

ANTONI TÀPIES

Antoni Tàpies was born in Barcelona in 1923. During a long convalescence from a lung disease he began his first experiments with art. He spent an increasing amount of time on drawing and painting and ended up abandoning his study of the law to devote himself fully to art. By the 1940s, he was exhibiting his works.

Tàpies shared a general sensibility which affected artists on both sides of the Atlantic after the second World War and the dropping of the atomic bomb and soon expressed an interest in matter—earth, dust, atoms and particles—which involved the use of materials foreign to academic artistic expression and experiments with new techniques. The matter paintings make up a substantial part of his work. Tàpies believed that the notion of matter must also be understood from the point of view of medieval mysticism as magic, mimesis and alchemy.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Tàpies created a series of images, usually taken from his immediate environment, which would appear in the different stages of his evolution. Often a single image would have a series of differentiated meanings superimposed on one another. His message focused on the revaluation of what is regarded as low, repulsive material (it is not by chance that he often chose subjects traditionally held to be disagreeable or fetishist, such as a defecating anus, a discarded shoe, an armpit or a foot).

Moreover, Tàpies' work always absorbed the political and social events of the time. In the late 1960s and early 1970s his political commitment in opposition to the dictatorship of Spain deepened and the works from that period have a marked character of denunciation and protest. Coinciding with the flowering of *arte povera* in Europe and post-minimalism in the United States, he worked more with objects, not showing them as they were but stamping them with his own seal and incorporating them into his language. In the early 1980s, once democracy had returned to Spain, his interest in canvas as a support took on renewed strength. At that time he produced works with foam rubber or a spray technique. He used varnishes and created objects and sculptures in refractory clay or bronze, while remaining active in the field of graphic art. In the later years of the decade he seemed to have a heightened interest in Eastern culture, a concern which had been incubating since the post-war years and which increasingly became a fundamental philosophical influence on his work because of its emphasis on what is material, the identity between man and nature and a rejection of the dualism of our society. He was also drawn by a new generation of scientists, who helped to provide a vision of the universe which understands matter as a whole in constant change and formation.

The works of his last years are, most of all, a reflection on pain—both physical and spiritual — understood as an integral part of life. Influenced by Buddhist thought, Tàpies believed that a better knowledge of pain allows us to soften its effects and therefore improve our quality of life. The passage of time, which was always a constant in his work, now took on fresh nuances when lived as a personal experience which brought greater self-knowledge and a clearer understanding of the world around him. In his final years he consolidated an artistic language which visually conveys both his conception of art and certain philosophical concerns which have been renewed over the years. His artistic practice was still open to the brutality of the present while offering a form which, despite its ductility, remained faithful to its origins. And so the works of his last few years were not only fully contemporary, they were also a record of his own past.