

Tàpies
at 30

Exhibition
3.10.2020–6.6.2021



FUNDACIÓ ANTONI TÀPIES

This exhibition is part of the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Fundació Antoni Tàpies. It focuses on the period 1953–63, when Tàpies was in his thirties. These were decisive years in the evolution of the artist's work and its reception for three reasons. Firstly, from 1954 he discovered his own language through which he would achieve artistic maturity. Secondly, it was from this time that he achieved international resonance and recognition in the form of awards and participation in competitions and exhibitions, both in Europe and the United States. Thirdly, he refused to be exploited by the Franco regime, which at this time sought to use modern art to present a more liberal image of itself before the international community.



Meditació epicúria (Epicurean Meditation, 1953).
Private collection, Barcelona

In 1953, Tàpies left behind the influences of Surrealism and the social line his work had previously taken: he experimented with pure colours and contrasts between tones, with elementary shapes and lines. He also began experimenting with texture, which was to prove especially relevant to the subsequent evolution of his work. Tàpies used tarlatan, fabrics and cardboard on the surface of his paintings; he made stains with solvents or materials that don't mix, such as oil with gouache or acrylic; he scraped the varnish, overlaid transparent forms, and covered the support with thick layers of matter, including the use of earth for the first time. Influenced by the evocative powers of music, Tàpies also tried to make his painting suggest emotions and moods.

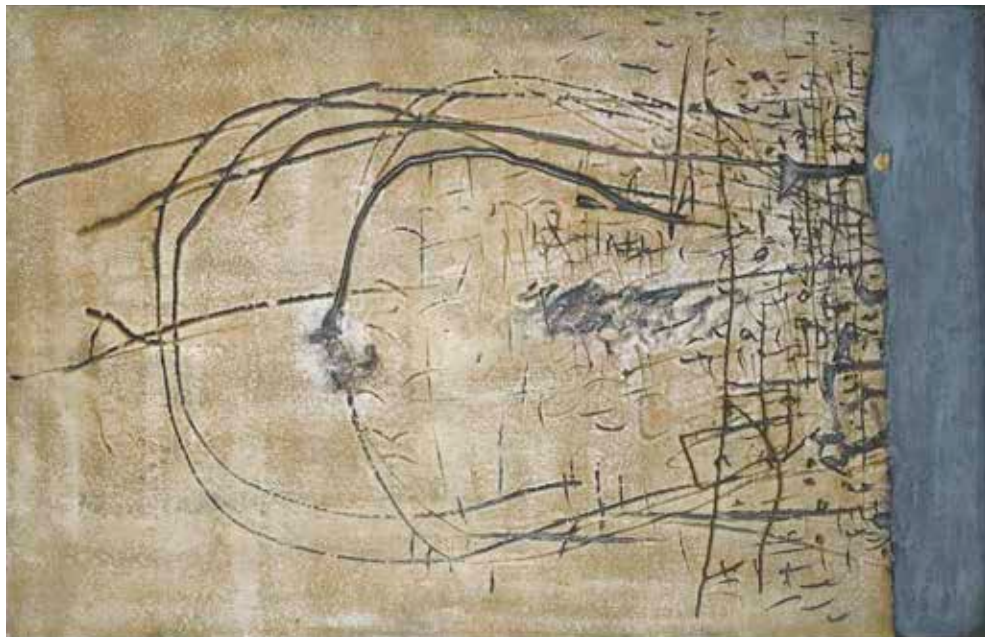
In 1954, this research led him to accentuate the material quality of the paintings. Tàpies used all sorts of elements – such as sand, coloured earth, whitewash, marble dust, hair, thread, rags, paper – and the textures became more evident. His colours favoured the earthy and grey range, while his paintings took on the characteristic wall-like appearance of his mature work.

This interest in materials was part of a widespread focus on matter, which, after the Second World War, was shared by artists on both sides of the Atlantic.

Experimentation with materials allowed him to evoke reality, not through the kind of a naturalism that relies on the artist's ability to represent, but utilising the suggestive force of matter itself, either through textures, or the use of outlines or other shapes in the painting. The images that emerged in his work became more iconographic from 1965 onwards, when he began to title some paintings with the formula 'matter in the form of', e.g., *Matèria en forma de peu* [Matter in the Form of a Foot], *Matèria en forma d'aixel·la* [Matter in the Form

of an Armpit], etc., but they were already present in the period 1954/1955–65. Over the years, his artistic language grew and developed. From 1958 onwards, the format of the paintings became larger. There is a predominance of 'poor' materials, such as cardboard, anonymous grey matter, boxes or waste, which gives value to small, everyday gestures and evokes the ravages of time. Tàpies drew parallels between his work and electronic music: above all, concrete music.

Pintura grisa (Grey Painting, 1956). Private collection, Barcelona

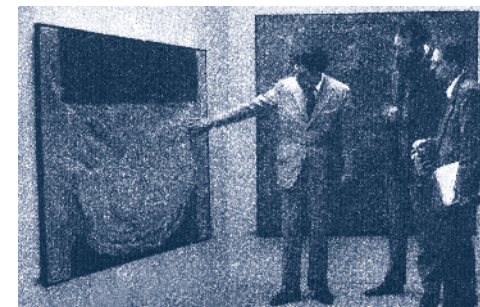


II

1953 was an important year, marking the entry of Tàpies' career onto the post-Second World War international circuit. That same year he received an award at the *II Bienal de São Paulo* and, above all, had his first two exhibitions in the United States: at Marshall Field & Company, Chicago, and the Martha Jackson Gallery, New York (Martha Jackson also offered to represent him in the United States). The paintings he showed were from 1948 to 1951, and therefore did not reflect the change that was taking place in his most recent work. Despite the poor response to the exhibitions, his trip to New York allowed him to encounter American Abstract Expressionism in situ and to see works by artists such as Tobey, Pollock, Kline, De Kooning and Motherwell.

Two years later he exhibited his matter paintings for the first time, to great critical acclaim. First in Paris, as part of the collective exhibition *Phases de l'art contemporain*, organised by the poet and art critic Édouard Jaguer at the Galerie Raymond Creuze. And later in Barcelona, at the *III Bienal Hispanoamericana de Arte*, where he was awarded a prize by the Republic of Colombia. In Paris, he met the French art critic Michel Tapié, a theoretical exponent of Informalism and a very influential figure in contemporary Parisian artistic circles. Interested in his work, Tapié invited him to join the Galerie Stadler, which was about to open in Paris.

It was in this gallery in 1956 that Tàpies had his first solo exhibition in the French capital. Featuring exclusively his matter paintings, the show proved a great success with both public and critics. For a little while longer, Paris remained the capital of the avant-garde. Tàpies signed a contract with Rodolphe Stadler that offered him continuity and a certain degree of economic stability. Martha Jackson, on the other hand, was reluctant to show Tàpies' recent work, and although she exhibited it in 1957, it was not until 1959 that she fully accepted the artist's new language. This change of heart was due to the successes Tàpies achieved in 1958. On the one hand,



Antoni Tàpies shows Emilio Vedova one of his works at the *Biennale di Venezia*, Venice, 1958

he received the first prize from the Carnegie Institute of Pittsburgh with an all-star jury: Marcel Duchamp, Lionello Venturi, Raoul Ubac and the Americans James Johnson Sweeney, Mary Callery and the famous B-movie actor and important contemporary art collector, Vincent Price. In the same year, he presented fifteen works in the Spanish Pavilion of the *XXIX Biennale di Venezia*, where he won the UNESCO Prize and the David Bright Foundation Award.

From then on, his works travelled increasingly around Europe and the United States: he participated in the *II Documenta* in Kassel (which in 1959 was devoted to abstract art) and in the inaugural exhibition of the Guggenheim Museum in New York; and had solo exhibitions in, among other places, Paris, Milan, Stockholm, Eindhoven, Essen, Munich, Washington DC and Buenos Aires... In 1962, the first retrospective exhibitions of his work took place in Germany, the United States and Switzerland: at the Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hanover, curated by Werner Schmalenbach, an exhibition that toured to the Kunsthau, Zurich; and at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, curated by Thomas Messer. By 1963, when Tàpies reached 40, his work was consolidated and he had established an international reputation. On moving into his new studio-house designed by J.A. Coderch, he finally fulfilled his dream of a 'true' studio where he could work more comfortably on the large format paintings that he had begun making in recent years.

III

In the context of the Cold War, Franco's Spain was an interesting proposition for the anti-communist bloc. In 1953, Spain and the United States reached a military and economic agreement in exchange for military bases, which, together with the concordat signed with the Vatican that same year, signalled the beginning of Spain's emergence from diplomatic isolation. The inclusion of Barcelona in the tour of the influential exhibition of modern American art from the MoMA collection, incorporated into the *III Bienal Hispanoamericana de Arte* in 1955, was made possible thanks to the bilateral relations between the two countries. In its official position, the Spanish regime began to accept modern art, though only in an attempt to appear more liberal to Western democracies.

Persevering in the strategic attempt to offer an image of modernity that suggested things were changing in Spain, in 1958 Luis González Robles, an experienced professional in both artistic and political circles, was commissioned to curate the Spanish Pavilion of the *XXIX Biennale di Venezia*. González Robles had the good sense to choose artists that best suited current international trends, and offered each an individual space. The success of the Pavilion was unquestionable. However, Spain remained a dictatorship, as some critics in the international press made clear. The situation troubled many artists, including Manolo Millares, Antonio Saura and Tàpies himself, who, feeling used, decided to play no further part in exhibitions organised by the regime.

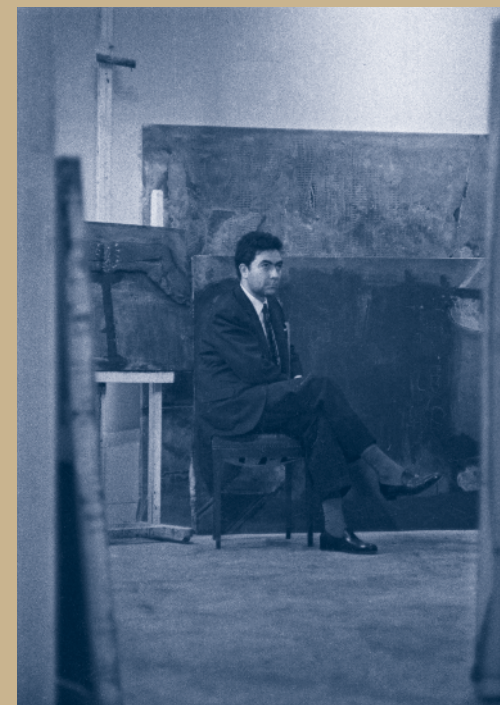
For this reason, in 1959 Tàpies refused to participate in the exhibition *13 peintres espagnols actuels* organised by the Spanish government at the Musée des arts décoratifs, Paris, and in 1960 in the exhibition *New Spanish Painting and Sculpture* to be held at MoMA, New York. However, Tàpies did finally participate in the latter exhibition because, in a strategy designed to overcome the reluctance of certain artists to collaborate in exhibitions organised

by the Spanish government, the coordination of the exhibition and the selection of works was put in the hands of the museum staff.

In 1962, the Tate Gallery, London, co-organised the exhibition *Modern Spanish Painting* with the Spanish government. Against the will of the artist, who refused to participate, a collector from Barcelona lent three paintings to the exhibition. Tàpies opposed this by evoking the intellectual property law giving artists rights over the public exhibition of their work, and won the case in court in 1963. On this occasion, he also took the opportunity to make some anti-Franco and pro-Catalan statements in the English weekly newspaper *The Observer*.



Composició blau ultramar. N. LXXVIII (Ultramarine Blue Composition. No. LXXVIII, 1958). Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven



Antoni Tàpies in the studio on Carrer Balmes, Barcelona, 1961. Photograph by Josep Maria Roset. © Heirs of Josep Maria Roset, 2020

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Cover: Antoni Tàpies, *Oval blanc*, N LI (White Oval No. LI, 1957). Kunstmuseen Krefeld. Of the works: © Comissió Tàpies / VEGAP, 2020.