



Frank Stella with one of his works at the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition in London in 2000.
Photo: Ian Nicholson/PA Images via Getty Images

RENOWNED PAINTER AND PIONEER OF MINIMALISM FRANK STELLA DIES AT 87

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Renowned minimalist painter Frank Stella died Saturday of lymphoma at his home in Manhattan, N.Y. The artist was 87 years old.

Stella's representative, Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York, confirmed the news with NPR.

"Marianne Boesky began representing Stella in 2014, and the gallery is deeply grateful for a decade of collaboration with the artist and his studio," Boesky said in a [statement](#) shared with NPR. "It has been a great honor to work with Frank for this past decade. His is a remarkable legacy, and he will be missed."

One of the most influential American artists of his time, Stella was a pioneer of the minimalist movement of the early 1960s. During that time, painters and sculptors challenged the idea that art was meant to be representative and used their medium as their message.



Stella's *Die Fahne hoch!* (1959) is part of a series of paintings that earned the artist notoriety in the 1950s.
Photo: 2015 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Digital Image

Instead of representing three-dimensional worlds through the canvas, some of Stella's early artworks reflected his desire to have an immediate visual impact upon viewers. A series titled *Black Paintings* used parallel black stripes to prompt awareness of the painting as a two-dimensional surface. As Stella once gnomically stated, "What you see is what you see."

"It was about being able to make an abstract painting that really wasn't based on anything but the gesture of making itself, which was the gesture of making the painting," Stella [Terry Gross in a Fresh Air interview in 2000](#).

Frank Stella was born into a middle-class Italian American family. His father was a gynecologist who painted houses during the Great Depression and his mother was a housewife and artist. Young Stella grew up surrounded by paint; amongst his mother's artworks and helping his father whenever he repainted his own home. "I always liked paint," he told Gross, "the physicality of it."

He started exploring paint more professionally when he was in high school in Massachusetts under the supervision of abstractionist painter Patrick Morgan, who taught there. Even while studying history as a Princeton undergraduate, Stella continued taking art classes. Through his Ivy League connections, Stella was introduced to the art world of New York City, which started to shape his early artistic vision as he encountered artists such as Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline, who would become some of his most admired influences.

"I really wanted more than anything to make art that was as good as the good artists were making. I wanted to make art that someday — and I didn't expect it to be that way right away — that it would be as good as [Willem] de Kooning or Kline or [Barnett] Newman or Pollock or [Mark] Rothko. They were my heroes and I wanted to make art that was as good as them," he told *Fresh Air*.

When Stella was only 23, he made his debut at New York's Museum of Modern Art. And soon after his series *Black Paintings*, which he started in 1958, Stella created two more series, *Aluminum Paintings* (1960) and *Copper Paintings* (1960-61), that committed to the idea that the art was in the medium and was, [as he told The Guardian in 2015](#), supposed to be "fairly straightforward."

In 1970, when he was 33 years old, Stella became the youngest artist ever to receive a retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art. His exhibition covered a decade of his drawings and paintings and emphasized his originality in simplicity.

In the 1990s, Stella's work evolved from the canvas to colorful geometrical configurations and sculptures. He started using computer technology and architectural rendering to incorporate digital images into his work. His *Moby Dick* series, a set of paintings, lithographs, and sculptures, took their titles from chapters of Herman Melville's classic novel. According to the [Princeton University Art Museum](#), the series was Stella's "most ambitious artistic endeavor ... [that] pushes the boundaries between printmaking, painting, and sculpture."

A straightforward, rather blunt artist, Stella never really cared about what others thought of him — or of his art. But his six-decade career inspired generations of artists, including painter Julie Mehretu. "Once I really started to understand his work and follow it, there's a certain type of invention and playfulness and extreme rigor with which he kept going forward," she [said in a 2015 NPR interview](#).

Stella's numerous awards and accolades included the [National Medal of Arts](#), the country's highest honor for artistic excellence, in 2009, and the 2011 Lifetime Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award from the [International Sculpture Center](#).



Visitors walk past the installation *The Honor and Glory of Whaling* (1991) by Frank Stella in the Folkwang Museum in Essen, Germany, in 2010.
Photo: Volker Hartmann/DDP/AFP via Getty Images.