

# ANTONI TÀPIES in the Suñol Soler Collection

The collection of nine works by Antoni Tàpies present in the Suñol Soler Collection offers a representative glimpse into the artistic journey of the renowned Catalan painter. Born in Barcelona in 1923 and passing away in the same city in 2012, Tàpies was the most significant Catalan painter of the post-war generation, with the greatest international impact. His work was pivotal throughout every stage of his career: from his debut with the Dau al Set group, to his international breakthrough with informalist art, the politically engaged works of the 1970s, and his later years marked by international recognition (such as the Golden Lion at the 1992 Venice Biennale), the creation of the Fundació Antoni Tàpies and controversial public works like *Homenatge a Picasso* (Tribute to Picasso, 1993) and the *Mitjó* (Sock) project (1991).

Following in the footsteps of his great reference point, Joan Miró, Tàpies considered himself the heir to the model of the avant-garde, socially committed artist. His work avoided aesthetic decoration, favouring a radical and humanistic approach. He focused on the marginal elements of existence – walls, domestic objects – and elevated them to their highest artistic and spiritual expression.

The first Tàpies work in the Suñol Soler Collection, *Peinture* (Painting, 1955), dates from the year he first publicly displayed his material and informalist paintings. Influenced by the masters of American and European abstraction, Tàpies withdrew into a profound state of introspection (which he called those “forty days in the desert”) where he definitively moved away from the dreamlike figuration that characterised his early work. He moved towards a personal, expressive abstraction composed of sand, incisions, spontaneous signs and universal symbols on mural-like backgrounds evoking the grey, weathered urban walls of the dictatorship. The title *Peinture* clearly reflects his connection to France, where he first gained international recognition for his informal paintings at Galerie Stadler – led by the art critic and informalist ideologue Michel Tapié – after having exhibited at the 2nd Hispano-American Art Exhibition in Barcelona.

*Pintura grisa* (Grey Painting, 1957) dates from the same period in which Tàpies won the 10th Lissone Painting Prize in Milan and the UNESCO David Bright Foundation Prize (29th Venice Biennale), cementing his position as a major figure in international painting. *Pintura Grisa* and *Composició amb sorra blanca* (Composition with White Sand, 1958) represent two key aspects of his early informalist period: the former emphasises the concentration of expressive force at the centre of the pictorial space, with scratches and accidents in the material; the latter, on the other hand, highlights his more open and suggestive side, stimulating the viewer’s imagination through the irregularities and subtle variations of the wall stain, with a single incision – both straight and spontaneous – that cuts across the work like a vast, tectonic horizon.

*Ocre amb cinc entallats* (Ochre with Five Notches, 1964) is a representative work from Tàpies' period of object transformation in the mid-1960s. At this time, the artist began incorporating everyday objects into his informal works, blending them spontaneously. His vision of realism expanded, viewing it not as a mimetic imitation of reality but as a transformation of the real world through objects, filtered through his humanistic and committed gaze. In this work, the incorporation of five humble carved wooden pieces – plastically transformed and arranged as if they were matchsticks on an immense desert – serves as a metaphor for the subversive power of the most insignificant everyday objects on the world around them. Consistent with the message inherent in the work, this piece was auctioned in 2020, with the funds raised allocated to philanthropic and research projects related to COVID-19, organised by the Fundació Glòria Soler.

In the work *Oval de feltre* (Felt Oval, 1976), the felt fabric's structure is fundamental: humble and domestic, common in the clothes and carpets of any post-war home. Tàpies is drawn to it because of the irregular qualities of its surface and the way it highlights the accidental stains of dirt. The felt is contained within an oval shape, also favoured by the artist (see *Peinture*, 1955) for the humanistic dimension it imparts: an anti-Cartesian form, linked to the natural movement of biology, humanity and the universe. On the other hand, at times the painter places more regular shapes at the edges of the work, decentralising regularity as a subtle critical metaphor against the Cartesian principles of the West, as Tàpies suggests in the small but delightful cardboard piece *Línia negra a l'angle* (Black Line in the Corner), 1986.

Tàpies is a deeply humanistic creator, and the mark of humanity always appears in his work. It is commonly expressed through the human imprint, but also through fragments of human bodies, which he alters to communicate deep and often ambiguous messages. In the graphic series *Les Doigts* (The Fingers, 1976), he places two fragments of a finger, which, when facing each other, contain the foundation of open and uncertain human knowledge, symbolised by mathematical figures that both affirm and negate themselves, giving the constructive affirmation and critical negation the same value. In *Peu i vernís* (Foot and Varnish, 1985), created with a technique highly favoured by the artist during the 1980s for its fluid qualities (paint diluted with varnish), the painter places a firm foot – immense but extraordinarily well-proportioned – upon the paper, accompanied by a cross, in a harsh (flesh and spirit) and suggestive contrast, also used in the famous public sculpture project Mitjó.

The Suñol Soler Collection includes two sculptures by Tàpies, a medium he began exploring later in his career, coinciding with public sculpture projects such as *Homenatge a Picasso* (1983) and *Núvol i*

*cadira* (Cloud and Chair, 1990). Among the studio works, *La butaca* (The Armchair, 1987), is one of the most famous: the armchair as a space of tension, a symbol both of bourgeois comfort and a corner for reflection and enlightenment. Cognitive symbols – the letter alpha, the arrow, the cross – are spontaneously inscribed on the surface of bronze; they appear here in a similar way to the sculpture *Càntir i bota* (Pitcher and Boot), also from 1987. In this work, Tàpies uses a popular object like the pitcher, which the artist treats as a relic, being crushed by a boot that could belong, indistinctly, to either a hiker or a worker. The boot contrasts with the pitcher in its active meaning – work, ascension and progress – compared to an age-old object that evokes tradition, craftsmanship, nourishment and celebration. The work reminds us of the words of Walter Benjamin, who said that progress is often a blind angel rapidly advancing into the future, leaving behind innocent victims of a culture built over centuries of existence.

**Albert Mercadé**



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