



Antoni Tàpies

Black with curves 1959

Antoni Tàpies

Spanish 1923–

Black with curves (1959)

cement and pigment on canvas

65.5 x 100.2 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Felton Bequest, 1961 (844-5)

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Antoni Tàpies is a Spanish Catalan painter. In 1943, while the Second World War still raged, Tàpies abandoned his study of the law to become a self-taught Surrealist painter. Tàpies was also inspired by the Dada movement of the First World War, in which political protest was expressed through spontaneous gestures. In 1948 Tàpies helped to found a postwar movement in Spain known as Dau-al-Set, which combined Surrealism and Dadaism?

Tàpies moved to Paris in the early 1950s where he joined the avant-garde. He began incorporating unconventional materials, such as clay and marble dust, into his paintings to produce a unique hybrid of painting and sculpture. Tàpies also liked to use other materials of little or no value such as string, rags and straw. In the 1970s he even began to include parts of furniture in his painting. Other European artists at the time were also using unconventional materials to question the traditional values placed on art. In Italy in the 1970s the movement became known as Arte Povera.

Tàpies has always sought to make his paintings as solid as the world around him. In *Black with curves* Tàpies plastered his canvas with heavily textured dark cement, resembling gritty lava, into which he incised spontaneous marks reminiscent of primitive writing. The aesthetic power of this work resides in the poetic contrast between the crude, black surface layer and the delicate fish-scale markings gouged into it.

In France, where Tàpies spent much time, this spontaneous approach, which exploits accidental effects such as blotches of colour and texture, was called Tachisme. The gestural impulse in his work also related to the American movement, Abstract Expressionism. For Tàpies, the process of creation is of primary importance. At the same time, Tàpies remains aware of the effect that his finished works have on audiences. Whereas some works are intended to be reassuring and meditative, through their use of humble and familiar materials, others are not. Tàpies's occasionally savage markings on his canvases have been interpreted as the artist's personal response to the sufferings inflicted on the Catalan people by the Spanish dictator General Franco. In this sense, Tàpies's work, like that of Picasso, shows a concern for the everyday plight of the Spanish people in the twentieth century.

Sophie Matthiesson

Antoni Tàpies

Español 1923–

Negro con curvas (1959)

Cemento y pigmento sobre lienzo

65,5 x 100,2 cm

Galería Nacional de Victoria, Melbourne

Legado Felton, 1961 (844-5)

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Antoni Tàpies es un pintor español nacido en Cataluña. En 1943, en plena Segunda Guerra Mundial abandonó sus estudios de Derecho para convertirse en un pintor surrealista autodidacta. Tàpies se inspiró en el movimiento dadá de la Primera Guerra Mundial, que, con gestos espontáneos, expresaba la protesta política. En 1948 Tàpies contribuyó a la fundación del movimiento español de la postguerra llamado Dau al Set, que combina el dadaísmo y el surrealismo.

Tàpies se trasladó a París a principio de los años cincuenta y allí se unió a los artistas de la vanguardia. Comenzó a utilizar en sus obras materiales nuevos como el barro y el mármol, creando un producto híbrido de pintura y escultura. A Tàpies también le gustaba utilizar otros materiales pobres como cuerdas, trapos y paja. En la década de los 70 empezó, incluso, a incorporar en su obra fragmentos de muebles. Otros artistas europeos de la época utilizaban también materiales poco convencionales en un intento de cuestionar los valores tradicionales asociados con el arte. En Italia, en los años setenta, este movimiento vino a llamarse arte povera.

Tàpies siempre ha aspirado a hacer sus pinturas tan sólidas como el mundo que le rodea. En *Negro con curvas*, de 1959, Tàpies cubre el lienzo con una capa pesada de cemento oscuro, que semeja lava arenosa, e incrusta en ella marcas espontáneas con reminiscencias de escrituras primitivas. El poder estético de la obra reside en el contraste poético entre la cruda y oscura capa y la delicadeza de las incisiones incrustadas, que casi parecen escamas de pez.

En Francia, donde Tàpies pasó mucho tiempo, este estilo espontáneo, que explota los efectos accidentales de manchas de color y textura, fue bautizado con el nombre de tachisme. El impulso gestual de su obra está también relacionado con el expresionismo abstracto americano.

Para Tàpies el proceso de creación es de primordial importancia, pero, a la vez, es consciente del efecto que la obra, ya finalizada, produce en el espectador. Mientras que algunas obras intentan ser tranquilas y reflexivas mediante el uso de materiales humildes y familiares, otras no lo son. Las furiosas marcas que ocasionalmente aparecen en sus lienzos han sido interpretadas como la respuesta del artista al sufrimiento del pueblo catalán bajo la dictadura del General Franco. En este sentido, la obra de Tàpies, como la de Picasso, muestra una preocupación por las dificultades de la vida diaria del pueblo español en el siglo XX.

Thinking and discussing before the visit

- What major changes have occurred in art from the late nineteenth century onwards? Consider artists' intentions, techniques, materials, subject matter and the impact of new technologies.
- What factors precipitated these changes?
- Can art be anything? Debate this question in pairs and then as a class.
- Does it matter if the viewer's interpretation of a work of art differs from the artist's original intention? Discuss.
- Using libraries and the internet, research and discuss the work of Spanish and Latin American artists from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Lucio Fontana (1899–1968) from Argentina

www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_md_47_1.html

Antonio Saura (1930–1998) from Spain

www.antoniosaura.org

Jesús-Rafael Soto (1923–2005) from Venezuela

www.jr-soto.com/fset_intro.html

Gallery visit activities

- What are your first thoughts when you look at this painting?
- How does it make you feel? What does it make you wonder?
- What shapes can you see?
- If you believe the shapes contribute to the meaning of the work, what might they symbolise?
- How does the repeated shape of the curve vary? What might this signify?
- How might the artist have made the lines and marks?
- What materials has the artist used to create the surface texture?
- Find evocative words to describe the character of the textural surface. What does it remind you of?
- How many different ways could you describe the blacks and greys in the painting? Like volcanic rock or charred wood for example.
- Which art element – line, shape, texture, colour – do you believe is most important in this work and why?

What factors in your opinion determine a great work of art? Justify your answer with reference to a work from any age that you believe meets these criteria.

'Sometimes people have the idea that art should be highly refined. But I always believed that one could make art out of simple, humble things ... Small things can be transcendental. They can change our way of looking at the world. I think it's important to make art out of almost anything.'

– Tàpies

from Martin Gayford, 'Earth to eternity', Telegraph, 25 March 2006.

Gallery visit activities, continued

Tàpies is well known for his distinctive 'matter' (or *matière*) paintings related to Art Informel, a movement that focused on the materials of art-making and took its inspiration from unsophisticated, everyday sights such as graffiti, stained walls and rags. He is fascinated by and explores the magical qualities of matter, which can transform from one state to another.

The artist has stated that his work is intended to reveal the unity of all things. His use of raw 'matter' such as soil, clay and sand in his paintings symbolises that humankind is also matter in a constant state of change. He hopes to inspire the viewer to scratch below the surface of everyday existence and reflect on the idea that they too are part of the mysterious unity that links the entire universe.

- How has this knowledge of the artist and his intention enriched or detracted from your appreciation and understanding of the painting?
- In pairs and then as a group, discuss what arguments you would use to convince a sceptical viewer that this painting is a great work of art that deserves to be included in the NGV collection?

Post-visit activities

- Using libraries and the internet, research the life and work of Tàpies.

<http://fundaciotapies.org/site/spip.php?rubrique64>

- Imagine you are writing a short article for a Spanish airline's inflight magazine introducing a forthcoming retrospective exhibition by Tàpies.
- Research the type of writing genre used for articles of this type beforehand. Look at inflight magazines or weekend magazines published by daily newspapers.
- Remember it must be accessible to people who do not have a depth of knowledge about art and may not be regular visitors to art galleries. How could you inspire your readers to visit the exhibition? Consider a catchy title to engage readers initially and which images you would include.
- Tàpies's style has been linked to the work of French artist Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985) and American artist Cy Twombly (born in 1928) who were both involved with the art movement known as Abstract Expressionism. Research this movement and in particular *Blue Poles: Number 11*, 1952, by the American artist Jackson Pollock (1912–1956). This work is in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra (see link below).

<http://nga.gov.au/International/Catalogue/Detail.cfm?IRN=36334&MnuID=2&GallID=1>

Tàpies experimented with a number of raw materials including sand, marble dust, waste paper, string, rags and even soil gathered near his house in the country in Catalonia. Create an abstract expressionist painting. Decide on a theme or message that you would like to communicate and express your ideas in a painting using paint and raw materials.