



American painter and sculptor Frank Stella.
Photo: Bob Berg/Getty Images

REMEMBERING FRANK STELLA, AN EVER-EVOLVING MASTER ARTIST

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“There are two problems in painting,” Frank Stella wrote. “The first is to find out what painting is and the other is to find out how to make a painting.” Mr. Stella’s death, on May 4 at 87 years old, deprived us of a towering figure whose pursuit of those problems established him as one of this country’s most potent, influential and inventive artists, almost since the first exhibition of his uncompromising Black Paintings, with their sturdy bands separated by hairlines of raw canvas, in 1959, at age 23. Sometimes he provoked controversy, but always intense interest.

For more than six decades, Mr. Stella tested our perceptions and confounded our expectations, never settling for the familiar or the expected. He continually moved into new territory, following the implications of his work no matter where they took him. Like his friend the British sculptor Anthony Caro, who declared that repeating ideas was “too boring,” Mr. Stella surprised and challenged his viewers—and himself—with what appeared to be radical shifts, growing from a Minimalist in the 1960s and ’70s to a full-bore maximalist from the late ’70s on, abandoning severe geometry for increasing complexity and indescribable shapes. He tested the limits of austerity and opulence, even raucousness, at different scales, in two and three dimensions; made prints and public works; flirted with architecture; and embellished an entire theater—always enthusiastic about what new materials and new technologies would allow him to do.

Yet these chameleon-like changes were neither arbitrary nor a quest for the new for its own sake. Each shift seemed triggered by a re-evaluation of assumptions and previously arrived at conclusions. Each series posits fresh notions about what a painting is, embodying and defining the desiderata of the moment, questioning those desiderata and forcing us to reconsider even firmly held opinions.

Mr. Stella's sometimes startling or disorienting shifts notwithstanding, it is plain that his dominant preoccupation was the nature of space, fictive and real, illusory and constructed, in Western art—something he discussed provocatively in his Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University (delivered in 1983-84, published as "Working Space" in 1986). Mr. Stella compared what he saw as a crisis in abstraction with a similar crisis in painting at the end of the 16th century. What artist could contend with the legacy of Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Giorgione and Titian? The answer was Caravaggio, who, Mr. Stella said, tried "to create a pictorial reality that subsumes stylistic differences" and succeeded in creating "the sensation of real space within and outside of the action of the painting." Now, Stella wrote, "abstraction must find a way to expand the boundaries willed by the pictorial past. It has to create a working space in which both the limits and the accomplishments of the past can be envisioned as expanding in a meaningful way under the pressure of our everyday efforts." Over the years, his paintings steadily became more robust and complex, moving aggressively into our space, yet always remaining paintings, largely indifferent to gravity and intended solely for the eye, no matter how rich their literal density.

Mr. Stella's evolution could be described as an effort to invent a new abstract equivalent for Caravaggio's persuasive fictive space, with modernist physicality substituting for 17th-century illusionism.



Mr. Stella's 'Gobba, zoppa e collotorto' (1985).
Photo: Frank Stella/Ars, N.Y./Bridgeman Images

His Black Paintings, with their repeated bands, defined a painting as a confrontational flat surface of particular proportions, dimensions and shape. The declarative flatness of that series was superseded in the mid-'60s by the implied illusionism of the Irregular Polygons—shaped, lushly hued works that made us rethink our ideas about perspectival rendering, at once suggesting three-dimensionality and insisting on the flatness of the object. In the late '60s and '70s, these ideas were further explored in the often enormous Protractors, which used familiar geometric drafting aids, dramatically enlarged, to generate overlapping, intersecting arcs of brilliant color. Mr. Stella continued to defy the traditional rectangle in the works that followed, but his unpredictable shapes were never imposed, instead always generated by events within the painting.

Mr. Stella's new conception of abstract pictorial space was first made fully explicit by the Indian Birds, in 1978 and 1979. They employed, like the Protractors, shapes derived from drafting tools, the sinuous templates once used by maritime and architectural draftsmen, and by railroad engineers. The Indian Birds arc away from the wall on curved grids, their layered shapes covered with illegible, polychrome calligraphy, glitter-strewn. This rowdy, sophisticated graffiti transubstantiates the cartoon-inflected "tags" that New York subway riders encountered daily in the 1970s, while simultaneously evoking the luxuriousness of High Baroque painting.

Over the past decade, Mr. Stella explored new materials and processes to construct his most richly articulated, complex, elaborately polychromed works to date, wall-hung or expediently supported, ranging from the intimate to the enormous. Immense, ravishingly colored versions of his Scarlatti Series and ample, suspended Atlantic Salmon Rivers, like exuberant exploded paintings, are currently on view at [Jeffrey Deitch Gallery](#), while Mirrored Boxes, the most “sculptural” of Mr. Stella’s recent work, in terms of embracing space and demanding to be viewed from all sides, are on view at [Yares Art](#). Conceived as celebrations, the exhibitions are now tributes to an irreplaceable modern master.