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Etel Adnan, Lebanese American Author and Artist, Dies at 96

Her novel about a kidnapping in Lebanon has become a classic of war literature. She was in her 80s when her art started to draw international attention.



Etel Adnan in 2015 in her studio in Paris. In her poetry, novels and nonfiction, she often wrote about political discord and violence in the Middle East. Catherine Panchout/Sygma

By Nana Asfour

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Etel Adnan, an influential Lebanese American writer who wrote a seminal novel about the Lebanese civil war and achieved acclaim in her later years as a visual artist, died on Sunday in Paris. She was 96.

Her death was confirmed by her longtime partner and only immediate survivor, Simone Fattal, who did not specify the cause.

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For much of her life, Ms. Adnan, who grew up in Lebanon and spent several decades in California, was an international literary figure, her lyrical prose reverberating with generations of Middle Eastern writers.

Her most widely acclaimed novel, “Sitt Marie Rose,” (1978) based on a true story, centers on a kidnapping during Lebanon’s civil war and is told from the perspective of the civilians enduring brutal political conflict. It has become a classic of war literature, translated into 10 languages and taught in American classrooms.

Ms. Adnan also wrote numerous collections of poetry. Her latest, “Shifting the Silence,” was published in October 2020. Reviewing her previous collection, “Night,” for The New York Times Book Review, Benjamin Hollander described it as “a meditative heir to Nietzsche’s aphorisms, Rilke’s ‘Book of Hours’ and the verses of Sufi mysticism,” and “an intricate thread of reflections on pain and beauty.”

In her poetry, novels and nonfiction, Ms. Adnan often wrote about political discord and violence. Her books on the Middle East, like “The Arab Apocalypse,” a poetry collection from 1980; “Of Cities and Women (Letters to Fawwaz),” from 1993; and “In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country” (2005), address the region from sociological, philosophical and historical perspectives.

Ms. Adnan caught the attention of the international art world in her late 80s, when her paintings were included in Documenta 13, the contemporary art exhibition in Kassel, Germany, in 2012. The invitation to the show resulted from a serendipitous visit by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Documenta 13’s director, to Lebanon, where she saw an exhibit of Ms. Adnan’s geometric and vibrantly colored abstract work on generally small canvases.

Since then, her work has appeared in numerous international exhibitions and art fairs, including the Whitney Biennial in New York in 2014. That same year, she was awarded France’s highest cultural honor, Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres. An exhibition of her work, “Etel Adnan: Light’s New Measure,” is currently on view at the Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan.

Etel Adnan was born on Feb. 24, 1925, in Beirut, Lebanon. Her father, Assaf Kadri, a Syrian born in Damascus, was a retired high-ranking official in the Ottoman army and a former classmate of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of the Republic of Turkey. Her mother, Rosa Kadri, grew up in the city of Smyrna (now the Turkish city of Izmir), which

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was largely destroyed by fire in 1922.

Her father changed the family's surname to Adnan, which was his father's first name, in 1932. Ms. Adnan has said that her father was "an unemployable man" by the age of 40 and that she grew up "with people who were defeated when they were still young."

She left Lebanon in 1949 to study philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris on a scholarship. A few years later, she moved to the United States for postgraduate studies in philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, and Harvard before settling in California.

There, she took up teaching, including a class on the philosophy of art at Dominican College in San Rafael (now the Dominican University of California).

Ms. Adnan said she had been moved to begin writing verse as an act of opposition to the Vietnam War, becoming, in her words, "an American poet."

Years earlier, in reverse fashion, it was her teaching that propelled her to the canvas.

"The head of the art department wondered how I can teach such a course without practicing painting," she told *The Paris Review Daily*. "She gave me crayons and bits of paper, and I started doing little works, and she said I didn't need any training, that I was a painter. So I kept going."

She was 34 when she began to paint, in 1959.

Ms. Adnan returned to Lebanon in 1972 and shortly thereafter met Ms. Fattal, an artist, in Beirut. Ms. Adnan spent the next few years working as a cultural editor for two of the city's daily newspapers.

After civil war broke out in 1975, she fled with Ms. Fattal to Paris. It was there that she wrote "Sitt Marie Rose," which was originally published in French, the language she knew best. (Like many Lebanese people, she attended a French school while growing up and could be punished for speaking Arabic, she said.) The novel was unavailable in Lebanese

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bookstores for many years because its political undertones were deemed too controversial.

Ms. Adnan returned to California in the late 1970s, living in Sausalito, in the Bay Area. There, the view out her window of Mount Tamalpais, northwest of San Francisco, became a repeated source of inspiration for her art, with abstract renderings of the mountain finding their way into her oil paintings.

In a review of Ms. Adnan's work at Callicoon Fine Arts gallery on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 2014, Karen Rosenberg wrote in *The Times* that the peak of Tamalpais was to Ms. Adnan what Mont Sainte-Victoire had been to Cézanne.

“We come to see Mount Tamalpais as both a specific landmark that offers reassurance to a nomadic artist (once exiled from her home country of Lebanon),” Ms. Rosenberg wrote, “and a universal idea of a mountain, upon which memories of different cultures can be projected.”

While she lived in several cities in her lifetime and spent her last years in Paris, Ms. Adnan continued to consider herself first and foremost as “a Californian artist.”

“I wouldn't say American,” she told *Apollo* magazine in 2018. “The colors I use, the brightness — they are the colors of California.”

In addition to her taut yet cheerful paintings, Ms. Adnan also drew praise for her leporellos, books folded like an accordion on which she combined drawings, splashes of color and Arabic words and numbers. After discovering leporellos, which were popular with Japanese artists, she decided to appropriate the format for her own work.

In 2018, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art presented a selection of Ms. Adnan's paintings alongside some of her written works. The art critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, who has written a monograph on Ms. Adnan, wrote that a “fraught dualism between tranquillity and turbulence” permeated all of Ms. Adnan's work, whether written or painted.

She added: “It is as if to say that this is us, we humans as tragically flawed creatures, who are capable of such splendor and ugliness all at once.”
