

# The Museum of Modern Art

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## FRANK STELLA 1970-1987

October 12, 1987 - January 5, 1988

At fifty-one, Stella seems to me even more inspired, and to be living more dangerously, than at thirty-three, his age at the time of his [1970] Museum of Modern Art retrospective.

--William Rubin\*

The Museum of Modern Art presents its second major exhibition devoted to the work of American artist Frank Stella--one of the most prominent and influential abstract artists of the postwar period--from October 12, 1987, to January 5, 1988. Organized by William Rubin, Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture, FRANK STELLA 1970-1987 provides an overview of the artist's important later work. This exhibition and its accompanying publication are made possible by a generous grant from PaineWebber Group Inc.

In the early 1970s, Frank Stella's art underwent a fundamental change, as the austerity of his youthful "minimalist" style gave way to dazzling exuberance. Since then, he has constructed his complex paintings outward, away from the plane of the wall. The breathtaking scale and vitality of these later "maximalist" works, with their intricate forms and flamboyant colors, are tangible expressions of Stella's desire to build what he calls "a pictorial space that accommodates the reach of all our gestures, imaginative as well as physical."

Approximately thirty-five large paintings have been selected for this exhibition from the many series--Polish Village, Diderot, Brazilian, Exotic

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Bird, Indian Bird, Circuits, Shards, Malta, South African Mines, Cones and Pillars, and, the current series-in-progress, Waves--that the artist has produced during the seventies and eighties.

In the early seventies, Stella began the Polish Village series (named for seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century synagogues destroyed in Poland by the Nazis). In different versions he moved from low-relief collage to high-relief works with surfaces of felt and painted cardboard. At this point in his career, Stella became increasingly interested in the notion of structuring or "engineering" the surface of a picture prior to actual painting.

Stella observes, "I need something that I feel is worth painting on, so I have to make it myself. . . . You can only take advantage of those gifts that you really have--that are part of your character, I guess--and you're lucky to be born with those gifts. I have a gift for structure. . . . Building a picture was something natural for me. Build it and then paint it. It was a job I was well suited for."

Stella was extremely productive during the seventies, developing several major bodies of work, such as the Diderot series (a continuation of his earlier Concentric Squares but now executed in mammoth size) and the Brazilian series (etched and painted metal reliefs that were named for areas in and around Rio de Janeiro). What distinguished the latter works was the painterliness of their execution, marking a sharp break with his earlier manner and leading to the freer and more dramatic drawing with color that would animate Stella's painting from that time forward.

Stella's "second career" began in earnest in 1976 with the brilliant series of metal reliefs called Exotic Birds (whose titles were prompted by his travels and new interest in bird-watching). This series marks another radical

departure in his art, as freewheeling curves become predominant over rectilinear geometry.

The maquettes for a subsequent series of painted metal reliefs, the Indian Birds, were executed while Stella was a guest of the Sarabhai family in India toward the end of the seventies. The maquettes made use of discarded sheets of tin alloy originally intended for commercial purposes, which resulted in an aesthetic all their own. The full-size reliefs represent the apotheosis of Stella's baroque tendencies; their curves are larger, more asymmetrical, and more complex than those of the Exotic Birds.

Stella's longstanding passion for car racing partly inspired his major series of the early eighties, the Circuits, which the artist calls the "longest and most concentrated streak of work that I've ever had." The individual reliefs were named for international auto racetracks, while the generic title Circuits refers not only to the racing circuit but to the paintings' intricate structural networks.

The Cones and Pillars series of 1984-87--forty-eight large-scale painted metal reliefs titled after Italo Calvino's Italian Folktales--and the still-in-progress Waves are the final series in the exhibition. Rubin explains that the pillars, the cones, the grilles, and the other forms act as a "kind of cast of characters that may be used interchangeably to act upon one another, to tell a story whose events are more pictorial than literal. . . . What Stella is about here, I think, is an attempt to reclaim for painting as much of the narrative drama of older art as is possible within what remains abstract imagery, yet to reclaim it more as a way of firing the artist's imagination than as a message for the viewer."

Frank Stella was born in 1936 in Malden, Massachusetts; he studied painting at the Phillips Academy in Andover and at Princeton University, where he graduated in 1958 with a degree in history. He soon moved to New York and in little more than a year completed his first body of mature work, the Black series. At this time, several of his paintings were included in group exhibitions, including SIXTEEN AMERICANS at The Museum of Modern Art.

In 1960 Stella's Aluminum series, his earliest shaped canvases, were the subject of his first solo show at the Leo Castelli Gallery. He then took his first trip to Europe, making sketches in Spain for what would become the series Concentric Squares and Mitered Mazes. During that time both The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art included his work in group exhibitions. In the later sixties he was represented in the U.S. Sections of the XXXII Biennale at Venice and the VIII Bienal de São Paulo, and he was given many solo exhibitions abroad. During that decade the artist's work was regularly included in major individual and group exhibitions shown internationally. At the same time he began to travel extensively throughout Europe, as well as to Brazil and India.

In addition to the numerous international exhibitions devoted to Stella's work over the past two decades, the artist has received many honors, including the Skowhegan Medal for Painting (1981), The Mayor of the City of New York's Award of Honor for Arts and Culture (1982), an Honorary Doctor of Arts degree from Princeton University (1984), an honorary degree from Dartmouth College (1985), and an Award of American Art from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia (1985). In 1983 Stella was named the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard, the first abstract painter so honored. He

delivered a six-lecture series entitled Working Space, which was published in 1986 by Harvard University Press. The artist lives in New York City.

After its New York showing, the exhibition travels to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (February 12 - April 10, 1988) and to the Musée National d'Art Moderne (Centre Georges Pompidou), Paris (mid-May - mid-August, 1988). Since this is the first major exhibition of Stella's work in France, the Paris presentation is including earlier works to create a comprehensive retrospective. The American tour continues at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (October 16 - December 31, 1988); the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (February 11 - April 23, 1989); and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (June 4 - August 13, 1989).

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