

Antoni Tàpies. A Biography (Barcelona, 1923 – 2012)

Creative Beginnings and International Projection (Until The 1950s)

Antoni Tàpies was born in Barcelona on 13 December 1923. Today, he is recognised as one of the most outstanding artists of the twentieth century. Following a childhood spent in a social and cultural environment marked by Catalan republicanism, during the Spanish Civil War, while still at school, the self-taught artist began practising drawing and painting. In the early 1940s, during a long convalescence recovering from a lung disease, his dedication to these artistic pursuits intensified. At that time, **he began his first attempts at combining thickly impastoed and non-standard pictorial materials**, such as paper, cardboard, threads, earth, ropes, rice and wire, together with the techniques of collage and grattage, in which his future interests are already apparent. It was at this point that he decided to abandon his university studies in law to devote himself fully to painting. In 1948, he founded the magazine *Dau al Set* together with Joan Brossa, Joan Ponç, Modest Cuixart, Arnau Puig and Joan-Josep Tharrats. During those years, he also met J. V. Foix, Joan Prats and Joan Miró, and made his first etchings in the workshop of Enric Tormo. His interest in Surrealism, psychoanalysis and modern science would have profound implications for his work. He began to exhibit from the end of the 1940s and in 1950 staged his first solo exhibition at the Galeries Laietanes in Barcelona. On a scholarship from the French government, he lived for several months in Paris, where he became interested in Marxism and, concerned about the political situation in Spain, produced numerous paintings with social themes.

1953 was a crucial year for the evolution of his work, marking the true beginnings of his career with his first appearance on the postwar international circuit. He won a prize at the 2nd São Paulo Biennial and held his first two solo exhibitions in the United States

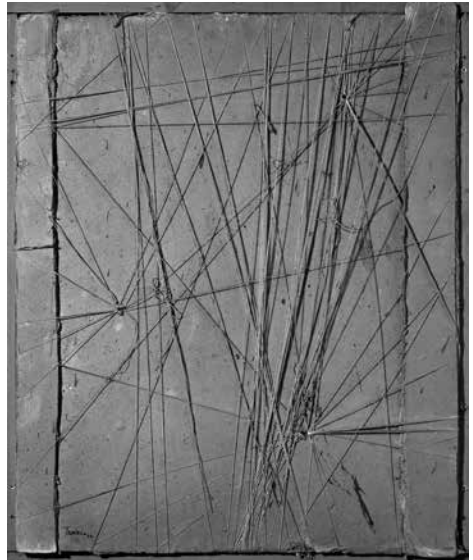


Fig. 1

Fig. 1: Antoni Tàpies. *Capsa de cordills* (Box of Strings, 1946).
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thanks to the support of Gordon B. Washburn and Martha Jackson, owner of the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York. On his first trip to New York, Tàpies had the opportunity to experience Abstract Expressionism first-hand. Seeing works by artists such as Tobey, Pollock, Kline, de Kooning and Motherwell, he found affinities that helped to confirm the line his own work was taking. From this moment on, the material quality of his paintings became accentuated, the textures more evident. **His works adopted the characteristic wall-like aspect of his mature art:** opaque surfaces made of marble dust mixed with a limited range of coloured pigments.

In 1954, he married Teresa Barba Fàbregas, with whom he had three children: Antoni (1956), Clara (1958) and Miquel (1960). That same year, he participated in the 27th Venice Biennale.

The matter paintings were exhibited for the first time in Paris in 1955, where he met Michel Tapié, artistic advisor at the Stadler Gallery, who would bring together various artists from Europe, the United States and Japan to whom he attributed the same aesthetic sensibility. This would contribute to changing the artistic taste of postwar Europe. In turn, Tàpies collaborated in the introduction of Informalism in Barcelona by putting Club 49 members in contact with Michel Tapié and Rodolphe Stadler, and by facilitating the organisation of exhibitions, activities and publications at Sala Gaspar.

Tàpies' international reputation was consolidated in 1957, when he participated in the 4th São Paulo Biennial. A year later he received the first prize awarded by the Carnegie Institute of Pittsburgh, and participated in the 29th Venice Biennale, where he was given the UNESCO Prize and the David Bright Foundation Award. Despite this success, realising the Franco regime was taking advantage of the growing international reputations of certain artists to appear more liberal, he made the decision to turn down all invitations to



Fig. 2

Fig. 2: Antoni Tàpies. *Ocre-gris sobre marró* (Ochre-Grey over Brown, 1962). © Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona/VEGAP. Photograph by: © FotoGasull, 2023

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participate in official exhibitions. He began to adopt an increasingly open **opposition to the regime, while at the same time championing the Catalan language and culture**, taking advantage of the platform presented by the internationalisation of his work. The appreciation of Tàpies' work in international avant-garde circles continued to grow, and by the end of the 1950s his works were frequently shown in Europe and America. In 1959, for example, he exhibited in the 2nd Documenta in Kassel and at the Martha Jackson Gallery. The same year he was included in the inaugural exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, and showed there again the following year, as well as at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

The Consolidation of an Artistic Career (1960s and 1970s)

The internationalisation of Tàpies' work was further confirmed in 1962 with the **first retrospective exhibitions** of his work in Germany (Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hanover), in the United States (Guggenheim Museum, New York) and in Switzerland (Kunsthaus, Zurich). His artistic language was strengthened and continued to develop during these and subsequent years. The formats of the paintings gradually became larger, with a predominance of 'poor' materials, such as cardboard, grey matter, boxes and general waste, bestowing value upon the small, everyday gestures and evoking the wear and tear indicative of the passage of time.

By the age of forty, Tàpies had consolidated his work and achieved international recognition, although in Catalonia and Spain he often invited controversy. At that time, the first monographs on his work were published.

In 1963, he moved into the Barcelona house-studio designed by J. A. Coderch, where he could work more comfortably on the large-scale paintings that he had recently begun

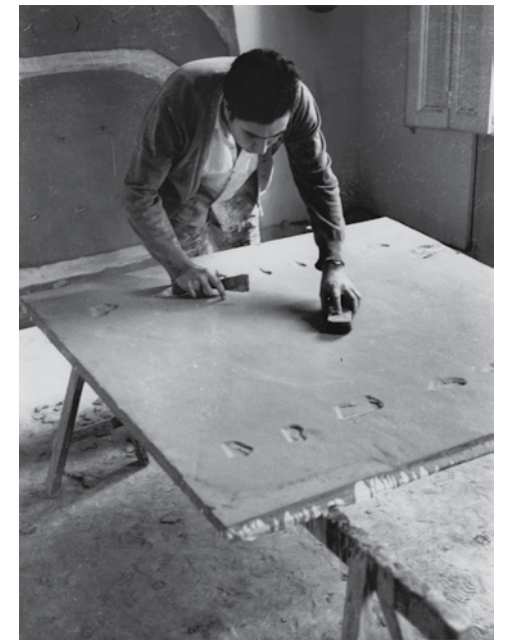


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Fig. 3: Francesc Català-Roca. Antoni Tàpies working at the studio, Barcelona, 1959. © Fons Fotogràfic F. Català-Roca – Arxiu Històric del COAC

Fig. 4: Antoni Tàpies visiting his retrospective exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1962. Behind, *Relleu sense color, Cal·ligrafia y Gran pintura* (Relief without Colour, Calligraphy and Large Painting, 1958). © Jesse A. Fernández

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producing, and started making **artist's books**. Produced together with the poet Joan Brossa, *El pa a la barca* (The Bread in the Boat, 1963) and *Novel·la* (Novel, 1965) were published by Sala Gaspar. Through the Galerie Maeght in Paris, with which he established a professional relationship that lasted many years, and later the publishing house Polígrafa, he began a long series of collaborations with poets, writers and thinkers, including Joan Brossa, Jacques Dupin, André du Bouchet, Pere Gimferrer, Edmond Jabès, Jean Daive, Shuzo Takiguchi, Rafael Alberti, Alexander Mitscherlich, Octavio Paz, Jorge Guillén, José-Miguel Ullán, Yves Bonnefoy, José Ángel Valente, J. V. Foix, Jean Frémon, María Zambrano, Joseph Brodsky, Antonio Gamoneda, among others. With these books, Tàpies continued to explore the techniques of lithography, screenprinting, etching, monotype and collage.

In 1966, he participated in the 'Caputxinada', the clandestine meeting convened at the Capuchin Convent in Sarrià, Barcelona, where students and intellectuals debated the creation of the first democratic student union since the end of the Spanish Civil War; after a stand-off with the police lasting several days, along with other participants he was arrested and subsequently fined. Following this experience, he began writing his memoirs, motivated by the commitment to review his biography and artistic career. *A Personal Memoir: Fragments for an Autobiography* was not published until eleven years later.

In 1969, Tàpies **began writing articles** for various publications in which he reflected on the role of contemporary art in society and considered specific aspects of art and culture. These would later be republished collectively, and were subsequently translated into several languages: *The Practice of Art* (1970), *Art against Aesthetics* (1974), *Reality as Art* (1982), *For a Modern and Progressive Art* (1985), *The Value of Art* (1993) and *Art and its Places* (1999).

In the 1960s and 70s, Tàpies' work was characterised both by the consolidation of the language of the matter paintings and by a commitment to **incorporate objects**, which from 1970 increased exponentially. He focused his interest on used objects and materials – old furniture, household utensils, dirty clothes, straw – that showed traces of the passage of time and human action. Implied in his choice of real and ordinary objects that refer to the everyday world, deliberately anti-modern, was a rejection of consumer society.

Towards the end of the 1960s, he designed sets for five **theatre performances**: with the first three, *Or i sal* (Gold and Salt, 1961), *Semimaru* (1966) and *L'armari en el mar* (The Wardrobe in the Sea, 1978), he contributed to the regeneration of Catalan theatre at a time when, freed from the repression of the Franco regime, it was aiming to reconnect with modernity and the wider European scene. *L'Éboulement* (The Landslide, 1982) was part of a theatrical experience that took place in alternative spaces in Paris, while *Johnny va agafar el seu fusell*, an adaptation of Dalton Trumbo's anti-war novel *Johnny Got His Gun* opened at the Mercat de les Flors, Barcelona, in 1989. Tàpies' relationship with the theatre went further and took various forms, his way of working being well-suited to the ephemeral nature of theatrical events. Unconcerned with permanence, he used 'poor' materials – paper, cardboard, ropes, clothes, rags, and objects such as a table, ladder or walking stick – that simply disappeared once the performance was over. They also reveal his fascination with magic and opera.

In 1970, together with around three hundred Catalan intellectuals with a known political commitment, Tàpies participated in the clandestine assembly at the Montserrat monastery known as the 'Tancada de Montserrat', a protest against the Burgos Trial. In the seventies

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Fig. 5



Fig. 6

and eighties, his concern over the political situation in Spain led to a significant increase in the **production of posters** for numerous civic and cultural activities and events. He contributed to various campaigns demanding the abolition of the death penalty in Spain, and participated in actions organised by opponents of the Franco regime in favour of amnesty for political prisoners and the definitive return of democratic freedoms. Tàpies spoke publicly about the condition of the artist, politics and the ethical commitments of cultural workers, highlighting the concerns of Spanish intellectuals during the beginnings of the Transition to a democratic regime after the death of Franco.

The Forging of a Universal Language (1980s, 1990s and 2000s)

In the 1980s, the varnish, which was already integral to the matter paintings and was used as a base for the marble dust, began to take centre stage, offering a transparency to counterbalance the opacity that typified his 'wall' paintings. Having already taken an **interest in Eastern art and philosophy** in his youth, during the 1980s references to Buddhism abound, both in his work and in his writings. Tàpies' varnishes, which have been associated with honey, express the unity between the universe and the beings that compose it, the confluence of matter and spirit, and the negation of the duality typical of Western thinking. In the same way, Tàpies related the idea of matter to medieval mysticism – through the writings of Arnau de Vilanova, Enric de Villena and Ramon Llull – understanding it in the context of magic and alchemy. At that time, he also made his first ceramic sculptures, assisted by the German ceramist Hans Spinner in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, while later he continued to produce **sculpture** using clay and bronze. He also experimented with foam rubber and the aerosol technique.

Fig. 5: Antoni Tàpies. *Palla i fusta* (Straw and Wood, 1969). © Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona/VEGAP. Photograph by: © FotoGasull, 2023

Fig. 6: Antoni Tàpies at his studio in Barcelona, 1973. Photograph by Lee Miller. © Lee Miller Archives, England, 2023. All rights reserved

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In 1981, he was commissioned by Barcelona City Council to create a monument dedicated to Picasso. The sculpture, *Monument Homenatge a Picasso* (Monument in Homage to Picasso), located on Passeig Picasso, was inaugurated in 1983, the same year as the *11 de setembre* (11 September) mosaic in Plaça Catalunya in Sant Boi de Llobregat. He was part of the honorary committee of the association organising the tribute to the Swiss International Brigades, held in Geneva. He also collaborated with the Coordinating Committee for the Safeguard of Montseny. In 1988, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Barcelona. In his investiture speech, he addressed several topics he was writing about at the time: the social function of art as a way of knowledge and a means of transforming consciousness and behaviour; the validity of certain spiritual and contemplative experiences and their adaptation to current needs; and the importance of artists' work as a contribution to the fight against commercialism and banalisation. This same year, Anna Agustí published the first of the nine volumes of the catalogue raisonné of his work.

1990 saw the inauguration of the foundation that bears Tàpies' name and which was to occupy the former headquarters of the Montaner y Simón publishing house. As he conceived from the outset, the **Fundació Antoni Tàpies** is an institution that aims to keep, exhibit and research Tàpies own work, alongside a programme of exhibitions of other artists, and which also functions as a centre dedicated to the study of and debate around contemporary art. The same year, the Sala Antoni Tàpies was inaugurated at the Palau de la Generalitat de Catalunya, for which he created the mural *Les quatre cròniques* (The Four Chronicles). He was awarded an honorary doctorate by the universities of Glasgow and the Balearic Islands.

During those years, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the cruelty and magnitude of the Bosnian war and other conflicts left



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Fig. 7: Antoni Tàpies. *Crani 376* (Skull 376, 1987).
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Fig. 8: Louise Bourgeois and Antoni Tàpies at the opening of the *Louise Bourgeois* retrospective exhibition, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 1990. © Raimon Ramis i Joan

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their mark on his work, in which he made constant references to death and pain. At the *Venice Biennale* in 1993, Tàpies presented *Rinzen*, a work that earned him the Golden Lion award and is now permanently installed in the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). In 1996, he created the Reflection Room at the Ciutadella Campus of the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, creating a space for reflection and meditation.

By the 2000s, Tàpies was indisputably recognised internationally, his output shown around the world in numerous exhibitions, while he continued to receive awards that honoured his work and career. He kept up the production of posters, such as for the Mercè Festival in Barcelona in 2002. In 2005, to mark the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the restoration of the Parliament of Catalonia, he donated the work *7 de novembre* (7 November, 1971), and made a commemorative screenprint. The same year, he was also presented with the Lissone Award for lifetime achievement.

In his late works, he returned to some of his great themes, such as the self-portrait, the body, death and desire, executed with a less inhibited and freer gesture, keeping alive the instinct that, from the beginning of his career, led him to seek new ways to capture and show reality.

Antoni Tàpies died in Barcelona on 6 February 2012 at the age of eighty-eight. Following an intense career spanning his entire life, he leaves behind an extensive artistic legacy.



Fig. 9

Fig. 9: Antoni Tàpies at his studio working on the poster for the Mercè Festival, Barcelona, 2002. © Teresa Tàpies Domènech

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