

THE  
NEW YORKER



Frank Stella was the poster prodigy of a new breed of artists: post-bohemian, university-trained, professional from the get-go.  
Photo: Chris Felver / Corbis / Getty

## THE INDESTRUCTIBLE ART OF FRANK STELLA

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

May 4, 2024

Since 1959, when, as a recent Princeton graduate, Frank Stella stunned the art world with big, symmetrical bands of black enamel pin-striped by lines of unpainted canvas, he has belonged to New York art as Rockefeller Center belongs to the city's architecture—glamorously stern, built to last. He went on to invent several styles, notably that of crisp, geometric-shaped canvases in eye-popping synthetic colors, each work projecting a once-and-for-all éclat. His last phase was neo-Baroque, with mostly metal, often wildly complex reliefs and sculptures. He was, he said, inspired by Caravaggio, though you wouldn't have guessed that. But Stella was changeless, fundamentally. One stubborn principle reigned at every turn, expressed in his famous words: "What you see is what you see." His was a formalist gospel, forbidding interpretation.

Arriving at the all-time peak of American hegemony in world art, Stella was the poster prodigy of a new breed of artists: post-bohemian, university-trained, professional from the get-go. The Museum of Modern Art and the Leo Castelli Gallery squabbled over which place would get to debut Stella's black paintings as a group. (moma prevailed.) Art people knew at a glance that the work was revolutionary, as much for what it didn't do as for what it did. Stella flaunted his confidence with such sardonic titles for his black paintings as "The Marriage of Reason and Squalor" and, recklessly provocative, "Die Fahne Hoch!" ("Raise the Flag!"), the anthem of the German Nazi Party. Power was the subject and the modus operandi.

Throughout the nineteen-sixties, Stella rattled standards of modernist abstraction rather as Bob Dylan did those of folk music, electrifying the medium. His influence waned somewhat in the seventies, as the art world turned to conceptual fashions. But no uncertainty hindered Stella's progress, a career arc that suggested, and still does, an irresistibly Apollonian art history, dismissive of alternate trends. Defying death, he had—and retains—a marmoreal authority that will not countenance any ambition not absolute. An earlier era might have provided a properly august tomb for him. As it is, Frank Stella will live on as a residual pressure, as tough as nails, in the minds of anyone who has cared or will care about art of the past six decades.

