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# Mohamed Melehi, Moroccan Modernist Whose Influence Loomed Large, Has Died at 84 of Covid-19



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Mohamed Melehi, *Pink Flame*, 1972.

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**Mohamed Melehi**

[\(https://www.artnews.com/t/mohamed-melehi/\)](https://www.artnews.com/t/mohamed-melehi/), a painter of vibrantly hued abstractions that helped spur an artistic renaissance in his home country of Morocco, has died at 84. According to Abu Dhabi-based, English-language publication **the *National***

[\(https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/art/renowned-moroccan-painter-mohamed-melehi-84-dies-after-contracting-covid-19-1.1101668\)](https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/art/renowned-moroccan-painter-mohamed-melehi-84-dies-after-contracting-covid-19-1.1101668), the artist died in a Paris hospital of complications related to Covid-19.

Melehi's colorful paintings featuring undulating wave-like forms aided in the development of modernism in Morocco during the 1960s. Working alongside artists such as Farid Belkahia and Mohammed Chabâa, he was active at the time as part of a group called the Casablanca Art School, which pushed its adherents to engineer a specifically Moroccan kind of modernism.

For Melehi and his cohort, that often meant eschewing

the influence of European movements like Cubism, Expressionism, and Surrealism for entirely different sources. Melehi, for example, called on his students at the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca to consider local architecture and Berber crafts when making art. Morocco had declared independence in 1956, and the Casablanca Art School's art was a way of developing a kind of modernism that existed independent of European influence.

Before he began making use of the wave forms, his abstractions were composed of sharply defined geometric forms that led some to classify it as “hard-edge,” a term that had been applied to Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, and others. “Hard-edge painting made me rediscover the abstraction inherent in Islamic art,” Melehi said in a 2019 [Guardian profile](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/apr/12/mohamed-melehi-casablanca-art-school-mosaic-rooms-london) (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/apr/12/mohamed-melehi-casablanca-art-school-mosaic-rooms-london>). “Moroccan art was always hard edge.”

Born in 1936 in Asilah, Morocco, Mohamed Melehi bounced around France, Spain, and the United States during his career, and ultimately ended up in Casablanca. (By the end of his life, he was based in Marrakesh and Tangiers.) While in Morocco, he continued to hone his political sensibility, contributing to the leftist journal *Souffles* and urging his students to take up “postcolonial architecture.” He also began exhibiting work outdoors in spaces outside galleries and museums to expand art’s role within the world, and he created the Asilah Arts Festival with Mohamed Benaissa in 1978.

Melehi is well-known in Morocco, but it was not until the end of his career that his contributions began to be recognized in Western institutions. In 2016, for example, he was included in the Haus der Kunst’s landmark exhibition “Postwar,” which was curated by Okwui Enwezor and sought to explore the global development of

postwar art. Other major surveys have taken place elsewhere—one appeared in 2017 at the Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, and another appeared at the Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden in Marrakesh last year. Earlier this year, his work appeared in an exhibition about Arab modernism at NYU’s Grey Art Gallery.

Up until the end of his career, Melehi thought of color as a liberating force. In one of his **final interviews** (<https://identity.ae/moroccan-artist-mohamed-melehi-on-the-role-of-colour-the-bauhaus-and-afro-arab-heritage/>), with the publication *Identity* earlier this year, he said, “I see color as a way to attain a certain state of freedom—from materialistic grounds, and from previously held beliefs.”



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