Exploring Abstraction in the Twentieth Century

A departure from the traditions of representational art, or art depicting things as they appear in real life, gained momentum in the early twentieth century as artists sought a different approach to visual form. By reducing compositions to the basic elements of art—color, line, shape, and texture—abstract artists prompted viewers to interact with their work without clear visual references to the outside world.
Abstract Expressionism
Artists of the Abstract Expressionist movement, which emerged during the 1940s, experimented with the inherent qualities of paint and canvas and the expressive nature of color. Some, known for their loose, spontaneous, and rapid application of paint on large-scale canvases through dripping or throwing, saw the physicality of their work as a mode of personal expression worthy of individual merit. A number of these artists, known collectively as Color Field painters, explored the emotional effects of paint on canvas through broad applications of flat fields of color on monumental surfaces. Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko are key figures of this influential artistic movement.

Minimalism
In the late 1950s and early 1960s the Minimalists, in contrast to the Abstract Expressionists, emphasized the fundamental essence of their subjects and the physical qualities of their materials rather than their subjective experience of artistic creation. By removing any visible sign of the artist’s hand and rejecting narrative and mood, Minimalism focused on geometric shapes, simplified forms, and defined lines. Along with their sheer physical presence, these works confront the viewer directly through their use of pure color and flattened pictorial space.

About the Artist: Frank Stella (American, born 1936 in Boston)
Frank Stella became interested in abstraction as a youth. When asked to paint a still life of ivy in his first high-school art class, he was the only student to venture beyond the comfort of realism. Years later he commented, “I always wanted to make abstract paintings. . . . I wanted my paintings to live in a world of their own.” Influenced by Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, Stella has championed the use of the basic elements of art in innovative compositions that distance his work from realistic representations of everyday life.

While majoring in history at Princeton, Stella experimented with the loose brushstrokes of the Abstract Expressionists whose work he saw in New York. His artistic career took off in 1959, when his series Black Paintings was featured in an exhibition of emerging artists at the Museum of Modern Art. Representing a break from the improvisational approach and gestural brushwork of the Abstract Expressionists, this series favored rationalism and restraint over spontaneity and abandon through its use of parallel vertical, horizontal, and diagonal bands of black enamel in symmetrical compositions. The restricted color palette and structural rigidity of the series laid the foundation for the Minimalism of the 1970s.

Marking the first major shift in his artistic practice, the series Irregular Polygons (1966) abandoned the monochromatic surfaces and rectangular format of Stella’s earlier work and employed a wide spectrum of brilliant colors in unbroken fields on asymmetrical geometric canvases. His Protractor series (1967)—to which Sinjerli Variation IV belongs—built upon these explorations in color and shape (see About the Painting). The use of curvilinear elements, which have often been compared to patterns traditionally found in Islamic art, added compositional complexity and linear intricacy to his work.

Following the critical acclaim of the Protractor series, Stella rejected the flat surfaces that had dominated his art. His paintings began to break away from the wall in layers of brightly colored organic curves made of diverse materials such as aluminum tubing and wire mesh. Expanding
the vocabulary of materials and forms, the artist now wanted to create works that accommodated “the reach of all our gestures, imaginative as well as physical.” By the mid-1980s, Stella’s reliefs had become so monumental, sculptural, and complex that it became increasingly difficult to classify his constructions as paintings. In recent years, Stella has been involved in various public-art projects, receiving commissions from around the world.

For images of the above-mentioned series, see the Book and Web Resources for Deeper Exploration and References sections.

About the Painting: Sinjerli Variation IV, 1968

This ten-by-ten foot (diam. 120 in.) tondo belongs to Stella’s Protractor series (1967), which includes eighteen large-scale canvases in variations of the protractor shape. By deriving the internal components of these works from the shape of the canvas itself, Stella sought to establish the physical presence of these paintings’ structural supports. Most of the paintings in the series are named after ancient circular cities in Asia Minor that Stella visited. Sinjerli, for instance, is a temple in southeastern Turkey.

Stella employed one of three basic designs (interlaces, rainbows, or fans) to compose each monumental painting with varying degrees of geometric complexity. Sinjerli Variation IV comprises interlaces, or intricate patterns of intersecting concentric protractor shapes. The canvas is first divided in two by these half-moon shapes and then further subdivided into sets of four. The shapes are arranged so that no one shape is completely behind another, thus eliminating any illusion of depth; the overlapping protractor shapes prohibits the forward movement of any individual piece. Although deceptively symmetrical at first glance, this intricate interlacing weaves a complex pattern having no clear beginning or end.

Leaving behind the monochromatic palette characteristic of his previous work, Stella embraced bright colors, including fluorescents, for this series. Often tinted with white to produce a vibrant glow, the colors are strategically placed to create various illusionistic effects that draw the viewer to the flat surface of the canvas. In harmony with the interlocking shapes, the eight-inch-wide bands of color activate the canvas, creating a dynamic movement that is held at bay by the flatness of the pictorial surface and the overlapping shapes. The monumental scale of the painting, along with its brilliant colors and the energetic movement of its curved forms, combine to physically engulf the viewer.

Classroom Activities

Quick Curriculum Connections
Abstraction: Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism
Elements of Art: Color, Line, and Shape
Geometry: protractor (see Principles of Design below)
Principles of Design: Balance (Symmetry and Asymmetry), Movement, Pattern, and Repetition
Questions for Guided Looking

Investigate this work of art through a classroom dialogue. Begin by asking students questions that elicit objective and descriptive observations. Move toward more abstract and subjective questions that develop students’ critical thinking skills as they seek to interpret the painting. Be sure that students cite visual evidence for their responses. Always encourage them to explore the painting visually before you reveal any art-historical information about the piece.

Adapt the following questions to your students’ level of comprehension.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

Identify the elements of art used to construct this painting.

How would you describe the colors, lines, shapes, and textures that you see?

What multiples of any color, line, or shape do you see?

What patterns emerge from the composition? Describe them in detail.

Where do your eyes go first? Do they stay in one place or move across the canvas?

Is the composition symmetrical? Take a close look at the intersecting bands of color!

Do you feel like you could walk into this painting? Why or why not?

How would describe the texture of the canvas? How would it feel to touch its surface?

DIGGING DEEPER

How does the shape of the canvas relate to its internal elements? Do you see any similarities?

What does this painting remind you of? What do the lines and shapes represent to you?

Reveal the title of the work and ask students to give it an alternate title based upon their initial observations.

Would this painting make you feel differently if the canvas were another shape?

A smaller size? **Three-dimensional**? Painted with a duller color palette?

The shape of this work was inspired by ancient circular cities. If you were to create a work of art based on a shape, what would serve as your inspiration?

Classroom Ideas for Younger Students

BREAKING DOWN THE COMPOSITION

Look around your classroom and select three objects to investigate. Ask students to break down the compositions of their selections using the basic elements of art. What colors, lines, and shapes make up these objects? If one of these elements were altered, how would the object be different? Could you use it the same way? Creating these connections to everyday objects will offer a smooth transition into a classroom discussion of how abstract artists employ the basic building blocks of art to create their compositions.

BODY LANGUAGE

Invite students to demonstrate the basic contrasts between the loose brushwork of Abstract Expressionism and the structured forms of Minimalism (see *Exploring Abstraction in the Twentieth Century*) by using their bodies. Begin by asking them to illustrate the physical brushstrokes of the Abstract Expressionist movement. (You should see a lot of rapidly moving arms and legs) Then, using *Sinjerli Variation IV* as an example, ask students to mimic the lines found in Minimalist art. How are they different? How are they the same? How does each feel?
Art Speaks: Quotations by Frank Stella

How do these quotations by the artist relate to what you see in this painting?

“Painting does not want to be confined—it needs room to move and breathe.”
“The experience of looking at a painting should not seem to end at its frame.”
“There must be a vital exchange between viewer and painting if both are to live.”
“What you see is what you see.”

The Artist’s Hand

You have just explored this painting with your eyes. Take a moment to respond with your hands.

VARIATIONS ON A SHAPE

Simple geometric shapes such as circles, squares, rectangles, and triangles form the structural foundations of many of Frank Stella’s early abstract compositions. The artist’s ability to create variations on these forms makes his works unique. Experiment with creating variations on a shape through the artist’s preferred style of hard-edged geometric abstraction.

Supplies needed: sketch paper, pencils, compasses, rulers, protractors, paintbrushes, tempera paint in regular and fluorescent colors, water and paint containers, masking tape, and thick paper.

Ask students to select one geometric shape that will form the structural base of their design. They will then sketch a composition using this shape, considering the principle of repetition as they seek to create variety in their arrangement. For example, a large rectangle may be composed of a series of smaller rectangles or a small triangle can be repeated until it forms a larger triangular composition. Students may change the scale (size) of their shapes or utilize the principle of overlapping to create a three-dimensional effect.

Once students have completed their sketches, they will use a ruler, protractor, or compass to create a “hard edge,” or precise line, final drawing on thick paper. They will then add color to their drawings, making sure to keep the lines crisp by using masking tape to mark the edges. Limit the number of colors students use. They should consider complementary color combinations. Ask students to title their finished works.

MAGNIFYING THE BIG PICTURE

Canvases in Frank Stella’s “Protractor” series are large in scale, ranging anywhere from twenty to twenty-five feet in width. Let students take a closer look at the big picture through this art-making experience.

Supplies needed: fourteen-by-eleven-inch paper, pencils, color reproductions of “Sinjerli Variation IV,” small magnifying glasses, and pastels.

Ask students to divide their sheets of paper into quadrants. Using small magnifying glasses, they will then explore the color reproductions of Sinjerli Variation IV. Students will select one portion of the work and replicate its enlarged design in the first quadrant of their paper. This should be repeated three times with three different sections of the painting to complete their compositions. Students will then apply color to their creations, mimicking those found in the
painting. When they have finished, ask students if they discovered anything new about the painting after having taken a closer look.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY
Frank Stella often noted that his works are based upon associations with places, books, and ideas. Ask students to revisit their artwork. Do their compositions remind them of things found in everyday life? They should consider the colors, lines, shapes, and patterns of their designs. Have students give titles to each quadrant of their work based on these discovered associations.

VARIATION
There are plenty of ways to magnify the big picture. As a class, create multiple large-scale reproductions of the basic shapes found in Sinjerli Variation IV. Ask students to collaboratively create their own large-scale artwork, rearranging these shapes as their imaginations allow. Encourage students to think outside the box (or circle!). Students will explore the concept of composition as they utilize the basic elements of art to create a new visual form.

Just Jargon

Abstraction (adj. abstract): A style that departs from accurate (realistic) representation. Abstract art often expresses feelings and ideas through lines, colors, and shapes rather than showing people, places, and things as they look in real life.

Asymmetrical: Off-balance. When elements of a work of art are organized so that one side of the composition does not mirror the other side.

Composition: The arrangement or placement of objects within a work of art.

Concentric: Two or more shapes sharing a common center.

Curvilinear: Formed or surrounded by curved lines.

Elements of Art: The basic building blocks for creating a work of art and expressing ideas, including color, line, shape, and texture.

COLOR: The name of a color is called a hue.
- Primary: Colors that are mixed to create all other hues: red, yellow, and blue.
- Secondary: Colors that are created by equally mixing two primary colors: orange, green, and purple. Together with the primary colors, secondary colors complete the color wheel.
- Complementary: Colors that are opposites on the color wheel: red and green, orange and blue, yellow and purple. When complementary colors are placed side by side, they accentuate one another.
- Warm: Colors that remind you of warmth: red, orange, and yellow. These colors appear to jump out of the picture plane.
- Cool: Colors that remind you of coolness: green, blue, and purple. These colors tend to recede into space, creating depth.
- Monochromatic: Having only one color.

LINE: The path of a dot as it moves through space. The outer edge of a shape is a line. Lines can be straight, vertical, horizontal, diagonal, curvy, and jagged.
SHAPE: A **two-dimensional** (flat) area that is made by beginning and ending a line at the same point. Common shapes include circles, triangles, rectangles, squares, and trapezoids.

TEXTURE: How a surface feels (actual) or looks like it would feel (implied). Common textures include smooth, rough, bumpy, and slimy.

**Form:** A shape that exists in three dimensions. For example, a circle is a flat shape and has two dimensions (height and weight), but a sphere is a form and has three dimensions (height, width, and depth).

**Geometric:** Having precise lines or shapes from geometry. Examples of geometric shapes include circles, ovals, triangles, rectangles, and squares.

**Gestural:** Lines or shapes that show evidence of the motion of a painter’s hand or brush.

**Hard-edged Geometric Abstraction:** A twentieth-century style in which the edges and shapes on a canvas are crisp and precise rather than blurred. Features delineated areas of color with particular sharpness and clarity.

**Interlaces:** One of the three basics designs employed by Frank Stella in his Protractor series (1967). These interlaces are formed by concentric protractor shapes with interwoven arcs.

**Movement:** The arrangement of the basic elements of art in a composition to create a sense of motion. Stella often uses lines and colors to lead the viewer through his work in a specific way.

**Overlapping:** Placing one object in front of another. Although this technique is often used to create a sense of space or depth in a work of art, Stella employed it in Sinjerli Variation IV to accentuate the flatness of its picture surface.

**Pattern:** Design that is repeated multiple times in a composition. It employs the principle of repetition.

**Protractor:** Semicircular drafting instrument used for measuring and constructing angles. Stella employed the crescent shape of this instrument for his Protractor series (1967).

**Relief:** Type of sculpture that projects into the viewer’s space. Sculptural elements are often included in Stella’s paintings.

**Repetition:** Technique of using the building blocks of art (color, line, and shape) over and over in a composition.

**Representational Art:** Using recognizable imagery to show things as they appear in real life. Representational art is also known as realistic, the opposite of abstract.

**Symmetrical:** Balanced. When elements of a work of art are organized so that one side mirrors or duplicates the other.

**Three-dimensional:** Having height, width, and depth. Sculptures are examples of three-dimensional artworks.

**Tondo:** Circular work of art.

**Two-dimensional:** A space that is flat, having height and width but no depth. Paintings and photographs are examples of two-dimensional artworks.
Book Resources for Deeper Exploration


Web Resources for Deeper Exploration

*Art Dictionary*
http://www.artlex.com/

*Contemporary Art at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art*
http://www.thewadsworth.org/contemporary-art/

*Frank Stella: Biography and Artwork*
http://livebinders.com/play/play/7339
http://www.theartstory.org/artist-stella-frank.htm

*Islamic Art*
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/orna/hd_orna.htm

*The Elements of Art and Principles of Design*
http://art.pppst.com/elements.html
http://www.artsconnected.org/toolkit/explore.cfm
http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/building_lessons/formal_analysis.html
http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/building_lessons/formal_analysis2.html
References


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Frank Stella
American, born 1936
Sinjerli Variation IV, 1968
Acrylic on canvas; diam.: 120 in.
The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund,
and partial gift of Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, Sr., 1982.157
From the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT.
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