

# SELECTIONS

ARTS / STYLE / CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND

#39



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## WHAT A RELIEF

American giant of post-painterly abstraction **Frank Stella** comes to **Leila Heller Gallery** in Dubai

by Yasmina Nysten

Born in Malden, Massachusetts in 1936, Frank Stella is a painter and printmaker who stood out very early on in his life for his innovative minimalist style and what art critic Clement Greenberg called “post-painterly abstraction” — a movement emanating from the abstract expressionism of the 1940s and '50s that espoused “openness and clarity” as a artistic philosophy.

From November to early January, some of Stella's most captivating work will be on show at the Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai, providing insight into his innovative and influential oeuvre.

Stella attended high school at the Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, after which he majored in history at Princeton University, where he continued to paint fervently. After graduation, he moved to New York, a city that he had visited on several occasions during his studies to meditate upon works by artists such as Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline.

Upon his move in 1959, Stella was immediately absorbed into art dealer Leo Castelli's stable of artists and proceeded to define his personal language through three consecutive series: the *Black Paintings* (1958-1960), *Aluminum Paintings* (1960) and *Copper Paintings* (1960-1961). Stella's vision didn't agree with the classical heritage of painting as pictorial representations of the physical world. He questioned the notion that his works had to conclude with something that went beyond raw material. The picture is “a flat surface with paint on it — nothing more,” he said.

*opposite page: Frank Stella, Thruxton, 1982, oil, oilstick, glitter, lacquer on etched magnesium, 190.5 x 216 x 38.1 cm*





*opposite page:* Frank Stella, *La Scienza della Fiacca 3.5x*, 1984, mixed media on canvas, etched magnesium, aluminum and fiberglass, 316.2 x 328.3 x 79.4 cm

*above left:* Frank Stella, *Guifa E La Berreta Rossa*, 1985, oil, urethane, enamel, fluorescent alkyd, acrylic printing ink on canvas, 330.5 x 408.3 x 79.4 cm



*above right:* Frank Stella, *Guifa E La Berreta Rossa*, 1985, oil, urethane, enamel, fluorescent alkyd, acrylic printing ink on canvas, 330.5 x 408.3 x 79.4 cm

*Die Fahne Hoch!* (1959), one of Stella's *Black Paintings*, takes its name from the national Socialist German Workers party anthem. The painting, whose title translates to *The Raised Banner*, is a black canvas depicting a stylistic cross in fine white lines of unpainted canvas, borrowing its proportions from the political party's banners. In his aluminium and copper series, Stella started to use his signature irregularly shaped canvases. These colourful works take the names of circular cities in the Middle East, which the artist had visited earlier on.

In the decade that followed, Stella started introducing a significant amount of relief into his works. This evolution transformed the nature of his work from painting to sculpture, which he defined as "maximalist" art. In 1967, Stella took on a significant project: the set and costume design of a dance piece by Merce Cunningham, called *Scramble*. In 1970, New York's Museum of Modern Art presented a retrospective of his work, making him the youngest artist to receive one.

Stella established a printmaking studio in New York, while creating more irregularly shaped pieces using new materials such as wood and collage, augmented with DayGlo colours. During the 1980s and '90s, the artist opted for larger scale three-dimensional pieces eloquently composed of ornamental shapes, such as cones in union with accents suggesting the motion of waves. Stella referred to Herman Melville's classic novel *Moby-Dick* as the instigator for the pieces of this era.

Stella entered the public eye through projects such his 10,000-square-foot mural for Toronto's Princess of Whales Theatre, and a free-standing sculpture placed outside the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.

The arrival of Stella's work in Dubai presents a fantastic change for local audiences to get to grips with one of America's artistic giants. ■

**FRANK STELLA** continues until January 4, 2017, at Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai