

MINIMALIST ART AND FRANK STELLA

*Minimalist art is abstract art consisting primarily of simple geometric forms executed in an impersonal style.*¹ It has proved difficult to describe because it seems to have little reference to anything outside of itself.

*If Abstract Expressionism dominated the 1940s and 1950s, Minimalism belonged to the '60s. It grew out of the restrained, spartan art of Abstract Expressionists, such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. A broad concept, Minimalism refers to either the paring down of visual variation within an image, or to the degree of artistic effort required to produce it. The result is an art form that is purer and more absolute than any other, stripped of incidental references and uncorrupted by subjectivity.*²

The simplification of art at this time was a revolt against Abstract Expressionism and Action Painting, rooted in American pragmatism. Only the simplest geometric forms were used. Minimalism does not describe the visual world or imitate the distinctive characteristics of any traditional movement in visual arts. Minimalist radically simplified the content so that the human point of view disappeared and the relationship between the viewer and the viewed became vital to realizing that something is a work of art. It is a type of art that has no personal touch but has an immediacy that challenges the viewer.

The movement has a dual meaning. It can mean a style either devoid of ornament or decoration or it can be indistinguishable from found objects or unaltered raw material. It has distant links with the past including the Shaker plainness and Sheeler precisionism and social experiments as Oneida and Brook Farm communities.

Frank Stella was born May 12, 1936 in Malden, Massachusetts. In 1950 he entered Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, where he studied art history and painting. He discovered that he was not interested in representational art. He graduated from Princeton University with a BA in History in 1958. He painted in the abstract expressionist style but did not seriously entertain the thought of becoming an artist. After attending an exhibit of Jasper Johns, Stella is quoted as saying "What you see is what you see." He was struck by Johns' style of painting and by the geometric patterns formed by the images on Johns' canvases.

After graduation, Stella moved to the Lower East Side of New York into a former jewelry store, converted into his studio. Immediately he attracted massive attention from the art world. He produced a kind of painting that was more abstract than anything before. His innovative work used a monochromatic palette and flat surfaces, which was 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"³ which demonstrated his view of art as an object in itself rather than a representation of an object, subject or emotion. His emphasis on form, not content, led him to become the leader of the Minimalist movement. In his first major works, the "Black Paintings" (1958-1960), Stella covered large canvases with black house paint,

leaving unpainted pinstripes in a repetitive pattern. At 23 years old, the Museum of Modern Art included four of his paintings in their *Sixteen Americans* exhibit and purchased one for their permanent collection.

In 1960 he held his first one man show at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York exhibiting striped canvases called the *Aluminum Paintings* which was a continuance of his explorations of the *Black Paintings*. The artist chose metallic paint because it has a quality that repels the eye, creating a more abstract appearance. Stella continued to produce more series of rigidly specific pictorial problems.

The first radical shift in Stella's work began in the mid 60s with the *Irregular Polygon*. He employed interlocking geometric shapes bordered by familiar bands but interjected large fields of color. His *Protractor* series with additional works is considered one of his most extraordinary series of paintings devoted to relationships of color, form and pattern. It is characterized by monumental scale, garish color, juxtapositions and for the first time curvilinear forms derived from drawing tools named in the title. *Damascus Gate II* (1968), part of the *Protractor* series, by Stella is in the Bank of America collection.

In 1970, Stella was the youngest artist to have a retrospective at MoMA. He reinvented himself again after a lengthy hospital stay where he began the drawings that would become the *Polish Village* series. It built upon the constructive geometry of the *Irregular Polygons* but in the form of collages. Named after a series of wooden synagogues destroyed by the Nazis, they signaled Stella's growing interest in Jewish themes and contemporary links to Cubism and Constructivism. He continued pushing the ideas further creating sculptural works claiming, "A sculpture is just a painting cut out and stood up somewhere."⁴ During this same period, Stella began his printmaking career, something he has passionately pursued since.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Stella continued to create his innovative prints while expanding his three-dimensional paintings into vibrant, brightly colored and multifaceted pieces. His print series were often named after paintings that explored similar things. Stella had another retrospective at MoMA in 1987.

Frank Stella has developed into a colorful, exuberant, multidimensional artist, from the geometric barrenness of his original work, continually experimenting and challenging formats. He is currently living in New York and continues to create large scale sculptures.

1 www.merriam-webster.com

2 Sister Wendy's Story of Painting, Sister Wendy Beckett & Patricia Wright, 1994, Dorling Kindersley Limited, London, p.379

3 www.theartstory.org/artist-stella-frank.htm

4 www.theartstory.org/artist-stella-frank.htm