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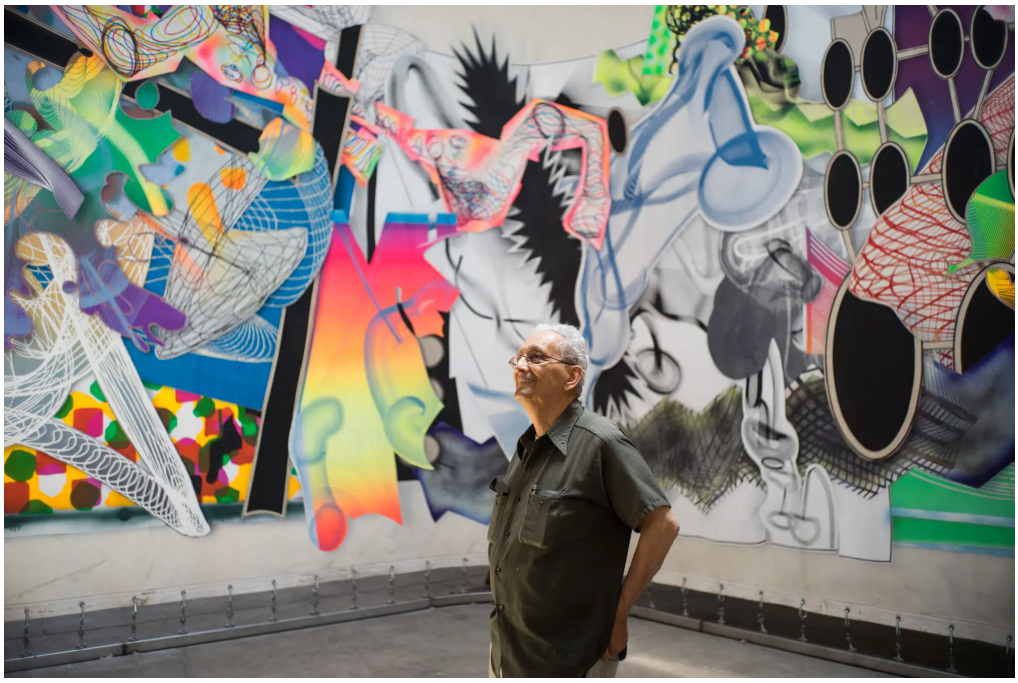

Frank Stella in 2015 in his studio in Rock Tavern, N.Y., with "The Michael Kohlhaas Curtain," which measures 100 feet long. A breathtaking painting and sculpture of geometric and ornamental elements and colors, it seems to pop out of the canvas
Photo: Todd Heisler/The New York Times

FRANK STELLA WENT FROM BAUHAUS TO FUN HOUSE

BY DEBORAH SOLOMON
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Frank Stella, who died on Saturday at age 87, once joked that he harbored only one regret. We were sitting in his scruffy studio in the East Village, and he said he was sorry that he had failed to take legal action when the men's wear store bearing his name opened in New York in the mid-70s. "People call here all the time asking for cashmere coats," he said.

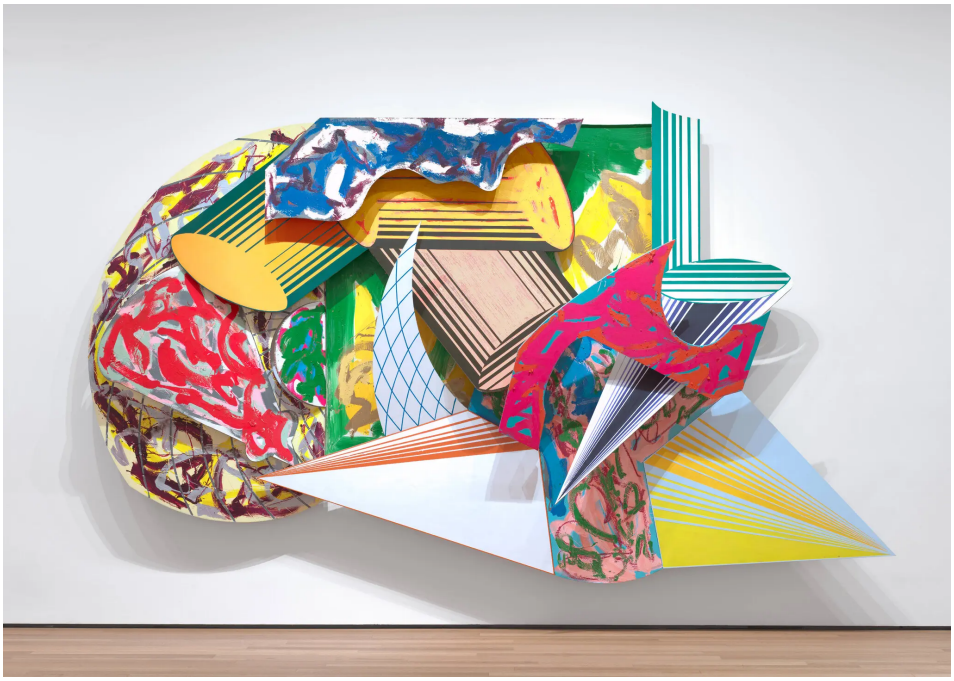
Stella, it can safely be said, was not a fashion plate. To the end of his life, he had the aura of a nervous whiz kid with oversize glasses and frizzy hair. He counted himself among the socially marginalized and once joked in a personal letter about "all us miscreants who drifted into the Bowery of Life, the art world."

His great passion was abstract painting, and he began his career with a big bang. In 1959, at the advanced age of 23, he became famous overnight for his Black Paintings, with narrow stripes that extend from edge to edge of the canvas and purged abstract art of any hint of spiritual uplift. Despite their portentous titles ("Die Fahne hoch!" for instance, or "The Marriage of Reason and Squalor II"), the paintings reference nothing outside themselves. "What you see is what you see," Stella declared, providing the Minimalist movement with a pithy and enduring slogan.

If Stella helped spawn the Minimalist movement of the '60s, he was also its best-known defector. In the late 1970s, he did an unrepentant flip-flop, pursuing deep space and baroque curves as fanatically as he had once eschewed them. Works such as the Museum of Modern Art's "Giufà, la luna, i ladri e le guardie" (1984) pile metal cones and columns into a nine-foot-tall assemblage that juts off the wall. He produced, with very mixed results, a profusion of giant metal reliefs, undulating and glittery constructions sprayed with automotive paint. Some of them are hard to relate to, except as spectacle, and feel like a cross between the Bauhaus and a fun house.

Today, in our era of figuration and socially conscious painting, Stella's 60-year devotion to abstract art might sound academic or even antediluvian. By his own admission, he did not see art as an efficient vehicle for improving society

or combating injustice. “If artists want to do something useful,” he once told me, “they can be social workers or politicians. Or they can join the U.S. Army. Art does not do what a social worker does. No abstract image is going to help anyone.”



“Giufà, la luna, i ladri e le guardie,” 1984. In a turnabout from Minimalism, Stella piled metal cones and columns into a nine-foot-tall assemblage that jutted off the wall at the Museum of Modern Art.
Credit: Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via the Museum of Modern Art

“A lot of people are under the illusion that art is good therapy,” he added. “But it’s only good enough therapy for people who aren’t sick. If you’re really sick, it’s not good enough.”

Stella began his career in the Eisenhower era, when art tendencies, as much as gender tendencies, were expected to fall into fixed categories. You were either an abstract artist or a figurative one. Over the decades, America changed — it opened up to both gender fluidity and genre fluidity — but Stella did not. He never stopped insisting on the inherent superiority of abstract painting. The goal of art, he finally decided, was “to create space,” by which he meant that he wanted to imbue abstract painting with the roominess — the ideal of amplitude — that had defined figurative painting since the Renaissance.

But what kind of goal is that? Creating pictorial space? It might seem hyper-specialized and overly rarefied compared to the contemplation of timeless themes like love or nature or death. Even the writer Susan Sontag, with her formidable powers of analysis, found Stella’s mission confounding. In 1966, she noted in her diary that contemporary artists reminded her of research scientists. “Frank Stella’s work is thought to be very interesting because it is a solution to central problems,” she wrote. “Without a knowledge of recent art history + its ‘problems,’ who would be interested in Frank Stella?”

It is true that Stella had an agenda, or what used to be called a vision, that appealed to the partisans of abstraction. In 1970, when the Museum of Modern Art honored him with the first of two retrospectives, he was apotheosized as the defining artist of his generation precisely because he validated the then-dominant view of modern art as focusing exclusively on form, shape and color and eliminating literary “meaning.” Unlike his colleague Andy Warhol, whose use of photography and photo-silk-screening was initially regarded as a fad that would pass (LOL), Stella legitimized the then-popular view that painting since Cézanne had been a march toward flatness.

Stella was exciting to me because he made high art feel like a high-I.Q. adventure. In contrast to Jackson Pollock, who didn’t attend college and mesmerized the world with his tossed and flung ribbons of paint, Stella offered a model of the artist as a Brainiac with a ruler and a compass. Fittingly, his first wife was Barbara Rose, the critic and art historian, who died in 2020. They were equals in brilliance, though their marriage did not endure beyond the ’60s. Stella made “brief and weak attempts at contact,” Rose lamented in her diary in 1964. “No real wish to see my tears or hear my story.” Fortunately, Stella forged a more lasting union in his second marriage, to Harriet McGurk, a pediatrician, who survives him.

Stella cultivated an image of a man who was always ahead of the pack, an alpha male who could outrun you. He collected racehorses, drove fast cars, competed at squash. He published a geniusy book, "Working Space," an academic best seller that still entertains with its erudite art gab and its hot takes on the work of Annibale Carracci, Caravaggio and other 16th-century masters. Caravaggio, by the way, died at 38, which was apparently fine with Stella, who was fond of saying that no artist needs to live past 40. The implication was that artists have their best ideas when they are young, and the rest of life is barely worth sticking around for.

Still, Stella worked with a sustained intensity to the end. It's telling that he currently has two shows of recent (large-to-whopping-size) work on view in galleries in New York, one at Yares Art, the other at Jeffrey Deitch.

During the pandemic, when he was cut off from the assistants and fabricators on whom he had relied for years, he found a new way to occupy himself. He took to making quickie collages with scraps he found around the house. "A collage a day keeps the Corona del Mar virus away," he joked in writing to an artist-friend, Dennis Ashbaugh, who was surprised to receive a collage in the mail as a gift. Curiously, the collage had been assembled from little bits of aluminum foil, brown cigar paper and cut-up images that had been stapled in place rather than glued, revealing Stella's impressive disregard of conventional beauty. Who has time to wait for glue to dry anyhow? And perhaps staples are not so ugly after all.

The painter Frank Stella's home, in 2019, when the artist auctioned some choice pieces from his personal collection at Christie's. From left to right: Hans Hofmann, "Bacchanale" 1946; Kenneth Noland, "Arrow" 1959; Dennis Ashbaugh, "Back from Nightmare" 1982 and Dennis Ashbaugh, "Endorfin — Analog" 1992.
Credit: Christopher Gregory for The New York Times

Defining a Brave New World

Born in Malden, Mass., in 1936, the son of a doctor, Stella attended boarding school at Phillips Academy before heading off to Princeton University. At college he majored in medieval history, and his lack of art-school training is evident in his art. Indifferent to the tradition of academic drawing, he created an art that rejected manual facility in favor of a brave new world of geometric progressions and a prescient devotion to computer design.

In 1959, his Black Paintings were unveiled at the now-historic "Sixteen Americans" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. To viewers who had finally warmed to the wide, whooshing brushwork of de Kooning and the Abstract Expressionists, Stella's canvases represented a direct assault on gestural painting, implying that expressionism and even human suffering had lost their allure as subjects for art.

In explaining the origins of his Black Paintings, Stella always cited Jasper Johns's paintings of the American flag, which come with official red and white stripes and a predetermined structure. Johns found a lifelong supporter in Stella, who had eked out a living as a house painter before he was famous and, in 1961, kindly painted the interior of Johns's newly acquired beach house in Edisto, S.C. In 2021, in a slightly more polished acknowledgment of their friendship, Stella installed a monumental aluminum sculpture, "Jasper's Split Star," at 7 World Trade Center.

Which are Stella's best paintings and sculptures? For now, there is no critical consensus on the high points or the low points in his enormous oeuvre, beyond agreement that the Black Paintings guarantee him a forever-place in art-history

textbooks. He certainly excelled at printmaking, an arena in which his own rush to innovation was productively countered by the medium's technical demands.

There is much to recommend his more restrained works from the 1960s — the softly warming Copper Paintings, or the arching stripes in his Protractor series, or his Irregular Polygons, such as "Sanbornville II" (Whitney Museum), in which triangles of bright color push into the sides of squares to create a lopsided but charismatic family. They are crisp and lucid and breathe visual oomph into geometry.

Although Stella liked to insist that his paintings connected to nothing outside their material selves, this is simply untrue. He let in more humanistic meaning than he cared to acknowledge. My own favorite Stellas belong to his Polish Village series, 130-plus large-scale constructions in which angular, interlocking strips of wood suggest the tradition of patient carpentry. Their titles (e.g., "Chodorow," "Zabludow") refer to the names of Polish villages where centuries-old, wooden-beam synagogues were destroyed by Hitler and his hacks during World War II. Stella told me he had first become fascinated by the subject when his friend Richard Meier, the architect, gave him a book of photographs titled "Wooden Synagogues." Although Stella was not Jewish — he grew up in a Catholic, Italian American home — his Polish Village constructions seem touched by a vulnerability that is absent from his other work; they capture the fragility of the built-by-hand world.

He also strove for moral largeness in his Moby Dick series. It consumed him from 1985 to 1997 and constitutes 226 works dedicated to the 135 chapters in Herman Melville's epic novel. The paintings and sculptures loosely evoke seafaring imagery, with rising wave shapes and a sense of swirling movement. The wall reliefs tend to blur together in the mind, perhaps because they are more about overall momentum than sensual surfaces, although their connection to Melville adds a layer of intrigue.

Stella said he had decided to reread "Moby-Dick" after a wave shape materialized in his work, and also after watching a whale with his sons in an aquarium. He owned a summer house on the coast of Massachusetts, not far from Nantucket, from where the Pequod initially sailed, and from where Captain Ahab began his doomed quest to destroy the white whale that had chomped off his leg, an obsession that would finally sink the ship and destroy its crew.

Stella, too, was consumed by an obsession: the fate of abstract art. Why was he so devoted to it? He found it mystifying, he said, that Picasso had never embraced pure abstraction. Even at the height of Cubism, which he invented, Picasso always included traces of common objects in his work — a pipe, a hat, a newspaper headline, as if unwilling to lose his last tether to recognizable reality.

Stella wanted to continue where Picasso had left off and show that abstract painting could have the fullness — the satisfying tactility — of the real world. He brought to the effort the combined force of his quick intelligence and singular audacity. For much of that time we thought that he was just advancing an agenda. But perhaps instead he was building a boat and setting sail for a goal we could not see, an American maverick casting off on his own.