. "I'd never thought about collecting Joyce or first editions, but I've always been somebody who has collected books passionately, I like the physical object," Kelly said. His interest in Joyce has been constant throughout his multi-decade career in the art world, but he started collecting seriously about 20 years ago. While on the hunt for Americana (namely Don DeLillo signed first editions) at a rare book dealer in Santa Barbara, he stumbled on a first edition of *Ulysses*, one of the 750 copies. It was around the time of his 40th birthday and he thought it was the perfect time to buy his first edition of *Ulysses*. The edition was slightly out of his price range, though, so he arranged a payment plan with the dealer who let Kelly pay for it in installments of \$1,000 a month over the course of a year.

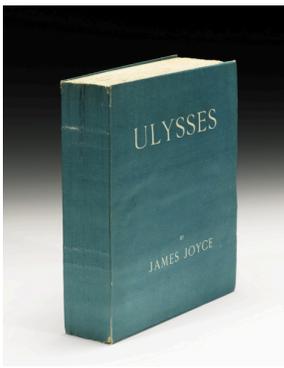
Since then, Kelly's collection has grown to approximately 124 Joyce items (books and ephemera), including 26 first editions. Kelly's last purchase, perhaps his most major acquisition yet, was a first edition of *Ulysses* dedicated and signed by Joyce, of which probably less than six exist. For Kelly, it's all

about the intellectual pursuit and the passion of collecting. “It’s about passion, and its not something you express publicly that often,” Kelly said.

Kelly was trained as an artist, then became a museum curator, then a museum director, then a festival director before opening his namesake gallery in 1991 in New York. “If you’re a museum director, you’re not allowed to collect in your own area,” he said. “I was never allowed to collect contemporary art because it was my own subject.”

“There are two great touchstones in my life that inform everything I do,” Kelly told me. “It’s James Joyce and Marcel Duchamp.” He drew a parallel between art market and the market for limited-edition books, and continued, “I realized firstly that Marcel Duchamp is massively undervalued in the marketplace. But also in comparison to the work I was engaged in, Joyce is cheap. If one of my artists sells for \$500,000 and you can buy a Joyce piece for a few thousand dollars, that’s cheap.”

Kelly’s collection continues to grow and is mostly housed in his New York City apartment. When he started collecting in 1991, his rule was that he would only buy things Ulysses-related. After exhausting that, he continued on to *Finnegans Wake*, then *Dubliners*, and his collection continues to grow. “I realized, sort of too late, that I was completely obsessed with Joyce.” Below a few items from Kelly’s prized Joyce collection.



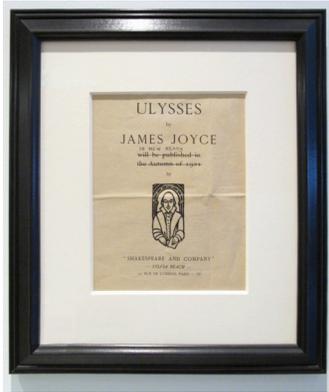
James Joyce, *Ulysses*, First Edition, number 541 of 750 numbered copies on handmade paper, presentation copy inscribed by Joyce to David and Esther Karsner (“To David and Esther Karsner | James Joyce | Paris 26.iii.924”) on front endpaper, original Greek blue wrappers lettered in white, collector’s blue cloth case and quarter blue morocco slipcase.



James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1,500 numbered copies, 250 signed by both Joyce and Matisse (all copies signed by Matisse). Introduction by Stuart Gilbert, six etchings with accompanying sketches on yellow and blue paper specially created for this edition by Henri Matisse (illustrating Calypso, Aeolus, Cyclops, Nausica, Ciirce and Ithaca episodes), one of 250 copies signed by Matisse and Joyce, original brown Bancroft buckram, upper cover designed by LeRoy Appleton embossed in bas-relief, original slipcase.



James Joyce poster designed by Richard Hamilton for the ICA London.



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