The Guardian

Frank Stella in front of one of his works at Wolfsburg's art museum, in Germany, 2012.
Photo: Matthias Leitzke/EPA/Shutterstock

FRANK STELLA OBITUARY

BY CHARLES DARWENT
May 5, 2024

In February 2015, a pair of enormous stars, one in polished aluminium and the other unvarnished teak, appeared in the courtyard of the Royal Academy in London. These were by the American artist and honorary Academician Frank Stella, who has died aged 87.

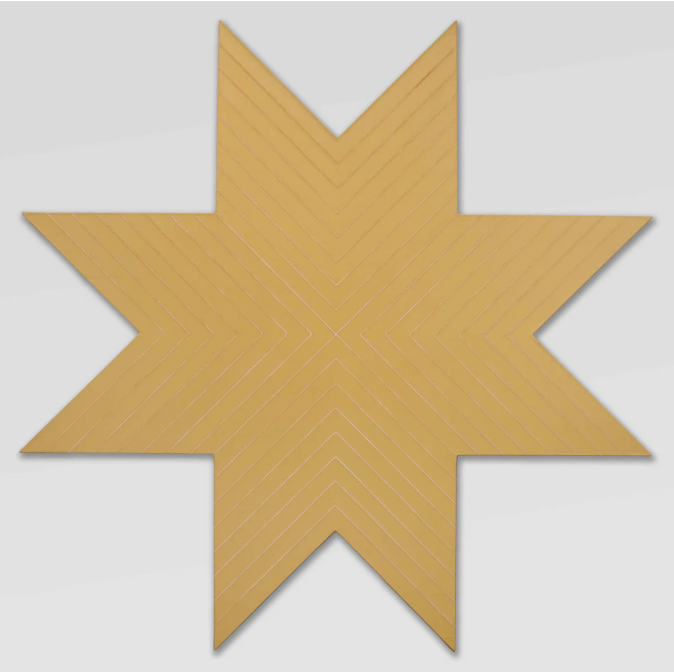
For all their differences, the two stars were part of a single work called, with deadpan literalness, Inflated Star and Wooden Star. Given their size – each measured 7 metres in all dimensions – it seemed unlikely that these could have anything to hide. In 1966, in a dig at the mystical airs of abstract expressionism, Stella famously said: "What you see is what you see."

It became the battle cry of a then newly emergent style known as minimalism – and also seemed to fit Inflated Star and Wooden Star to a T.

And yet Stella's work raised many more questions than it answered. His stars were welded together by a tubular metal armature, as they were by their title. They seemed to be in orbit around each other, although which exerted gravitational pull on which was impossible to say.

Visually as materially, they were very different from each other. Inflated Star was plumped-up and cushiony, polished to a Jeff Koonsy high gloss; Wooden Star seemed austere and skeletal. It was impossible to read one without reference to the other, and yet the frame of that reference – before / after, older / newer, stronger / weaker – was left entirely to the viewer to decide.

Beyond this again was the question of puns. Both sets of Stella's grandparents had arrived in the US as Sicilian immigrants at the turn of the 20th century. His parents, Frank Sr, a gynaecologist, and Constance (nee Santonelli), an artist turned housewife, spoke Italian to each other at home. Stella is Italian for "star".



Plant City, 1963, zinc chromate on canvas, by Frank Stella.
Photo: 2015 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Stella's engagement with the star form began early, and in two dimensions. By 1963, on a residency at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, he was making paintings on star-shaped canvases, such as Port Tampa City. These were joined by prints such as the 1967 Star of Persia series. In one form or another, Stella's many hundreds of stars are to be found in galleries, plazas and sculpture parks all over the world. He remained testily insistent that the form was not his nominative calling card, and pointed out that the only person he knew who did not own a Stella star was himself.

Fame came to him early. The oldest of three children, Stella was born in Malden, an affluent suburb of Boston, Massachusetts, and was sent by his ambitious parents to Phillips Academy, Andover, a local equivalent of Eton and alma mater to both Presidents Bush. The art lessons he had there were the only ones he would receive. After graduating with a BA in history from Princeton in 1958, he moved to New York, where he rented a loft in West Broadway and earned his keep as a house painter.

In this he had been trained by his father, who, despite working a 60-hour week, insisted on doing painting jobs around the house with the help of his son. Stella's early Copper Paintings (1961) used the barnacle-repellent gunk with which he had caulked his father's sloop the summer before. Another series, begun in the same year, was named Benjamin Moore after the well-known brand of house paint in which they were made. Andy Warhol bought an entire set of the works from new, beginning his own Campbell's Soup series shortly after.

Stella was no pop artist, however. He used household paints and brushes not to satirise popular culture but because they were familiar to him. "The first time I saw a Pollock," he said in a 2000 interview with the NPR radio network, "I knew straightaway how it was done."

The black paintings that he began in 1959 remain among his most famous, canvases such as Die Fahne Hoch!, in the Whitney Museum of American Art, powerful in part because of the domesticity of their darkness. Built up of parallel bands of black household enamel separated by narrow strips of raw canvas, they are popularly known as "pinstripe" paintings; a mode that Stella would use into the 1970s. So instantly successful were these early works that their 23-year-old maker was included in the show Sixteen Americans at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1959,

alongside Jasper Johns and Ellsworth Kelly. In 1970, at 33, he became the youngest artist ever to be given a MoMA retrospective.

Stella's early insistence that a painting was "a flat surface with paint on it – nothing more" seemed reductive, but it gave him a set of rules to battle with. An early way around the self-imposed strictures of his own form of minimalism was the production of shaped canvases – stars, and so-called "notched" paintings such as Newstead Abbey (1960), in which nicks cut from all four sides of a vertical canvas generate a rhythm of lines that suggest a rhombus in the middle of them. The feeling is of a flattened ziggurat, as though Stella's two dimensional work might at any moment spring into three dimensions.

That was more or less what happened in the mid-80s. For the ensuing decade, Stella made works such as La Scienza della Fiacca (4x) (1984) that responded in a broad way to the novel Moby Dick. Where the black and pinstripe paintings had worked with and against their own insistent flatness, Stella's paintings of the 80s and 90s suddenly broke free of the wall, pushing outwards in curls and swoops of moulded fibreglass and aluminium, often dappled with paint. ("They're surfaces to paint on," he said of the new works at the time. "So it's still all about painting.") It was a short step from there to sculptures such as the stars that appeared in the courtyard of Burlington House in 2015.

If this seemed like a shift from minimalism to maximalism, change was itself part of Stella's story. Also in the mid-80s, the cigar-chomping artist had become fascinated by the idea of turning smoke rings into sculptures.

Over the next 20 years, these slowly morphed, as smoke rings will, into works with names such as Atalanta and Hippomenes (2017), some wall-based and some made for the floor. As with his stars, Stella's intention seemed to be to see how far he could push representation before it disappeared in a puff of abstraction.

Change also meant his work moving back and forth between media, dimensions and decades. When the World Trade Center was destroyed in September 2001, the large diptych paintings by Stella that had hung in the lobby of one of the buildings went with it. In 2021, they were replaced in the plaza of the rebuilt WTC by the sculpture Jasper's Split Star, named after his friend Johns. This was both an entirely new work and one whose roots went back 60 years, to the painting Jasper's Dilemma (1962-63).

By the 21st century, Stella was unquestionably one of the grand old men of American art. In 2009, he was awarded the National Medal of Arts by President Barack Obama. In 2023, Delta, one of his earliest black paintings, went on sale at Art Basel Miami with a price tag of $45m.

Stella married the art historian and critic Barbara Rose in 1961. They had two children, Rachel and Michael, and divorced in 1969. He had a daughter, Laura, from a relationship with Shirley De Lemos Wyse. With the paediatrician Harriet McGurk, whom he married in 1973, Stella had two sons, Peter and Patrick. She and all five children, and five grandchildren, survive him.

Frank Philip Stella, artist, born 12 May 1936; died 4 May 2024