

# Egyptian-Armenian artist Chant Avedissian dies at 67



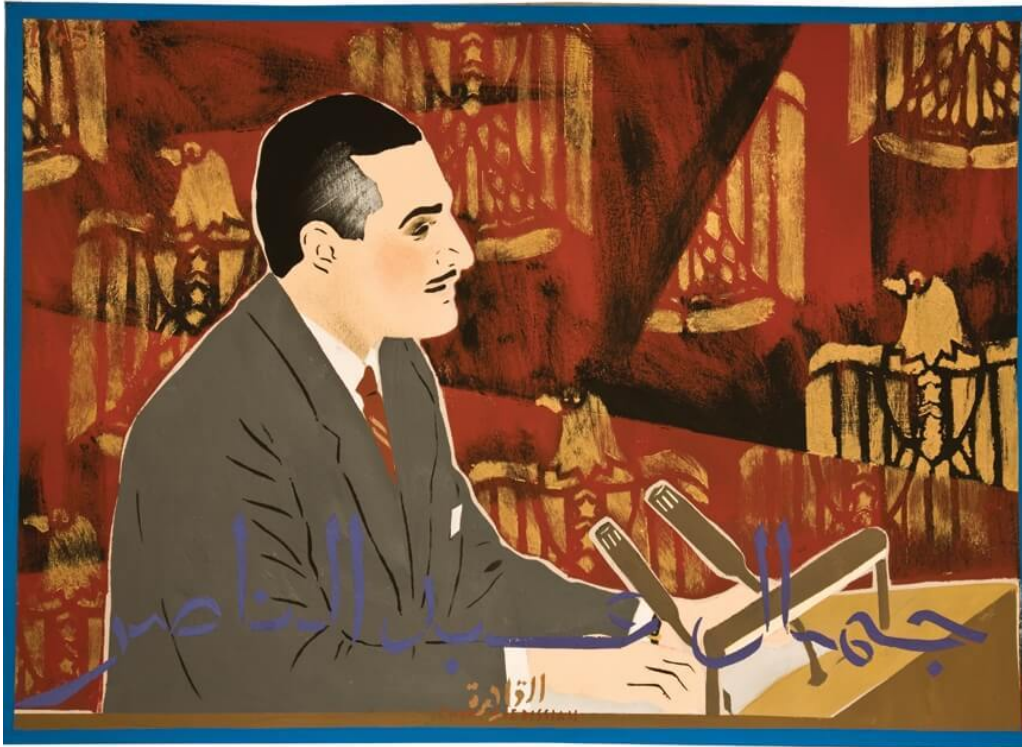
Egyptian-Armenian artist Chant Avedissian has died in Cairo at the age of 67. In a statement, his family said he died of lung cancer.

Avedissian's work engaged with the glories of past Egypt, from Pharaonic hieroglyphs to more recent demigods such as the beloved singer Umm Kulthum. He would print iconic images of these figures against stencilled backgrounds drawn from Ottoman, Bedouin, and traditional Islamic motifs, in a mix of pop culture and folklore.

## Who was Chant Avedissian?

Avedissian was born in Cairo in 1951 to Armenian parents, and the relationship between national identity and cultural interest remained of paramount interest throughout his life. His focus was on Egypt's golden age – that of the Pharaoh's as well as Gamal Abdel Nasser's revival of that

past – and the wider Arab region: his pantheon of Egyptian figures was quite literally set against patterns from along the Silk Route. Drawn carefully as the backgrounds to images of well-known Egyptian figures such as Abdel Halim Hafez, Abdel Nasser, Farid Al Atrash and Faten Hamama were motifs from Ottoman textiles from the 15th and 16th centuries, Uzbeiki kaftans, the Abdulaziz Khan Madrassah in Bukhara, wooden Mamluk doors, and Upper Egyptian Bedouin kilims.



Chant Avedissian's 'Gamal Abd El Nasser' from 2008. Courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation

Avedissian's fluency with both fine and applied arts was also a factor of his education: he studied fine art in Montreal, Canada and then print-making in Paris at the Ecole nationale superieure des arts decoratifs. This more formal training was altered by his experiences upon his return to Egypt in 1980, when he worked at the Aga Khan Foundation with the architect Hassan Fathy, known as Egypt's architect of the poor. Fathy had revived traditional Islamic and Egyptian techniques, and introduced Avedissian to local materials. Back then, the young artist began dyeing textiles according to the Bedouin fashion, and – saying he felt freed by moving away from European classicism – incorporating everyday materials such as

corrugated cardboard and Arabic gum into his works.

## How his work evolved over time

The Gulf War in 1991 marked a watershed moment for Avedissian, even though the fighting did not spread to Egypt as he feared. He began making works that emphasised memory and cultural history in greater depth. His masterpiece, *Icons of the Nile*, which he worked on from 1991 until 2004, is a large-scale installation of 120 patterned drawings arrayed in a grid. Again, here are the big-name figures from Egyptian popular culture and political life, but also images from daily life: typical Egyptian families and historical elements, such as the Egyptian-made Nefertiti sewing machines that were part of Nasser's promise to create an entirely self-sufficient Egyptian economy. As the critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie wrote about the mass-media emblems, in a review of the work in [The National](#) when it was shown in Beirut in 2010: "This is not straightforward replication, but a sustained rumination on the circulation of images, and the various purposes they serve." Avedissian's work, trafficking both in pop culture and folkloric traditions, challenged the separation between the two: both are imagery belonging to the people, and travelling among them, whether among nomads or on newspapers and televisions.

Avedissian's later years continued his exploration of traditional patterns, often dotted with Egyptian emblems such as the crocodile or the donkey, a symbol for the ancient Egyptian god of the afterlife. These appear in his work in bright vinyl stickers – emblematic, too, of his light touch and willingness to work across materials low and high.

In the UAE, Avedissian's work is in the collection of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and Barjeel Art Foundation. It is also held by the US's National Museum of African Art, the British Museum in London, and the National Gallery of Jordan.

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