

The Washington Post



Frank Stella poses between his collages at the Wuerttembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart in Germany on Sept. 20, 2001.
Photo: Thomas Kienzle/AP

FRANK STELLA, CELEBRATED ARTIST OF MINIMALIST POWER, DIES AT 87

BY FRED A. BERNSTEIN
May 4, 2024

Frank Stella, an artist who achieved early fame with monochromatic paintings that helped establish minimalism as an alternative to abstract expressionism in the late 1950s, then spent the next 50 years creating colorful works that seemed to repudiate his youthful principles, died May 4 at his home in Manhattan. He was 87.

The cause was lymphoma, said his wife, Harriet McGurk. Mr. Stella lived in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City but worked until shortly before his death in a studio in the Hudson River Valley near Newburgh, N.Y.

Mr. Stella was in his early 20s and just out of Princeton University when he burst onto the scene with his "[Black Paintings](#)," in which regular bands of dark paint were separated by pinstripes of unpainted canvas. Four of the paintings were included in the Museum of Modern Art's seminal 1959 show "[Sixteen Americans](#)," in which Mr. Stella was the youngest artist represented.

His works — flat, lean, patterned — were immediately seen as a challenge to Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock and other abstract expressionists who had dominated the New York art scene in the 1940s and 1950s and whose compositions tended to be colorful and energetic.

Mr. Stella insisted he wasn't trying to unseat the older generation of painters. Instead, he [said in 1972](#) in a filmed interview: "I wanted to be able to have what I think were some of the virtues of abstract expressionism but still have them under a kind of control, but not control for its own sake. A kind of conceptual painterly control."

He compared his paintings to the plays of Samuel Beckett, such as "Waiting for Godot," in which, Mr. Stella observed, there are "certain very simple situations in which not much happens."

"I like the idea ... that these would be very hard paintings to penetrate," he continued in the 1972 interview. "All of the action would be on the surface. The idea was to keep the viewer from reading a painting. ... It wasn't so much of

an invitation as it was a presentation. In other words, I made something, and then it was available for people to look at, but it wasn't an invitation for them to explore."

Other artists — including Kenneth Noland, Robert Motherwell, Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin and Barnett Newman — were also doing striped and monochromatic paintings. But with the MoMA show in New York, the young, brash Mr. Stella became known as a pioneer of minimalist art. The museum bought one of the "Black Paintings," "[The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II](#)," bestowing on Mr. Stella instant establishment credibility.

But the young Mr. Stella was restless. In 1960, he started a series of works executed in metallic aluminum paint. Like the "Black" series, the aluminum paintings contained simple stripe patterns, but some of those patterns left the corners of the artworks unresolved.

To solve that problem, Mr. Stella simply cut away those corners, creating what have been called the first shaped canvases by a contemporary artist. Soon he was painting on trapezoids, pentagons, hexagons and even more complex shapes.

By 1970, when MoMA mounted a [solo exhibition](#) of his work, Mr. Stella had "dropped his reserve for increasingly playful bravura and showmanship," New York Times art critic Roberta Smith wrote in 2015. "His stripes broadened into shapes that knocked canvases off square. His somber colors brightened."

Soon Mr. Stella was adding elements of collage to his paintings. Then his canvases became fully three-dimensional, with sculptural forms derived from cones, pillars, French curves, waves and architectural elements. Free-standing sculptures followed, in stainless steel, fiberglass, poured molten aluminum and newly invented plastics.

From 1986 to 1997, he produced more than 100 works — including paintings, lithographs and sculptures — named for the chapters of Herman Melville's novel "Moby-Dick."

That project, Mr. Stella told fashion designer Stella McCartney in a 2014 [conversation](#) published in Interview magazine, "changed my idea about abstraction. ... Abstraction didn't have to be limited to a kind of rectilinear geometry or even a simple curve geometry. It could have a geometry that had a narrative impact. In other words, you could tell a story with the shapes. It wouldn't be a literal story, but the shapes and the interaction of the shapes and colors would give you a narrative sense. ... That sort of turned me on."

The critics weren't always smitten. Deborah Solomon, writing in the Times in 2003, described some of Mr. Stella's new pieces as "so laden with expressionist gesture, so plainly over-the-top, they seemed as extreme in their brashness as the 'Black Paintings' had been in their restraint. They made you think of a man willing to do anything short of suicide to escape the burden of his intellectual clarity."

But 12 years later, Solomon wrote, appreciatively, that "Mr. Stella has done more than any other living artist to carry abstract art, the house style of modernism, into the postmodern era."

Mr. Stella generally tried to avoid explaining his work. "The one thing I learned," he told McCartney, "is not to say anything about my own paintings. Keep my mouth shut." Otherwise, he said, "You'll never stop hearing what you said. It will come back to you again and again."

But critics searched for meaning in his output, with some detecting traces of labial imagery in Mr. Stella's swirling forms. "I'm not going to deny that it's there," he told the Times in 2003. "I'm not going to deny that I live in the world and that I have had distant relations with women. You know, my father was a gynecologist."

Frank Philip Stella was born in Malden, Mass., to parents of Italian descent, on May 12, 1936. His father delivered many of the town's babies. His mother was a homemaker who later achieved some recognition as a landscape painter.

Mr. Stella graduated in 1954 from the private Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., and at Princeton, he majored in history but also studied painting. His many visits to New York as a student exposed him to abstract expressionism. After graduating in 1958, he moved to New York, where he lived on the Lower East Side and supported himself as a house painter. He used house paint, bought for \$1 a gallon, and house painters' big brushes for his "Black Paintings."

His first marriage, to Barbara Rose, an art historian and critic, ended in divorce. In 1978 he married McGurk, a pediatrician. He had two children from each marriage and one from an earlier relationship. A complete list of survivors was not immediately available.

"I always get into arguments with people who want to retain the old values in painting — the humanistic values that they always find on the canvas," he remarked in an oft-quoted [1966 interview with Art News](#). "If you pin them down,

they always end up asserting that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas. My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there.

"If the painting were lean enough, accurate enough or right enough," he added, "you would just be able to look at it. All I want anyone to get out of my paintings is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any conclusion. ... What you see is what you see."