

Frank Stella

The Waves Series

In the 1980s, Frank Stella was inspired by Herman Melville's classic novel *Moby-Dick* to create one of the most ambitious projects of his career — a series of paintings, sculptures, and prints, one for each chapter of the book. Rather than illustrating the story literally, Stella used flowing curves and dynamic shapes to capture its feeling: the movement of the ocean, the energy of the hunt, the power of the whale. He called it the Waves series, and it took him over ten years to complete

In the artist's own words — Interview excerpt

Frank Stella

By [Stella McCartney](#)

November 10, 2014

McCARTNEY: I want to ask you about your *Moby-Dick* series. When did you first read that book?

STELLA: I read it twice. It was an accident. It's hard to find things on the weekend to do with the kids, so we went to the aquarium in Brooklyn, down on Coney Island. This was in the early '80s. Pretty near the entrance there's a big tank with beluga whales in it, the white whales. I came in there and they just moved. It was very dramatic. It reminded me of some pieces we'd been working on. We called them wave shapes. And when I looked at the belugas, I started thinking about the waves. I was brought up near the ocean. And I was just standing there thinking about it, and the whales and their forms moving. It was the opposite in every way of a straight line, or a perpendicular plane. It was really about motion and curvature—the curved line rather than the straight line. So I started reading *Moby-Dick* again, and then I said to one of my older boys that I wanted to work on *Moby-Dick*. I know a lot of people have illustrated *Moby-Dick*, but I had a couple of ideas, and I made some pieces that related to it. And I thought, "Well, I'd like to do a piece for each chapter, but it wouldn't be an illustration. One might be a sculpture, one might be a painting, one a print—different kinds of things." But I was a little discouraged by the idea, because there were, I don't know, 200 chapters or something like that. I said, "I don't think I'm going to come up with 200 ideas that really related to Moby and the waves and traveling and all of that." And my son said, "Don't worry, you don't have to do them all." And then I got so mad.

McCARTNEY: You got mad at your son?

STELLA: Not mad at him. I was mad at myself. But then I thought, "Screw that, I'm going to do them all."

McCARTNEY: My God, he gave you a window out!

STELLA: So that's why there are so many works. I can be as stubborn as Ahab. We worked on and off on them well over 10 years.

McCARTNEY: How do you feel when you look at them?

STELLA: You know, I like almost everything. In fact, I like everything. There are some things that are not that fabulous in a certain way, but I like the variety and the way they move. I think it changed my idea about abstraction or about what I was doing. Abstraction didn't have to be limited to a kind of rectilinear geometry or even a simple curve geometry. It could have a geometry that had a narrative impact. In other words, you could tell a story with the shapes. It wouldn't be a literal story, but the shapes and the interaction of the shapes and colors would give you a narrative sense. You could have a sense of an abstract piece flowing along and being part of an action or activity. That sort of turned me on.

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