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Pedro Friedeberg, Surrealist Artist Who Designed the Iconic Hand-Chair, Dies at 90

BY **ALEX GREENBERGER**

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Pedro Friedeberg.
MEDIOS Y MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES

Pedro Friedeberg, an artist affiliated with the Mexican offshoot of the Surrealist movement and who is now best known for his absurdist designs, including the iconic Hand-Chair, died on Thursday in San Miguel de Allende. He was 90, according to his New York gallery, Ruiz-Healy Art.

Friedeberg's diverse practice included paintings dense with dreamy imagery and design objects that looked like body parts and animals. Though commonly labeled a Surrealist, he bristled against being associated with that movement.

When a *W* magazine journalist made the error of claiming that he was the last of the Surrealists in 2024, Friedeberg said, "That's a terrible mistake. I'm neither a Surrealist nor the last of anything." He also didn't like being labeled an artist—"a horrible word," he once told an interviewer for Christie's -- and said that, if his career took a different form, he would have become "a spiritualist or a gigolo."

He is most fondly remembered for the Hand-Chair, a seat resembling a large palm that he designed during the early 1960s. He had been assigned to provide work to a carpenter of a friend of Friedeberg's knew, and the artist told that carpenter to go sculpt a hand. "I thought that would be funny," Friedeberg recalled in a 2017 interview with *Architectural Digest*.

The sculpture ended up becoming popular in Mexico. "Everyone had a Friedeberg at home," the writer Déborah Holtz said in *Pedro*, a 2022 Netflix documentary about him. "Everyone had a Hand-Chair."

While he remains best known for his design objects, he also produced paintings that feature arrays of birds and mind-bending architectural spaces whose walls and floors are depicted with zigzag patterns.

Pedro Friedeberg was born in Florence in 1936. His parents were Jewish, and so, amid the threat posed by Benito Mussolini's fascist regime, the family fled for Mexico in 1940. He would later reflect on a culture shock that continued to influence his taste for absurdism. "I was born in Italy during the era of Mussolini, who made all trains run on time," he once said. "Immediately thereafter, I moved to México, where the trains are never on time, but where once they start moving, they pass pyramids."

His father, an engineer, inspired him to study architecture at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. After graduation, he worked with Mathias Goeritz, an artist who had likewise fled Europe for Mexico. Having closely observed the work of modernist artists in his native Germany, Goeritz brought an experimental spirit to Mexico City's art scene that influenced Friedeberg.



A Hand-Chair designed by Pedro Friedeberg.
PHOTO TIM JOHNSON/TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE VIA GETTY IMAGES

Through Goeritz, Friedeberg went on to meet many European and American expatriates living in Mexico City, among them Surrealist painters such as Alice Rahon and Leonora Carrington, as well as the photographer Kati Horna.

"I was telling my parents I was studying architecture, which was a big lie," Friedeberg told *W*. "I was just hanging around other people's houses. That's how I met Leonora and Kati and all these fascinating people."

Friedeberg's practice is widely recognized in Mexico City, where he received a retrospective at the Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes in 2009. In 2016, the Riverside Art Museum in California surveyed his early work.

He worked prolifically and actively well into the later stages of his career. On the occasion of his 2009 retrospective, he told the *New York Times*. "I never relax. My art is my therapy, my medication."



Pedro Friedeberg, *Palmengarten*, 1994.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND RUIZ-HEALY ART

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