

ARTFORUM



Frank Stella in his New York studio, 1987.
Photo: Jack Mitchell/Getty Images

FRANK STELLA (1936–2024)

BY NEWS DESK
May 6, 2024

Frank Stella, a giant in the arenas of Minimalism and post-painterly abstraction, died of lymphoma on May 4 at his home in New York. He was eighty-seven. Explosive in its subdued ambiguity, Stella's earliest work is noted for its complete lack of pictorial illusion, his paintings functioning *as* objects rather than illustrating them and embodying his famous quote "What you see is what you see." These flat, seemingly depthless geometric designs stood against the theatrical emotion of the Abstract Expressionism popular at the time and predicted both Minimalism and Conceptualism. Stella's later irregularly shaped Day-Glo paintings and the colossal multimedia reliefs that followed marked additional seismic shifts in the modern-art paradigm. "I want to make exalted art," he told the *New York Times* in 2003. "A successful image has pictorial lift. I am looking for whatever is up there."

Frank Stella was born in Malden, Massachusetts, on May 12, 1936, to first-generation Italian American parents. His father was a gynecologist; his mother, who had attended fashion school, was a housewife and a landscape artist. After graduating from Phillips Academy in nearby Andover, Stella attended Princeton University, where he studied painting and history and, spurred by visits to New York, gained an interest in Abstract Expressionism. Following his graduation, he moved to New York in 1958 and began painting austere, geometric canvases such as *Die Fahne Hoch!*, 1959, in which a symmetrical cruciform figure is limned through faint striations of naked fabric visible in an otherwise jet-black enamel field. Its title, which translates to Raise the Flag!, references a phrase from the anthem of the Nazi Party, lending it an incendiary meaning not originally gleaned from its appearance, which does in fact recall the shape of a Third Reich banner.

He achieved recognition almost immediately. In 1959, his work was featured in "Three Young Americans" at the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College and in "Sixteen Americans," which opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. That same year, he gained representation by Leo Castelli's gallery. Series dating to around this time include

his "Black Paintings," 1958–60, to which the aforementioned *Die Fahne Hoch!* belongs; "Aluminum Paintings," 1960; and "Copper Paintings," 1960–61.

Though he was creating pathbreaking work at the time, Stella saw himself as enmeshed with the fabric of the New York art world of the day, not as standing apart from it. "The art scene in New York was pretty casual then, and it wasn't a big deal to visit someone's studio, whether it was Jasper Johns, Bob Rauschenberg, Larry Poons, or John Chamberlain," he told [Artforum](#) in 2003. "It was straightforward: You did occasional studio business, saw the shows, and met after exhibition dinners—a lot of Chinese dinners. Today people may look back at the '60s and see a division between abstract painting and painters who were doing Pop, but at the time it wasn't a question of taking sides, because there really weren't any sides. Everybody was in it together. By and large, the scene, including Minimalists, Pop artists, Color Field painters, and leftover Abstract Expressionists, was fluid and well integrated."

Stella in 1961 married Barbara Rose, who would later become an influential art critic (the pair would go on to have two children and divorce in 1969). As the '60s waxed on, he focused increasingly on shaped canvases, with the series "Irregular Polygon," 1965–67, and "Protractor," 1967–71, the latter featuring frequently overlapping arcs placed within square borders, the individual paintings titled after Middle Eastern cities he had visited. Around this time, he became interested in printmaking and in 1967 began working with Kenneth Tyler at Gemini G.E.L. Initially creating lithographs, he later expanded his purview to other forms of printmaking, including screen printing (see, for example, his *Double Gray Scramble*, 1973); he would continue to investigate the medium for decades. Also in 1967, he designed the set and costumes for Merce Cunningham's dance piece *Scramble*.

In 1970, Stella was given his first retrospective, at MoMA, at thirty-three becoming—and today remaining—the youngest artist awarded such an honor by the institution. The ensuing decade saw him experimenting with relief to create what he called "maximalist" paintings, works that were often sculptural in nature. These works, which incorporated wood, among other materials (see, for example, his "Polish Village" series of 1970–73), stood in sharp contrast to his earlier, flat works. Around the middle of the decade, he shifted to aluminum as his preferred support, often deploying fluorescent hues in Minimalist works that were growing increasingly baroque. Writing in [Artforum](#) in 1975 about a group of aluminum reliefs Stella was exhibiting, Hayden Herrera noted that the works "actually turn painting conventions inside out" and raised the question, "What will Stella do next?"

In 1978, the artist married pediatrician Harriet McGurk. He was by now ensconced in his East Village studio, a former horse auction mart, where he would remain until 2005. Beginning in the mid-1980s and continuing for roughly ten years, he made work responding to the Herman Melville classic, *Moby-Dick*. To make this work, which was fully three-dimensional, he first constructed collages or maquettes and then, aided by assistants, deployed various methods, including metalwork and digital technologies, to reproduce these at enlarged proportions. He is among the earliest artists to have adopted computer-aided design (CAD) in making work.

The 1990s saw Stella creating his first major public sculptures. Among these are the 1993 decorative scheme for the Princess of Wales Theatre in Toronto, which encompasses a 10,000-foot mural; and the 5,000-square-foot acrylic-on-canvas painting *Euphonia*, installed in the Moores Opera House at the University of Houston in 1997. A 1999 aluminum bandshell set to be built in downtown Miami and recalling a cheap, collapsible beach hat from Brazil was scrapped owing to cost. Two years later, in 2001, his *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg, Ein Schauspiel, 3 X*, a thirty-foot-high tangle of fiberglass, aluminum, stainless steel, and carbon fiber [described](#) by the artist as "the best idea I've had in a long time," was erected outside the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.

Beginning in about 2010, Stella began creating large metal, star-shaped sculptures using software. In 2022, he released "Geometries," a series of NFTs that gave the owner the right to three-dimensionally print the digital sculptures contained therein.

Among the many honors Stella received in his life was an invitation to deliver Harvard University's Charles Eliot Norton Lectures in 1983–84. Those talks are collected in a volume titled *Working Space* (Harvard University Press, 1986). He received the National Medal of Arts in 2009 and in 2011 was given the Lifetime Achievement Award in Contemporary Sculpture by the International Sculpture Center. The artist's 1967 *Point of Pines* broke a record at Christie's auction house in 2019, commanding \$28 million. Stella received a second retrospective at MoMA in 1987; his most recent retrospective took place at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 2015. His works are held in the

collections of arts institutions around the globe, including the Art Institute of Chicago; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Tate Gallery, London; and Kunstmuseum Basel, among many others.

“The whole idea of making art is to be open, to be generous, and absorb the viewer and absorb yourself, to let them go *into* it,” Stella told [BOMB](#) magazine in 2000. “Whatever the political climate may be, it’s still the one beautiful thing about the art world—you can just do it.”