

# For Etel Adnan, art world success came late – in her eighties. Anna Coatman met the writer and painter in Paris ahead of a major show in London.

From the Summer 2016 issue of *RA Magazine*, issued quarterly to Friends of the RA.

Etel Adnan opens the door to her Paris apartment before I have the chance to knock. The grand scale of the door frame makes the nonagenarian artist and writer appear even tinier than she actually is. But her diminutive stature belies her impressive reputation, and I am nervous. I have no need to be – she grins, clasps my forearm and pulls me into her home.

It is, gratifyingly, exactly the kind of place I imagined her to have: windows with views onto the streets of St Germain, parquet floors, faded Persian rugs, books and paintings everywhere. I force myself to stop staring and hand over the cakes I have brought, as an offering. “From England?” she asks, impressed. No, I admit, they are from the patisserie around the corner. Still, she says, “certainly they won’t be wasted!”

We settle down in the living room and Adnan begins to tell me about her life and work, in a voice richly textured with accents from the many different places she has called home. She was born in Beirut, in 1925, to a Greek mother and Syrian father, and went on

to study philosophy in Paris before continuing her education in the United States. From 1958 she lived and taught philosophy in California, until she moved back to Lebanon in 1972, where she stayed for five years. After that, she alternated between California and Paris, eventually settling in the French capital. She speaks five languages – as evidenced when she answers the phone in several of them, over the course of the afternoon.

Having already established herself as an important poet, academic and essayist, Adnan began painting at the age of 34. “Painting just happened,” she explains. “I didn’t know I would become a painter; I didn’t go to art school. When I was teaching the philosophy of art I had access to artists and materials, so I began to paint, and people I trusted liked what I did.” If painting came relatively late to Adnan, the kind of recognition she now has as a painter came even later, when she was already in her eighties.





*Etel Adnan at home*

---

Photo: Fabrice Gibert.

A turning point came in 2010 when the Galerie Sfeir-Semler, with spaces in Hamburg and Beirut, asked her to show with them. Two

years later, her work was the highlight of the dOCUMENTA (13) art fair, and since then she has had a string of solo shows in high profile venues, including White Cube. The next will be at the Serpentine Sackler in London this summer.

Adnan creates, among many other things, small-scale, colourful, semi-abstract landscape paintings and tapestries, and foldout illustrated books known as leporellos, as well as large-scale public murals. “When I do a painting it may be like a landscape, but there is more to it,” she continues. “You don’t recognise what landscape it is, as it is not a particular landscape – it is maybe a memory of a particular landscape. I lived in California for most of my life and I loved it, so my paintings are homages to those memories, to the beauty of them.”

She paints, primarily, because she enjoys it. “I love the pleasure of painting and why shouldn’t I be happy? I think that is why people sometimes don’t like artists: they see that they are happier than they are themselves. In fact they are not more happy – in their everyday life they may have big tragedies, but the act of making art is happy. It is a liberating gesture.” Happiness, for Adnan, is political. “Art has a political function in the sense that it brings something life-enhancing, a desire for life.”

Reaching people beyond the exclusive coterie of the contemporary art world is important to Adnan, who feels ambivalent about suddenly becoming one of its rising stars. The art market, for one thing, dismays her: “Some collectors don’t even look at the art they own. It is not about art any more, it is about ego – ‘I own ten Picassos’. So what! I would rather have one reproduction and look at it than ten sitting in the bank.” She also regrets that she cannot make the most of her position, confessing, “I wish it had happened

before, because I make money and you know I cannot spend it – I cannot go on aeroplanes, I cannot do many things. And it breaks my heart.”

Her sadness, however, is short-lived. She brightens within seconds, countering, “On the other hand it’s good it did not happen before because I had peace of mind, and I stayed meditative about art. I am not against galleries – it is necessary for art to be shown and reach the public – but they have their own financial pressures. So they have to keep selling and the artist has to keep producing. I have not fallen into that trap. I do not think a real artist falls into that trap. They do what they have to do anyway.”

For this reason, Adnan believes fervently in the importance of public art. “We emphasise too much galleries and shows, because art has become an industry,” she argues. “We need public participation in art. With a small budget, a few artists can go into an ugly street and help the people who use that street to beautify it. They pay great attention to the beauty of Paris, for instance.” She gestures to the window. “They do not pay attention to the ugliness, the visual poverty, of the suburbs. I am not saying this is the only reason for the trouble there, but it is one of the reasons, and it is a problem we can more easily answer than the others.”

At the age of 91, Adnan has lived through many political earthquakes, but these have only made her more resolute in her conviction that “in times of trouble we need even more art and not less. It is not an extra, it is not superfluous, something marginal: it is something fundamental.” She may have reservations about the art world, but there is no doubt the art world needs Etel Adnan.

***Etel Adnan: The Weight of the World is at the Serpentine Sackler***

## **Gallery, London, until 11 September.**

*Anna Coatman (@AnnaCoatman) is Assistant Editor of RA Magazine*

# Enjoyed this article?

## *Become a Friend to receive RA Magazine*

As well as free entry to all of our exhibitions, Friends of the RA enjoy one of Britain's most respected art magazines, delivered directly to your door.

Why not join the club?

**Find out more >**

The ancient Romans admired their Etruscan neighbours for their amazing skill in bronze work. For us – partly thanks to D.H. Lawrence's *Etruscan Places* – the Etruscan civilization, centred around modern Tuscany, is rather mysterious, best known for its extravagantly decorated tombs, and vast tomb complexes or 'cities of the dead'. For the Romans, the Etruscans were experts in religion – and, more than anything else, they were metalworkers. One Etruscan masterpiece that probably stood in the centre of Rome from almost the beginning of the city's history was the famous 'Wolf', now in the Capitoline Museums. (The 'probably' is important here – for, in one of those intriguing debates that often surround the exact date of these early bronzes, it has recently been suggested that the 'Wolf' is actually medieval.) An even more impressive Etruscan piece, usually dated to around 400 BCE, is the so-called *Chimera of Arezzo* (opposite), which brings almost to life one terrifying ancient mythical hybrid. Part lion, part goat and with a serpent's tail, the monstrous fire-breathing



A third-century BCE mosaic, found in a house in Rhodes, shows Bellerophon killing the Chimera. It is now in Rhodes Archaeological Museum.

The Chimera was said to have terrorised the countryside of Lycia (in modern Turkey) until the hero Bellerophon arrived to dispatch it, riding on his winged horse Pegasus (above). In this bronze sculpture the beast has already been wounded: drops of blood ooze from the goat's head emerging from the lion's back, and there is the sign of another wound in the creature's rump. It is drawing back, mane bristling, claws out, to try one last lunge at its attacker. The Chimera was dug up on 15 November,

1553 during building works at one of the gates of the town of Arezzo. Almost 30 years earlier, the marble group depicting Laocöon and his sons had been excavated in Rome itself (in the presence of Michelangelo, according to some reports), and this new discovery caused almost as much excitement – as well as similar puzzles for scholars, artists and restorers. The Chimera came out of the ground with its tail missing, so it was immediately identified as a simple lion (quite how they reconciled the integral goat's head with that interpretation is something of a mystery). Giorgio Vasari, author of *Lives of the Artists*, and a native of Arezzo, was one of the first to spot that it was an altogether more complicated beast. But it was not until the 18th century that the serpent was restored at the tail end. It is thanks to the restorer that we have what is, for modern viewers, one of the most disturbing details of the group: for the serpent is biting the horn of the goat, as if the animal, in its distress, is running on itself. Whether lion or chimera, it quickly found a role in the cultural politics of the Italian states in the 16th century. The powerful Duke Cosimo I de' Medici (1539-74) did not let this masterpiece stay in Arezzo for long. He had it

brought to the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, and the story is that he spent his evenings cleaning and re-touching the piece, under the instruction of Benvenuto Cellini himself. For Cosimo it was a wonderful artistic emblem of the Tuscan heritage (at a time when Renaissance antiquarians were becoming more and more interested in Etruscan remains). And, of course, it was an impressive rival to the Roman bronze wolf – a symbol that Florence and Tuscany really did outclass Rome. But where had the Chimera originally stood – and why? One clue is found on the right front leg, where an inscription, written in reverse, a common practice among the Etruscans, reads 'TINSCVII'. Vasari thought this was an artist's signature, but we now know – even with our limited understanding of the Etruscan language – that this means 'For Tinia'. Tinia was the major god of the Etruscan pantheon (the Etruscan equivalent of Jupiter or Zeus). So this must have been a dedication in some Etruscan sanctuary. And it is a good guess, though we do not know for certain, that it was originally part of a sculptural group, which would have included the heroic victor Bellerophon, even if not Pegasus.

And where exactly was it made? Despite the Romans' confidence in the prowess of the Etruscans in bronze-working, there has been considerable debate about this. A number of art historians have pointed out that the Chimera does look very different in style from most other Etruscan bronzes we have (including the 'Wolf', if indeed it is ancient). In fact, the style and treatment look decidedly Greek – the three-dimensional quality of the modelling and the way you see the anatomy so convincingly through the animal's skin are reminiscent of several Greek representations of this odd animal hybrid made in the Hellenistic baroque style. Maybe, some have suggested, it was cast in Etruria from a model made by Greeks in southern Italy. Or maybe it was even made in the Greek settlements of southern Italy. Perhaps, in other words, Cosimo I de' Medici's confidence in the Chimera as a symbol of Florentine and Tuscan superiority was misplaced. Bronze Main Gallery, Royal Academy of Arts, London. © 2012 Royal Academy of Arts. www.royalacademy.org.uk, until 9 Dec. Events and Lectures page 75. See RA Magazine blog at <http://bit.ly/RAmagazine>

'...drops of blood ooze from the goat's head emerging from the lion's back and there is the sign of another wound in the creature's rump'

The Chimera of Arezzo is one of the most arresting works in the RA's 'Bronze' exhibition, which brings together some of the finest examples of bronze sculpture across the ages. **Mary Beard** explores this intriguing mythical hybrid and the mysteries of Etruscan civilization it reflects

# Beauty and the beast



The Chimera of Arezzo, Etruscan, c.400 BCE, from the National Archaeological Museum, Florence

# Read more

Share this story    

[Leave a comment](#)

## Topics

RA Magazine RA Magazine Summer 2016 Serpentine Sackler Gallery Etel Adnan

Poetry Painting Interviews

## Related articles



*RA Recommends* 10 days ago

### 10 art exhibitions to see in April

From powerful and symbolic 20th-century war paintings to the first ever exhibition dedicated to queer British art, here's the best art to see this month as chosen by the RA Magazine team.

[Read more](#)



*RA Recommends* 25 days

### The new museum putting Potsdam on the map

The billionaire software entrepreneur Has Plattner has made Potsdam an international art destination with the opening of his Museum Barberini.

[Read more](#)