

Antoni Tàpies (1923–2012) gained prominence in the 1950s as a painter, regularly exhibiting in that era's biennials (Pittsburgh, Venice and São Paulo), years before his peers (artists born in the 1920s and linked with Fluxus, Gutai, Nouveau Réalisme, Pop Art, and Arte Povera) received acclaim. As a result of his early start, critics cast his oeuvre as the link between Surrealism's puzzling "écriture automatique" and Art Informel's gloomy, existential angst. What gets lost in this assessment is the fact that between 1944 and 1954 Tàpies proceeded rapidly through a vast range of painting styles, ranging from Dada-like collages and surrealistic motifs to primitive art, dream scenes, illusionistic atmospheres, gestural incisions, and even hard-edge abstraction. Over six subsequent decades, he not only produced innovative artists' books, drawings, etchings, installation art, objets trouvés, paintings, public art, sculpture, and theater design, but he actively collected books, fetishes, statues, votives, as well as paintings by Asians, peers, and Spaniards.

Antoni Tàpies, *El meu index*, 1996. Mixed media on canvas, 54,6 x 65,4 x 4,8 cm
21 1/2 x 25 3/4 x 1 7/8 in. © Comissió Tàpies / SABAM Belgium 2019



'A DYNAMIC STATE OF FECUND FREEDOM'

by Sue Spaid

ANTONI TÀPIES



Portrait of Antoni Tàpies in his studio, 1969

Rather than summarize his prolific career, this text highlights aspects of Tàpies' oeuvre that prove especially relevant for today's art world. Eschewing representation, his works furnish real-time experiences with haptic objects, whose mystical elements, everyday icons, and architectural motifs trigger imaginative associations. On this level, he was among the first to consciously render inscrutable signs, preferring his works to remain enigmas on par with Zen koān. In one of his earliest catalogs, French curator Michel Tapié characterized his work as a secret, "existing as an end in itself, whose key is never revealed, maintaining with marvelous clarity a dynamic state of fecund freedom." The Greek cross, Tàpies' signature leitmotif, first surfaced in *Newsprint Cross* (1946-1947), when he created a plus sign from newspaper obituaries. To the ancients, this sign symbolized God. In Tàpies' hands, its meaning is endless. Not only his initial, but it was also his wife Teresa's. Most important, the "T" was the cornerstone of Catalan medieval mystic Ramon Llull's *ars combinatorio*, a system for revealing divine truth. It cannot be coincidental that tapia (Spanish for wall), which served as another "motif, theme, and technique" for six decades, recalls Tàpies.

Fusing sight and touch, Tàpies permanently tagged his tapia all over with graffiti, incisions, scrawls, stitches, and/or staples, thus demonstrating his preference for non-dualistic Eastern philosophies that unite body and mind and treat knowing and doing as simultaneous acts. Time, too, is implicit in these sensuous works whose processes of making (graffage, scars, and stratifications) and time-worn indices (decay, corrosion, fissures, and peelings) are rendered explicit for all to explore firsthand. Like Marcel Duchamp, Tàpies claimed that "The meaning of a work depends on the co-operation of the viewer. Those people who live without inner images, lacking imagination and the necessary sensitivity to generate their own set of mental associations will see nothing at all." That said, he deemed "art one of the last oases of freedom, [since] it still has the capacity to make people think."

A Barcelona inhabitant since birth, Tàpies' shuttered home lay barricaded behind a wall, yet he sought "as much contact with nature as possible," regularly walking in the mountains near his country house in Campins. Keen to challenge knowledge's anthropocentric perspective, his ongoing obsession with "ground" roots human beings in earth and connects them to nonhuman beings. In 1962, Guggenheim curator Lawrence Alloway attributed his paintings' gritty, dusty, craggy surfaces to the "Spanish palette" that evokes "barren, dry, rocky, brown" earth, a generalization the painter quickly repudiated. Alloway alternatively framed them as "city walls, the earth's crust, raked sand gardens in Zen Buddhist temples, [and] archaeological sites." Well aware that Buddhists meditate with "the aid of earth," Tàpies anticipated his paintings' impastoed surfaces facilitating meditation. In fact, he esteemed "meditation [as] a prerequisite of artistic experience. It is also essential to the reception of art: the viewer requires a similar faculty and must be able to activate it at will."

Antoni Tàpies, *Medi-missatge*, 1999. Painting, collage and assemblage on wood, 283 x 283 cm
111 3/8 x 111 3/8 in. © Comissió Tàpies / SABAM Belgium 2019



Portrait of Antoni Tàpies in his studio, 2003

Acutely aware of both medieval Catalan mysticism and Asian philosophy, he envisioned his art having magical powers on par with talisman. "My aim is to transform the painting into a magical object, a kind of talisman with the power to heal by touch." When asked what he most valued and hoped his art might achieve, Tàpies replied "self-knowledge," which hardly seems surprising for such a curious man, whose desire to preserve, protect, and prompt fading memories led him to embed disparate signs from across the ages. For example, he regularly painted four red vertical bars against a yellow background to recall Catalan sovereignty. Perched on the border between literature and art, he viewed his oeuvre as "meta-poetry," and used it to defend valueless things in a world overwhelmed by material abundance. Unafraid to explore death, he noted that Buddhist monks encouraged their pupils "to visit places where death is present, such as slaughterhouses and graveyards," which could explain his interest in newspaper obituaries.

Reflecting on his own life, Tàpies recalled that one of his first purchases was a book of Henri Matisse drawings. And one pencil drawing from 1946 looks remarkably Matissean. Although they couldn't have been more stylistically divergent, both produced works that bear witness to the joys and sorrows of everyday life, which is hardly the case for Tàpies' artistic peers, save perhaps Marcel Broodthaers. On this level, six Tàpies sculptures from 1970 stand out: a stack of 50 dinner plates, three handmade straw brooms adjacent crumpled paper, folded newspapers stacked in a wash basin, a pile of straw overflowing a desk, a circular spray of confetti occluding a mirror, and a side table replete with peeling paint. An inveterate archivist, he chronicled materials used and themes explored. One millennial painting *Medi-missatge* ("Medium Message") inventories numerous repeat icons: stretcher bars, crosses, dirt, newsprint, glue, objects, staples and stitches, thus framing his own artistic practice as part and parcel of every day life.

These days, neuroscientists test people's physiological responses to actual artworks. I highly recommend Tàpies' tremendous talismans be included in such experiments, so that scientists can assess whether haptic properties really do engender freedom, have healing powers, facilitate meditation, and unite human and nonhuman beings, as he anticipated sixty years ago.

Antoni Tàpies, *Creu de paper de diari (Newsprint Cross)*, 1946-47. Collage and watercolor on paper, 40 x 31 cm - 15 3/4 x 12 1/4 in. © Fundació Antoni Tàpies / SABAM Belgium 2019. Origin of the image: VEGAP Image Bank



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Portrait of Antoni Tàpies in his studio, 1959

