

Gallery text exhibition Colour as Language

Inhoud

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Gallery text: Colour as Language

Etel Adnan used intense, bright colours to depict a personal experience of nature, just as Vincent van Gogh did. In his paintings and letters, she recognised a search for the essence of existence. This exhibition presents Adnan's work alongside that of Van Gogh.

Adnan was born in Beirut in 1925, the daughter of a Greek mother and a Turkish-speaking father from Damascus. For almost a century, she moved between different languages and cultures, living alternately in Paris, California and Beirut. In the 1960s and 1970s, she made a name for herself as a socially engaged writer and poet. With growing awareness of the colonial background of the French that she used, she looked for a freer way to express herself. She found a new language in colour.

In November 2021, during the preparations for this exhibition, Etel Adnan passed away in Paris at the age of 96. It is sad that she will not see the exhibition, but we are grateful that we were able to speak to her about her life, her work and about Vincent van Gogh.

Gallery text: 1 Balance in colour

It is the distinctive use of colour that first leaps out when you look at Adnan's works. 'Colours exist for me as entities in themselves,' she said. She always chose her colours intuitively, often applying them to the canvas with a palette knife straight from the tube, without any mixing. Adnan's early paintings consist of abstract combinations of areas of colour. Over time her works became smaller in size, and more of a landscape can be discovered in them. Bright shades form a collage of planes, in which the viewer can see a horizon, mountain or sun.



Painting: Etel Adnan, Untitled, c. 1970s

As a child, Adnan dreamed of becoming an architect, but that was an unthinkable profession for girls in Beirut at the time. This love of architecture can be seen in her work. Some of her early paintings, such as this one, resemble floor plans or buildings. She signed this work in Arabic, as she often did during this period, as a sign of solidarity with the original language of her native country.



Painting: Etel Adnan, Inca King (Roi Inca) , 1965

Adnan hardly ever gave titles to her work, but this is an exception. *Roi Inca (Inca King)* is a reference to the Inca people, who lived in what is now Peru. Adnan felt a great connection with the original inhabitants of both North and South America, cultures that were ruthlessly oppressed by European colonists. There is a parallel with her own childhood here, when she grew up in French Mandate Lebanon.

Gallery text: 2 Feelings in nature

Adnan and Van Gogh both felt a great connection with nature. They translated their experiences of the landscape into painting styles that were all their own. Adnan believed that nature expresses itself in its most powerful form through colour. She considered Van Gogh to be the painter who had in effect 'liberated' colours in art, his intuitive use of colours in his work paving the way for the generations that followed him – including Adnan herself. With their use of colour, both Adnan and Van Gogh conveyed the power and grandeur that they perceived in nature.



Painting: Vincent van Gogh, Piles of French Novels, 1887

In this painting of French novels, Van Gogh created a composition of coloured planes, which finds an echo in Adnan's landscapes. The work is an ode to modern French literature. Van Gogh and Adnan lived in Paris for a number of years in their twenties, and it was a formative period for both of them. They were inspired by the French writers of their own eras. For Adnan, this was Jean-Paul Sartre and for Van Gogh it was Émile Zola.

Gallery text: 3 The art of weaving

When Adnan was growing up in Lebanon, there were no museums, but there *were* Persian rugs. She went with her father to visit the carpet traders at the souks. 'He would look at each rug the way we look at a Rembrandt today,' she said. These rugs were Adnan's earliest encounter with art. In her mind, there was no difference between a painting, a rug or a decorated vase. It was all art and of equal value. In the 1960s, Adnan created her own first colourful textile works. Rugs and tapestries formed a bridge between painting and writing for her. In

weaving, the colours develop 'line by line'. It is only at the end that you see the coherence and balance, just as in a poem.



Watercolour: Etel Adnan, Draft for wallpaper, 2021

In 1957 Adnan went on a long journey to Mexico, where she was impressed by the many colourful paintings and mosaics in the streets. This inspired her to discover other forms of artistic expression than only paintings and drawings. In addition to tapestries, she designed ceramic tile works and what she described as 'wallpapers', which she preferred to be presented outside, in a large format and accessible to everyone. This is one such design, which we have had printed in the stairwell for this exhibition.



Painting: Vincent van Gogh, Tree Roots, 1890

Tree Roots is one of Van Gogh's most abstract paintings. He wanted to use colour and brushstrokes primarily to reflect his feelings for this place. Yet reality was always the starting point for his work, including in this painting. Adnan went a step further. She summoned from memory an image of the landscapes she knew and then depicted them based on her own experience.



Tapestry: Etel Adnan, Autumn Forest (Forêt automnale), 2015

Adnan used special pens to draw the designs for her tapestries. This is clearly reflected in the final woven versions, in the bright colours and the way in which the lines have been placed. Adnan wrote of her colourful textile works: 'My tapestries are hanging gardens. [...] They are images, which are intended for people to look at and enjoy. And the wool softens a room. Gives it life. They humanize a space.'

Gallery Text: 4 A mountain as a best friend

Adnan created dozens of depictions of Mount Tamalpais, her beloved mountain in California. In the late 1970s, Adnan left her hometown of Beirut because of the Lebanese Civil War. In 1980, she returned to California, where she had previously lived. Mount Tamalpais became an anchor point in her life, and she described it as her 'best friend'. She looked out at that mountain from her home every day, carefully studying how the colours constantly changed under the influence of the light and the seasons. In her paintings and her drawings, she interpreted these changes over and over again. She continued to do so even after she had left California and was living in Paris. From memory, she conveyed her experiences of and emotional reactions to this special place.



Painting: Etel Adnan, Untitled (Mount Tamalpais), c. 1983-86

Mount Tamalpais was, for Adnan, both an anchor point and a symbol of colonised land. This mountain had been taken from the original inhabitants by European colonists. The local people called the mountain Tamal-pa: 'the one close to the sea', while the Spanish colonialists referred to it as Mal-Païs, 'bad country'. By painting this mountain, Adnan tried to look at it in the same way as the original population did.



Watercolour : Etel Adnan, Montagne Sainte Victoire 7, 1990

Adnan was not the only artist to have become fascinated by a mountain. In her essay *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* (1986), she mentions the French artist Paul Cézanne several times, who endlessly studied and depicted Mont Sainte-Victoire in France. With this drawing, she paid tribute to his quest, also connecting it to her own fascination with *her* mountain.



Painting: Etel Adnan Mount Tamalpais, 1985

Adnan painted Mount Tamalpais dozens of times, and one of her best-known essays is also dedicated to this mountain. In *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* (1986), Adnan created an ode to the mountain with which she felt such a deep connection. In this essay, she explored the link between nature and art and her own personal experience of the mountain. 'Tamalpais is a miraculous thing, [...] the pyramid of our own identity. We are, because it is stable and it is ever changing.'

Gallery Text: 5 Weight of the world

The intense colours of Adnan's paintings lend them a cheerful appearance. However, her concern about the great problems of existence sometimes shines through in these works. In her writing, Adnan was always explicitly committed to social and political causes. She wrote both prose and poetry about the wars and the violence that occurred during her lifetime, in Lebanon and elsewhere, which were often rooted in the history of colonialism. The vulnerability of the Earth and climate change were also important themes for her. Since the first lunar landing in 1969, she had been fascinated by the cosmos, of which humanity is just a small part. In her paintings, such as those in the series *The Weight of the World*, she expressed this fascination by depicting the planets as spheres that are simple and floating, but also at times vulnerable or heavy.

Gallery Text: 6 The sun

Adnan often depicted the sun as a fiery red circle or square. It was a starting point for her, a shape around which she could build the rest of the painting. These suns shine in her work, radiating energy. Adnan's fascination with the sun goes back to the Beirut of her childhood, where the presence of the sun and the sea was felt so strongly. Her first long poem was about a sensual encounter between the two. In one of her most famous poems, *L'Apocalypse arabe* (1980), the sun plays the cruel role of destroyer. She viewed the sun in her own work, and also in Van Gogh's *The Sower*, as an 'architect of the landscape'. 'The sun is an image of the infinite. In the late afternoon it's a perfect circle on the horizon.'

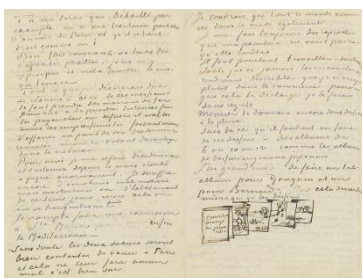


Painting: Vincent van Gogh, The Sower, 1888

In the period when Van Gogh was painting in the south of France, he was delighted by the beautiful, intense colour effects of the bright sun on the landscape. He gave the sun a prominent position in this painting, as a vivid yellow circle, which he contrasted with the purple of the field. He wrote to his brother Theo about the inspiration that the sun gave him: 'I foresee that other artists will wish to see colour under a stronger sun.'

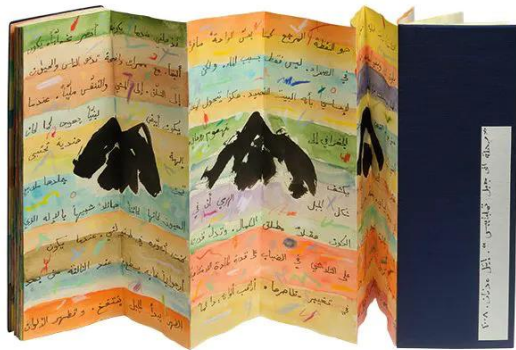
Gallery text: 7 Writing is drawing

'Drawing is writing, and writing is drawing.' As Adnan pointed out, both are done with the same movement of hand and arm, and letters are in fact drawn shapes. She considered the leporello, a book folded like an accordion, the perfect way to combine image and language. In these accordion books, she often copied texts by Arab writers and poets whom she admired, adding her own drawings. This was how she mastered the script of Arabic, a language that belonged to the country where she grew up, but which she did not speak. Arabic was a second-class language in French-controlled Lebanon. Adnan recognised a great writer in Van Gogh's letters and, in his art, she saw his hand as a writer: 'To a degree he writes on his canvas, he is writing a landscape.' Adnan painted her own canvases while they lay on a table, rather than on a painter's easel: 'I attack the surface as if I am writing.'



Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh with a sketch of a leporello, 28 May 1888

Van Gogh was familiar with the leporello, or accordion book, as a form used mainly by Japanese artists for drawings and writing in ink. Inspired as Van Gogh was by Japanese art, he wanted to make leporellos, too, using them for drawing scenes from Arles and the surrounding area in the south of France, where he was staying at the time. In this letter to his brother Theo, he added a sketch to give him an impression.



Leporello: Etel Adnan, Journey to Mount Tamalpais (Rihla ilâ Jabal Tamalpais) , 2008

Adnan had some of her own writing and poetry translated into Arabic, which she then copied and illustrated in leporellos. She did that here with *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* (1986), which she illustrated with sketches of the mountain.



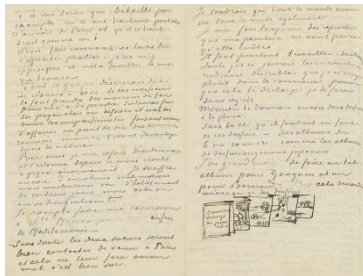
Leporello: Etel Adnan, Text by Joumana Haddad (1970), The Return of Lilith (Awdat Lilit), 2004

In this leporello, Adnan chose to copy and illustrate a text by the Lebanese feminist writer and human rights activist Joumana Haddad (b. 1970). In *Awdat Lilit* (*The Return of Lilith*, 2004), Haddad writes about the mythological figure of Lilith, traditionally a dangerous woman, but presented in this poem as a powerful feminist symbol. Adnan illustrated the text with associative shapes.



Leporello: Etel Adnan, *There* (Hunâka), 2012

Adnan copied out her poem *Hunâka* (There, 2000) in Arabic in this leporello. She called it a meditation on the conflicts in the Arab world. Such conflicts were already playing out during Adnan's childhood, when she was growing up in French-controlled Lebanon. Arabic was a second-class language, and so Adnan did not learn it at school. Writing leporellos like this one was a way for her to finally master Arabic script.



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