

PAUL HARRIS

100 YEARS



Paul Harris, Bolinas, Calif.



Trained in painting but known for sculpture and a consummate drawer, Harris constantly practiced his hand and eye as he stroked crayon across paper or litho stone, molded wax for bronze to be poured, punctured fabric with a sewing needle, or pushed paint across canvas. Emotionally, artmaking was a means for articulating the ineffable...

—Leah Triplett, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 2025

His life-size stuffed female figures in their environments remind one of poems which reflect experiences of life, yet do not represent them.

—Suzanne Foley, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1972

What we do feel is that Paul has captured complex personalities in revealing moments. His insight is so deep, his perception so acute that the figures have a kind of inevitability – the hand could not be otherwise, the angle of the head could not be different. It must be so.

—Phyllis Diebenkorn, 1981



2025 marks the centenary of Paul Harris (1925–2018), a vanguard, multidisciplinary artist appreciated in his lifetime for his vibrant, floral patterned fabric and cloth sculptures, as well as bronzes and work on paper, and close, lifelong friendships with Phyllis and Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993) as well as artist and writer Elaine de Kooning (1918–1989) after meeting her at Hans Hofmann’s summer school in Provincetown in 1949. Quintessentially postmodern, Harris championed the new and nascent in contemporary American art across his paintings, drawings, prints, and sculptures that were included in some of the most significant shows of the cacophonous 1960s and 1970s, while blurring the lines between Pop Art and French Modernism and working at the apex of the avant-garde vis-à-vis alternative materials and situating him alongside artists such as Claes Oldenburg (1929–2022), John Chamberlain (1927–2011), Andy Warhol (1928–1987), Eve Hesse (1936–1970), and Bruce Conner (1933–2008).

The new paulharrisestate.com is the destination platform for the centennial, featuring fresh scholarship and insights by contemporary curators and visual critics, including Leah Triplett, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and whose curatorial practice looks at the ways in which contemporary and historical artists incorporate soft materials to offer novel ways of merging material with expression; a greatly expanded, and for the first

time, a visually illustrated chronology with a special focus on the artist’s exhibition history; newly digitized archival material; work across media, mediums, and decades; and much more. Debuting alongside an all-new @PaulHarrisEstate Instagram channel, the website will be regularly updated and expanded throughout the year.

Thank you for joining the Paul Harris Estate in a year-long celebration of the artist by participating online/offline with us. We encourage and invite you to install work, share stories, unearth letters and photographs, make new connections, research, write, and connect with us from anywhere by using #PaulHarris100.

We have also developed content and digital assets around the centennial, including suggested signage and social media graphics, that are available for use by any institution.

Cheers,

Katharine James
for the Paul Harris Estate

Head of Digital and Public Engagement
Brent Foster Jones | MacFadden & Thorpe

Resources

We are honored by your participation in the celebration of the art and life of Paul Harris. For all related activities, we invite you and your marketing/communications team to join our social media campaign #PaulHarris100. We encourage you to create video reels interviewing a colleague, visitor, student, and/or staff member as well as share written reflections. For the highest impact, please use the following digital assets:

[#PaulHarris100 Logo Animation 1:1](#)

[#PaulHarris100 Logo Animation 16:9](#)

[#PaulHarris100 Archival Animation 1:1](#)

[#PaulHarris100 Archival Animation 4:5](#)

[#PaulHarris100 Archival Animation 16:9](#)

[#PaulHarris100 Partner Template 1:1](#)

[#PaulHarris100 Partner Template 16:9](#)

[#PaulHarris100 Artist Image](#)





Artist Biography for Instagram

Paul Harris. 100 Years. A vagabond in his younger years. A vanguard in soft sculpture. Multidisciplinary and versatile. Paul Harris (1925–2018) worked in string, fabric, papier mâché, bronze, concrete, plaster, crayon, and lithography. He moved effortlessly across mediums, returning to some materials over and over, leaving others after an intense fixation, and worked for six decades in bronze.

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At 34, he was included in a 1959 survey of new American sculpture at @theMuseumofModernArt alongside Alexander Calder, John Chamberlain, and David Smith. Two years later, he served as a Fulbright Professor at Universidad Catolica in Santiago, Chile in 1961; and at 40, his cloth figures were exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago and the New York World's Fair in 1965. At 47, while on faculty in the sculpture department at California College of Arts and Crafts, he received solo exhibitions at the @SFMOMA in 1972, and at 59, the @CantorArts Center at Stanford University, previously the Stanford University Museum of Art, in 1984.

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Born in Orlando, Florida in 1925, Paul Harris served in the United States Navy, stationed in the Pacific Theater during World War II, and studied at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, receiving a B.F.A. in 1950 and an M.A. in 1951; at the New School for Social Research in New York (1943–49); and at the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts in Provincetown, Massachusetts in 1949. Harris was represented by Poindexter Gallery in New York from 1958 to 1970, and he moved to Bolinas, California in 1963 and died in Bozeman, Montana in 2018.

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#PaulHarris100



Condensed Artist Biography *for wall labels, press releases, editorial*

Written by Leah Triplett

With a career spanning most of the twentieth century, Paul Harris (1925–2018) evaded definition materially, thematically, and aesthetically as he confidently forged his own path in art and life. His formal training in painting, Harris’s media ranged from crayon and pencil to oil paint, fabric, and bronze. Likewise, having come of age as an artist in the effervescent 1950s, when stylistic allegiance was paramount, Harris was singularly comfortable across the spectrum of abstraction and figuration in two or three dimensions. In drawing, printmaking, and painting, his mark-making is richly lyrical, with spirited colors in vibrant dynamism; his bronze and soft sculptures are expansive in form and shape, their intricacies in surface betraying his early training in painting. Harris made lifelong friends on both sides of the aesthetic aisle early in his career, including Richard Diebenkorn and Elaine de Kooning, as he found his particular confidence using both recognizable, familiar imagery from nature with psychologically charged mark making, no matter the medium.

Quintessentially postmodern, Harris made and exhibited work for over 60 years, vigorously championing the new and nascent in contemporary American art. In honor of the artist’s centennial, museums throughout the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond are celebrating his life and art both online/offline by installing Paul Harris work in their galleries and sharing stories online. Join today by using #PaulHarris100.

#PaulHarris100



Artist Biography

Written by Leah Triplett

With a career spanning most of the twentieth century, Paul Harris (1925–2018) evaded definition materially, thematically, and aesthetically as he confidently forged his own path in art and life. His formal training in painting, Harris's media ranged from crayon and pencil to oil paint, fabric, and bronze. Likewise, having come of age as an artist in the effervescent 1950s, when stylistic allegiance was paramount, Harris was singularly comfortable across the spectrum of abstraction and figuration in two or three dimensions. In drawing, printmaking, and painting, his mark-making is richly lyrical, with spirited colors in vibrant dynamism; his bronze and soft sculptures are expansive in form and shape, their intricacies in surface betraying his early training in painting. Harris made lifelong friends on both sides of the aesthetic aisle early in his career, including Richard Diebenkorn and Elaine de Kooning, as he found his particular confidence using both recognizable, familiar imagery from nature with psychologically charged mark making, no matter the medium. Throughout his life, Harris was faithfully disciplined, consummately passionate, a bold experimenter with form, content, and media to find his fullest expression.

Born in Orlando, Florida, Harris's mother passed away when he was six years old; perhaps it was this early loss that propelled him to constantly, steadfastly search out new modes of artistic articulation. He was first introduced to the arts by his

stepmother, dancer Helga Ebsen (who married his father Julian in 1936), and her sister Vilma Ebsen. The sisters took the young artist from Florida to Pacific Palisades, California, in the summer of 1943, so he could study at Chouinard School of Art while working as a riveter at Douglas Aircraft in Los Angeles. This journey was perhaps just the earliest trip in a lifetime of travel for art, which took him across the country as well as to Chile, Jamaica, and beyond. After his 1944 high school graduation, Harris enlisted in the Navy, shipping off to the Pacific Theater on the USS Ault in December of that year. Onboard, he routinely drew his shipmates and made lasting friends, including one from New Mexico who inspired Harris to study there after his release from the Navy. In 1946, Harris enrolled at the University of New Mexico, where Agnes Martin was a classmate, and where he quickly made friends with Richard Diebenkorn and his wife, Phyllis. This also started a period of fervent and formative education (by 1955, he had a BFA and MA degree from UNM and an EdD at Teacher's College, Columbia University). Harris journeyed to the Northeast in 1948, where he first studied with Johannes Molzahn at the New School for Social Research in New York and in the summer of 1949, with Hans Hofmann at his celebrated school in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where Elaine de Kooning was an upstairs neighbor in his waterfront studio. Finding a buddy, confidante, and like-minded figurative abstractionist in de Kooning, the two struck up a conversation



that would last decades, mostly through their frequent letters and postcards to each other. Also in 1949, Harris became engaged to Marguerite Kirk, who would become his faithful and devoted partner as the couple raised two sons. Marguerite was the main breadwinner, while Paul developed his career in the 1960s and 1970s. Also in that decade, the couple lived abroad in both Chile and Jamaica before settling in California.

The pair and their two sons, Christopher and Nicholas, settled there in Bolinas, in 1963, near their friends the Diebenkorns, and at first moved into a house that had previously suffered a fire. Finding discarded mattresses and clothes from the former owner, he set to work rehabilitating them into artworks, manipulating, sewing, and stuffing them. In 1968, Harris began teaching at California College of Arts and Crafts, an institution offering classes across disciplines; this prescient interdisciplinarity put the school at the forefront of every major art movement of the 20th century. Harris—with this tenacity for crossing genres, styles, and disciplines—was a beloved teacher until his retirement in 1992. The 1990s began an equally fervid period of making, as he would publish short stories and prints in his book *Phases of the Moon* in 1995 (published with the imprint he established in 1973–74, Wrongtree Press), worked on bronzes at Shidoni Foundry in Tesuque, New Mexico, and made drawings and cartoons before he died in Montana in 2018.

Quintessentially postmodern, Harris made and exhibited work for over 60 years, vigorously championing the new and nascent in contemporary American art. Harris was an active participant

in two of the most critical arteries of advanced American art of the post-war period: Poindexter Gallery, NY (where he first exhibited in 1958 with a solo presentation), and *ARTnews* (where he was an editorial associate starting in 1955). Harris exhibited his work starting in 1951, with paintings, drawings, prints, and sculptures included in some of the most significant shows of the cacophonous 1960s and 1970s. Among these are the seminal *American Sculpture of the Sixties* (1967), curated by Maurice Tuchman, and the watershed *Sewn, Stitched and Stuffed* (1973-74), curated by Sandra R. Zimmerman, which established textile-based sculpture as a true mode of “high” art. Harris’s vivaciously colored, highly patterned soft sculpture demonstrates a painterly sensibility and a command for expressing emotion through material and formal juxtapositions. They also anticipate installation art of the late 1970s and 1980s in their sense of space and scale. As Tuchman wrote in his introduction to the *American Sculpture of the Sixties* catalogue, Harris was among the vanguard of San Francisco artists who “present sculpture which incorporates change and is patently vulnerable.”¹ As he developed this practice in the 1960s, he served as a Fulbright professor at the Universidad Catolica in Santiago, Chile, and exhibited his work there as well as across Europe. Throughout the next several decades, he continued to explore the boundaries of form and materiality and exhibited his work to acclaim locally and internationally, completing residencies such as at MacDowell and receiving major awards from foundations, including the Guggenheim Fellowship. His work was the subject of numerous solo exhibitions, most

¹ Maurice Tuchman, ed., *American Sculpture of the Sixties* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967). Page 12.



notably in California at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now SFMoMA) in 1966 and 1972, Stanford University Museum of Art, Palo Alto, 1981–82, and the Bolinas Museum, Bolinas, in 1999. Noting his sensitivity towards space, one reviewer for the former exhibition called his work “stunning in its simplicity,” his graceful clarity of form belying many long, hard hours with wood, bronze, and fabric. Throughout his last decades, he continued making work while also writing copious correspondence as well as his short stories and giving lectures, all in an effort to share new modes of expression with the world. Always searching out an authentic form for “loneliness, our desperations, our delights,” Harris tested material as much as formalism, creating a lifetime of artworks, yearning to make lucid his deepest desires and feelings.

#PaulHarris100

Selection of Historical Articles

1958

A reviewer in *Arts*: “With a certain specific, contemporary anecdote in mind, Paul Harris molds papier-mache into a sturdy, critical, witty series of nine masks...*Patriot* glitters in glaucous, snowy enamel, triumphantly coifed in yellow-white hair, her sightless socketed eyes ready to ferret out subversion, the oval, lipless mouth continually in chatter, wherein is seen her triumphant red, white and blue tongue.”

1960

The artist, teacher, and critic Lawrence Campbell who reviewed contemporary painting and sculpture in New York for nearly four decades, wrote in [ARTnews \(October 1960\)](#): “Paul Harris, in this sculpture and drawing show, creates a special ambiance of surprise, of theater...suddenly things seem possible. Instead of making a sculpture and calling it a woman, Harris finds a woman (in this instance, a mannequin) and calls her a sculpture...Somewhere else, two female legs poke through the ceiling, and in the center of the room there is a ‘real’ door with Eve in paper glued to the other side. All these pieces have an essentially magic quality—both for Harris and for the spectator. The figures seem to be alive.”

The *New York Times* art reporter and critic Stuart Preston in “Full Speed in All Directions,” on September 25, 1960: “Finding a category for Paul Harris’s astonishing work at the Poindexter Gallery is no easy matter. A first impression of the

white plaster figures whether whole, truncated, or chopped up into separate pieces, is that of wandering into Madame Tussaud’s on moving day...Then are the big creased plaster shapes that resemble weapons for a pillow fight, or taffy blown up grotesquely. Harris has no end of manual skill at his fingertips, which the excesses of his fantastic, surreal ideas do not disguise.”

1962

Harris was included in the prestigious “New Talent in America” issue of *Art in America*. The two-page spread highlights *Garden Hat* (1956) and *The Onslaught of Puberty* (1960), a striking half-length female nude made of papier mâché and twine. A quote by the artist reads: “I feel that a sculptor makes his comment when he makes a sculpture.” The magazine’s long-running “New Talent” designation, created in 1954, ran in the magazine until 1966, identifying artists in the 1950s and 1960s such as Donald Judd (1928–1994), Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011), Ellsworth Kelly (1923–2015), and Joan Mitchell (1925–1992).

1963

In her review in [Craft Horizons \(May 1963\)](#), sculptor, land artist, and influential fiber artist Alice Adams (b. 1930) wrote: “Five large constructions made of string stretched around and between one by two wooden frames of different shapes and



placements, with the string often used as warp for woven areas. In two of these, approximately twelve-foot tall ‘collapsible monuments,’ the forms are tubular and mostly opaque. More effective, however, are an open forest of black string and a woven, labyrinth, also in black...the idea is startling...these forms represent a leap in a new direction...”

1967

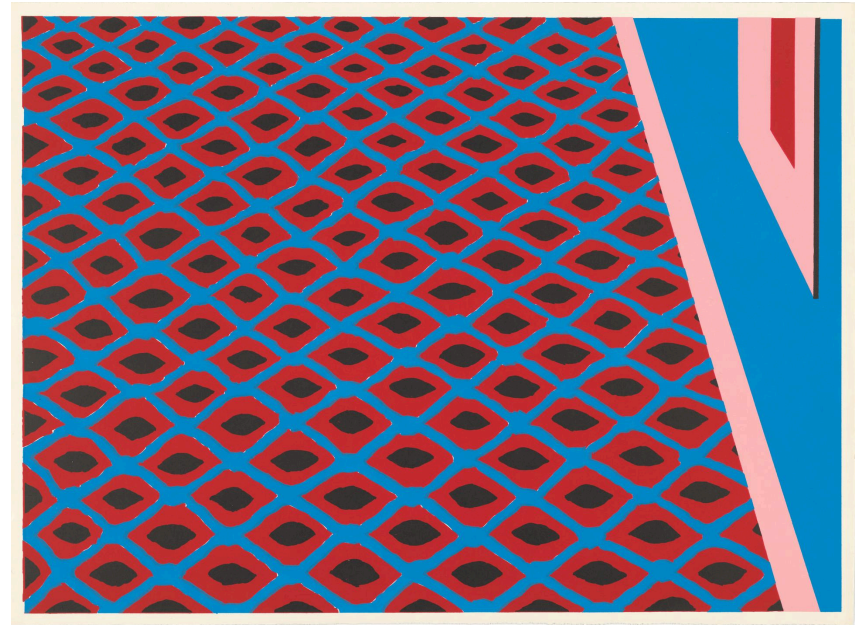
In the [March 1967 issue of *Artforum*](#), Robert Pincus-Witten: “Paul Harris, in these large stitched and stuffed dolls executed between 1964 and 1966, displays an accomplished sense of planar simplification and supple, surface modulation despite the recalcitrant medium he has chosen to work (sew) in. His figures, for all their evidently Pop-ish afflictions—particularly their Vegas color and floral splotches—achieve a kind of distinguished solemnity. Harris is really an equestrian sculptor who has replaced the horse with the chair — circular rattans, wicker seats and chaise lounges. The figures meld into a comfy upholstered world as distant from the slick ingratiations of Frank Gallo as from the neutral, philosophical presences of George Segal...Harris, quite unlike Segal, adores sensuously affronting color...The boy sews like an angel.”

In the 1967 exhibition catalogue [American Sculpture of the Sixties](#), Maurice Tuchman remarked on Harris’s “sewn and stuff personages” as effigies...poignant as they are terrifying.” In an essay in the exhibition catalogue on Dadaist tendencies among contemporary sculptors, James Monte, an American art critic and associate editor at *Artforum*, writes: “Paul Harris, another of the sculptors chosen for the exhibition, remains

difficult to characterize in the normal, ‘he-comes-out-of-so-and-so; or such-and-such a tradition.’ When his upholstered women emerge from their upholstered plinth chairs the viewer experiences a jerky, visual dislocation. The chintz material used to cover the figures and the chairs unifies each piece as an ensemble. Usually Harris paints the various segments of chairs, limbs, clothing, shoes, etc., to give the viewer a better opportunity to differentiate between them. In so doing, he deliberately permits a certain feckless nonchalance to permeate the finished pieces. By grouping four or five pieces together, a tableau effect is created making one acutely aware of the multiplicity of levels on which Harris' work affects the onlooker.”

1970

In “[Paul Harris at Poindexter](#),” May 1970: “In this show, Paul Harris reveals himself as an artist with a special sensibility and a unique way of seeing; he is not an artist whose work is easily recognizable by recurrent stylistic motifs. The Shut-in Suite, a group of lithographs done in conjunction with the Tamarind Lithography Workshop, deals with recollections—of objects seen by the shut-in, of past experiences momentarily revisited....The lithographs seem to reveal that Harris tends to see life in terms of art...a window screen becomes one spare grid set above another, for all the world like a Minimal Agnes Martin drawing. A newspaper seems to evoke the imagery, the sketchy surface and tonal grays of a Jasper Johns graphic. A tiled bathroom wall with a mirrored medicine chest becomes a cool, Pop image.”



Living Room, from the *Shut-In Suite*, 1970, lithograph, 22 13/16 × 31 1/16 inches

A Close Reappraisal of Paul Harris *specially commissioned on occasion of the centennial*

Paul Harris: Interior Interests

Written by Leah Triplett

“Becoming an artist is a serious undertaking rather like preparing for a trek across Antarctica,” wrote Paul Harris (1925–2018) in 2008 to a young cousin considering the life path.² Harris, who would pass away ten years later in 2018, after a long career as a teacher (most notably at California College of the Arts from 1968 to 1992) and with exhibitions nationally and internationally, typed this letter from his longtime home in Bolinas, California. But his art—spanning disciplines and dimensions—had physically taken him and his family across the country, abroad to Chile and Jamaica, and around the world, as his work was exhibited in museums across Europe. Trained in painting but known for sculpture and a consummate drawer, Harris constantly practiced his hand and eye as he stroked crayon across paper or litho stone, molded wax for bronze to be poured, punctured fabric with a sewing needle, or pushed paint across canvas. Emotionally, artmaking was a means for articulating the ineffable, as it went from a boyhood outlet for grappling with the loss of his mother at five years old, a means to show kinship for his crewmates when he served in the Navy during World War II, and how he connected

² Paul Harris, Letter to a young artist dated September 20, 2008. Paul Harris Archives. Accessed July 21, 2025.



Paul Harris with *Instrument and Strings*, 1955, string and metal hoops, 96 x 36 inches

with his coterie of lifelong friends, artists or otherwise, throughout his 92 years. Spanning media, his work is united in a sense of a search; its surfaces, shapes, space, and shades of color, all an effort to survey the oscillations of human experience.

Harris was an innovator of forms and materials, anticipating interdisciplinarity through abstract figuration that harnessed the possibilities of bronze, wood, fabric, and textile-based techniques alike. Accordingly, his prolific practice had been celebrated in his day through critical writing, significant exhibitions, and acquisition in important private and public collections alike. Harris became an artist to critical esteem beyond the reach of most. But, as Harris's son Christopher reflected in his father's eulogy, "fame came by his door but never knocked."³ Indeed, despite his decades of accolades, as well as his place at the forefront of the leading artistic movements throughout the twentieth century, Harris is today less known compared to some of his closest friends (like Richard Diebenkorn or Elaine de Kooning), though no less awarded or lauded. Perhaps Harris felt his career had been like a trek to an unknown land. Writing this letter to an unnamed cousin, Harris must have reflected on moments along the journey; we can imagine him measuring each word in the short, twelve-lined letter, ensuring that they communicated the sum of his wisdom and experience in the most concise, accessible

³ Eulogy for Paul Harris, Paul Harris Art (accessed August 2, 2025), <https://www.paulharrisart.com/new-page-1>



Installation views of *How the West Was Done*, Art Council of Philadelphia, 1966



Woman Smelling Her Roses, 1966, acrylic resin and ink on textile and wood,
60 x 24 x 42 inches

way possible, just as he had all his life in drawing, painting, printmaking, and, most significantly, sculpture. For this work, as Harris wrote to the young cousin, “the rewards were rarely monetary, but the trek can be most interesting.”⁴

It was this curiosity, this pursuit of the “interesting,” that fueled Harris to traverse media, movements, and materials (crayon, pencil, lithography, oil paint, bronze, wood, fabric, plexiglass, were just among the many he used), never resting in any one manifestation of art making. Today, one hundred years after Harris’s birth, artists are celebrated for such versatility and dexterity of materiality. In Harris’s day, a multi-faceted artist confounded the critics and curators who wrote art history. Emerging on the New York scene in the heady days of Abstract Expressionism and the hard lines it drew around style (of which Harris was well aware as both an artist and editorial associate for *ARTnews*), those scaffolding the critical pillars of the postmodern acknowledged a stylistic splintering yet struggled to dispel with silos of simple definitions. As art historian Jo Applin writes in her book *Eccentric Objects: Rethinking Sculpture in 1960s America*, early postmodern critics “recognised the developing art scene as being marked by a number of unusual and seemingly out of place or unfamiliar new directions,” but the “complexity of the period” has nevertheless been fairly reduced to be synonymous with

⁴ Paul Harris, Letter to a young artist dated September 20, 2008. Paul Harris Archives. Accessed July 21, 2025.



Minimalism.⁵ Similarly, almost all of the essayists in the catalogue for the seminal *American Sculpture of the Sixties* (1967), curated by Maurice Tuchman for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art, and including Harris, began their discussion of the form as it related to painting. Likewise, the equally watershed *Sewn, Stitched, & Stuffed* (1973–1974) curated by Sandra R. Zimmerman for the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, NY (now the Museum of Arts and Design), all nineteen artists adhered to traditional ideations of how fabric could be manipulated, as in the characteristic sewing, stitching, and stuffing. And though Harris used all three techniques in his sculpture included in that exhibition (*Flo Waiting*, 1971–72), he singularly fused an abundant sense of space with a sparseness of form, essentially coalescing the tenets of Minimalism with the painterly sensibility of abstraction and figuration. This stylistic fusion typifies Harris's work, regardless of the material or form, while his singular focus on the interiority of an object differentiated him from other artists, critics, and curators of the postmodern period. His chase of the "interesting" is reflected in the confounding but enthralling inwardness, suggesting a pulsating emotionality beyond the formalism of the day. This placed him on a maverick, parallel track to the prevailing taste of his contemporaries, who were much more invested in the surface and exterior. His chase of the "interesting" is reflected in the confounding but enthralling

⁵ Jo Applin, *Eccentric Objects: Rethinking Sculpture in 1960s America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 11.

inwardness, suggesting a pulsating emotionality beyond formalism. As fellow artist and critic Donald Judd wrote in *Specific Objects*, his 1964 essay on new sculpture sweeping the American scene, "the most obvious difference within this diverse work is between that which is something of an object, a single thing, and that which is open and extended, more or less environmental....A work needs only to be interesting."⁶ Mentioning Harris as one such artist heralding the "open and extended," Judd obliquely suggests that the interesting is that which elucidates or intrigues. For Harris, the interesting is interiority.

Quintessentially postmodern, Harris relentlessly pursued new forms and materials throughout his career, driven to eloquently externalize his personal experiences, narratives, and subjectivities. Harris's integration of personal narrative in his work, in concert with his stylistic hybridity, effectively estranged him from a postmodernism that extolled essential objecthood, complicating the criticism of his work. Harris made objects, but in doing so, summed up a tension between interiority and exteriority by integrating a simplicity of form with an expansiveness of shape and surface. Nowhere is this more evident than in his soft and stuffed sculptures, widely exhibited during the 1960s and 1970s; these works presage the Pattern and Decoration movement and foreshadow the

⁶ Donald Judd, *Specific Objects*, in Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959–1975, ed. Kasper König (Halifax, Nova Scotia / New York: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design / New York University Press, 1975; repr., New York: Judd Foundation, 2015, page 184.





synthesis of high and low art forms of the late twentieth century, offering a foundation for artists working intermedially today. In them, he used domestic materials (furniture, fabric, stuffing) to create surface tensions and messy forms from the inside out, making palpable a private, inward domain that referenced his life, simultaneously gesturing towards a more universal experience.

Throughout his writings and teaching, Harris would evoke a sense of emotional interiority as well as a sense of space, just as he did in the letter to the young cousin. Once, on a computer-typed, yet undated but hand-edited note, Harris suggested that artists' works were like extensions of their psyches; he wrote that

When an artist is making a piece, there's an unchecked open channel between the artist's unconsciousness and the work. When one has finished that process the door closes in some way, and the artist is almost a stranger to the work itself.⁷

Harris printed and edited this two-sentence philosophy in bright blue pen; despite this statement, the act of editing nevertheless indicates a meditative, iterative quality to his practice. All of Harris's seven-decade career could be read as something of an iteration on form and content, a consistent

⁷ Paul Harris, undated artist statement. Paul Harris Archives. Accessed August 2, 2025.

attempt to create an open channel between his unconsciousness, his work, his community, and viewers that germinated in his youth.

Born on November 5, 1925, Harris grew up with one sister, a year older, Shirley, in Orlando, Florida. His father, Julian, was an orange broker who also dynamited hardpan—the layer of dense ground just below topsoil—for more orange trees, while his mother, Dorothy Paul Harris, was a homemaker.⁸ Given the domestic scenes of solitary, anonymous women that Harris created starting in the 1960s with stuffed sculpture when he was a family man himself, one wonders what his early home life was like and how that may have influenced his later work. Is the elongated, immense woman that so often figures in this work his mother or another caregiver? Sadly, in 1931, when Harris was only five years old, his mother suddenly and tragically died of unknown causes, precipitating him and his sister moving in with his maternal grandparents. Her unexpected death—and disappearance from his life—powerfully impacted Harris and, according to his son Christopher, who stated in his eulogy that his father “unconsciously tried to heal that wound by immersing himself in artwork and embracing friendships.”⁹

⁸ Jordan Bowen, “Paul Harris, of Bolinas, Harnessed Power in Art,” Point Reyes Light, June 21, 2018, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://www.ptreyeslight.com/features/paul-harris-bolinas-harnessed-power-art/>

⁹ Eulogy for Paul Harris, accessed August 2, 2025.



Paul Harris with his grandmother and sister Shirley in Orlando, Florida, c. 1944, Paul Harris Archives

Truly, artwork and friendship would be the two contours of his life, which would take him from the orange groves of Florida to South America, the South China Sea, Jamaica, Germany, New Mexico, California, and Montana.

Relationships with women (maternal, romantic, or as close friends) were particularly significant to Harris, influencing or guiding him at opportune or fortuitous moments. In 1936, Julian Harris married Helga Ebsen, whose father, Christian Ludolf Ebsen, had a dance studio in Orlando. Alongside her sister, actress Vilma Ebsen, Helga taught Harris and his sister Shirely to dance and encouraged him to pursue the arts. (The Harris siblings eventually performed a tap dance routine at local venues to bring in extra cash for the family.) Meanwhile, a schoolteacher introduced Harris to his lifelong artistic medium—the crayon—when he was in the sixth grade.¹⁰ The waxy, colorful marks that crayons make are limitlessly varied and malleable, and over his lifetime, Harris would create innumerable drawings in crayon that have both material and graphic presence. For instance, in the pastel *Waterboy* (1939), one of Harris's earliest works and a self-portrait, he is depicted in action, carrying a heavy bucket with an arm jutting outward for balance.¹¹ His whole body leaning from the weight, Harris's eyes look outward, towards some unknown action beyond the picture plane. The picture itself almost appears as a

¹⁰ Paul Harris, interview by Carrie Adney, College of Marin radio program, 2000, audio recording, College of Marin, Kentfield, CA, in possession of PaulHarrisArt.com, accessed August 16, 2025.

¹¹ Michele Corriel, "Self-Portraits," unpublished essay, accessed August 23, 2025.

contour drawing, with heavy, curvilinear lines outlining the figure's shape, its volume implied by the heft of Harris's shading. Though heaviness (both thematic and formal) is the dominant feeling of the drawing, the roundness of Harris's line suggested a supple softness, presaging the subtle rotundity of his stuffed sculpture. Further, the pull of primary colors red, yellow, and blue, accented by the secondary greens, portend the "push pull" relationships between colors that Hans Hofmann would teach Harris ten years later at his Provincetown, Massachusetts, during the summer of 1949. The start of that season saw Harris living in a wharf-side shack below Elaine de Kooning, a tenacious artist and prescient writer married to the becoming famous Willem de Kooning (who was fresh off his pivotal 1948 exhibition at Egan Gallery). That summer, the two struck up a close and mutually supportive friendship—often sending each other drawings or other works for critique—that would persist for decades to come. In one such exchange from 1954, after Harris had sent de Kooning some masks (that she hung on her studio wall) as well as drawings, she wrote her impressions of the drawings, calling one depicting a female form "magnificent."¹² de Kooning also critiqued another set of drawings, which, by her description, seem dimensional in Harris's method of adhering cut paper to the surface. "When those little pieces of paper are pasted on and you paint or draw over them, the drawing is made sharper or more unpredictable...the indirection-ness (?) [sic] helps."¹³ Was this

¹² Elaine de Kooning to Paul Harris, 1954, Paul Harris Archives.

¹³ de Kooning to Harris, 1954.



Marguerite's, 1972, crayon on paper, 15 1/2 x 12 1/4 inches

early "indirection-ness" a budding attempt at the interdisciplinarity that Harris would later embrace in sculpture? Or an example of how Harris's hand (and its gesture) always pervaded his work, as he selected small particles of paper to affix and manipulate? Regardless, de Kooning's letter

encouraged him and demonstrates that, even in these years of Abstract Expressionism's dominance, Harris was already resolutely invested in figuration, dimensionality, and evidencing his hand.

Drawing and handwork were integral to Harris's late teenage years and early adulthood. In 1943, six years before his summer in Provincetown, his stepmother and her sister would take him from the Orlando orange groves to Pacific Palisades, California, where he attended classes at the Chouinard School of Art (now the California Institute of the Arts, or CalArts). With World War II raging, he also worked as a riveter for Douglas Aircraft in Los Angeles, but returned home to Florida to graduate from Orlando High School in 1944 and enlisted in the Navy shortly thereafter. By December of that year, he was aboard the USS Ault and entering the Pacific Theater, making fast friends who would nevertheless endure for decades (many of whom would be the subjects of sketches that Harris constantly drew while at sea). One such pal was Servando Trujulo from New Mexico, whose descriptions of the arid and open landscape inspired Harris to enroll in the University of New Mexico following the war in 1946.¹⁴ There, he met Peggy, a classmate whose mother, Mrs. Cannedy, and sister, Billie Bob, ran a rooming house for sixteen boarders that became his home away from home. "All of us had become a family," Harris would later say.¹⁵ Harris lived with the Cannedy family

¹⁴ Paul Harris, "Our Lady of Sorrows Story," undated. Paul Harris Archives. Accessed August 7, 2025.

¹⁵ Harris, "Our Lady of Sorrows Story."

throughout his first stint in Albuquerque and would eventually create the bronze *Our Lady of Sorrows* (1991) for the UNM campus in honor of Billie Bob.



Our Lady of Sorrows, 1991, bronze, 72 x 192 inches, University of New Mexico, Health Sciences Center Plaza, Gift of Douglas and Peggy Kirkland in memory of Billie Cannedy Earnest, 2002; *Our Lady of Sorrows*, 1983, pencil on paper, 18 ½ x 12 ½ inches

Still referencing softness and femininity, despite its materiality and angularity, this bronze is among the most spare of Harris's sculptures. In dialogue with many of his referential bronzes of the 1980s and 1990s, the black, patinated bell shape in this work is an oversized, pleated skirt in mid-swish, although the wearer is nonexistent. This absence (much like the voided faces of the female figures in his soft sculptures) is perhaps referencing that of his mother, whom he had drawn as a nameless woman at six years old, recalling a figure at once deeply personal and universal. Recalling this during his remarks to inaugurate the sculpture in 1991, Harris said of *Our Lady of Sorrows* emanated from this "simple drawing" that he

found great comfort in this drawing...A few months earlier my mother had died...Although she didn't wear floor length skirts she must have had some robes or gowns that went to the floor...behind which I could hide. Something lost had been somewhat regained. A six year old had discovered that art has astonishing possibilities.¹⁶

Indeed, the female figure, along with a textured, worked surface, would be a hallmark of Harris's work across media, the form and aesthetic abstractedly disclosing a powerful, poignant psychological realm. Slender on top and billowing in neat, vertical folds, the "skirt" in *Our Lady of Sorrows* is hewn with linear, hand-drawn, scratch-like marks throughout its

surface, imbuing not only a sense of movement but also a sense of wear and tear, thus of time passing and imprinting its duration on our bodies.

Harris's matriculation in Albuquerque was the start of a fervent, if itinerant, education and early career as an art professor. While there, he met Agnes Martin, who recently moved from New York to study for her MFA at UNM. Still a beat away from the deceptively simple formal compositions of color and line, Martin nevertheless heralded an evolution beyond Expressionism or Action Painting toward the essentialism of Minimalism as well as the relationality of assemblage. Form—what it was, its potential, and its importance to all art forms—dominated conversations at the UNM studios and beyond. Already occupied with questions of form, Harris sought acquaintance with a myriad of cultures, places, and teachers; before he completed his BFA and MFA from UNM, Harris traveled around Central America, studied in New York with Johannes Molzahn at the New School for Social Research, and spent a summer in Provincetown with Hofmann, de Kooning, and other leading lights of American painting. By the mid-1950s, he had married Marguerite Kirk and completed an EdD at Columbia University's Teacher's College, where he wrote a thesis on artists-as-teachers and patronage.¹⁷ Like generations of artists after him, Harris assumed a career in education as a means for stable, if not substantial, financial support. And like generations of women

¹⁶ Harris, "Our Lady of Sorrows Story."

¹⁷ Michele Corriel, "Self-Portraits," unpublished essay, accessed August 23, 2025.



artists before and after him, his family (by 1954, sons Christopher and Nicholas) and home life ordered his artistic one. The public and private fed from each other as the Harrises moved to Jamaica in 1952, where Harris taught at the Quaker School in Highgate and then Knox College, and then to Santiago, Chile, where he was a Fulbright Professor at the Universidad Catolica from 1961–1963. While in Chile, Harris wrote to his friend, Richard Diebenkorn, whom he had first met in New Mexico, asking for leads on a job in the Bay Area, where Diebenkorn lived with his wife, Phyllis, and two kids. This eventually led to a job at the San Francisco Art Institute and then, finally, in 1968, at the cutting edge California College of Arts and Crafts in San Francisco. In 1964, the Harrises settled about an hour north in Bolinas, where they would mostly reside for the rest of their lives.

In the family's first Bolinas home, Harris found and reclaimed furniture, clothing, and other detritus that the previous occupant had left after a fire. As thrifty as he was inventive, Harris quickly landed on the sculptural potential of these discarded household items. Brightly colored fabrics were collaged and stitched together in an assemblage of patterns, while upholstery was repurposed as stuffing to create figurative forms, almost cartoonish in their swell and scale alike. For instance, in *Woman in Blue Slacks* (1963), one of his earliest stuffed works, a singular woman sits on a chair striped with blue, grey, black, and white. Her legs are crossed at the knees, and her arms rest on her lap and to her side, respectively. The

titular woman is lifelike in both gesture and form. Nevertheless, a certain absurd roundness pervades her body, melding her into the similar fullness of her chair. Her upturned face, raised in attention as if she's just been called to, is disturbingly blank, a void in a work otherwise rich in detail (her blue ballet slipper shoes, the seams in her denim-colored outfit, and the tawny tone of her hair). This uncanny edge between lifelike and abstract is further teased in works like *Woman Looking Out to Sea* (1965), in which a female figure lies almost prostrate, her legs swept beneath her and hidden under a floral skirt, on another striped chair, this one rounded with layers of orange and blue. The depicted woman rests her chin on a hand along the top edge of the chair, while her other stretches out behind her and onto the azure blossoms of her skirt. The woman's dark crimson hair appears windblown, pieced together with white seams, and our gaze naturally follows hers away from the sculpture and into its surroundings, as it does with *Woman in Blue Slacks*. Like the earlier work, the face in *Woman Looking Out to Sea* is but an absence, left for the viewer to project their own interpretations of what that countenance might be, thereby drawing on their own memories or experiences of similar scenes. Harris evoked gestures, patterns, and body language that, while extracted from his domestic and everyday life in Bolinas, nevertheless articulated something of an emotional universality.

Like Pop artists Duane Hanson or Claes Oldenburg, Harris's work in the 1960s and 1970s relied on seemingly ubiquitous or





Woman Looking Out to Sea, 1965, stuffed cloth on metal chair frame,
43 x 26 x 31 inches

mundane objects or environments to meditate on the everyday life of the turbulent times. Often extracting the prosaic from their typical contexts, these artists critiqued or celebrated the mass-produced and hyper-commercialized ethos of the

post-war period; in his work, Harris extracted and elevated the ordinary as a means of personal expression. Manipulating the aesthetic characteristics of the soft to make strange the familiar, Harris, like Oldenburg, relied on a sense of humor or the absurd to enchant and enthrall the viewer. However, Harris's use of the soft was less a means of critique and more a way to create an "open channel" between himself, his unconscious, and his viewers. The soft emotionally charged and otherwise straightforward representation or figuration, as the reality of the material distorted and abstracted into the poetic. As Maurice Tuchman wrote in his catalogue essay introducing *American Sculpture of the Sixties*:

Many artists of this decade are explicitly concerned with the presentation of Man, and say so clearly...Real props fill out these works. [Harris] makes savagely mutilated life-sized freestanding figure assemblages, primarily from cloths and fabrics...in his sewn and stuffed personages...his effigies are as poignant as they are terrifying...the "representational" element—the potency of the image—is so charged as to blind our cognizance of the forms. Originality of content seemingly overpowers "style." In a period marked by the contributions of abstraction, objects and figures have been re-introduced [sic] into sculpture with directness and conviction.¹⁸

¹⁸ Maurice Tuchman, ed., *American Sculpture of the Sixties* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967), 11.



Installation view of *American Sculpture of the Sixties*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967

Tuchman selected four vibrantly colorful soft sculptures depicting women for the exhibition: *Women Laughing* (1964), *Woman Giving Her Greeting* (1964), *Woman in Green Gown* (1965), and *Woman Smelling Her Roses* (1966). In each, Harris's female figures perform a routine action that suggests another person or thing (such as laughing, greeting, looking, or smelling). All but *Woman Giving Her Greeting* incorporates a patterned, rotund, and seemingly comfortable chair or chaise with which the figure's simplified physicality coalesces. These early stuffed works are tableaux not unlike those of Marisol or

Edward Kienholz made in through hard materials, and they anticipate the installation or "environmental" work that these artists would explore over the decades from the 1970s onward. However, Harris would explore the relational and situational aspects in his soft sculpture, emphasizing a volume of form instead of an emptied-out, "hollow" of object that Barbara Rose describes in "Post-Cubist Sculpture," her essay for *American Sculpture of the Sixties*.

As critics grappled with the aesthetic and material diversity of the postmodern (fractured in style, yet unified in a distrust of grand narrative as well as embrace of irony and material purity) sculpture, Harris continued to exploit the emotional possibilities of softness. For this, he was among a vanguard of artists across the US manipulating fabric, string, and batting through deskilled or sophisticated needlework and weaving. Included in a groundbreaking show of such work, *Sewn, Stitched, and Stuffed* (1973-74), Harris's *Flo Waiting* (1971-72) is a room-sized installation with walls enclosing a single female form, her hands almost clasped as she stands erect off center in the room, her head pointed up in anticipation. Her solid, royal purple floor-length gown contrasts with the tight lines of bell-shaped flowers and vines that pattern the installation's wallpaper. Two potted plants bookend the figure along the right wall. Do the plants, which are about as tall as a third of the wall, signify a burgeoning growth as yet unrealized? Is the figure between the pair of these two young greens, just as Harris was amidst representation and

abstraction, sculpture and installation, with this work? Unlike many of his soft sculptures of the period, *Flo Waiting* has a smoothness of surface—all of its edges flattened and seamless—that belies the full shapeliness of the stuffed technique. This flatness, coupled with the relationship between figure and ground, light and shadow, serves to emphasize the poignancy of the figure’s expectation and sensuality, as its objecthood is sneakily and neatly rendered into clean volume, shape, and spatiality, more traditionally associated with sculpture.

Lucy Lippard, surveying the new sculpture of the 1960s, identified such evocative formalism as “eccentric abstraction.” Writing her essay to introduce her 1966 exhibition of the same title at Fischbach Gallery, Lippard states that artists in this vein

refuse to eschew imagination and the extension of sensuous experience while they also refuse to sacrifice the solid formal basis demanded of the best in current non-objective art...the eccentric idiom is more closely related to abstract painting than to sculptural forms.¹⁹

Harris, with his commitment to representation and figuration, does not fit squarely in Lippard’s definition. However, his abstract style, so informed by painterly color and surface tension, nevertheless commands a psychological sphere

¹⁹ Lucy R. Lippard, “Eccentric Abstraction,” in *Abstraction*, ed. Maria Lind (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 89.

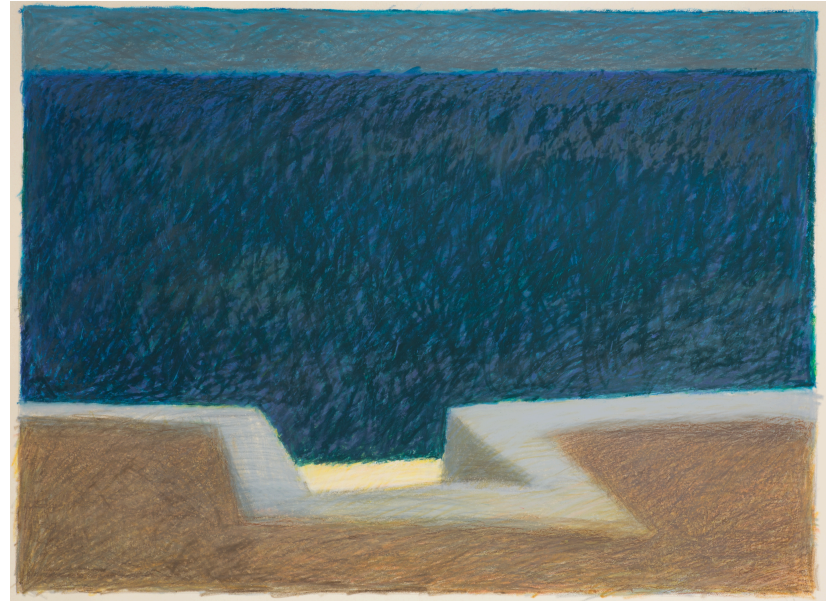
through the nature of his materials. This is inscribed in his surfaces, which, no matter his media, tend toward the rough-hewn, the haptic, or the tactile. Preoccupied with form throughout his career, Harris summons a formlessness within his forms, letting an eccentricity take hold once it is contained. Not intrinsic to his materiality, his forms were rooted in emotion. As he wrote on form following a class for San Quentin inmates co-taught with his friend and former CCA student, Rick Hall, forms emerge “from concentrated yearning or desire...Sculpture must engage, arouse, disturb, and irritate some tiny particle within us that nothing else touches.”²⁰ This definition of sculpture assumes that forms—figurative or otherwise—tease a certain eccentricity, an interiority felt singularly but, through art, shared widely.

Harris would never surrender his pursuit to give form to “our loneliness, our desperations, our delights,” as evidenced in his drawings, prints, and sculptures from his last decades, marked by rich texture and dynamism that reflect the varied verisimilitude of emotion.²¹ Drawings and prints from the 1980s on (such as *The Way Down to the Sea*, 1983, or *Flores*, 1993) build up surface and shades of color through quick, urgent scrawls of line that feel, as de Kooning called his drawings a half-century beforehand, “unpredictable.” With a similar aesthetic, in 2007 (a year before writing his young cousin), Harris completed a portrait in bronze depicting

²⁰ Paul Harris, “Thoughts on Form,” Paul Harris Archive. Accessed August 7, 2025.

²¹ Harris, “Thoughts on Form.”

nothing but his face. His mouth opened in agony, his eyes hauntingly vacant, the intricately rough, Rodin-like finish betraying an anguish as well as a mesmerizing passion. Across the dark patina, the skin is folded and almost craggy, effectively drawing interest to see the facial features through the veneer. Like all of his life's work, this bronze manifests inside behind the face, and searches outward to the trek of finding connection beyond the unchecked channel between form and psyche.



The Way Down to the Sea, 1983, crayon on paper, 15 ½ x 21 ½ inches



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