

# **Frank Stella 1970-1987 : [brochure]**

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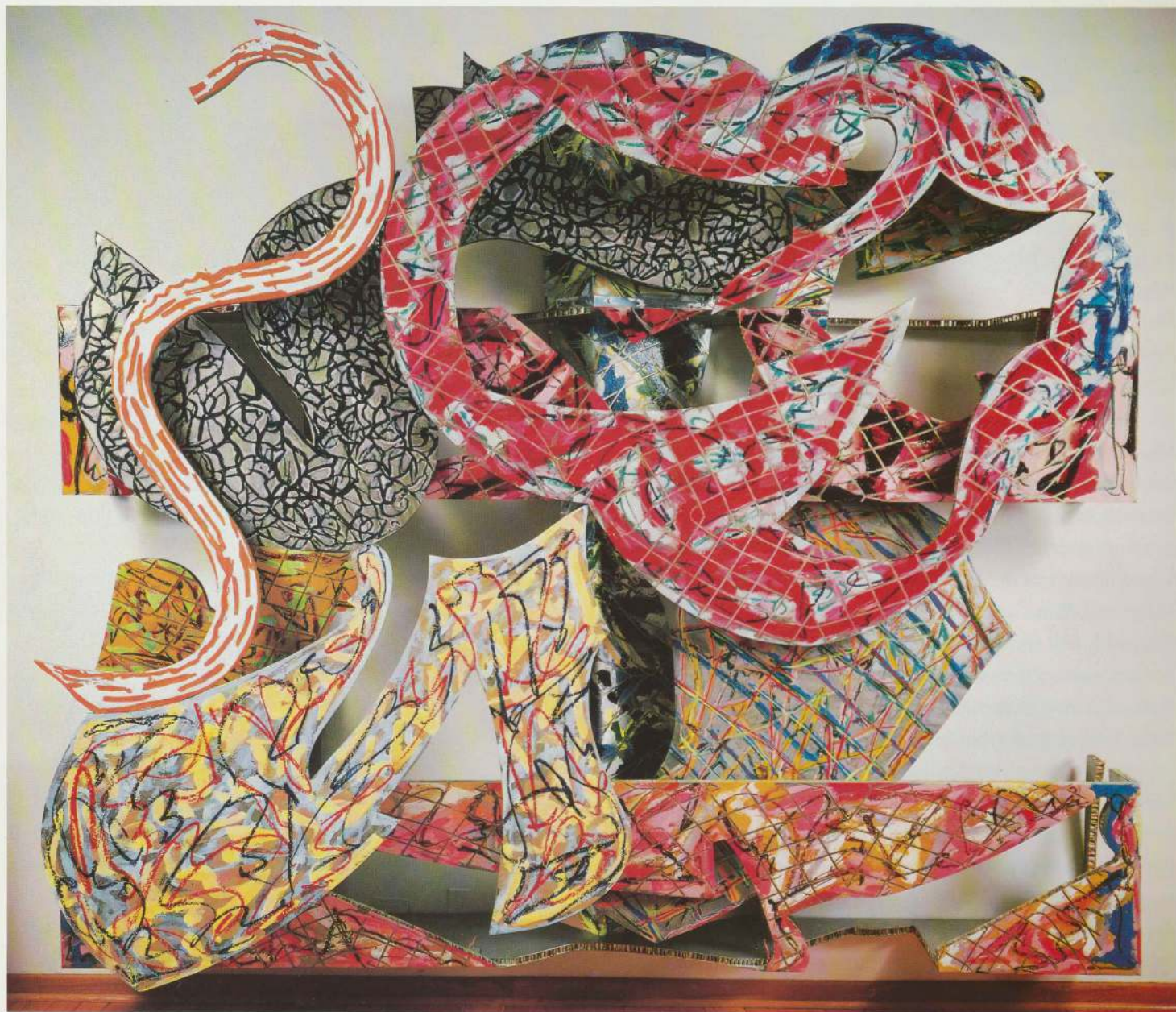
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The Museum of Modern Art  
New York

October 12, 1987–January 5, 1988

# Frank Stella

1970–1987



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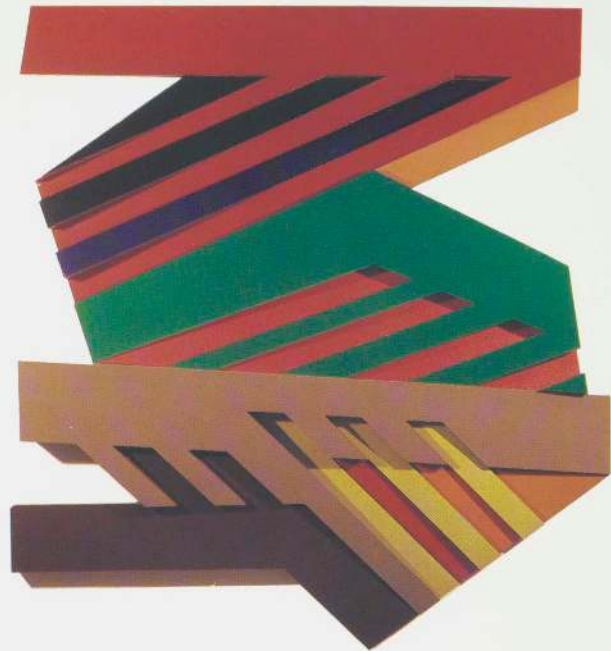
**F**rank Stella was thirty-three when, in 1970, The Museum of Modern Art held a retrospective exhibition of his work. Soon after, he radically shifted the direction of his art, and the austerity of his youthful "minimalist" style gave way to a dazzling exuberance. Together, his multifaceted stylistic explorations have endowed non-figurative painting with a range and variety it had never known before.

The present exhibition is a report on Stella's work over the past seventeen years, 1970 to 1987, during which his paintings began breaking away from the wall in ever-multiplying layers of luxuriant curves, colors, and diverse materials. The breathtaking scale and vitality of these later, "maximalist" works 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."



From the beginning Stella has wanted to stretch the seeming limits of abstract painting. Within a year of his graduation from Princeton in 1958, he definitively established himself as an artist with his reductive, but also enigmatic, Black series of paintings. These stark compositions of black stripes separated by slim margins of bare canvas were a direct challenge to the then-prevailing style of Abstract Expressionism, with its impulsive brushstrokes and theatrical personal gestures. In his rigorous purge of such influences, Stella seemed to banish all the elements of painting suggestive of improvisation and luxuriousness, "scraping his painting to the flattest, leanest, most minimal bones," as Robert Rosenblum has written. Further effort to eliminate anything extraneous prompted him in 1960 to begin cutting away the sections of his canvases that were not part of the design scheme. The resulting "shaped canvases" opened up new possibilities for painters and sculptors and marked the beginning of what was to become a major

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*Piaski III*. (1973). Mixed media on board, 7'8" × 7' (233.7 × 213.4 cm).  
Collection Brigitte Freybe, West Vancouver, B.C.

direction of Stella's later work—the effort to physically "shape," or build, the surface on which he will paint.

During the early 1970s, at the transitional point in his career, Stella was working on an extended series known collectively as the Polish Village paintings. (The titles of the individual works refer to seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century synagogues that had been destroyed by Hitler.) The Polish Village compositions are an important step in Stella's continuing quest to find new ways of infusing abstract painting with volume, mass, and spatial dynamics. *Piaski III* (1973), for example, is a low relief, its overlapping and interlocking jigsaw shapes built out from the supporting wall. Each composition in the series was meticulously constructed—first drawn, then redrawn on graph paper, realized in models, and finally executed in several versions of increasingly high relief, using materials that included fabric, canvas, cardboard, and wood. "Struggling through the Polish pictures

opened things up for me so that I was able to use my gift for structure with something that modernism hadn't really exploited before, the idea that paintings could be constructed.... Building a picture was something natural for me. Build it and then paint it."

Stella continued to explore relief compositions, but following the "carpentry" of the Polish Village paintings he instituted a significant change of materials and of style. The Brazilian reliefs of 1974–75 (named after places in Rio de Janeiro) were fabricated in metal. And for the first time his "handwriting" became clearly evident, in the spontaneous scribbles of brush and crayon that enliven the factory-fresh surfaces. Most of his subsequent works of the seventies and eighties would develop from the breakthrough made here, as Stella worked out the growing possibilities presented by the painterly handling of metal constructions.

In contrast, the Diderot paintings of 1974 (named after works by the French encyclopedist) look back to his earlier style of tightly controlled painting on canvas. Reviving the long-favored format of the Concentric Square series of 1962–63, Stella seemed to be testing the new directions in his art against the ascetic principles of his youth. The artist particularly liked the square, subdivided into equally measured colored bands, because it was neutral, diagrammatic, simple, and flat—"a powerful pictorial image," as he notes. "It's so good that you can use it, abuse it, and even work against it." For the new Diderot group of Concentric Square paintings, such as *Jacques le fataliste* (1974), Stella enlarged the squares to over 11 feet, yet kept the strips of color as narrow as they had been in the earlier paintings. The relatively small bands within the larger squares not only enhance the impression of immense overall size but also permit more color changes. The finely graduated color sequence imparts an illusion of space, since some colors recede while others project. For Stella, this kind of color effect



*Jacques le fataliste*. (1974). Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 11'3" x 11'3" (343 x 343 cm). Private collection (Photo: Bruce C. Jones)

constitutes a new "extravagance" that creates a pleasurable tension with the strict geometry of the square.

The tendency toward extravagance in Stella's work after 1970 becomes even more pronounced with the brilliant series of metal reliefs called *Exotic Birds*, produced from 1976 to 1980 and named after endangered or extinct species. (Influenced by his second wife, Harriet McGurk, Stella had become involved in bird-watching.) The series marks another radical departure in his art, as freewheeling curves become predominant over rectilinear geometry. Stella had never drawn freehand curves and did not do so now. The wild, fanciful arabesques are determined by prefabricated forms called templates, used in mechanical drawing. Stella had previously worked with common drafting tools—ruler, triangle, or protractor—and the readymade, measurable forms appealed to his engineer-like sensibility. In 1975 he had discovered and purchased an elaborate set of the templates known as

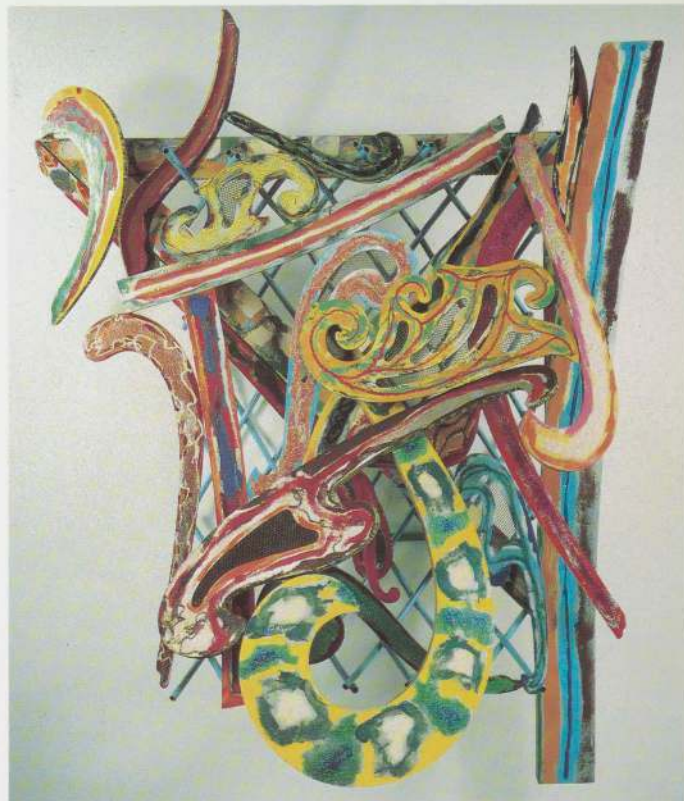
ship curves (used in nautical design); later he acquired sets of railroad curves (straighter curves used to plot the turning of railroad beds) and complex, ornamental French curves (which vaguely suggest musical G clefs).

All of these different types, known collectively as irregular curves, appear in combination in the Exotic Bird series. In *Steller's albatross* (1976), a ship curve dominates the center, with a French curve directly above it and a yellow-edged railroad curve below it. The active, arching shapes amidst tilting blue, white, and black planes tease the viewer's perception of depth but satisfy Stella's definition of a picture's space: "Pictorial space is one in which you have two-dimensional forms tricked out to give the appearance of three-dimensional ones, so that the space you actually perceive comes down somewhere in-between."

Toward the end of the seventies, Stella was invited to India as a guest of the Sarabhai family. While working there on a group of twelve large reliefs, he developed the idea of creating an open grille structure on which



*Steller's albatross*, 3 x . (1976). Mixed media on aluminum, 65 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (165.8 x 217.4 cm). Collection Henry and Maria Feiwel (Photo: Bruce C. Jones)



*Rām gangra*, 5.5 x . (1978). Mixed media on aluminum, metal tubing, and wire mesh, 9' 7" x 7' 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 43 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (292.2 x 230 x 110.6 cm). Collection Mr. and Mrs. Victor W. Ganz (Photo: © Steven Sloman)

the irregular curves could be affixed. The wall shows clearly through the teeming, multicolored swirls and turquoise latticework of *Rām gangra* (1978); although we know it intellectually to be extremely heavy, nonetheless the huge composition appears to float freely, delicately suspended. (Because the models reminded him of birds in cages, Stella found a book on the birds of India to supply the titles.) The *Indian Birds*, begun in 1977 and completed in 1979, reveal the artist at his most Baroque. We encounter a projective, sweeping space that Stella believes is comparable to the visual effect of the seventeenth-century paintings by Caravaggio and Rubens he so admires. In a brash gesture, he liberally applied gold paint, metal shavings, and ground glass to achieve an effervescent glitter and a glitzy artificiality.

With characteristic energy, Stella was finishing the last of the Exotic Birds and Indian reliefs while simultaneously preparing a new set of drawings and models for what was to be his largest group of paintings. The Circuits of 1980–84 reflect Stella's longstanding passion for road racing. The individual works are named for international automobile racetracks, while the generic title Circuits acknowledges the paintings' intricate structural networks. The dominant visual elements of the series derive from the Flexicurve, a drafting instrument that creates snake-like forms evocative of the roadways of the title. A Flexicurve form can be seen in the center of *Talladega* (1981). It appears with a profusion of other curves, all combined and overlapped, so that the identity of the individual components is almost overwhelmed. Deciphering the tangled design becomes more of a challenge because Stella introduced maverick forms into the composition, odd, residual shapes that were left over when the template curves were cut out. He enjoyed the quirky charm of these scraps and used them as elements in several subsequent series: the Shards, the Malta series, and the South African Mines.



*Talladega*, 4.75 x. (1981). Mixed media on etched magnesium, 9' x 10' 5½" x 17¼" (274.4 x 318.8 x 43.8 cm). Collection Stefan T. Edlis (Photo: Bruce C. Jones)



*Giufà, la luna, i ladri e le guardie*, 3.8 x. (1984). Mixed media on canvas, etched magnesium, aluminum, and fiberglass, 9' 7¼" x 16' 3¼" x 24" (292.7 x 495.9 x 61 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the James Thrall Soby Bequest (Photo: Kate Keller)

The disparate metal elements of the Circuits are of enormous scale and complexity of design. Because of this, their surface treatment serves a critical unifying function. In many of these works, crisscrossing patterns of parallel lines were etched into the surfaces of the metal at the factory. Stella believes the etching alters the character of the factory-made pieces, rendering them more personal and human-scale. But it is essentially his painting that provides vital cohesion as well as visual excitement. He contends that "painting these metal reliefs is a way of infusing the piece with life; the brushstrokes, the flow of paint, might be compared to the circulatory process in the body." The brilliantly colored calligraphic markings of *Zandvoort* (1981), enlivened by the underlying etching, pull the eye over and around dangerous curves and awkward angles in an accelerated, pulsating rhythm.

The expressive power of Stella's reliefs is further demonstrated in a later series, descriptively titled *Cones and Pillars* (1984–87). Individual titles, assigned after the reliefs were composed, were chosen from Italo Calvino's *Italian Folktales*. (He had met Calvino while the two were at Harvard in 1983–84.) Stella believes that the pictorial

drama of his paintings shares something of the strong narrative quality of the tales. In the series, monumental geometric forms are contrasted with irregular residual shapes. The giant cones and cylinders of *Giufà, la luna, i ladri e le guardie* (1984) are modeled by slick, hard-edge lines and appear charged and ready to collide with the other, softly brushed forms. Reminiscent of the mechanistic style of Fernand Léger yet also recalling Crayola crayons, the Cones and Pillars are at once potent and playful.

Since 1986, Stella has been working on the Wave series, reliefs named after chapter titles in Melville's *Moby-Dick*. *Loomings* (1986) reaffirms the artist's unusual ability to exploit a variety of forms and techniques within one work: suggesting the "wave" of the series title (and perhaps hinting at Melville's great white whale), a silvery metal strip gently swells over a folded cylinder etched with a disciplined linear pattern of concentric squares; lapping out from the crisply cut cylinders are French curves painted with the familiar gestural brushwork. It is rare for an artist to encompass such diversity with such success (Picasso is a notable example).

And it is equally rare that an artist dares to change styles radically in mid-career, as Stella has done, while maintaining consistency and quality. His change to a "maximalist," inclusive style that draws upon an ever-growing vocabulary of forms and techniques gives Stella's art its continuing strength. Comparing his pre-1970 "stripe" paintings with the works in this exhibition, Stella recently said, "The new things really were different. There's a power in the stripe paintings that the newer ones will never have. On the other hand, there is an energy—a kind of florid excitement—in the newer works that the stripe paintings didn't have. I don't think you can do it all at once. That's why you're lucky to have a lifetime."

Emily Bardack Kies



*Loomings, 3x*. (1986). Mixed media on etched magnesium and aluminum, 11'10½" x 13'6½" x 44" (361 x 412.8 x 111.8 cm). Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Gift of Joan and Gary Capen, 1987 (Photo: Glenn Halvorson)

**Frank Stella 1970–1987** was organized by William Rubin, Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture.

#### Publication

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#### Lecture

Thursday, November 5: "Stella, Then and Now"  
Robert Rosenblum, Professor of Fine Arts, New York University

The lecture will begin at 8:30 p.m. in the Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1. Tickets are \$8, Members \$7, students \$5. For more information, inquire at the Lobby Information Desk or call (212) 708-9795.

#### Videotapes

A program of videotapes on Frank Stella will be shown continuously in The Edward John Noble Education Center, off the Garden Hall.

Cover: *Zandvoort, 4.75x*. (1981). Mixed media on etched magnesium, 9' x 10'4" x 20" (274.4 x 315 x 50.8 cm). Collection Donald and Barbara Zucker (Photo: © Steven Sloman)

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