In Manhattan in 1958, the year he graduated from Princeton, Frank Stella assembled the crude object at left and titled it Them Apples, as in “How d’ya like them apples?” Both the question and the four dirty smears of paint—the apples—at the bottom of the work “challenge the viewer,” according to Megan R. Luke, “to make a judgment of taste about an object so unlike one of Cézanne’s signature still lifes of apples that it throws us into a kind of epistemological crisis: Is this thing a painting or a mere thing, a work of art or a useless object?”

Luke is a doctoral candidate in Harvard’s Department of History of Art and Architecture and co-curator of Frank Stella 1958, an exhibition that will run at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum from February 4 to May 7 and then travel. It brings together 20 seminal works from a year of experiment and immense productivity. The art world of that time was roiled by debates between the advocates of abstract painting and those of minimalism. Stella was pulled in both artistic directions. Although his work already says “Stella,” the radiantly colorful fields and stripes show the influence of abstract expressionists, and the repetitive compositional elements of his paintings signal his emerging minimalism. When the Museum of Modern Art gave Stella his first big break and included him in a group exhibition, Sixteen Americans, that opened in late 1959, he was represented exclusively by a group of his now-famous black paintings, a series begun in 1958. He was by then ready to declare in an artist’s statement, “Art excludes the unnecessary. Frank Stella has found it necessary to paint stripes. There is nothing else in his painting. Frank Stella is not interested in expression or sensitivity. He is interested in the necessities of

Left: Frank Stella’s Them Apples is an assemblage of two pieces of cardboard conspicuously nailed to four wooden boards. “Slathered in pink, red, and orange paint,” writes co-curator Megan R. Luke in the exhibition catalog, “the thing bears what is arguably a pictorial composition, but like its support, it seems so casually put together that we wonder whether these areas of color have not been routinely assembled rather than artfully composed.” She calls the work “a play of simultaneous contrast (showing the way one color will change when it abuts different colors), which works against color change caused by material overlayering. . . .”

Because of “their proximity to ordinary things,” the works of American painter and sculptor Jasper Johns were both attractive to and traumatic for Stella, but, writes Luke, he “took a number of corrective measures against his own works’ flirtation with their status as things.” Stella’s paintings in 1958 “exposed in advance what would soon become a commonplace critical fallacy—that art, and Stella’s art in particular, had to be either ‘modernist’ or ‘literal,’ pictorial or thingy.”
Above: Coney Island. Exhibition co-curator Harry Cooper calls Stella’s 1958 paintings “perceptual psychology experiments gone wrong, or set loose.” Eight of them involve stripes interrupted by a block. In Coney Island the block seems to levitate, “something like a barrel going up a waterfall.” Stella worked huge; this painting is seven feet high.

Above, right: Cricket/Kit Construction is an assemblage made while Stella was at Princeton and has never before been exhibited publicly.

Below: Untitled is a triptych of cardboard strips painted blue nailed to cardboard panels painted white and supported by wooden boards, with a central assemblage of wooden molding. “I consider this work to be absolutely pivotal in our understanding of Stella’s practice in 1958,” says Luke, “as it clearly shows his interest in Jasper Johns, through both the practice of assemblage and a repetitive abstraction of striped pattern. However, this work demonstrates the fate this more materialist assemblage mode would meet in Stella’s subsequent career. The pattern of the wooden fixture suggests that it can be subsumed into the overall pattern of the cardboard and paint stripes, serving to unify the composition. Materiality is increasingly sacrificed for pattern. Today it is difficult for art historians to recall that Stella once engaged a collage aesthetic, but rather they celebrate him as one of the most renowned artists who worked with so-called cool, hard-edged abstraction dominating American painting in the 1960s. This exhibition looks back to a moment when materiality and opticality existed side by side in his work. I think Stella fans will be surprised by this materialist moment.”
painting. Symbols are counters passed among people. Frank Stella’s painting is not symbolic. His stripes are the paths of brush on canvas. These paths lead only into painting.” One commentator labeled this a clarion call of minimalism.

Harry Cooper, curator of modern art at the Fogg Art Museum, is co-curator of the exhibition. He and Luke interviewed Stella himself and several of his early colleagues. In their research they re-discovered a number of these early works and arranged to include in the show many that have rarely been displayed. Each curator contributes a substantial essay to the comprehensive exhibition catalog, jointly published by the Harvard University Art Museums and Yale University Press, which contains reproductions of all 37 known Stella works from 1958.

“These pieces were created at a moment of exuberant experimentation,” says Cooper. “The fact that they are full of obvious, undisguised revision and over-painting distinguishes them from the methodical canvases that Stella painted from then on.”

“I think viewers will be surprised by how tactile these paintings are, by how Stella could radically alter his touch in works of almost the same composition,” says Luke. “This exhibition will change our understanding of Stella while offering a new perspective on minimalism, a movement that is just now in the throes of serious reevaluation.” Thomas W. Lentz, Cabot director of the museums, adds that “the exhibition may be especially resonant for a student audience at the same stage of life as Stella was when he created these dramatic works.”

Frank Stella 1958 travels to the Menil Collection in Houston in May and to the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus in September. For details about a day-long symposium on Stella on April 8 or the Sackler’s hours, go to www.artmuseums.harvard.edu.

Top: Astoria. Center: Blue Horizon. This stunning pair—the first from the Museum of Modern Art, the second from Brown University—has never before been exhibited together. Both have heavily encrusted surfaces, unlike Stella’s later work. In both, horizontal bands obfuscate earlier compositions, yet the painted-over images have reemerged—pentimenti—giving an illusion of movement to Stella’s fields of horizontal stripes. In Astoria, the shadow of an oblong block hangs from the upper edge. In Blue Horizon, several faint vertical stripes (originally horizontal; Stella rotated the work during composition) run the length of the canvas. “These pentimenti were apparently caused by poor coverage resulting from the combination of cheap commercial paint and unsized canvas,” writes Cooper.

Bottom: Great Jones Street. “Toward the end of 1958,” writes Luke, “Stella was apparently pre-occupied with limiting his palette to black and one other color.” Cooper says that his catalog essay is unorthodox in reading the 1958 works in terms of optical effects. “According to the standard account, first proposed by Stella himself,” writes Cooper, “the story of the 1958 paintings is one of increasing symmetry, flatness, and regularity leading up to ‘the final solution’ of the black paintings.”
Left: *Plum Island (Luncheon on the Grass)*. Luke calls this painting “as overt a landscape as Stella ever made.”

Below: *Morro Castle* is one of the first of what Cooper calls “the daunting and reductive” black paintings, the first series of paintings that Stella did, from late 1958 into 1960. Luke quotes Swiss artist Franz Fedier: “*Morro Castle* seems to me to be a key painting in Stella’s work, because it contains everything that becomes important in the following paintings of the black series. It also combines what was separated in two pictures from the transitional period, *Coney Island* and *Grape Island* (both from 1958): the striped ground and the thing in the middle. The thing in the middle is a dark rectangle—the actual and unmediated message that the paintings contain.” Cooper points out that Stella, radically, thought of the spaces of unpainted canvas between the black stripes “as not being part of the painting.” In 1984 Stella said, “Ideally, a good way of looking at the stripes would be that they become so real, so real that they’d be able to separate themselves from the canvas, and just be.” In a 1966 film about him, Cooper notes, Stella complains “that viewers had focused so much on the thin lines of bare canvas that they ‘didn’t see the part I had actually painted at all.’”