

The New York Times Magazine



Frank Stella in 2019. In an admonition to critics, he insisted that “what you see is what you see” — a formulation that became the unofficial motto of the minimalist movement.
Credit: Christopher Gregory for The New York Times

FRANK STELLA, TOWERING ARTIST AND MASTER OF REINVENTION, DIES AT 87

BY WILLIAM GRIMES
MAY 4, 2024

Frank Stella, whose laconic pinstripe “black paintings” of the late 1950s closed the door on Abstract Expressionism and pointed the way to an era of cool minimalism, died on Saturday at his home in the West Village of Manhattan. He was 87.

His wife, Dr. Harriet E. McGurk, said the cause was lymphoma.

Mr. Stella was a dominant figure in postwar American art, a restless, relentless innovator whose explorations of color and form made him an outsize presence, endlessly discussed and constantly on exhibit.

Few American artists of the 20th century arrived with quite his éclat. He was in his early 20s when his large-scale [black paintings](#) — precisely delineated black stripes separated by thin lines of blank canvas — took the art world by storm. Austere, self-referential, opaque, they cast a chilling spell.

Writing in *Art International* magazine in 1960, the art historian William Rubin declared himself “almost mesmerized” by the “eerie, magical presence” of the paintings. Time only ratified the consensus.

“They remain some of the most unforgettable, provocative paintings in the recent history of American Modernism,” the critic Karen Wilkin wrote in *The New Criterion* in 2007. In 1989, “Tomlinson Court Park,” a black painting from 1959, sold at auction for \$5 million.

Mr. Stella, a formalist of Calvinist severity, rejected all attempts to interpret his work. The sense of mystery, he argued, was a matter of “technical, spatial and painterly ambiguities.” In an oft-quoted admonition to critics, he insisted that “what you see is what you see” — a formulation that became the unofficial motto of the minimalist movement.

Over the next five decades, he proved himself a master of reinvention. In the early 1960s he animated the stripe formula with vibrant colors and [shaped canvases](#). Later in the decade, he embarked on the wildly ambitious "Protractor" series — more than 100 mural-size paintings crowded with overlapping half-circles of brilliant, sometimes fluorescent, color. The paintings, inspired by that simple measuring tool in the title, "carry the whole notion of chromatic abstraction to a point of almost baroque elaboration," Hilton Kramer wrote in *The New York Times*.



"Protractor Variation IX" (1968). In Mr. Stella's "Protractor" series, more than 100 mural-size paintings were crowded with overlapping half-circles of brilliant, sometimes fluorescent, color.
Photo: Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

First exhibited at the Leo Castelli Gallery in Manhattan in 1967, the series made Mr. Stella "a god of the sixties art world, exalting tastes for reductive form, daunting scale, and florid artificial color," the critic [Peter Schjeldahl wrote](#) in *The New Yorker* in 2015. Mr. Stella's impact on abstraction, Mr. Schjeldahl added, "was something like Dylan's on music and Warhol's on more or less everything."

In the 1970s and '80s, with great panache, Mr. Stella abandoned the flat picture plane, pushing his works away from the wall in assemblages bristling with painted aluminum curlicues, curves and whorls.

These "maximalist paintings," as he called them, were extroverted, joyous and buzzing with energy, light-years removed from the brooding authority of the black paintings. They served as a calling card for Mr. Stella's next phase, as a designer of large public works, such as the murals for the Gas Company Tower in Los Angeles (1991) and the hatlike bandshell, formed of convoluted aluminum ribbons, that he delivered to the city of Miami in 1997.

Some critics found his work uninviting and programmatic. Harold Rosenberg, writing in *The New Yorker* in 1970, scoffed at Mr. Stella's ideas as "chessboard aesthetics."

Reviewing an exhibition of his earliest paintings in *The Times* in 2006, [Roberta Smith wrote](#) that his work since the early 1980s was regarded by many as "inherently corporate." Mr. Schjeldahl, in *The New Yorker*, dismissed much of the work after 1970 as "disco modernism."

For most of his career, however, Mr. Stella rode a wave of adulation and stupendous commercial success, buoyed by dozens of one-man shows and retrospectives at museums around the world.

Mr. Rubin, after becoming the Museum of Modern Art's director of painting and sculpture, reaffirmed his admiration for Mr. Stella's work by making him the youngest artist ever to be honored with a retrospective at the museum in 1970, when he was 34. In another unprecedented move, Mr. Rubin mounted a second retrospective in 1987.

Mr. Stella was the first abstract artist to be invited to deliver the Charles Eliot Norton lecture at Harvard, in 1983 and 1984. (The lectures were published in 1986 as "Working Space.") In 2015, when the Whitney Museum of American

Art reopened in its new building, in the Chelsea section of Manhattan, the inaugural exhibition was a Stella [retrospective](#).

In 2020, the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Conn., presented "Frank Stella's Stars," a survey of the artist's use of star forms in various mediums, culminating in sculptures made in the last few years.

Frank Philip Stella was born on May 12, 1936, in Malden, Mass., north of Boston, to Frank and Constance (Santonelli) Stella. His mother had gone to art school and later took up landscape painting. His father was a gynecologist and also a painting enthusiast.

The younger Frank attended Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., where one of his instructors, the painter Bartlett H. Hayes Jr., exposed him to the work of Hans Hofmann and Josef Albers.

At Princeton, where he earned a bachelor's degree in history in 1958, Mr. Stella became fast friends with the future critic Michael Fried and the future color-field painter Walter Darby Bannard.

Again he was fortunate in his teachers. William Seitz, with whom he studied art history, established an artist in residence program under which the New York abstract painter Stephen Greene gave the school's first studio courses in painting and drawing.



Frank Stella with his daughter Rachel in 1963
Photo: Robert Walker/The New York Times

With much encouragement from Mr. Greene, Mr. Stella turned out gestural paintings in the manner of Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning. But after seeing Jasper Johns's flag paintings at the Castelli Gallery in 1958, he took a cooler, more analytic approach that derived its effects from precision and repetition.

After failing his Army physical — a childhood accident had left him with missing joints on the fingers of his left hand — he settled into a studio on the Lower East Side and began working on the black paintings, supplementing his income by painting houses.

In 1961, he married Barbara Rose, an art-history student at the time but soon to become a widely read critic of contemporary art. The marriage ended in divorce in 1969; she died in 2020.

Mr. Stella is survived by his wife, Dr. Harriet E. McGurk, a pediatrician, and their two sons, Patrick and Peter; two children from his first marriage, Rachel and Michael; a daughter, Laura, from a relationship with Shirley De Lemos Wyse between his marriages; and five grandchildren.

Recognition came with lightning speed. His work was shown in group exhibitions at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery and Castelli in 1959. Later that year, Dorothy Miller included four of his paintings in "16 Americans" at the Museum of Modern Art, which bought "The Marriage of Reason and Squalor."

In the next few years Mr. Stella appeared in two important shows: "Toward a New Abstraction," at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan in 1963, and "Post-Painterly Abstraction," curated by the all-powerful critic Clement Greenberg at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1964.

In 1965, he was selected to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale, where he was the odd man out in a Pop-heavy lineup that included Mr. Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Jim Dine and Claes Oldenburg.

By then he had already escaped the endgame aesthetics of the black paintings, using commercial radiator paint to produce striped works in copper and aluminum and concentric squares based on primary colors.

In a subsequent series of paintings, he reconfigured his canvases to follow the geometry of the stripes. This was the first in a series of quasi-sculptural moves leading to the shaped canvases of the "Irregular Polygons" series, with their large expanses of unbroken color, and the grandly exuberant Protractor paintings, his first big sellers, whose completion brought him to a turning point.

"By the late '60s, I seemed to hit a wall with the very large Protractor paintings," he told the journal *Sculpture* in 2011. "I didn't think I could take color and surface flatness any farther."

In the 1970s, he began producing metal reliefs that progressed from the vaguely Constructivist "Brazilian" series to the "Exotic Birds" and "Indian Birds" series, in which aluminum curls, whorls and graffiti-like marks jutted out from an aluminum panel or grid.

He veered even further into three dimensions after visiting Rome in the early 1980s and studying the work of Caravaggio, whose intense chiaroscuro and deep space made a profound impact on him. "The space that Caravaggio created is something that 20th-century painting could use: an alternative both to the space of conventional realism and to the space of what has come to be conventional painterliness," he said in one of the Norton lectures he delivered at Harvard.

Although the works were undeniably three-dimensional, he referred to them as "maximalist paintings" or "painted reliefs."

"No matter how sculptural or three-dimensional or projective they might be from the wall, the essential way that you look at them and address them is through the conventions of painting," he told *The Times* in 1987.

Mr. Stella continued to explore his distinctive blend of painting and sculpture in the late 1980s and '90s in an extended series of 266 mixed-media reliefs based on "Moby-Dick," whose 135 chapter titles he applied to the works, and in florid, occasionally raucous sculptures like "Kamdampat" (2002) and the computer-generated "[Scarlati Kirkpatrick](#)" series, begun in 2006.

A sculpture of Mr. Stella's called "Jasper's Split Star" (2017), constructed out of six small geometric grids that rest on an aluminum base, was [installed](#) in the public plaza in front of 7 World Trade Center in November 2021.

The full range of his work was on display in the career-encompassing "Frank Stella: A Retrospective" at the Whitney in 2015, an outsize show for a towering if divisive figure, as obsessed as Ahab in his quest to reframe abstraction.

"Even the clunkers, such as a ghastly pileup of cast aluminum painted with wavy, tie-dye patterns, exhibit prodigious, indeed Melvillian, ambition," the critic Jason Farago wrote in [The Guardian](#). "They are the works of an artist unwilling, unable, to sit still."