

Frank Stella, the Indian bird maquettes : [exhibition] the Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 12-May 1, 1979

Author

Stella, Frank

Date

1979

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

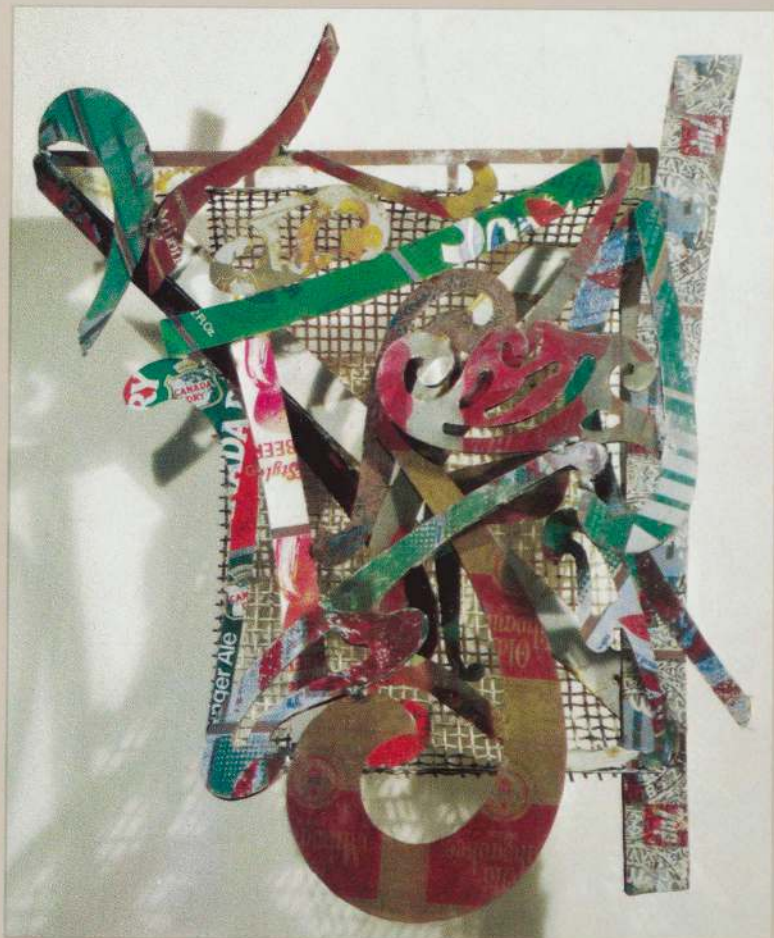
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Frank Stella:
The Indian Bird Maquettes

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
March 12–May 1, 1979





The maquettes for the brilliant Indian Bird series were executed in October 1977, while the artist was a guest of the Sarabhai family at their residence in Ahmedabad, India. (A duplicate set of these maquettes was given by the artist to the Sarabhai Foundation.) Stella remembers the twelve days of his stay in Ahmedabad as "wonderfully

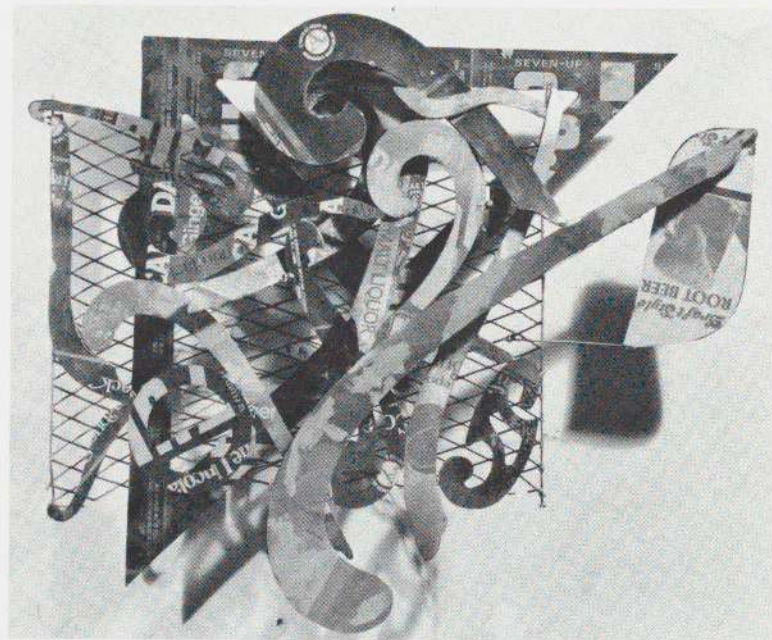
productive." The Sarabhais were generous in furnishing assistants—starting with four, the crew became twenty-four (including part-timers)—and the artist retains fond memories of the shared excitement of this collective participation.

Stella had just begun to elaborate his ideas for this series when he departed for India. He carried

with him a few drawings and a model—in paper and foamboard—for what eventually became the second in the series to be completed. Each model was first developed in its actual size as a series of superimposed drawings executed on transparent paper. (Compare the drawings on the back cover with the color reproduction of

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Front cover: Maquette for #3, *Rām gangra*, 21 x 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". All maquettes executed October 1977; imprinted metal alloy sheets, wire mesh, and soldered and welded metal scraps, with paint and oil crayon. All works, collection of the artist

Opposite page, top: The artist with Anand Sarabhai

Maquette for #1, *Jungli kowwa*, 16 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 19 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

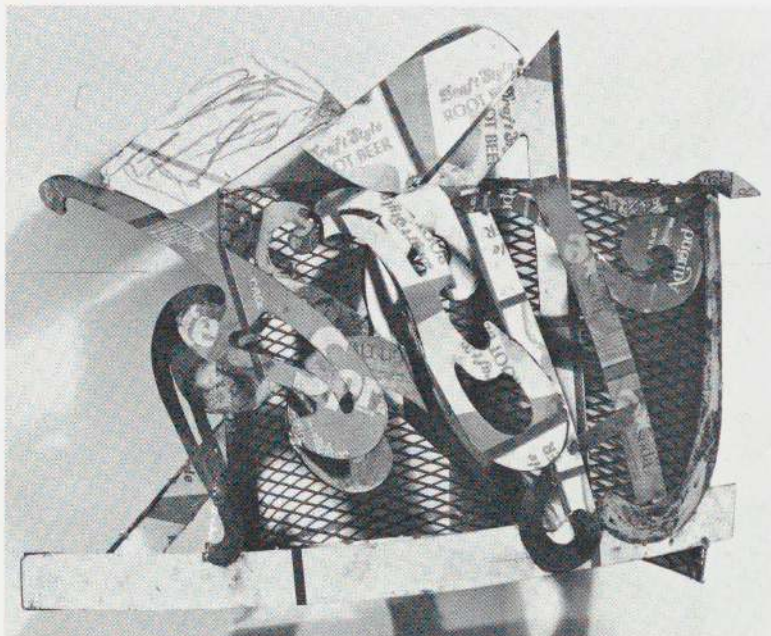


the same work on the front cover.) Stella's assistants then traced the forms and cut them out of scrap metal sheets. Most of the latter were tin-alloy sheets, silk-screened with misregistered and multiple over-prints of the names and logos of various soft-drink and food-processing companies.

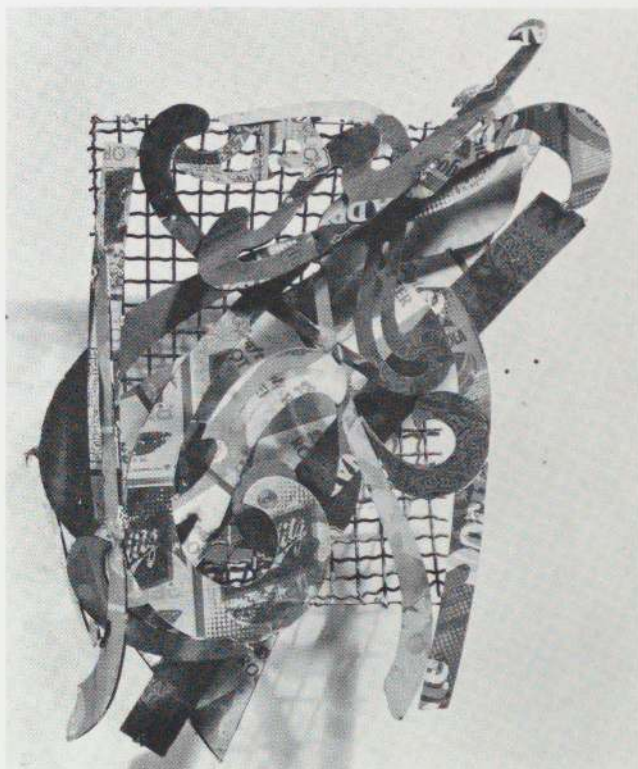
The characteristic shapes—like

those of the preceding Exotic Bird series—are all Irregular Curves, taken from instruments used by marine and architectural draftsmen. The majority of forms in the Indian Birds are Danish Ship Curves, but there are also Railroad Curves, used to plot the patterns on which rail bedding turns. The overall structure of the reliefs is tripartite: The "field"

or background against which the Irregular Curves function—the structure that quite literally holds the reliefs together—is a half-cylinder of metal grillwork. The two forward edges of the grill support a flat pattern of shapes posed at right angles to the spectator's line of vision (back cover, fig. A), which establish a picture plane, and thus



Maquette for #2, *Maha-lat*, 15½ x 20"



Maquette for #4, *Sat-bhai*, 20 x 15½"

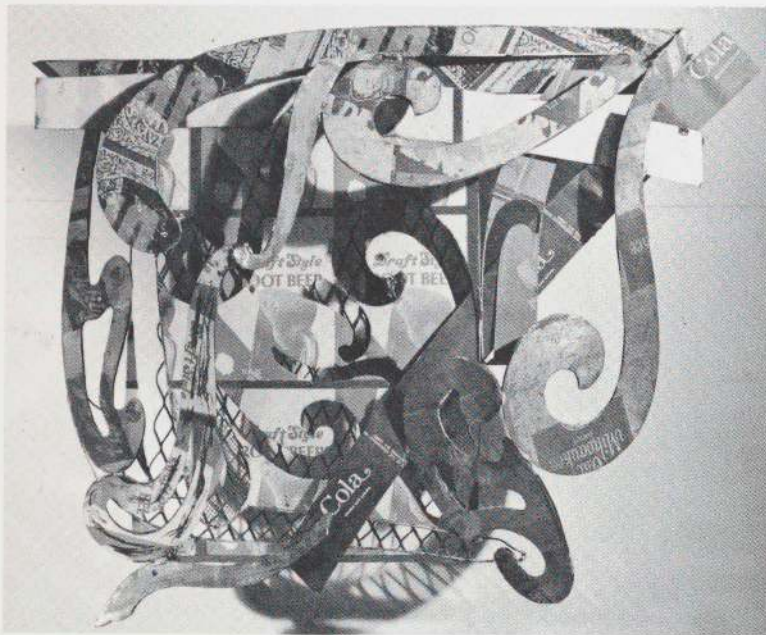
maintain the pictorial character of the conception; it is formed of irregular curves in the smaller of two scales. Penetrating this "picture plane" at different angles, moving in front of and behind it, are a set of curves in a scale three times larger (back cover, fig. B) that constitute the third component. Odd bits of additional scrap such as wire, metal

mesh, screening, and metal rods are also worked into the relief models.

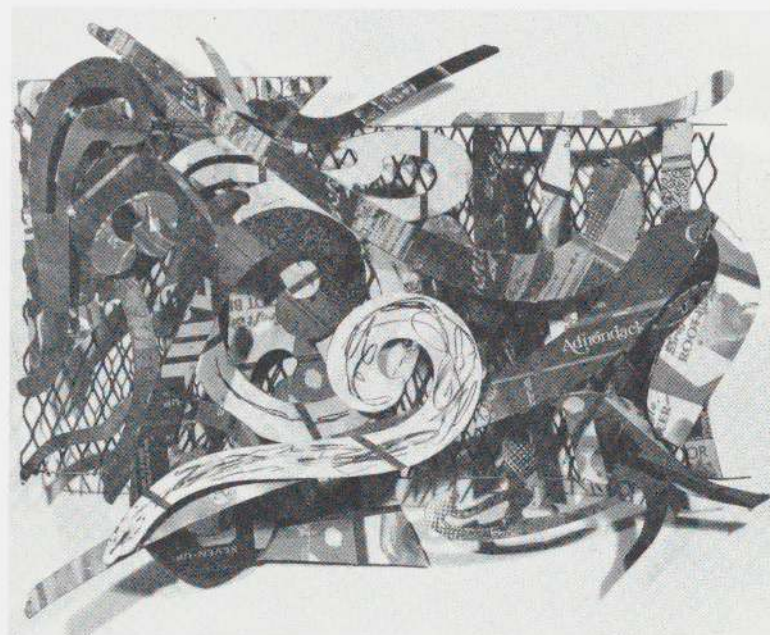
There are virtually no straight lines in the Indian Birds—a trait that would seem to set them morphologically in polar opposition to the Black, Aluminum, and Copper pictures with which Stella's career began. But for all their arabesques, the Irregular Curves nevertheless



constitute—like the "niches" that establish the step patterns in Stella's earliest shaped canvases—a fixed, *a priori* vocabulary of forms. Thus Stella's rigorous self-limitation here to these particular Irregular Curves is finally an extension, of his earlier methods—that of the Protractor Series



Maquette for #5, *Bulal-chashm*, 16¾ x 21½"



Maquette for #6, *Shoubeeji*, 16¾ x 21¾"



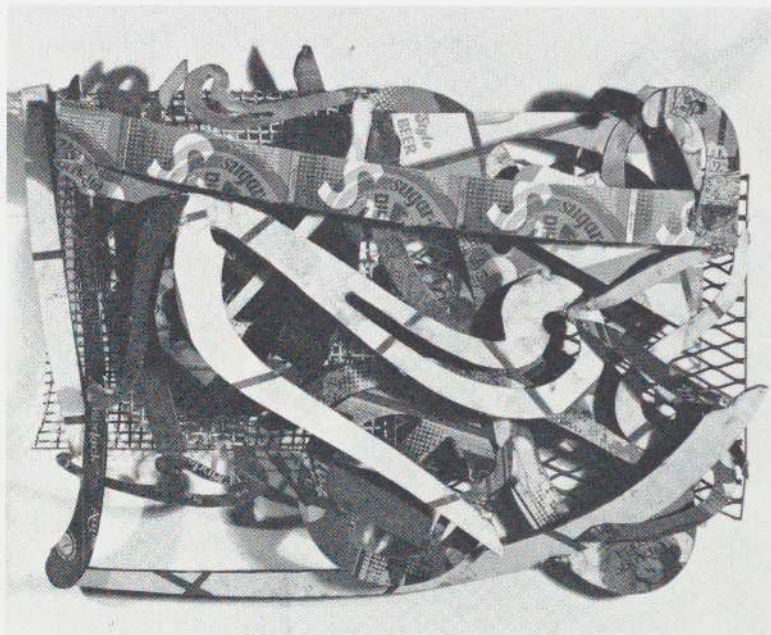
especially. In the Indian Birds, as in all Stella's prior series, the composition of these received forms is designed to provide a basis for the act of painting. "In order to start painting," he insists, "I have to have a structure worth painting on. If it fails—as in all my earlier work—it fails by what happened before I begin painting."

In the maquettes for the Indian Birds, there is virtually no painting. With the exception of some scumbled color or scribble—designed to bridge the color gaps on some of the imprinted tin—the material was used as found, though it was selected for variety, "so it wouldn't all say Root Beer." Thus we have to understand the models as focusing

essentially on the first step of Stella's procedure: providing the structure. The process of painting came into play only in the realization of the large, definitive reliefs (shown in January 1979 at the Castelli Gallery), which were executed 5.5 times larger than the models.

In the maquettes, then, such color as exists remains largely

"aleatory," on the level of a controlled accident. It had to be bright, irregular in its patches, and sufficiently atomized to dissolve the hard forms into pictorial scintillation. That we can read the print—"Canada Dry," "Coca-Cola," etc.—amuses us; it is as if Stella had cut his patterns from the raw material of Pop Art (though in India the sheet stock does



Maquette for #7, *Harewa*, 16¾ x 21½"



Maquette for #8, *Khar-pidda*, 21¾ x 16½"

not pass for Pop—it's just considered scrap). But the cutting-out of specific forms from a sheet of Pop material, actually a field of colors and letters created by the multiple misprintings, allowed Stella to see the scored pieces as abstract parts inviting reassembly. In a manner not wholly unrelated to Jackson Pollock's paintings (one of Stella's

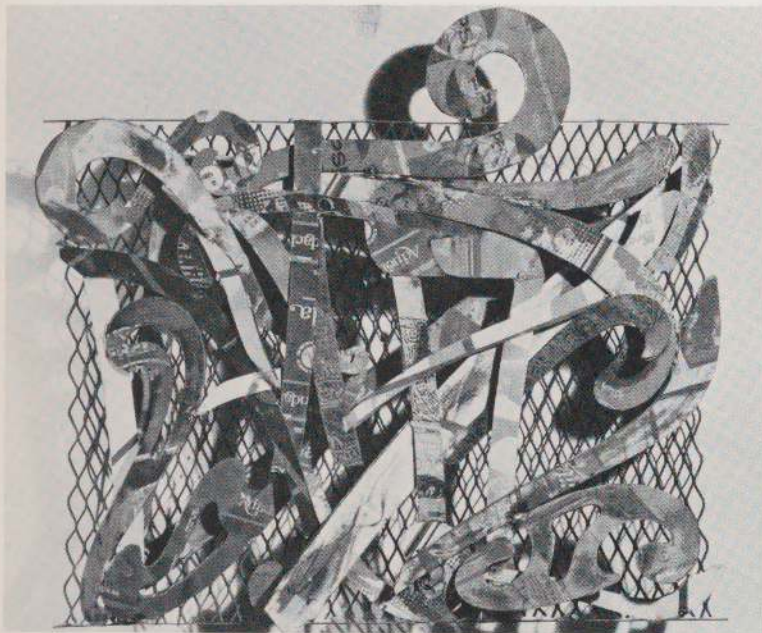
earliest loves), the fragmentation of color in the models, combined with the interweaving of their arabesqued forms, creates a sense of allover flicker and activity that keeps the surfaces alive and pictorial—and thus keeps these reliefs closer to the art of painting than of sculpture.

In the full-scale *Indian Birds*, the

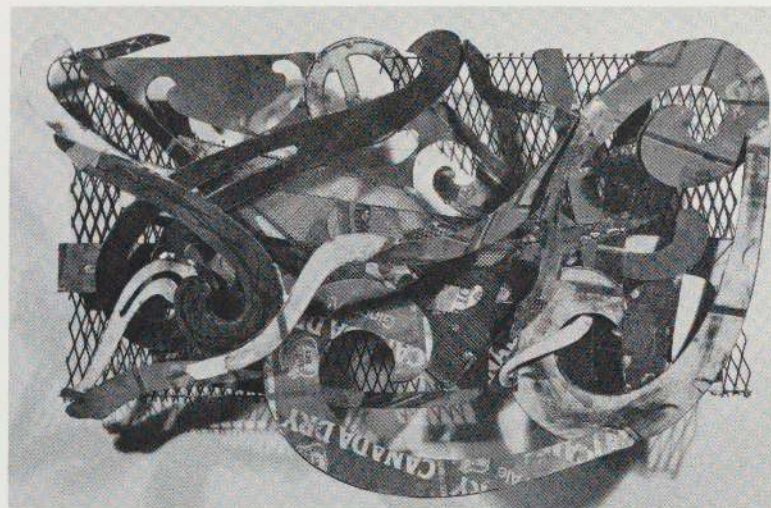
accidental printed patterns of the tin were replaced by brush, glittering, often metallic colors (sometimes textured by metallic shavings). The heightened colorism of these works has suggested to some critics the ambience of Little Italy or Las Vegas; some have been shocked by what they considered "distasteful" color. For Stella the question is elsewhere.

"If you want to think that way, forget about art," he observes. "There are no wrong colors. Nothing fails because it has vulgar or theatrical color. Things fail when they don't make it as art."

More than that of any other painter of his age, Stella's art has been a constant challenge to taste, to received values. In this sense the



Maquette for #9, *Thirthira*, 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ "



Maquette for #10, *Shama*, 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ "



brash and variegated coloring of the Bird series functions like the implacable "non-color" of his earliest pictures; and if the earlier style dared a definition of painting based on an unprecedented minimum of visual incident, the new ones challenge by incorporating a maximum of it. The models only hint at this, however; only in the larger works

is the challenge fully bodied forth.

What I have always liked about Stella's art is that it consistently forced me to expand the boundaries of my experience. Indeed, it has expanded the definition of what painting can be, to the profit of a whole generation of artists.

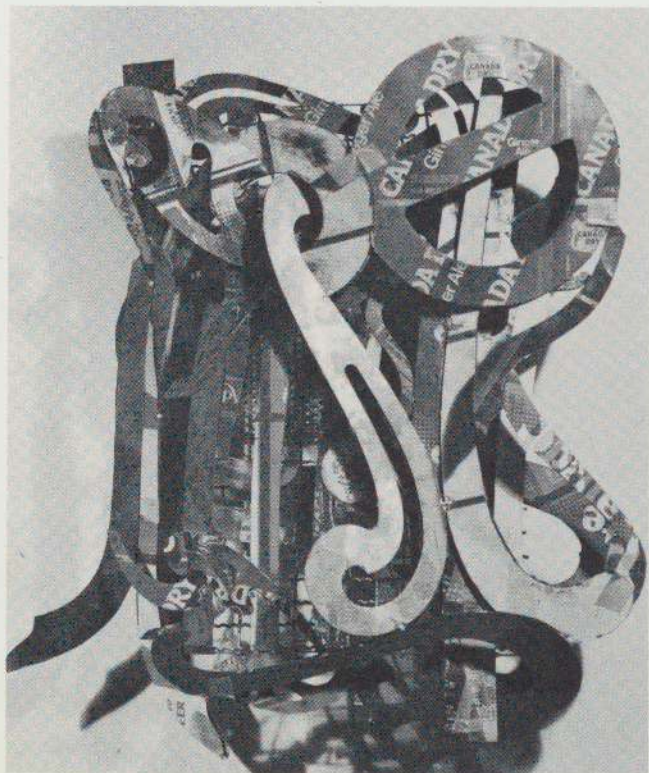
William Rubin



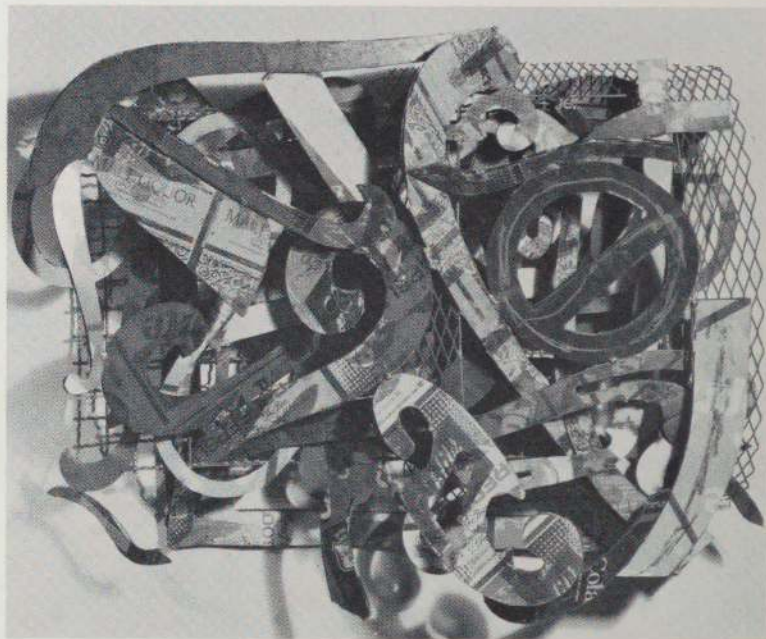
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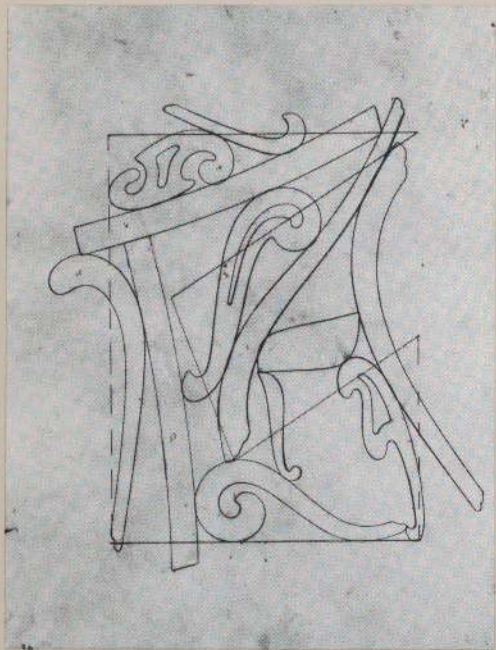
photos of the drawings by Mali Olatunji
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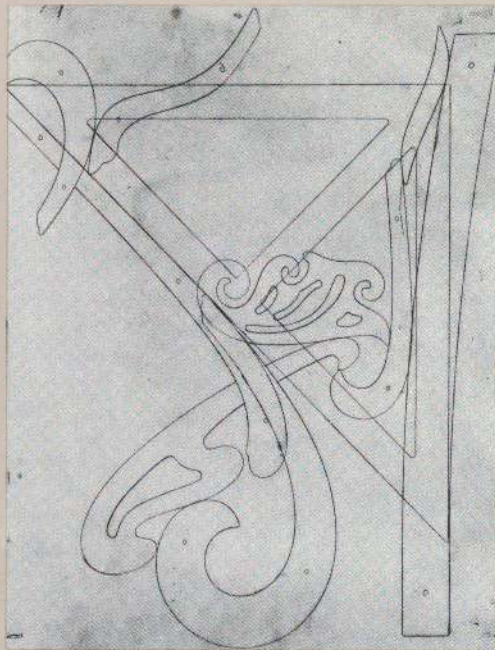
Maquette for #11, *Kastūra*, 21 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ "



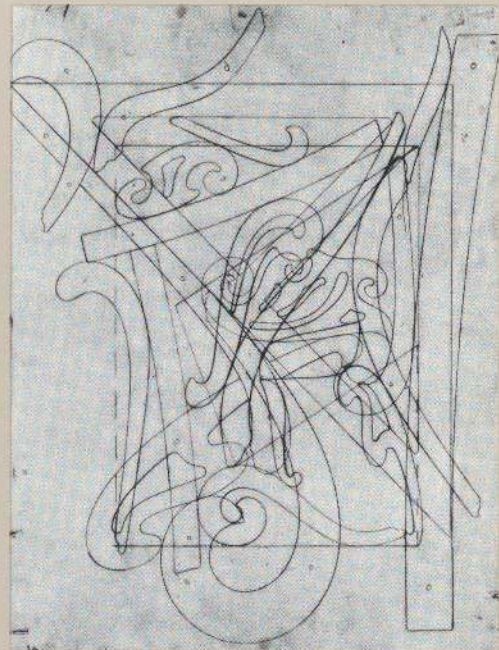
Maquette for #12, *Pachanak*, 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 22"



Drawing A for #3, *Rām gangra*,
pencil on transparent paper, 22 x 17"



Drawing B for #3, *Rām gangra*,
pencil on transparent paper, 22 x 17"



Drawing B superimposed
on drawing A, 22 x 17"