

# The Printed Word

AN EXHIBITION AT PRINCETON IS DEDICATED TO THE LITERARY INSPIRATIONS OF ONE OF THE UNIVERSITY'S MOST PROMINENT ALUMNI, FRANK STELLA. BY CHRIS SHIELDS



From left: Frank Stella, *Jonah Historically Regarded (Dome)*, 1992, hand colored etching, aquatint, relief, engraving, screenprint and stencil on paper, 186.69 cm x 134.62 cm.; *The Cabin. Ahab and Starbuck*, 1991, etching, aquatint, relief, and Carborundum on white, shaped TGL handmade paper, 185.4 x 134.6 x 15.2 cm.

THE PRINCETON UNIVERSITY Art Museum's new exhibition, "Frank Stella Unbound: Prints and Literature," draws attention to an important and illuminating dimension of the artist's print work by presenting four series with literary inspirations. *Moby-Dick*, *Had Gadya*, *Italian Folktales*, and *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* provide the launching pad for the 41 prints that will be on display alongside historical editions of the texts from May 19 through September 23. This unique exhibition takes advantage of Princeton's wealth of fine art and its impressive library holdings to flesh out an important period in the towering career of one of its alumni.

The museum's Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Mitras Abbaspour,

describes the function of literature in Stella's printmaking as providing "an alternate mode of thinking through concepts foundational to the history of European painting, questions of abstraction, composition, and illusionism as means of evoking expressive drama." And dramatic and expressive these works are, with their unexpected forms and colors, as well as their dynamic connection to the artist's paintings. The synesthesia Stella conjures with his invocation of particular works of literature appears to nod to the give and take that was occurring between his printmaking and his painting practices at the time. Elements moved between the two mediums freely, and, as Abbaspour says, "He would recycle the elements from a painted relief to create seg-

ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART, PHILLIPS ACADEMY, ANDOVER, MA, U.S.A. TYLER GRAPHICS LTD., 1974-2001 COLLECTION, GIVEN IN HONOR OF FRANK STELLA, 2003-44, 500 / © 2017 FRANK STELLA / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; COLLECTION OF PRESTON H. HASKELL, CLASS OF 1960 / © 2017 FRANK STELLA / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK





ments of his printing plates, and illusionistic geometric forms from prints would find their way into his sculptural reliefs. In sum, part of what makes these print series so significant within Stella's oeuvre is precisely the enormous cross-pollination between mediums during this era of his career."

With this in mind, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* may be the perfect novel for Stella to draw inspiration from. The book, which gained favor in the 1930s (it was

published in 1851), can be seen as a series of narrative approaches—a lengthy opening list, a philosophical digression into the nature of “whiteness,” strangely comic, narrative scenarios staged in an idiosyncratic world that isn't quite our own—circling a story that ironically does not exist outside of them despite their seeming incongruence. *Moby-Dick* is as much about the way it is constructed as the story it tells. Stella's focus on the picture as an end in

Clockwise from top left: *Cantahar*, 1998, lithograph, screenprint, etching, aquatint and relief on paper, 133.35 cm x 133.35 cm.; *Then Came an Ox and Drank the Water*, 1984, hand-coloring and collage with lithograph, linocut, and screenprint on T.H. Saunders paper (background) and shaped, hand-cut Somerset paper (collage), 137.2 x 133 cm.; *Despairia*, 1995, screenprint, aquatint, etching, relief, lithograph, engraving, and mezzotint on white TGL handmade paper, 50.8 x 132.1 cm.







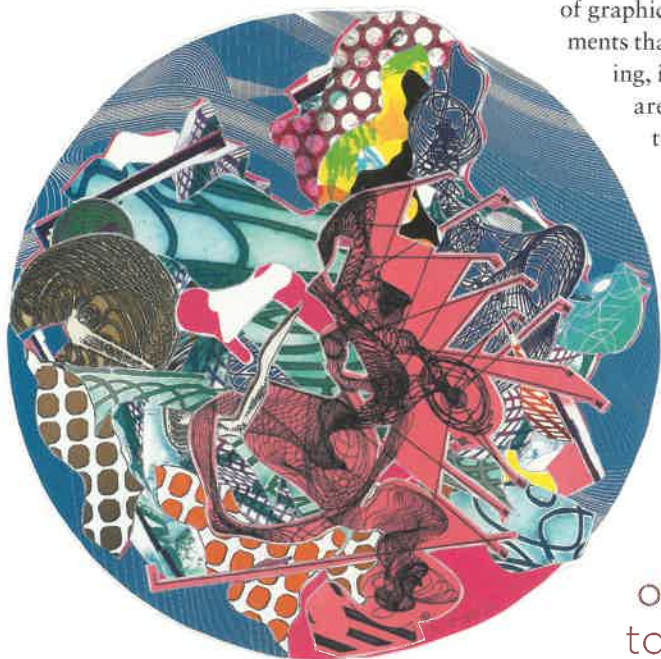
Clockwise from top left: *Had Gadya: Front Cover*, 1984, hand-coloring and collage with lithograph, linocut, and screenprint on T.H. Saunders paper (background) and shaped, hand-cut Somerset paper (collage), 108 x 86 cm.; *Juam*, 1997, relief, etching, aquatint, lithograph, screenprint, woodcut, and engraving on white TGL handmade, hand-colored paper, two sheets (irregularly shaped and overlapping): 201.9 x 156.2 cm.; *Perinthia*, 1996, lithograph, screenprint, etching, aquatint, and relief on white TGL handmade paper.

itself, a non-representational collection of graphic and, eventually, sculptural elements that tell the story of their own making, is similar to Melville's style. Both are interested in types of abstraction—one visual, one thematic—and both use a fluid technique to achieve their ends, which are inseparable from their means. Abbaspour identifies Stella's choice of books as evidence of his "deep investments

in history, the evolution of artistic practices, the conceptual questions of abstraction and his role and place within these conversations."

These conversations and intriguing connections aside, the visually arresting prints speak for themselves. Stella's 1996 lithograph, screenprint, etching, aquatint, and relief on paper, *Atvatabar*, is a visual text of its very own with multiple layers, shapes, and optical illusions (and allusions) for the eye to read. What appears to be a type of

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exposed geode interior is also a pile of graphic ideas that struggle for prominence with joyful urgency. The artist's handcoloring and collage with lithograph, linocut, and screenprint *Had Gadya: Front Cover* (1984) mingles the intimacy of a sketch with the precision of geometric forms. The viewer may be tempted to see toppled columns or a ruined amphitheater in the hot pink and black image. Again, Stella's prints may hint at geographies or abstract narratives, but they also allow for enough freedom to maintain their mystery.

The balancing act of materials and visual elements in Stella's prints seems nearly effortless. The speed with which these works appear to



Clockwise from top right: *Sanor*, 1996, lithograph, screenprint, etching, aquatint, relief and engraving on paper, 73.66 cm.; *Atvatabar*, 1996, lithograph, screenprint, etching, aquatint and relief on paper, 66.68 cm.; *Juam, State I*, 1997, hand colored relief, woodcut, etching and aquatint on paper, 198.76 cm x 152.4 cm.

change directions and ideas, however, belies the complex processes behind their making. Stella worked closely with master printmaker Ken Tyler to develop his own skills and later set up a printing press in his home studio, where he employed skilled assistants in order to make multi-process prints. Abbaspour observes, "The prints that Stella made during this 15-year period represent his period of greatest experimentation—both technically and compositionally—in printmaking." There is a cycle of searching and refining that characterizes these exciting, visually articulate works. They speak as boundary-pushing books do, in many modes and forms, and the story they tell is one that lives in their constituent materials and yet somewhere beyond, just out of reach, like the white whale. 