THE ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE FOUNDATION

Michael Ward Stout, Lawyer Who Shaped Artists' Legacies

Michael Ward Stout, the longtime president of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation and a New York lawyer whose work and influence helped define the field of art law, died peacefully in his sleep on October 16, 2026, in Carmel, New York. He was 83.

After working for several established law firms, Mr. Stout launched his own law practice in 1974, a time when few lawyers considered the representation of visual artists to be a viable specialty. Over five decades he helped make it one. His clients included an array of creative people and arts institutions, including noted painters, sculptors, photographers, choreographers, designers, arts foundations, artists' estates, and art museums. Artists relied on him for advice on the complex legal and practical issues unique to the visual and creative arts, including the innovative use of artist-endowed foundations to protect a creator's legacy after death. For many of his clients, as well as the institutions that dealt with them, his legal counsel established the working rules of this esoteric field.

An early client was Salvador Dalí, whom Mr. Stout met at a Soho party in 1975. Mr. Stout worked extensively with Dalí until the artist's death in 1989 on a range of issues as diverse as structuring a complex international artwork transaction or figuring out how to rent a horse-drawn sleigh in Manhattan (as Dalí once demanded after a major snowfall).

Another long-standing client, as well as a close friend, was Robert Mapplethorpe, whom Mr. Stout represented during his lifetime. After the photographer's death from AIDS in 1989, Mr. Stout became president of the foundation that Mapplethorpe, with Mr. Stout's guidance, had established a year earlier. Mr. Stout served in this capacity for more than three decades, and was deeply involved in the culture wars that erupted over Mapplethorpe's photographs, including the legal battle in Cincinnati that followed the arrest of a museum director on obscenity charges for exhibiting Mapplethorpe's images. Mr. Stout's championing of the photographer's work in the years that followed was instrumental in securing Mapplethorpe's artistic reputation, consistent with the Mapplethorpe Foundation's mandate to promote photography as a fine art on a par with sculpture and painting.

As the Mapplethorpe Foundation's president, Mr. Stout also spent several decades working to advance the foundation's second charitable mandate, which is to support AIDS and HIV research. He served on the boards of the Robert Mapplethorpe Residential Treatment Facility at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York, and the American Foundation for AIDS Research.

Over the years, Mr. Stout represented an array of other noted artists, as well as artists' estates and artist-endowed foundations, such as the estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the Keith Haring Foundation. He served on the photography committees of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and on the Library Council of the Museum of Modern Art. He was a long-time member of the board of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College and the Chazen Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin (his alma mater). He was a member of the American Bar Association and, from 1997 to 1999, a member of the Art Law Committee of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York. He was frequently honored by the various institutions he supported and was a recipient of the Whitney Museum's American Art Award.

When the U.S. government investigated art fraud, it frequently turned to Mr. Stout. He testified as an expert in proceedings brought by the United States Department of Justice, the New York State Attorney General's Office, the Federal Trade Commission, and the United States Postal Service. He lectured on copyright, the visual arts, and estate-planning for artists, and he was particularly knowledgeable about artist-endowed foundations. Much of the expertise he imparted was developed from his own law practice, which focused almost exclusively on contemporary visual arts.

Mr. Stout was a well-known figure in the international art world, and was frequently an instrumental player in high-profile art exhibitions, museum acquisitions, artwork commissions, and other fine-art projects. Some of the most prominent figures in the art world relied on his counsel, and so did relatively unknown artists. An unrecognized and struggling painter received the same unhurried consideration from Mr. Stout as he bestowed upon a major museum director. He particularly valued his collaborations and friendships with curators, whom he felt were the art world's key figures, second only to the artists themselves. A conversation with Michael Stout was always a highlight, and often the moment when a difficult problem became manageable.

Michael Ward Stout was born in Milwaukee in 1943. He attended both the college and law school of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, receiving his bachelor's degree in 1965 and his law degree in 1968.

He was a classically trained pianist, and also loved to play the organ. He delighted in the restored pipe organ he installed in the barn of his country house, and played it barefoot to better feel the pedals. He particularly enjoyed entertaining his many friends in his inimitable style, formal without being stiff, generous without ostentation. Mr. Stout had a gift for friendship and an uncanny ability to befriend people from every walk of life. He was famously engaging in conversation, and his anecdotes, gathered over a long, eventful, and well-lived life, were delivered with dry wit and a broad smile. He was as invariably attentive to the youngest guest at the table as to the most celebrated.

Mr. Stout met his longtime friend, Stephen Shea, in the mid-1960s, and they maintained their close friendship for five decades until Mr. Shea's death earlier this year. Mr. Stout is survived by his sister-in-law, Joanne Stout, and his two nieces, Paula Moldenhauer and Stefanie Strasburg.