

Frank Stella

American, born 1936

Euphonia, 1997

Acrylic on canvas,
lobby ceiling: 360 x 840 inches;
triptych: 120 x 600 inches;
theater catwalk: 600 x 372 inches
University of Houston

Like all great painters, Stella has the gift of recognizing not only what painting is but what it can be. —William Rubin, *Frank Stella 1970–1987*

What Painting Can Be

There is an undeniable spirit of generosity about Frank Stella's grand mural *Euphonia* (1997). To behold it is to fall (literally) under its sway—from below—and marvel at its powerful presence and overabundance. The monumental generosity of this work arises from the fact that it is a public work, at a public university, in a space activated by countless performances and events attracting wide audiences. Stella specifically created *Euphonia* to be shared—communally and in a setting alive with music and gatherings.

In 1997, as the newly minted director of the University of Houston's Blaffer Art Museum, I had the unmitigated surprise and thrill to be able to work with this iconic artist on the creation of this masterwork, and on the accompanying exhibition it occasioned. We titled the show *Stella in Studio* to highlight what was to come as he undertook one of his largest commissions to date—a project so vast that it necessitated the opening of a Stella studio in Houston. Little did we know what to expect.

Euphonia is also generous in its accumulation of styles. While largely composed of abstract shapes and colors, the work does not rely on the stereotypical brand of modernist abstraction that offers little visual stimulation to its viewer—difficult, stingy, hermetic, minimal. Instead, *Euphonia* exuberantly shares and delights in a world of influences, references, colors, shapes, and complexity. It nearly *sings* with an expressive maximalism. Layer upon layer of colorful shapes and patterns jostle for space and attention, commanding our gaze and rewarding extended viewing. The images move and dance, and they move us—like music.

Arriving at *Euphonia*

Twenty years before *Euphonia*, Frank Stella began a fascinating and productive artistic journey with a series he titled *Exotic Birds*. Following several decades of an art world dominated by the supposed meaning-laden gestures of Abstract Expressionism and







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the professed purity of reductive Minimalism, Stella broke ranks and focused on the simple visual delights of painting, without direct allusion to inner or outer referents or ideological positions. In these large, complex reliefs of the 1970s, the artist deployed “French curve”–derived shapes along with his signature geometric forms, each covered in a broad range of mark-making techniques. With each *Bird*, the astonishing and dazzling whole reads as a kind of compendium of the possibilities of painting.

In his earliest artist statements, Stella had wrestled with the very essence of what made a painting a painting, an approach summed up in his oft-repeated dictum “What you see is what you see.” By 1976, however, Stella had turned the question on its head, and he seemed to explore how *elastic* the definition of painting might become, whether it might stretch to include or accommodate elements from the adjacent arts of sculpture, architecture, and music.

Before arriving in Houston, I had written a doctoral dissertation about the Situationists, an obscure and esoteric group of philosopher-activists whose radical notions had permeated postwar culture, their provocations erupting and made manifest in arenas as diverse as student riots, painting, and punk rock. Following my academic work, I curated one of my first major exhibitions on the intersection of music and visual art in a project I called *Synesthesia: Sound and Vision in Contemporary Art* (San Antonio Museum of Art, 1994). I had no way of knowing how relevant that work would be to my next role at UH: presenting visual music on a grand scale, installed in a new music school and performance venue, the Moores School of Music.

Making Sound

The creation and fabrication of *Euphonia* in 1997 required the grandest generosity of all. In order to paint at such an overwhelmingly large scale—thousands upon thousands of square feet—Frank Stella established a temporary studio in Houston for an extended period of time. In a sweltering warehouse space, the artist and his team employed dozens of young Houston artists to execute the vision for the mural’s component parts. Burgeoning careers were forged in the experience, as many hands contributed to the symphonic whole. Bright artistic minds and talents worked to achieve the master’s goals, but also collaborated to invent new ways of working, expanding even Stella’s reach and capabilities. The dynamic was that of a medieval guild, with brilliant apprentices working individually and collectively, approaching daily challenges and making significant breakthroughs. A cadre of Texas artists still counts the experience as one of great meaning in their artistic trajectories.

Members of the *Euphonia* team told me that they bonded through the course of this work—a diverse group of makers finding common ground within the project. One key to their bonds was the daily sharing of individual musical passions on a communal boom box. Music brought them together, and music made them a team.





In the Public Eye

Stella's long engagement with public art projects had, in fact, begun in Houston in 1982, when he was invited to create the environment for a gala at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. By the time the University of Houston commissioned *Euphonia* in 1994, the artist had already created a subsequent and impressive body of public projects, in a practice he referred to as "pictorial architecture." The enormity of the UH project—at more than six thousand square feet—would require an expansion of the artist's process.

During his Houston sojourn, Stella agreed to open the doors of his studio, first to schoolchildren, then the curious public, and eventually to the mayor and other dignitaries. Hundreds came to witness the act of creation. Stella offered a kind of generosity not often in evidence among world-renowned artists. To peek behind the curtain at the making of a masterpiece, and to experience the hard work, trials and error, and sweat equity was a remarkable revelation for many in the Houston community. Firsthand knowledge of its making also engendered a deep sense of public ownership of the finished work—public art fully and devotedly embraced by the public.

Reflecting on *Euphonia* today, one marvels at its freshness and painterliness. Throughout his extraordinary multi-decade career, Frank Stella has explored countless new terrains. But he has consistently remained true to one theme: a deep interrogation of paint and painting. In the hallowed hall of a glorious music school, *Euphonia* at age twenty continues to elevate eyes and spirits through its expansive generosity, expressive voices, and dazzling musicality. It is, in short, a work of art—and a signal achievement—for the ages.

Don Bacigalupi

[Top:]
Frank Stella and studio
assistants in front of
Euphonia, 1997.

[Middle:]
Houston Chronicle
article "Artistic Chaos
Prevails at Frank
Stella Benefit," 1997.

[Bottom:]
Images from the Frank
Stella Benefit, 1997.