

Antoni Tàpies
The acid is my knife

Exhibition
24.1-24.5.2020



FUNDACIÓ ANTONI TÀPIES

'When I dip a copper plate in a bath of nitric acid, the acid replaces the knife.'

Barbara Catoir. *Conversations with Antoni Tàpies*. Munich: Prestel, 1991: p 119.

This exhibition features a set of prints and artist's books made between 1988 and 1990, focusing on Antoni Tàpies' experiments in the field of printmaking. The material aspects of an artwork were of prime importance for Tàpies, hence his interest in constantly trying new elements and techniques. In this sense, chalcography offered him a wide range of possibilities.

For the artist, one of the biggest challenges of this medium was to transfer onto paper the variety of textures that he was able to achieve in his paintings. This was done by using a copper plate that Tàpies treated as though it were a piece of cardboard or paper, and by performing the same operations with his fingers and brushes. It was just another way of attacking the surface by which, as Tàpies said, submerging the copper plate in acid replaced the knife.

Of all the techniques with which Tàpies experimented, this exhibition focuses on chalcography, that is, the process of biting an image into a metal plate through the action of acid. There are two types of chalcographic process: etching and aquatint.

An etching is made by incising a plate covered with a layer of acid-resistant varnish; wherever the varnish has been scratched away, the metal is exposed. The corrosive action of a nitric acid solution bites into the exposed metal, with the immersion time determining the depth of the line. Once the remaining varnish is removed, the plate is ready for printing.

The process of aquatint is similar, but here resin granules are spread over certain areas of the plate and heated. The resin melts and adheres to the plate, leaving minute spaces between the granules. When acid is applied to the exposed metal, the grainy 'bite' leads to a tonal effect in the final print.



Antoni Tàpies,
Flud, 1988.



Antoni Tàpies, (*Spiral and Footprint*, 1990).



Antoni Tàpies, *Capsa de te* (Tea Box), 1990).

Unlike much traditional printmaking, most of the works in this exhibition are large-format. Because they were made using standard-sized copper plates, two or even three had to be used to create the different parts of each print. The same applied to the paper, where several sheets were joined, often using heavy-weight paper to increase its resistance. Sometimes, Tàpies even emphasised the joins by allowing the stitches to show.

Both the etchings and aquatints exhibited on Level 1 and the engravings from artist's books shown on Level 2 feature a series of images that are related and which establish a common pictorial thread. Motifs such as crosses, feet, letters, etc., reoccur in various forms. However, they do not have a narrative character with a beginning, a middle and an end, but are rather variations on a theme.

On Level 2, the exhibition includes the screening of the documentary *Tàpies* (1990), directed by Gregory Rood and produced by BBC - TVE Catalunya. It shows Antoni Tàpies' creative processes using various media (painting, printmaking and ceramics), and recalls some events of his life and career.

'(Of my printmakings) Perhaps I would emphasise the expressiveness I try to convey to the support, to the sheet. Obviously, it is very different to work with a satiny white sheet, without anything "accidental", than to work with a sheet with accidents, stains and strong textures. This second kind of support is what has always interested me. I can assure you that, from a traditional point of view, I've treated the support with very little respect. I have always tried to transform the paper, to give it dimensional relief, to add external elements or to tear it. Just as I have done very little pictorial painting, I have created a body of printed work that uses elements antithetical to the pictorial. And I have had the chance to collaborate with technicians who didn't fear the problems I presented. However, what I've never done is to seek variety of material or technique for its own sake. My interest in the expressive value of these novel techniques has a technical but also experiential character.'

Manuel J. Borja-Villel. 'La expresividad del papel. Una conversación con Antoni Tàpies', in *Antoni Tàpies. Obra gráfica 1947-1990*. Zaragoza: Gobierno de Aragón and Diputación de Zaragoza, 1994: pp 7-14. Quote translated from Spanish.

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