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Skirball Cultural Center presents
Frank Stella: Had Gayda

April 4–September 1, 2024

Traditional Passover Song Captures the Imagination of
Two Boundary-Pushing Artists



Frank Stella: Had Gadya on view at The Heller Museum in New York in 2023. Displayed right to left: "The Butcher Came and Slew the Ox" and "Then Came Death and Took the Butcher."

LOS ANGELES, CA—The Skirball Cultural Center presents *Frank Stella: Had Gadya*, an exhibition that explores the power of Jewish storytelling as a constant source of inspiration for creative expression. Centered on the beloved traditional song, "Had Gadya," sung around the world for centuries at the Jewish holiday of Passover, the exhibition is a dialogue between two artists of different generations, religious backgrounds, and cultural contexts. Renowned American artist Frank Stella (b. 1936) was inspired to create a series of prints that captured the action and emotion he perceived in Russian Jewish modern artist El Lissitzky's (1890-1941) lithographs that illustrate the verses of "Had Gadya," created over half a century earlier. Organized by and co-presented with Hebrew Union College—

Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), *Frank Stella: Had Gadya* opens to the public on April 4, and will be on view at the Skirball Cultural Center through September 1, 2024.

“The visual conversation between the two artists highlights the myriad ways in which Jewish traditions and memories can be reinterpreted, experienced, reimagined by people from all backgrounds and generations. Why has ‘Had Gadya,’ a song that exemplifies Jewish storytelling at holiday celebrations, captured the imaginations of Lissitzky and Stella, as well as countless artists and musicians? We hope that part of the joy in visiting the exhibition is considering this question. *Frank Stella: Had Gadya* artfully expresses the Skirball’s mission, rooted in Jewish and American ideals, to foster human connections across cultures and communities,” said Sheri Bernstein, Vice President and Museum Director, Skirball Cultural Center.

"Had Gadya" ("One Little Goat") is an Aramaic/Hebrew song traditionally sung to conclude the Passover Seder, the ritual meal of the Passover holiday—which in 2024 begins at sundown on April 22 and lasts for eight days. The song begins with a father who buys one little goat that gets eaten by a cat, that is bitten by a dog, that is beaten by a stick and so on. Each subsequent verse builds on the story, with aggressors becoming victims themselves; finally, the cycle is broken through divine intervention—calling our attention to the suffering caused by cyclical violence while holding onto radical hope. In the exhibition, visitors will hear different renditions of “Had Gadya,” and discover cumulative songs from other traditions, cultures, and languages.

Lissitzky, who worked to revive Jewish folk traditions for the 20th century in the years immediately prior to and during the Russian Revolution, illustrated the story of “Had Gadya” in a colorful style blending Russian folk-art conventions and the angular, tilting geometry of the Constructivist movement with which he was closely associated. Years later, Stella took inspiration from Lissitzky’s works and the narrative of “Had Gadya” to create an abstract interpretation that removes the literal elements of the story to focus on the theme of destruction and the cumulative structure of the song, which adds a new element in each successive verse.

Although Stella was raised in a Catholic home, he was inspired by the history of the Jewish people, particularly the Holocaust, during which time he was a child in the US. During a trip to the Tel Aviv Museum in 1981, Stella became fascinated by a series of prints by Lissitzky illustrating the classic Passover song and was inspired to create a series of prints of his own that captured the action, emotion, and essential narrative elements that he perceived in Lissitzky’s visual interpretation. Known for his frequent use of innovative materials or techniques to create abstract compositions, Stella completed the twelve prints between 1982 and 1984—one for each stanza of the song, plus a frontispiece and an endpiece—that comprise his series.

Organized by HUC-JIR and co-presented with the Skirball Cultural Center, the Skirball's presentation of *Frank Stella: Had Gadya* will include for the first time:

- A **soundtrack** of various recordings of "Had Gadya," in different languages, will be playing aloud in the gallery. The track list will be posted on the wall in the gallery, for any visitors who are interested in knowing more about what they are hearing as they enjoy the exhibit.
- The Skirball Guide on the **Bloomberg Connects app** will feature more "Had Gadya" and Passover content, including additional background about the holiday, as well as a playlist of cumulative songs from many cultures and languages.
- A seating area with copies of the **Skirball Haggadah** to further explore the Passover seder, its songs, and traditions.
- A **photo area** for visitors to use props and their own imagination to stage a scene from "Had Gadya."

On view during the Passover holiday and through the summer, the Skirball will also host a series of public programs related to the exhibition.

About the Artists

Frank Stella (b. 1936, Malden, Massachusetts) gained attention early in his career for his use of innovative techniques and materials and quickly came to be regarded as one of the preeminent Minimalist artists of the 1960s. In the decades since, he has continued to work in painting, sculpture, and printmaking, and has created several large-scale commissioned works for the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. His work has been widely displayed internationally, including at Documenta 4 in Kassel, Germany in 1968; survey exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City in 1970 and 1987 and the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Basel, Switzerland in 2015; and retrospective exhibitions at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg in Wolfsburg, Germany in 2012 and at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City in 2015. Stella received his BA in History and Art History from Princeton University. He currently lives and works in New York City.

El Lissitzky (b. 1890, Pochinok, Russia–d. 1941, Moscow, Russia) was an avant-garde Russian Jewish artist who made major contributions to the art movements of Suprematism and Constructivism. Lissitzky studied art from a young age under Yehuda Pen, who also taught Marc Chagall, and studied architecture at the Technische Universität in Darmstadt, Germany. Lissitzky was involved with the Yiddish Kultur-Lige, a project to bolster and reinvigorate Jewish culture in Ukraine after its independence from the Russian Empire in 1918; his *Had Gadya* portfolio project was part of this work. Lissitzky is best known for his dynamic designs for posters supporting Bolshevik causes during the Russian Revolution

(1917-1923), and for his contributions to the development of a new Soviet art and design in the decades after the Revolution. Today regarded as a major figure in the development of abstraction, Lissitzky's works are held in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Tate Gallery in London, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, among others.

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Frank Stella: Had Gadya is organized by Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) and co-presented with the Skirball Cultural Center. For its presentation at the Skirball, Ivy Weingram is the exhibition's managing guest curator, in coordination with Jean Bloch Rosensaft, Director, Heller Museum, HUC-JIR/New York.

Frank Stella: Had Gadya and its related educational programs at the Skirball Cultural Center are made possible through lead support from Marlene Louchheim along with support from Carol and Jerome Coben.

About the Skirball

The Skirball Cultural Center is a place of meeting guided by the Jewish tradition of welcoming the stranger and inspired by the American democratic ideals of freedom and equality. We welcome people of all communities and generations to participate in cultural experiences that celebrate discovery and hope, foster human connections, and call upon us to help build a more just society.

Visiting the Skirball

The Skirball is located at 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90049. Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday, 12:00–5:00 pm; Saturday–Sunday, 10:00 am–5:00 pm; closed Mondays and holidays. Effective March 1, new streamlined ticket prices provide access to all exhibitions as part of General Admission: \$18 for General, and \$13 for Seniors, Full-Time Students, and Children 2-17. Exhibitions are always FREE to Skirball Members and Children under 2. The permanent exhibition Noah's Ark at the Skirball requires timed entry and is ticketed separately. Reservations are recommended. For general information, the public may call (310) 440-4500 or visit skirball.org.

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