

## **FRANK STELLA**

Throughout his prolific career as a painter, sculptor, printmaker and architect, Frank Stella has been known for helping to launch the Minimalism movement and then for breaking away from it. First impacting the art world by endowing non-representational artwork with new significance, Stella's instantly acclaimed 1958 Minimalist paintings contrasted Abstract Expressionism's emotional canvases. He has constantly reinvented himself, creating increasingly textured, dynamic and vivid work. Stella continues to work and advocate for artists' right today.

### **Key Ideas / Information**

- Although he began creating art when Abstract Expressionism's gestural brushstrokes were the dominant technique, Stella painted flat, smooth works that led the art world in another direction, towards Minimalism.
- Stella was an early advocate of making non-representational paintings, rather than artwork that alluded to underlying meanings, emotions or narratives. He wanted his audiences to appreciate color, shape and structure alone.
- Stella challenged the very notion of a painting by declaring his flat canvases, structured reliefs, metal protrusions and freestanding sculptures all to be paintings.

### **Childhood**

Frank Stella was born the oldest of three children to first-generation Italian-American parents. In his sophomore year of high school at Phillips Academy in Andover, MA, he began learning to paint from Abstractionist Patrick Morgan, who taught at the school. Stella continued taking art courses at Princeton University while earning a degree in history. His Princeton professors, painter Stephen Greene and art historian William Seitz, introduced Stella to the New York art world by bringing him to exhibitions in the city, shaping his earliest artistic aesthetic.

### **Early Training**

These trips to New York galleries exposed Stella to artists such as Jackson Pollack, Franz Kline and particularly Jasper Johns. Johns' geometric paintings of flags and targets inspired Stella's work during his Princeton years. After graduating, Stella moved to the Lower East Side of New York, where he set up a studio in a former jeweler's store. Almost immediately, he drew massive attention from the art world. His innovative work, which utilized a monochromatic palette and flat surfaces, signaled a break from the thick, textural paint and gestural compositions of the Abstract Expressionists. Stella famously called a painting "a flat surface with paint on it - nothing more," which demonstrated his view of art as an object in itself, rather than a representation of something emotional, intellectual or physical. With their emphasis on form, not content, his early paintings are often credited with helping to establish the Minimalist artistic movement. For his first major works, the stark "Black Paintings" (1958-1960), Stella covered canvases with black house paint, leaving unpainted pinstripes in repetitive, parallel patterns. At only 23 years old, he gained instant recognition for these intense paintings. The MoMA included

four in its 1959-1960 *Sixteen Americans* exhibition and purchased one for the permanent collection. That same year, famed gallery owner Leo Castelli began representing Stella and his work.

### **Mature Period**

From his *Black Paintings*, Stella moved onto the *Aluminum Paintings* (1960) and the *Copper Paintings* (1960-1961), for which he created his own geometrically shaped canvases, challenging the traditional rectangular structure. Much of his work at this time drew on the stripe motif begun with the *Black Paintings*, but he soon expanded to brighter colors and worked complex circular forms into his compositions, especially in the *Irregular Polygon* (1965-1967) and *Protractor* (1967-1971) series. During this period, Stella also began delving into printmaking, an aspect of his work he passionately pursued throughout his career.



In 1970, Stella was the youngest artist to become the subject of a retrospective at MoMA, receiving a second in 1987. Following this exhibit, Stella reinvented himself once again, and began incorporating collage and relief into his paintings - an extension of the layered bands of color in his previous works. For the *Polish Village* series (1970-1973), he attached paper, felt and wood to canvas. And building on this trajectory, the later *Indian Birds* series (1977-1979) featured an assemblage of painted aluminum forms protruding from the wall. This growing focus on three-dimensionality and dynamic textures sharply contrasted the flat, smooth work that had first brought Stella into the public eye. He continued pushing the idea further, creating sculptural works marked by elaborate tangles of curves, spirals and loops, which were more representative of a Baroque style than his initial Minimalism. Yet, even these highly sculptural works are still "paintings" in Stella's eyes. He claimed, "A sculpture is just a painting cut out and stood up somewhere."

### Late Period

In 1980s and 1990s, Stella expanded his three-dimensional paintings into increasingly explosive, vividly colored and multifaceted pieces, while still continuing to create innovative prints. His series based on Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* includes works of all types, from metal reliefs, to giant sculptures, to mixed-media prints combining diverse techniques such as woodblock printing, etching and hand-coloring. After moving towards freestanding bronze and steel sculptures, Stella's work then grew to include architectural structures, reflecting his comment, "It's hard not to think about architecture when you've gone from painting to relief to sculpture." These works include an aluminum band shell in Miami (1999) and a monumental sculpture, *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg, Ein Schauspiel, 3X* (1998-2001), on the lawn of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (1998-2001). Currently living and working in New York, Stella continues to create large-scale sculptures, as well as designs for potential architectural projects.



### Legacy

Frank Stella secured his place in art history as one of the first proponents of Minimalism, and has remained a key figure through his consistent ability to re-conceive his artistic directions. While many thought his earliest paintings were a rejection of Abstract Expressionism, Stella never viewed them as such, and his admiration for the movement's dynamism and tactility was realized in his later work.

### TOUR TIPS

This painting can be used on a wide variety of tours such as:

- Visual Elements
- 19th- and 20th-Century Art
- Art of America
- Math and Art
- How Was It Made?

TITLE: Tahkt-I-Sulayman Variation II  
ARTIST: Frank Stella  
MEDIUM: Painting/ Acrylic on canvas  
CREATION PLACE: United States  
ACCESSION NUMBER: 69.132



### THE TITLE

The painting was named after an ancient Parthian sanctuary in Azerbaijan, Persia dating to the 1st century A.D. All that remains of the sanctuary today, which translates as "The Throne of Solomon," is a circular wall made of enormous stones that once surrounded a sacred fire.<sup>9</sup> An aerial view of the wall seen by Stella on his travels to the Near East in 1963 prompted his interest in the circle. The artist's use of the circle was a purely formal one, however, and *does not have a symbolic reference to the ancient site itself*. Titles were quite arbitrary to Stella. In another series, he named the paintings after his friends and in another the towns in New Hampshire. We have to remind ourselves of the admonition Stella gave us, "only what can be seen there, is there."

### FORM

The simplicity of the basic forms (circles, semi-circles, and squares) and the symmetrical arrangement of the composition disguises the complexity of the design. Our initial impression is that we can instantly comprehend the entire composition. The curving bands of color cross over and under each other, yet they never suggest the illusion of deep space, because *one band of color is never placed consistently behind another*. They are not so much overlapped as they are inter-woven. Even when our eyes are lured momentarily into believing we see the illusion of depth, they are brought right back to the surface.

## **THE CENTER**

Each of the semi-circles appears to pass under a square, and because the color is identical on both sides, we read it as a completed circle. This occurs with one exception. At the center, we are tempted to read the two semi-circles as a completed circle and thus as the focal point (like a target). But at the same time, we realize that he denied us the right to draw that conclusion by making the semi-circle on the right a different color from the one on the left. Thus the painting can be read not only as a whole, but as two independent halves, which are identical in form, but varied in color. (Hold up a paper so that you can only see one half at a time.) Because the painting is broken up by small squares, each small section can also be read independently of all others, like a bunch of individual boxes stacked upon each other in a row. Nonetheless, after we have analyzed the painting into parts, the tendency is to look at it once more as a whole (components of equal importance without a focal point). Stella's stated intention-to create an object which is flat and symmetrical, which can be viewed dispassionately for a moment, and grasped structurally-seems to be achieved.<sup>10</sup>

## **COLOR**

While the basic arrangement of forms in this painting is somewhat discernible, the ordering of colors is not. Forms repeat, but the placement of colors seems arbitrary and unpredictable, although we can be certain they were pre-determined. Stella mixed his own paint, combining acrylic<sup>11</sup> and fluorescent (Day-Glo) pigments to achieve a range of colors, varying widely in intensity and hue. A single coat of paint was applied with a brush to an unprimed canvas resulting in colors with a transparent, less substantial quality.

The positioning of colors greatly enhances or diminishes their impact. In some areas, intense complementary colors border each other, creating powerful, shimmering contrasts. In other areas, pastel colors are placed side by side. Even though some colors advance and others recede, the illusion of deep space is denied, because Stella has arranged the colors so that as one advances, it is balanced by another that recedes, thereby keeping colors flat and on the picture plane.

Stella's palette includes a wide range of hues, tints, shades, and intensities. The exact shade is never used twice. Some are very similar, but upon closer examination you realize that they differ ever so slightly. For example, three of the squares that frame the circular forms are gray, but each has a hint of another color-blue, green, or violet. Or is that an illusion? Do the gray squares appear to be of different shades because of the colors that border them? Stella's painting is like a complex puzzle that invites endless speculation.

Stella consciously attempted to avoid using colors that would evoke associations with elements of the natural world. (Green should not stand for grass, or blue for sky etc.) This is one of the reasons why so many of the colors are harsh and dissonant intermediaries that radically depart from the colors we usually associate with nature. Within the implied "center circle", colors range from fluorescent-pink and neon-yellow on the periphery to pastel pink and blue on the inner bands. The brown and blue bands are saturated colors, but they are bordered by pastel tints of pink and beige. To the right of the center, half of the inner-most circle is a powerful advancing red, which is countered on the left by a receding, though equally, intense gray. Through this intricate interplay of colors, Stella creates a delicate tension that enlivens the composition and prevents it

from being static. Form is what lends unity and stability to the composition, but color is what makes those forms dance!

### **BREATHING SPACES**

Like the unpainted strips of canvas in the black stripe paintings of 1959, Stella also reserved thin unpainted strips in this painting that act as "breathing spaces" for the colors. He placed masking tape between the colors, deliberately choosing cheap tape that paint thinner would eat through, thereby giving the edges a soft irregularity. Stella's reason for doing so, as was true of the earlier works, was to avoid the mechanical look of conventional geometric and "hard-edge" painting, which he thought had a hard brittle quality.

### **STRETCHERS AND THREE- DIMENSIONALITY**

An art historian once suggested that the reason Stella used deep stretchers (three inch) on his canvases was to give them a third-dimension and thereby emphasize the picture as a three dimensional object. In truth, Stella began to build stretchers with 1 x 3s for economic reasons.<sup>12</sup> The lumber was cheap and easy to butt together to form the corners. After the fact, he noticed that the deeper stretchers lifted the paintings off the wall, causing them to cast a slight shadow, and consequently giving more emphasis to the surface of the canvas. As his work developed in later years, it was also observed that the width of the three-inch stretcher conformed to the three-inch bands of color in the paintings, suggesting that the two were directly related, a point Stella vehemently denied. Whether or not there is a link between the two is debatable. However, if we consider the fully three-dimensional paintings by Stella of the 80s and 90s, we might conclude that the three-inch stretchers were an early indication of what was to come.

### **NEW KIND OF SPACE**

The complexity of design that underlies the seeming simplicity of Stella's painting is the result of Stella's search for a new kind of "space" appropriate for abstract painting. He believed that it was absolutely necessary to remove illusionism from his painting for his purposes. After a long process of experimentation, he accepted the fact that although he had pared down the suggestion of illusionary space, he could never totally abolish it. Overlapping forms and the tendency of colors to recede and advance created the illusion of space, but it could be controlled by the use of regular pattern, resulting in absolute symmetry.

### **PERSONAL NOTE**

There is a host of information about FrankStella available online. I have only covered but a snapshot of his career. Please check out the information for yourself if you are still interested in this amazing artist. Youtube has many videos available as well that let you see and hear him as he discusses his work. Enjoy!