

Frank Stella: Selections from the Permanent Collection

Frank Stella (United States, b. 1936) has been a pivotal figure in the development of modern art since the late 1950s. Working in multiple mediums, he has created an extensive body of work that has consistently challenged the conventions of art making. Over the past sixty years Stella has pushed the boundaries of Abstract Expressionism, helped usher in Minimalism, and blurred distinctions between painting and sculpture, continuously experimenting with new materials, abstract forms, and innovative techniques.

Stella worked in series throughout his career, exploring various formal issues and themes in depth. This exhibition features a selection of works from LACMA's permanent collection—many of which have not been on public view in more than thirty years—that represent significant developments in the artist's oeuvre. From an example of his groundbreaking Black Paintings of the 1950s to his recent monumental sculpture, the works on view present a glimpse into the rich trajectory of Stella's artistic practice, while revealing central themes that recur throughout his career.

Getty Tomb, 1959

Black enamel on canvas

Contemporary Art Council Fund

M.63.21

Getty Tomb is one of about two dozen works by Stella known as the Black Paintings (1958–60), which are composed of parallel bands of flat black paint separated by thin lines of unpainted canvas. To make these works, Stella applied commercial paint with a housepainter's brush, which dictated the width of the black stripes. With their highly controlled brushwork and minimal compositions, the Black Paintings were a radical departure from Abstract Expressionism, the movement that dominated art in the previous decade. Eliminating illusionistic space and narrative or symbolic allusions, this series called attention to the physical properties of paint and canvas, conveying the artist's statement at the time that "what you see is what you see."

Bampur, 1965

Acrylic and Day-Glo on canvas

Gift of the Phil Gersh Agency, Inc. through the Contemporary Art Council

M.72.8

In 1963 Stella traveled to Iran. Inspired by the landscape and vibrant culture he experienced there, he later created a small series known as the Persian Paintings (1965), of which *Bampur* is an example. Stella titled each of the paintings in the series after Iranian cities, with *Bampur* named for a city and river in southeastern Iran. While conveying Stella's ongoing formal experimentation, *Bampur's* bent stripes of intersecting fluorescent colors reference the geometric mosaic patterns he saw in Persian architecture.

WHOM (single), 1967

Oil on canvas

Gift of Robert H. Halff through the Modern and Contemporary Art Council

M.2005.38.37

WHOM (single), from Stella's Concentric Squares series, presents a rainbow of nested squares. The kaleidoscopic composition appears to tunnel toward the center of the canvas and outward to the margins of the frame, resulting in a dynamic optical effect. Like many artists of his generation, Stella was influenced by artist Josef Albers's color theories. Stella's Concentric Squares recall Albers's iconic Homage to the Square series (1950–76), which explored color relationships through simple compositions of embedded squares. The "WHOM" in the painting's title references the radio call letters for 94.9 FM, which airs from Mount Washington in New Hampshire.

Hiragla Variation I, 1969

Fluorescent-alkyd on canvas

Museum Purchase with Museum Associates Acquisitions Fund

M.69.68

Stella's paintings from his Protractor series (1967–71), including *Hiragla Variation I*, are based on the instrument used for measuring and drawing angles. *Hiragla Variation I's* intricate composition consists of interwoven bands of bright colors that form semicircles and squares. Monumental in size, the Protractor works express Stella's interest in architecture: the paintings in the series are named after ancient Middle Eastern cities with circular plans and architectural structures such as gates that surrounded them.

Rozdol II, 1973

Felt, canvas, paint, and cardboard on wood

Gift of the Douglas S. Cramer Foundation

AC1997.130.3

Works such as *Rozdol II*, from the Polish Village series (1971–73), mark an important step in the development of Stella's pictorial language. Moving away from an emphasis on two-dimensionality, the artist built up the surface of these collage-like constructions by applying materials including felt, cardboard, and plywood. These hybrids between painting and sculpture are a precursor to Stella's three-dimensional metal reliefs, such as those in this exhibition. In addition to their formal innovations, the Polish Village paintings have significant cultural and historical meaning: they are based on Jewish synagogues destroyed by the Nazis during World War II.

Inaccessible Island Rail, 1976

Mixed media on aluminum

Gift of the Grinstein Family

M.90.187

In the mid-1970s Stella began a series of metal reliefs called Exotic Birds (1976–80). Increasingly three-dimensional, works such as *Inaccessible Island Rail* and *Kagu* project into the viewer's space. Comprising playful, swirling forms and painterly brushwork that recalls the graffiti of Stella's New York City environment, these works appear in stark contrast to the rigorous geometries of the artist's early paintings. However, the swooping shapes of the Exotic Birds are based on French curves and other technical drafting tools used for boat building, railroad track construction, and architecture.

Kagu, 1979–80

Mixed media on aluminum

Bea and Phil Gersh Fund, Modern and Contemporary Art Council Matching Fund
with National Endowment for the Arts Purchase Plan Award

M.80.137

St. Michael's Counterguard, 1984

Mixed media on aluminum and fiberglass honeycomb

Gift of Anna Bing Arnold

M.84.150.1-.12

Stella's monumental *St. Michael's Counterguard* is from his Malta series (1983–85), inspired by a 1983 visit to the Mediterranean island. Although sculptural in form, Stella considers *St. Michael's Counterguard* a painting. Around the time he made this work, he stated: "What painting wants more than anything... is space to grow and expand into, pictorial space that is capable of direction and movement, pictorial space that encourages unlimited orientation and extension. Painting does not want to be confined by boundaries of edge and surface."

K56 (large version), 2013

ABS RPT and stainless steel

Gift of Marianne Boesky

M.2018.19

K56 (large version), from Stella's recent Scarlatti Kirkpatrick series (begun 2006), emphasizes the relationship between color, form, and space. The title of the series refers to eighteenth-century Italian composer Domenico Scarlatti, best known for his harpsichord sonatas, and twentieth-century harpsichord virtuoso and musicologist Ralph Kirkpatrick. *K56*'s vibrant, lyrical lines evoke musical composition, suggesting both the lively rhythm of a Scarlatti sonata and a swirl of gestural brushstrokes. Stella employs 3D printing technologies in the Scarlatti Kirkpatrick series, representing a new chapter in his artistic evolution and technical experimentation.