ANTONI TÀPIES AND RAMON LLULL: TOWARDS A MODERN ART OF COMBINATION

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ABSTRACT

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The works of Spanish artist Antoni Tàpies (1923-2012) draw heavily from the themes of the Spanish Civil War and the Catalan region. These topics have been widely discussed in relation to his art. Scholars also frequently examine the relationship between Tàpies’s work and Eastern thought as a major theme throughout his career. While several commentators have noted the influence of Western medieval mystic Ramon Llull (c. 1232 - c. 1315) on Tàpies’s art, this topic has not been given sustained critical attention. This thesis paper argues that the relationship between Tàpies and Llull is not merely stylistic. A close examination of Tàpies’s writings reveals a deeper metaphysical connection between Tàpies’s methodology as an artist and Llull’s methodology as a theologian. I argue that Tàpies employs Llull’s metaphysical model of the “Art of Combination” in his artwork to produce a deeper meaning for the viewer. I demonstrate this claim by an appeal to Tàpies’s writings as well as a formal analysis of his paintings and prints. Finally, I argue that Tàpies’s use of Llull’s Art of Combination can be situated in Tàpies’s wider system of a secular religion, where art has replaced the social function that religion once filled.
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INTRODUCTION

The works of Spanish artist Antoni Tàpies (1923-2012) draw heavily from the themes of the Spanish Civil War and the Catalan region. These topics have been widely discussed in relation to his art.¹ Scholars also frequently examine the relationship between Tàpies’s work and Eastern thought as a major theme throughout his career.² While several commentators have noted the influence of Western medieval mystic Ramon Llull (c. 1232 - c. 1315) on Tàpies’s art, this topic has not been given sustained critical attention. Youssef Ishaghpour presents Llull as the father of the Catalan region who influenced Tàpies’s work, but he only briefly mentions Llull.³ Manuel Borja-Villel states that the Catalan culture and language, “whose beginnings are associated with the thirteenth-century philosopher and poet Ramon Llull, would become central to the art of Tàpies,” but he does not indicate how Llull specifically influenced Tàpies (except indirectly through the history of the Catalan region).⁴ Finally, Barbara Catoir deals more extensively with the topic, but she focuses exclusively on the stylistic relation between Tàpies’s work and Llull’s diagrams through Tàpies’s interest in medieval art and history.⁵

This thesis paper will argue that the relationship between Tàpies and Llull is not merely

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³ Ishaghpour notes that according to Tàpies a “few words from Llull could … be used to describe some of [Tàpies’s] paintings.” See Youssef Ishaghpour, Antoni Tàpies: Works, Writings, Interviews (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2006), 10.
⁵ See Barbara Catoir, Conversations with Antoni Tàpies, With an Introduction to the Artist's Work (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1991), 14-19.
stylistic. A close examination of Tàpies’s writings reveals a deeper metaphysical connection between Tàpies’s methodology as an artist and Llull’s methodology as a theologian. I will argue that Tàpies employs Llull’s metaphysical model of the “Art of Combination” in his artwork to produce a deeper meaning for the viewer.\(^6\) I will demonstrate this claim by an appeal to Tàpies’s writings as well as a formal analysis of his paintings and prints.\(^7\) Finally, I will argue that Tàpies’s use of Llull’s Art of Combination can be situated in Tàpies’s wider system of a secular religion, where art has replaced the social function that religion once filled.\(^8\)

This investigation makes reference to several images from Tàpies’s oeuvre. Many of these works belong to several series of prints which include “Llull” in their titles. For instance, in 1984, Tàpies created a series of prints, each including Llull’s name in the title, followed by the number of the print (Llull núm I through Llull núm XXXII), and in 1986, he continued this series (Llull núm XXXIII through Llull núm XLVII). Finally, in 1989, he made two additional prints titled Ll-ull I and Ll-ull II. The focus upon the “Llull” prints, as well as selected works from his wider oeuvre, offers a parallel with the investigation of the correlation between Tàpies and Llull. While many critics of Tàpies have focused on his Eastern influences as well as his work in relation to the Spanish Civil War, this thesis elucidates a neglected but central aspect of his work.

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\(^6\) Ramon Llull developed a system called the “Art of Combination” as a tool for his reader to discover truths in God and the world. For this purpose, he composed various mnemonic tools, the main one being a circular diagram with which the reader could combine divine attributes and draw certain truths from these combinations. Llull’s method will be explained and discussed in more detail throughout this paper.

\(^7\) I draw on Tàpies’s writings, dialogues and interviews. These writings consist of his personal memoir titled A Personal Memoir: Fragments for an Autobiography, tr. Josep Miquel Sobrer (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2009), as well as several essays that he wrote throughout his career. The majority of his essays can be found in several volumes of his compiled works: La Pràctica de l’Art (Barcelona: Ariel, 1970); L’Art contra l’Estètica (Barcelona: Ariel, 1970); La Realitat com a Art (Barcelona: Laertes, 1982); Per un Art Modern i Progressista (Barcelona: Empúries, 1985); Art i Espiritualitat (Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona, 1988); Valor de l’Art (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1993); L’Experiència de l’Art (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1996); and L’Art i els Seus Llocs (Madrid: Siruela, 1999).

\(^8\) The majority of Tàpies’s theories regarding art and religion can be found in Valor de l’Art (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1993) as well as in Art i Espiritualitat (Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona, 1988). He also discusses the topic in his interview with Barbara Catoir, and remarks that “God and many religious symbols are nothing more than human projections, and that is it now up to “artists, … poets and philosophers … to depict them.” See Antoni Tàpies in Catoir (1991), 97.
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TÀPIES AND LLULL

Tàpies’s interest in the philosophy of Ramon Llull became foundational to Tàpies’s creative method and way of thinking. Llull was a medieval mystic and evangelist who lived during the thirteenth century. His major contribution to the intellectual field was a system which he called the *ars combinatoria* or “Art of Combination.” This system was a method of persuasion but also a tool for discovering knowledge of the truth. Tàpies’s interest in Llull related deeply to his own life, including his childhood. Tàpies grew up in the Gothic quarter of Barcelona in a district that exemplified the “austerity and gloom of the city, that mysterious, forbidding air emanating from the tall rows of houses in the dark, narrow streets.” Living in this part of the city put him into daily contact with medieval art and architecture which, according to the artist, “constitutes a historical heritage that contemporary artists cannot ignore.” Tàpies considered medieval art to be a clear precursor to modern art. According to him, the style and values of medieval art prefigure modern art, and modern artists should be directly inspired by medieval art.

This idea might seem strange to some contemporary artists, but it could be explained by the fact that the region of Catalonia “did not fully experience the Renaissance ... but passed from medieval culture to Modernism.” In this sense, Tàpies experienced the medieval period in a very personal and contemporary way. He drew heavily upon the past while still being concerned with current events, and for him, the present cannot be isolated from previous time periods.

Tàpies’s Catholicism from his childhood also deeply influenced his work and brought

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9 “Art” in this context is not used in the sense of “fine art.” Llull defines it as a “plan established for knowing the purpose of something about which one desires knowledge.” See Ramon Llull, *Doctrina pueril* (73.1), quoted by Mark Johnston in *The Evangelical Rhetoric of Ramon Llull: Lay Learning and Piety in the Christian West around 1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 21.
10 Catoir (1991), 33.
12 Ibid., 115. Translation mine.
him to his interest in Llull. His mother was a devout Catholic, and Tàpies attended Catholic school as a child. His memories of this time are not overwhelmingly positive, and eventually he abandoned his belief in God and distanced himself from Catholicism.\(^{14}\) However, this belief system made a deep impression on him. For example, consider the following childhood memory:

[I] recall a macabre scene the nuns had us enact from time to time. They made us boys file before a straw-filled heart, representing the Sacred Heart of Jesus, into which the nuns had previously stuck dozens of large wooden needles, which we had to remove one at a time with our delicate little fingers. That ritual left a great impression on me and, at my grandfather’s, I re-enacted it with pins stuck in the little red pincushions of an old sewing kit.\(^{15}\)

His memory of this situation becomes significant when considering his attention to the ritualistic processes arising from this ceremony. As a child, Tàpies had already sensed the symbolic nature of certain religious practices, and he internalized them in a deeply personal way that reemerged at times in his later works and writings.

But Tàpies was not simply interested in the ritualistic and symbolic aspect of religion. Indeed, he was also fascinated by mysticism and magic. He stated that he became “strongly attracted to motifs which are connected with the occult, with the notion of secrecy, motifs which are difficult to recognize and grasp.”\(^{16}\) This theme of secrecy and magic, this “world of the mystic” is, according to him, “better revealed through plastic images.”\(^{17}\) In several early self-portraits, Tàpies portrayed himself as a magician or alchemist. This connection for him revealed

\(^{14}\) In his memoir, Tàpies spoke of his mother’s devotion to the Catholic faith, and in his assessment of her life, he concluded that her belief transformed her into a deeply fearful and guilt-ridden individual. He also felt this guilt throughout his childhood, and judged it to be an unhealthy state of mind in which to live. See Tàpies (2009), 49-50, 62.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^{16}\) Tàpies in Catoir (1991), 75.

itself to be more than stylistic, since he saw artists as the modern analog of “saints, prophets, mystics and sorcerers.” He believed artists fulfill the same social role as gatekeepers and communicators of mystical and hidden knowledge.

*Self-Portrait* from 1947 (Figure 1), is one of several images in which Tàpies portrayed himself as an alchemist. In this image, he surrounded himself with markings resembling alchemical symbols. He also included certain tools associated with arcane knowledge, such as a chalice containing a globe in which he inscribed his own initials, A and T. The halo around his head indicates a reference to sainthood, and the whole self-portrait centers around the artist’s eyes, from which the “lines of the artist’s spiritual cosmos are seen as emanating.” Tàpies identified personally with the alchemist and the mystic, and he perceived this role as fitting for all true artists.

Tàpies discovered Llull while investigating the history of Spain, and in particular the history of the Catalan region. He stated: “The fact that Llull was one of the international figures of Catalan thought drew me to his writings very early on.” Llull also wrote in many languages, including his native tongue of Catalan, and a major theme throughout Tàpies’s work and life was to promote the region of Catalonia and to revive the language and culture. Tàpies wrote exclusively in Catalan, and the titles of his artworks follow this dialect.

Tàpies was not the only modern artist to be inspired by Llull: André Breton, the leader of

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19 Tàpies created an adjoining work to this one, also titled *Self-Portrait* from 1947, in which he portrayed himself once again as a magician or alchemist. Additionally, in 1948, another work also titled *Self-Portrait* makes use of similar imagery including a chalice and symbols which look alchemical.

20 Although the symbols that appear in this image are not historical alchemical symbols, they bear a striking resemblance to them. For example, the symbol in the top right corner (just above Tàpies’s head) resembles , the symbol for “catinus,” and the one on his left shoulder as well as the one right above share a structure with the symbols for “argentums,” . See *Medicinisch-Chymisch- und Alchemistisches Oraculum* (Ulm, 1755). Also, many of the symbols in the work contain a triangle with a similar structure to , the symbol for “creufet.” See Nicolas Le Fevre *Traicté de la chymie* (1663), Feuillet 153.


22 Antoni Tàpies in Manuel Borja-Villel (1992), 17.
the Surrealist movement, was also deeply interested in Llull. This is significant because Tàpies’s first great artistic influence was that of the Surrealists, and he stated: “My interest [in Llull] became stronger ... when I realized that the Surrealists quoted him.”

Tàpies owned several volumes of Llull’s works, and in an interview with Manuel Borja-Villel, Tàpies stated: “I myself collected books by Llull; I have some first editions. I always try to acquire illustrated ones. Many of Llull’s books include diagrams, whose plastic values immediately attracted me.” Tàpies’s collection of first editions of Llull's writings, combined with his statement regarding the inspiration he drew from the diagrams in these books, shows his commitment to the medieval mystic.

A striking similarity between Tàpies and Llull is that both of their lives were marked by visions as a guiding principle for the future. At every major junction in his life, Llull was apparently presented with a vision, and he recounted one example of this phenomenon in his Vita coaeetanea (Contemporary Life), in which:

[Llull] looked to his right and saw our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross, as if suspended in mid-air ... And thus at last he understood with certainty that God wanted him, Ramon, to abandon the world and dedicate himself totally to the service of Christ ... While turning over these doleful thoughts in his mind, suddenly ... a certain impetuous and all encompassing notion entered his heart: that later on he would have to write a book, the best in the world, against the errors of unbelievers.

According to Llull’s story, these visions helped him change his ways or make major decisions. Similarly, Tàpies made the decision to become an artist after a long illness, during which he

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23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
experienced visions. He noted: “It was these visions which steered me towards art [and I] suddenly realized that I could express the same visions through pictures.” Although Tàpies may not have been aware of this phase in Llull’s life, both claimed to have experienced visions which shaped the outcome of their respective careers.

Barbara Catoir, the only scholar who deals in any detail with the influence of Llull on Tàpies, ends the extent of the connection between the two men here. She notes Tàpies’s interest in Llull as an important historical figure for him, as well as a stylistic inspiration for his mystical and magical works. She also examines Tàpies’s interest in alchemy and mysticism, and Llull’s visual influence on Tàpies in the form of diagrams and combinations of letters in Tàpies’s work. However, she does not explore theoretical and methodological influences of Llull on Tàpies.

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28 Catoir gives several visual examples of Tàpies’s incorporation of Llull’s diagrams in his work, such as in Triangle and Letters from 1975, and Composition from 1977. See Catoir (1991), 17-18. She also mentions Tàpies’s inclusion of Llull’s name in the painting Three R’s from 1975. See Catoir (1991), 19.
LLULL’S ART OF COMBINATION

The features that connect Tàpies and Llull are not simply accidental historical similarities. Rather, Tàpies’s work and writings reflect a deeply intentional connection to Llull’s system of thought. Tàpies noted that Llull’s diagrams often came to be “reflected in [his] art works” and that Llull’s thoughts on art were “extremely interesting and similar to a lot of [Tàpies’s own] intuitions.” As was previously mentioned, Llull’s religious devotion began with a vision of Christ on the cross. The symbol of the cross appeared as an extremely important theme for him, since through this vision, Llull became aware of his life’s work, which would be to “accept dying for Christ in converting the unbelievers to His service; to write the [ars combinatoria] ... and to procure the establishment of monasteries where various languages could be learned.” Llull’s main intention was to develop a system of communication through which he could establish truths foundational to both Islam to Christianity. This system would provide common ground on which both religions could dialogue.

Llull’s system proposed to demonstrate “how all knowledge and being reveals divine truth.” It begins with the premise that the foundational principles of the universe are found in God’s attributes. In his Art of Combination, Llull defined nine Absolute Principles derived from God’s divine attributes, and nine Relative Principles describing the “participation and mutual disposition of all created beings among themselves.” He assigned a letter to each of these Absolute Principles, using nine letters from the alphabet: B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I and K. He also

29 Tàpies in Borja-Villel (1992), 17.
30 Llull in Bonner (2010), 37.
32 Johnston (1996), 12.
34 There does not seem to be a reason for the omission of the letter “J.”
used the same letters for the Relative Principles, but assigned different meaning to them than the Absolute Principles. The letter “A” he reserved to indicate the totality of the nine Absolute Principles which are foundational to his *ars* (see Figure 2). Although the Absolute and Relative Principles constitute his primary categories, Llull also assigned letters to other categories (nine in all), such as his “Subjects,” which form the different levels of existence, and “Rules,” which provide the hermeneutic questions upon which a preacher can draw to engage an audience.\(^{35}\)

In order to produce meaning, Llull placed these letters in various mnemonic figures, the most common being a circular diagram with several rings, with each ring containing different variations of the nine letters of the Absolute and Relative Principles, and possibly letters from the other nine categories (depending on the number of rings included in the diagram). Each of these rings can be rotated to combine the different categories. For example, in Figure 3, each of the three rings refers to different meanings of the letters employed. In itself, the *ars* remains inert and it requires the active engagement of the reader to function properly. By rotating the wheel in different ways, the reader combines the letters, forming different associations which Llull believed would lead the reader to various truths.

The particular diagram in Figure 3 does not indicate what category each ring belongs to, but for the sake of explanation, it can be assumed that the outer ring corresponds to Absolute Principles, the middle ring to Relative Principles and the inner ring to Rules. If the combination consists of “E” on the outer ring, “G” on the middle ring and “B” on the central ring, the reader refers herself to the table which Llull provided in his *Ars Magna* (see Figure 4).\(^{36}\) The Absolute Principle “E” corresponds to “Power,” the Relative Principle “G” refers to “End,” and the Subject “B” signifies “Whether?” The reader then combines the various elements - here “Power,”

\(^{35}\) Mark Johnson offers a more thorough investigation of these nine additional categories in Johnson (1996), 12.  
“End,” and “Whether?” - and deduces truths by thinking about these concepts combined. For example, “Does the power of God have an end?” The eventual answer for Llull would be no. God is eternal, and therefore has no end. This is just one combination which results from this system.

For Llull, these “groups of two or more letters ... must constitute viable formulations of all possible philosophical and theological propositions, because the Absolute Principles and the other categories that the letters symbolized are indisputably true and necessary.” By investigating the resulting combinations of two or more truths, one will obtain the results of other truths. Llull’s system has as its goal to investigate all the truths through their combination.

The letter “T” also holds a foundational position in Llull’s system. Figure T (see Figure 5), one of the most important figures in Llull’s ars, refers to the “triad of difference, concordance, and contrariety.” The use of multiple triangles at the center of the diagram indicates further relationships between particular elements in the wheel. In a remarkable parallel, “A” and “T” are the most important letters employed in the diagrams of Llull’s Art of Combination, and Tàpies also frequently employed these letters in his artwork. Additionally, “A” and “T” are, of course, Antoni Tàpies’s own initials, and as will be discussed further in the paper, he relied heavily on this relation between his name and the two primary letters of Llull’s ars in his own work.

Llull wanted his ars to be a tool for the preacher, who “will be able to impress well, movingly, and clearly glorious virtues and customs upon the listeners.” And the listeners too

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37 Ibid., 13-14. Although Llull intends for his system to account for an infinity of possibilities, this is not the case in actuality, since it is mathematically impossible for a finite number of combinations to yield an infinite number of possibilities.

38 Anthony Bonner, The Art and Logic of Ramon Llull: A User’s Guide (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 24. According to Bonner, the foundation of Llull’s Art begins with the “basic concepts of the Art [which are] Figure A [and] Figure T.” See Bonner (2007), 22.

“will be able to adopt virtues easily, and remove and extirpate vice from themselves, by knowing how virtues increase and decrease.”

Truth does not come from the system itself, rather it comes out of the reader’s own interpretation of the combinations. The mechanics of the *ars combinatoria* do “nothing more than to collate the values symbolized by the letters combined. The Lullian artist must then construct an argument about those values that correctly relates them.”

To summarize, through the combination of elements in the diagrams, Llull’s *ars* serves as a tool that points the reader toward a higher truth.

Llull wanted his audience to understand truths through his work and he relied on a Neoplatonist conception of Reality to do this. Neoplatonism developed out of the philosophical system of the Greek philosopher Plato (429-347 BCE) who based his thought on the idea that ultimate reality is made up of Forms, which are “permanent, unchanging, abstract entities, graspable by discerning minds.” Neoplatonism emerged in the thought of Plotinus (204/5-270 CE) and his metaphysics closely resemble the system Llull presented in his own thought.

Plotinus determined that three basic principles exist in the world: the One, the Intellect and the Soul. He presented the One (similar to Plato’s Good) as the Godhead from which everything proceeds. The Intellect he characterized as the “locus of the full array of Platonic Forms, those eternal and immutable entities.” Finally, the Soul allows us to contemplate the One through the

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40 Ibid.
41 It may be helpful here to remember that, for Llull, the *ars* was mainly designed as a preaching tool to convert the “infidels.”
43 Johnston offers an extensive discussion of Llull’s Neoplatonism in relation to Augustine in *The Evangelical Rhetoric of Ramon Llull* (1996). This resource will be essential for any further discussion of the matter.
45 Plotinus is considered the founder of Neoplatonism, even though he considered himself a Platonist. The distinction that we now make between Platonism and Neoplatonism is a recent one. See Lloyd Gerson, “Plotinus,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008), Edward Zalta, ed. Last modified Fall 2008, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/plotinus/.
46 Ibid.
Forms. The Soul can ascend from the dimmer regions toward the “light,” through its contemplation of the One. In this way, the individual can experience the reality of the Forms.

This system has clear parallels with Llull’s method, in which the audience can know truths by combining elements that are found in the world.

Neoplatonism came to be synthesized with Christianity through two main thinkers: Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) and an anonymous author typically identified as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (5th-6th century CE). According to Dionysius, “few human beings have the ability to contemplate the intelligible names in their purity,” and because of this, “most of us require the names to be incarnated in visible things before we can understand them.” For this reason, the Church has developed rites, since the monks and laity “require a visible trigger—the symbol—to stimulate their intelligible contemplation,” and through these rites, they are able to “receive the intelligible truth.” Llull’s system of the *ars combinatoria* offers its figures as the “visible triggers” by which the reader can access this “intelligible truth.”

Llull developed a hierarchical system in which every being relies on God, and all things lead to the truth of God. In Llull’s words, “as every creature is a likeness of God, just as through the *Bonitas* [Goodness] of God every *Bonitas* is revealed, so through the *Veritas* [Truth] of God is revealed every *Veritas*.” Through his *ars*, Llull arranged the combination of elements for the purpose of allowing his audience to understand the truths found in the person of God. The

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47 Following Plato’s model of the Good as analogically comparable to the sun, Frederick Copleston offers a helpful picture to illustrate Plotinus’s system: “Plotinus pictures light as proceeding from the center and passing outwards, growing gradually dimmer, until it shades off into that total darkness which is matter-in-itself, conceived as the privation of light. [Matter] proceeds from the One (ultimately), in the sense that it becomes a factor in creation only through the process of emanation from the One; but in itself, at its lowest limit, it forms the lowest stage of the universe and is the antithesis to the One.” See Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Volume I: Greece and Rome: From Pre-Socratics to Plotinus* (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1993), 469.


49 Ibid.

creation of this system became possible because the “higher spiritual level of existence orders a lower corporeal level.”

Thus, Llull’s system relies on the Neoplatonist tradition in which all that exists can be seen as existing on a spectrum with God (or the Good or the One) at the highest level, in order to explain how his audience can experience God through the combination of elements which are found in God’s divine attributes.

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TÀPIES AND THE ART OF COMBINATION

Llull’s theories and methods significantly guided Tàpies’s thoughts, and in turn Llull’s system came to be reflected visually as well as intellectually in Tàpies’s oeuvre. When discussing his own intellectual background, Tàpies revealed that the “main impression [he] kept from … the history of philosophy… came from thinkers who questioned the validity of thought,” and he listed “Plato and his myth of the cave wherein we only see shadows of authentic reality” as the first example.\textsuperscript{52} Tàpies discussed Llull alongside Plotinus and Porphyry, and claimed that the ideas contained in these thinkers’ writings “fitted [his] ideas like a glove,” since these ideas explained the “ultimate truth in life.”\textsuperscript{53} As with the earlier philosophers, both Llull and Tàpies sought to achieve knowledge of this Reality with their various philosophical and artistic practices.

In his writings, Tàpies repeatedly expressed the desire that his artwork guide the viewer to an experience of the essence of a deeper reality. When Tàpies used the term “reality,” he did not refer to ordinary or everyday experience. Rather, he often used terms such as “total reality” and “ultimate reality,” which refer to the essence of things, to a deeper truth that lies beneath our everyday experiences.\textsuperscript{54} In order to make this distinction, the capitalized term “Reality” appears in this thesis to signify this deeper essence.

Tàpies stated that “all great artists want to uncover the authentic nature of things, the functioning of authentic reality … everyone has within him the capacity to know reality. The artist simply helps awaken this capacity.”\textsuperscript{55} Through his art, Tàpies wanted to “be in touch with a reality which lies beneath the surface of things … things which are almost like visions or mystical

\textsuperscript{52} Tàpies (2009), 127-128.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 158.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 261.
revelations.”

Similarly, Llull’s system of the Art of Combination had as its primary purpose to direct the reader to deeper truths by investigating God’s divine attributes.

Tàpies’s writings are replete with references to combination as a tool for the viewer to explore the nature of Reality. He considered the alchemical and mystical investigation of Reality to be very near his own goals, and he believed the point of alchemy was (historically) to “attempt to make the spectator know and feel a total reality, the ultimate reality.”

This Reality, for him, comes about with the “coincidence of opposites,” and the “artist and the poet [are] most suited to bring [this coincidence] about.” This reference to a “coincidence of opposites” illustrates part of the role that Llull’s Art of Combination played in guiding Tàpies’s artistic methodology.

Tàpies purposefully executed a series of paintings “pregnant with allusions to the combination of elements” beginning in 1953 with the painting *El Foc Interior (The Inner Fire)* (Figure 6).

In this work, the darker background forms the torso of a figure, at the center of which a fire burns within a pointed oval. The faded red and rusty tones in this painting, in combination with the title *Inner Fire*, produce an aggressive energy, and the scratch marks throughout the composition introduce a visceral quality to the painting. Tàpies stated that this “trait [of the combination of elements] would become more accented in the following years as it is a kind of declaration of principles with this background: the universe as a whole and humanity are made out of the same elements.”

Although this image does not contain the full method of combination, Tàpies had begun to develop this concept in his work.

In his writings, Tàpies discussed at length the idea of the combination of elements in his paintings, stating that in his visual work, he had a “desire to provide a cosmic theme for

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56 Tàpies in Catoir (1991), 95.
57 Tàpies (2009), 261.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 271.
60 Ibid., 272.
meditation and reflection on the beauty of the *infinite combinations* of the forms and colors of natural materials."\(^{61}\) In the following passage, he showed his interest in using combination as a tool for evoking meaning:

> [Isn’t] this combination of images ... what ultimately confers richness and value to a work of art? Deep down, this means that in painting, however abstract it may seem, every element awakens in us a concrete, even “figurative,” resonance. A red stain will always suggest blood ... everything can express something, even seemingly unimportant details.\(^{62}\)

The combination of various elements in Tàpies’s work allowed him to express ideas through the connotations of each component.

In many of Tàpies’s works, he included the symbol of the cross, which became the most significant and most frequently used element in his paintings. Perhaps this choice of the cross reflected Llull’s thought that “painters painted, drew, or carved no other things than crosses.”\(^{63}\)

Tàpies himself said something very similar:

> All of our artworks are just that: they are attempts to answer this one great question, this unknown, this X, this Tao, this cross, which we find when we reach the limits of knowledge: the great Mystery, through which we have felt the equality and solidarity of all the being of the Universe throughout time.\(^{64}\)

In explaining why he employed the cross as a central symbol in his work, Tàpies stated that “the imagery of the cross and the crucifix … are considered in many cultures to be fundamental symbolic representations of the world” and that “these images allow us to … analyze the

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\(^{61}\) Ibid., 292, my emphasis.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 300.


\(^{64}\) Tàpies (2001), 151. Translation mine.
problem of being and show us ultimate reality.”65 Tàpies did not choose the cross arbitrarily or simply as an aesthetic feature. The cross, or the “X” (or the “T”), for him, symbolized this quest in his work to discover a deeper Reality.

One of Tàpies’s earliest prominent uses of the cross appeared in his work Creu de Paper de Diaria (Newsprint Cross) from 1946-1947 (Figure 7). In this work, several pieces of thin ripped paper surround a cross, which has been torn from a newspaper. The blue and gray background becomes darker behind the central cross, and scratches appear in the bottom portion of the work, exposing the deep blue underpainting. The cross stands out as the focus of this image, since it appears brighter than its surroundings. A closer look at the central cross reveals that it was cut from the obituary section of a newspaper page. The cross could strike the viewer as a sign of redemption, and the obituaries force the viewer to focus on issues surrounding mortality. Borja-Villel asserts that the paper surrounding the cross, “which looks like toilet paper ... tells us of the transcendence of what is humble, of the spirituality of the material.”66 The cross on its own holds various associations for different viewers, but through this particular combination, Tàpies guides the viewer into an invitation to ponder mortality.

In many of his works, Tàpies inserted the letters “A” and “T,” primarily to signify the presence of the artist in his own work. In this sense, “A” and “T” act as a signature for the artist. In Llull núm V (Figure 8), various elements surround the outline of a foot, including an indecipherable formula above the foot, and an unknown script to the left. Tàpies mirrored the foot in this composition through the inclusion of a sock in the top portion of the print, as well as the imprint of a shoe in the background, which overlaps the foot. In this work, the artist marked his presence by the “T” or cross on the foot, and he also included a sideways “A” on the left.

65 Ibid., 141. Translation mine.
portion of the print. Tàpies noted that he felt the need to “impose a certain seal or imprint of the human in [his] work,”67 and that he “adopted the cross as the initial of [his] name, as a distinguishing sign of [his] work.”68 In this context, “A” could stand for “Antoni” and “T” for “Tàpies,” and this group of symbols acts to mark the presence of the artist in this piece.

Few of Tàpies’s works do not incorporate a “T,” a cross or an “X,” since Tàpies employed these symbols as his signature. However, it would be incorrect to conclude that these signs simply function as signatures and nothing else. In his writings, Tàpies suggested some alternate interpretations of the cross:

I am interested in the symbol of the cross because of the great variety of meanings that it evokes: the cross (and also the X) as a sign to mark a place; as a representation of the unknown; as a representation of mystery; as a symbol marking a territory, marking certain places, objects, people or body parts as sacred; as a symbol used to produce a mystical experience, evoke death, namely the death of Christ; as an expression of a paradoxical concept; as a mathematical symbol; as a marking used to erase another image, to express disagreement, to deny.69

“A” and “T” can also “refer to the two main figures of [Llull's] ars,” since Tàpies was familiar with the Lullian system, and as was previously noted, “Figure A” and “Figure T” were pivotal to Llull’s ars.70 “A” and “T” do not have one definite meaning in his work, rather they hold multiple meanings.

In Díptic de Vernís (Varnish Diptych) from 1984 (Figure 9), the cross functions differently than in the two previous images, since it cannot be removed from its sexual context.

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67 Tàpies (2009), 309.
69 Ibid., 143. Translation mine.
In this image, the bottom portion of a female figure depicted in varnish exposes its genitals in a squatting position. The partial figure appears transparent and the legs shrivel at the extremities, disappearing entirely on the right-hand side of the work, replaced by a crude outline of a foot next to the withered leg. In the center, a slanted bold black cross, ending in a tip resembling a finger, either points at a depiction of female genitalia or penetrates the anus of the figure, and presents the cross as a phallic symbol. Tàpies’s frequent use of the “T” or cross as his mark or signature (as it was in *Llull núm V*) gives an additional level of interpretation to this image, since the artist places himself in the position of the phallic element. This combination of sexuality and religion can be related to the long tradition blending sexual and religious experiences.

However, *Díptic de Vernís* does not simply portray a sexual act, since both the representation of the female figure and the placement of the cross act to debase the iconography. The exclusive focus on the lower half of the body as well as the shriveled appearance of the limbs dehumanize the figure in the work. Most importantly, the positioning of the cross as either a sexual indicator or penetrator degrades its status as a religious symbol. The combination of religion and sexuality is not an unusual theme. However the way that this image blends these two elements indicates the lowering of the status of the cross as religious symbol, as well as the elevation of a crude image to the status of art.

In that sense, *Díptic de Vernís* fits into a series of works in which Tàpies sacralized a vulgar or banal representation by pairing it with a cross, placing it on a canvas and making it art. This sacralization of the banal (even the grotesque) reoccurred as a theme throughout Tàpies’s 71

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71 This would not be uncharacteristic of Tàpies, who readily expresses his interest sexual topics, such as Tantric sex, his visit to a brothel when he was younger, and his flirtatious and at times sensual relationship with one of his nannies.

career. In this category of works, considered to be _arte povera_, Tàpies combined everyday unwanted objects or base representations with more elevated themes (such as the symbol of the cross), and in doing so, he gave a new meaning to both subjects. In this particular work, he emphasized this point by including a sock in the upper right-hand corner. The artist “[set] out deliberately to reveal the spirituality that exists in the lowest forms.”

Through this method, Tàpies reminded the viewer that even the simplest objects are important and can lead us to meditate on life, truth, and perhaps even Reality.

In each of these examples, Tàpies incorporated the symbol of the cross, and although the symbol on its own evokes certain meanings to the viewer, these meanings change, depending on what other elements Tàpies combined with them. In these examples, although Tàpies featured the same symbol of the cross, “T,” or “X,” he used the concept of combination to evoke certain meanings to the viewer, and the different combinations change the interpretation of the cross. By making the viewer actively participate in this process of interpretation, Tàpies intended his audience to understand a deeper Reality by creating meaning through the combination of the various elements in the work.

This Reality, however, does not appear directly in the work: it has to be “created by a process of association, in the mind of the viewer.” Although certain materials and images encourage the viewer more readily to make associations, Tàpies did not claim that the actual work encompasses Reality. He believed that the work acts as a sign that points the viewer to Reality, and that its significance emerges in “its role as a springboard that helps us reach knowledge.” Thus, this process by which the viewer experiences Reality relies on the collaboration and full participation of the viewer.

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73 Borja-Villel, “Porta metàl·lica i violí,” http://www.fundaciotapies.org/site/spip.php?article2980
74 Tàpies in Catoir (1991), 105.
THE FUNCTION OF REALITY IN THE WORKS OF TÀPIES

The conceptual framework that Tàpies employed is reminiscent of medieval ways of viewing art. Medieval art relied heavily upon Neoplatonist metaphysics and this becomes relevant when attempting to understand how a medieval viewer would have interacted with medieval works of art. In medieval vision as theorized today, the image served as a tool for the soul to ascend to God. Cynthia Hahn establishes three principal levels based on an Augustinian model of vision, through which the medieval viewer ascended. The first level, “corporeal vision, [consists] of what one sees with the eyes of the body.” The second level called “spiritual vision” comes with the “occurrence of images in dreams or the imagination.” Finally, the third level, and the most sought after level of medieval vision encompasses “intellectual vision [which] occurs exclusively in the highest levels of the mind and is the only site where Augustine admitted the possible perception of divine truths.” This third level can be compared to the goal Tàpies had for his viewer, since in medieval art, the “beauty [of art] was a revelation, to the senses and the intellect alike, of the divine order.” In this way, viewing art granted the medieval viewer the possibility to access divine truths.

Theorists of medieval vision make the distinction between intromission and extramission theories of vision, which play a crucial role in the level of engagement of the medieval viewer.

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77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Hugh Bredin, “Medieval Art Theory,” in Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde, eds., A Companion to Art Theory (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 29. According to Georgia Frank, in medieval vision the work of art did not solely serve to elevate the viewer’s soul to God, it also connected the viewer to past events and acted as a conduit through which the viewer could participate in biblical stories, transforming the viewer into a “spectator at, perhaps even a participant in, an event from the biblical past.” See Georgia Frank, “The Pilgrim’s Gaze in the Age Before Icons,” from Nelson (2000), 100.
80 According to Nelson, the theory of extramission presents vision as the “result of something leaving the eye and traveling to the thing seen and back to the eye,” whereas intromission is the theory by which the “visual rays pass from the object seen to the eyes.” See Robert Nelson, “Introduction: Descartes’s Cow and Other Domestications of the Visual,” in Nelson (2000), 5.
Although these theories present the issue of vision from two distinct perspectives, “all vision in … the Middle Ages was comparatively active.”

In order for the viewer to reap the full benefits of this viewing experience, medieval works of art must be viewed “with faith or they have no meaning at all” and the work “functions only to cue a memory [of the salvific truths] in the faithful.”

The medieval image acts as a “metaphor for the contemplation of the divine” and through the contemplation of the image, the soul can ascend to the contemplation of God. This idea is reminiscent of Dionysius’s theory, in which the laity required a visual trigger in order for their soul to ascend to the higher spiritual realms.

When Tàpies talked about experiencing Reality, he did not simply mean that the viewer would understand the world around him better by viewing the work. Rather he suggested a much deeper experience, and just like in medieval vision, he divided this process into two possible levels:

In order to better explain the role that painting can play on the path to “knowledge,” it will perhaps be useful to be reminded that there are two levels of knowledge. The first is that which is given to us by our senses, perception and reason. This is common knowledge, everyday knowledge … The second level is what some call the “deep consciousness.” This knowledge is experienced through feelings, intuitions, symbolic dreams and mythico-poetic images. It is not connected to the intellect and … it cannot be discussed through language. This second level is an intimate experience, and at its deepest level, it can allow us to experience all things in their primordial essence.

Thus, he believed one can experience Reality at its most basic level, much like the Platonic

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83 Ibid., 184.
84 Tàpies (2001), 38. Translation mine.
Forms, and painting (and other forms of art) can allow us to have these experiences.

Tàpies hoped to achieve the second level of knowledge through the use of certain techniques in his paintings, one of which is the inclusion of “pure” materials. In Creu i R (Cross and R) from 1975 (Figure 10), he did not employ conventional materials. Small shards of stone and sand cover the surface of the wooden board, and on top of this layer, several white strips of linen form part of a grid. Red paint saturates the linen at the top of the work, evoking a blood-soaked bandage. An “R” composed of dark soil lays over the partial grid, and a bold cross in the center reveals the bare wooden background. The partial word “Gat,” another “R,” and an additional cross are carved into the sand. This composition presents a layering of unconventional materials, including dirt, sand and stones.

For Tàpies, every material has a connotation, and he suggested that this aspect was “explored by [him] more than by most artists.” Tàpies tended to avoid certain conventional materials, such as oil paint, because the “quality of regular oil paint already had its connotations,” and he became interested in exploring the possible meanings that other materials may have for the viewer. He believed that certain materials express “a kind of raw material manifesting true nature, the noumenal reality,” which he regarded as the “one and veritable reality of which everything was made.” Tàpies specifically selected this material in Creu i R because of the associations the viewer will make, but also because one small portion of the material comes to represent the greater whole. In this case, one stone, speck of dust or grain of sand represents the totality of that thing (rock, mountain, beach). If we take this concept further, this small stone or speck of dirt does not simply refer to the material itself, but it also represents the “very idea that in a tiny, insignificant piece of clay one could come to see the whole

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85 Tàpies (2009), 290-291.
86 Ibid., 290.
87 Ibid., 173-174.
universe.” Tàpies’s combination of elements does not simply come from the imagery present in the work, since even the choice of material produces meaning.

Tàpies also believed that conventional materials can evoke certain associations, and that these materials were at times underappreciated. In the case of his “Llull” series, all of the images are prints on paper. Even with this conventional surface, Tàpies made a deliberate choice. The use of a plain piece of paper could evoke the concept of a book, which he did not consider to have been “made casually [since] there is a definite decision to choose a kind of paper, a style of type, and a particular format.” It could also evoke a similar concept to his use of sand and marble dust, that “man is not a privileged being, but a part of the universe, that his nature is the same as that of the stars, or of a piece of paper or a leaf.” For him, even typically insignificant elements add meaning to the work.

In Llull núm II (Figure 11) from 1984, Tàpies incorporated this concept by combining several elements, including the features of a face with an imprint of a leaf on its forehead. A pair of closed eyes, lightly depicted by a thin line, sits beneath a bold gestural white wave. The closed eyes, along with a lowercase “a” and the number “8” constitute a rudimentary face. The delicate nature of the closed eyes and the gentle curve of the white wave create a sense of calm in the composition, and these elements welcome thoughts of sleep, meditation or spiritual contemplation. Tàpies’s inclusion of a natural element (the leaf imprint) reinforces his concept that man is a part of the universe, and that “[man’s] nature is the same as that of … a leaf.” Additionally, the title makes reference to Llull, presenting the image as a mystical, combinative composition acting as an aid to contemplation of that concept.

89 Tàpies in Catoir (1991), 77.
90 Tàpies in Borja-Villel (1992), 3.
91 Ibid.
Although Tàpies seemed principally to advocate a meditative approach to the viewing of his work, he also presented the concept of his art as a talisman or icon. In these cases, he aimed to “transform the painting into a magical object, a kind of talisman with the power to heal by touch.” He also emphasized the concept of touch, which in a contemporary context does not typically play a part in the viewing process. The viewing context of art today almost exclusively discourages the viewer from touching works in galleries and museums.

Tàpies mentioned this concept several times, stating that the “value of presence had to be as strong as that of a talisman or an icon, which, by simply touching them with your hand or with your body, release beneficial effects,” and again, that a “painting does not represent things, but that it is a thing. A sort of talisman that, just by touching it, can affect us.” Rather than advocating the use of touch, Tàpies suggested in these passages that the work has to act in such a way that the viewer feels the benefits of touch, without actually touching the piece.

In Tassa (Teacup) (Figure 12) from 1979, Tàpies portrayed a large teacup, in which the sandy texture of the material immediately gives the impression of the rough feel of pottery. The bright orange color of the handle creates an energetic effect by uncovering the bright backdrop of the actual wooden board behind the heavily textured painting. In this image, Tàpies captured the impression of a ceramic teacup, even though he did not clearly define the teacup visually. He involved the sense of touch in this viewing experience by visually evoking the feel of the texture of pottery, even though the viewer could not directly touch the object.

Tàpies did not seek to present a mere copy of the world in his art through the imitation of nature. Instead, by providing “only the barest clue” of the meaning of the elements in his works,
Tàpies “forced” the viewer to “fill in the gaps by using his own imagination.”

According to Tàpies, “art can have nothing in common with the imitation of reality and still offer the pure expression of colors and forms,” and he strove to “evoke the real object” in his work. To do this, he did not make the elements look like real objects, rather, he made them feel like real objects to the viewer, and he presented his audience with the essence of the subject matter.

Through this distinction, Tàpies avoided Plato’s principal complaint about art, namely that it imitates an imitation, since according to Plato, art seeks to imitate the world around us, which itself is an imitation of the perfect Forms. Tàpies attempted to encompass Reality in his work and he could not achieve this by merely imitating the ordinary world. Rather, he sought to point directly to Reality, through the use of a Neoplatonist model, in which the art object serves to elevate the mind to the Good/God/Reality.

In *Ll-ull I* (Figure 13) Tàpies presented his viewer with very strong visual elements in a relatively empty space. The simple outline of an eye connects to a cross directly underneath it, and dark strokes of varnish define the letters “LL” to the left of the eye. These letters lead the viewer upward, and the thin gestural lines of varnish pull the viewer’s eye up and off the paper. This image seems very effortless and spontaneous. The bold darkness of the “LL” contrasts the lightness and simplicity of the eye, giving the latter a serene and meditative quality.

*Ll-ull II* (Figure 14) mimics the composition of *Ll-ull I*, except, in the place of “LL,” an arrow bends at a right angle and points skyward. In *Ll-ull I*, the eye stares at the viewer. But in *Ll-ull II*, vigorous gestural lines lead from the eye to the arrow, which now points upward. Tàpies

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95 Tàpies in Catoir (1991), 85.
97 Tàpies also states that he has an “urge to get right inside things.” See Tàpies in Catoir (1991), 125.
played with the concept of the representation of the eye in contrast to the viewer’s eye. In *Llull I*, the image of the eye confronts the viewer, but in *Llull II*, the image of the eye leads the viewer’s eye skyward as in *Llull I*.

These prints encourage the viewer to ponder the concept of transcendence in a mystical sense. The viewer’s eyes, being the “windows to the soul,” are physically directed upward by the image, through the inclusion of the arrow. This ascent of the eyes represents the ascent of the mind through the levels of consciousness until the viewer achieves the experience of Reality. These images act as a talisman, since they guide the viewer’s eyes, which in turn guide the viewer’s thoughts, and finally lead the viewer to ponder deeper truths.

In *Llull núm XLII* (Figure 15), Tàpies combined many symbols and images that at first glance seem nonsensical together. Many of Tàpies’s works require that the viewer spend time observing them in order to recognize any potential meaning or significance. At the center of the work, darkness surrounds the outline of a white foot, and several crosses are spread out over the image. The foot itself forms a cross or “T” on the right side, and becomes very dark at the bottom, and the color lightens as one follows it to the top. On the lower portion of the image a cross, a “1”, an upside down “T,” and an “A,” followed by an “8,” imitate a mathematical formula, inserted as if to explain the enigmatic elements of the rest of the image. However, this formula itself also remains mysterious. The line of writing right above the foot appears even more unknowable, since the letters and symbols are not recognizable. Although this image contains indecipherable elements, this sense of ambiguity encourages the viewer to interact with the image and meditate on its possible meanings.

The cross read as a religious symbol combined with the foot (which transitions from a dark crude outline to a pure white cross) evokes transcendence. The cross in the bottom portion
of the image and the mock-formula act as a mathematical symbol rather than a religious symbol. Finally, the script in the background evokes arcane knowledge and the concept of a manuscript, perhaps a parchment, a scroll or a secret message. Presented with familiar symbols, the viewer must engage with the image and seek an interpretation, and although there does not seem to be one correct formulaic explanation, the image gives a general impression of mystery. By presenting the viewer with elements that by their nature cannot be deciphered (such as the imitation of an ancient script) or are intrinsically nonsensical, Tàpies encourages the viewer to meditate on the secrets of the universe, timeless deep truths and arcane knowledge.
TÀPIES’S UNTRANSCENDENTAL MYSTICISM

Tàpies employed Llull’s Art of Combination in order to lead the viewer to a deeper essence that lies behind everyday reality, advocating a meditative approach to art. This particular method belongs to his wider concept of untranscendental mysticism, or non-religious religion, in which the function of art has come to replace that of religion. Tàpies advocated religion without God, a secular religion. Tàpies’s basic thought claimed that religion is outdated and the “Gods [dwell] no longer in heaven, but the problems that created them now [live] in man.”⁹⁹ Certain elements considered to belong to the realm of religion are actually human issues that exist in our mind and in our experience. Modern society, according to Tàpies, is in the process of “secularizing all traditional values,”¹⁰⁰ and with this transition, “many of the subjects which were previously associated with religion are now becoming philosophical concepts.”¹⁰¹ For him, religion has become increasingly irrelevant, since it no longer offers the tools necessary to navigate modern life. Through the secularization of religious values, these elements can once again become useful to society.

Tàpies wanted to make a distinction between religion and spirituality, and also between religion and mysticism. Although both spirituality and mysticism typically belong to the category of religion, Tàpies believed that each of them has something to offer apart from traditional religion. He believed that the “spiritual and mystical experiences, as well as religious experiences, do not belong exclusively to religious institutions,”¹⁰² and that with the decline of organized religion, it has become “urgent that we revitalize religious, spiritual and moral

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⁹⁹ Tàpies (2009), 267.
¹⁰¹ Ibid., 12. Translation mine.
¹⁰² Ibid., 34. Translation mine.
Tàpies did not mean by this that more people should participate in organized religion. Rather, he suggested that although religion is on the decline, there are certain activities that in the past have been considered exclusively religious, such as spirituality, which can exist without these institutions. But in order for this to happen, the public needs to make an effort to develop these previously religious elements apart from religion.

In regard to mysticism, Tàpies stated that although he “completely severed all connection with the Church and the beliefs with which [he] had been indoctrinated…[he has] always retained an interest in … mysticism, but not in any religious context.” The type of mysticism that he advocated was “untranscendental mysticism, in the sense of [a] love of mystery, and the desire to discover the unknown.” Tàpies also supplied a list of ideals that “untranscendental mysticism” strives to discover, which have significant parallels with Llull’s Absolute Principles, or even with Christian ideals. His list included “simplicity, goodness, wisdom, light, beatitude, glory, truth, love, justice, liberty, peace and immortality.” Most of the items on the list can easily be associated with humanistic ideals, with the exception of “immortality,” which still seems to point to some religious system outside of the simple virtues that we can extract from religion.

In this sense, Tàpies still seemed to be allowing for more mysticism and spirituality than most atheists or agnostics would typically be comfortable with. For example, he argued that society should still see the clear need for the use of terms such as “transcendental, noumenal, absolute and even divine,” as well as “all symbols and images borrowed from mythology, religion and occult science” since all of these “symbolic, imaginary, mythical and ritual forms,

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103 Ibid., 63. Translation mine.
104 Tàpies in Catoir (1991), 72-73.
105 Tàpies (2009), 142.
106 Tàpies (2001), 68. Translation mine.
stripped of their superstitions which with they are typically associated, constitute real elements in our psyche” (emphasis mine). Hence, even in this newly secularized society, Tàpies wished to preserve or even revive certain magical elements of religion that would perhaps not typically be considered productive outside of a religious context.

According to Tàpies, the role of religion has declined, and for this reason, “it is important, and urgent, that we find an equivalent to these spiritual contemplative experiences, adapted to the modern mentality, that will help us feel deep reality,” and he found this substitute in art. Tàpies claimed that he did not affiliate himself with any particular set of religious beliefs, but that he considered his work “a meditation and enlightenment.” According to him, the “spiritual uncovers myths which belong to the human soul: they’re not the private property of religion.” He saw a very special role for art in society in the process of secularization: art must encompass the most important functions that religion used to perform, as a vessel through which mysticism, spirituality and the contemplative or meditative experience can be communicated.

One of the main elements that has been “transferred” from the religious realm to the aesthetic, according to Tàpies, is mysticism. Tàpies did not see mysticism as a separate element to be experienced only by saints and zealots. On the contrary, mysticism for him has close ties to science, and remains necessary to any investigation of Reality and nature. For him, mysticism “can be extremely useful in contemporary life,” since it “enables one to discover things which cannot be found by any other means.” So, according to Tàpies, the mystic does not remain in a contemplative state, but the “true mystic” leads the “illuminated to a more external life that is

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110 Ibid., 97.
111 Ibid., 73.
112 Ibid.
more active.” For Tàpies, the concept of the mystic became a vital one, because he considered the role of the artist to be akin to a mystic, who can lead the public to the experience of Reality, and then to a more “illuminated” life.

In the very first print from the “Llull” series titled *Llull núm I* from 1984 (Figure 16), Tàpies presented a fairly confusing set of imagery at first glance. At the top, a partially formed cross resembles the cross at the top of the foot from Figure 15. Thin horizontal lines cover most of the image, and erratic markings fill in the space between the horizontal lines. In the background, two large opposing figures resembling heads face each other. In many of his works, Tàpies included purposefully obscured imagery, so that the viewer would be forced to engage more deeply with the work, as exemplified in this image.

The erratic markings in this image resemble a script. Comparing this work with *Cal·ligrafia* (*Calligraphy*) from 1958 (Figure 17) shows Tàpies’s interest in themes of ancient writings and arcane knowledge, which have appeared at various times throughout his career. Figure 17 resembles an ancient tablet, and Tàpies played with the concept of a language that no one can understand. The worn edge on the right side of the work and the exposed layers surrounding the etched letters imitate the presence of age and decay. Even though the writing cannot be deciphered, it gives the impression that if only one could detect a pattern in the use of symbols, one would be able to piece together a coherent language. *Cal·ligrafia* imitates ancient tablets guarding secrets, whose meaning and language have disappeared from human knowledge.

Tàpies presented the artist as a “shaman,” and he wanted his paintings to be “endowed with such power that they could cure on being applied to the body or the head,” evoking the

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concept of art as a talisman.\footnote{Antoni Tàpies, “Interview with Philippe Dagen,” \textit{Le Monde}, 28 Feb. 1988, quoted by Valeriano Bozal, “Tàpies, Wall, Time and Body,” in Borja-Villel (2004), 111.} According to Valeriano Bozal, a commentator on Tàpies’s work, this artist is a shaman in an “aesthetic” sense, because “his power is not that of the laying-on of hands but of invoking our memory and our experience.”\footnote{Bozal, “Tàpies, Wall, time and Body,” in Borja-Villel (2004), 111.} Quoting Bozal, the secularization of society has “transformed the religious and sacred aura into an aesthetic aura.”\footnote{Ibid.} Tàpies believed that, like the talisman or the icon, it is precisely the “materiality of art” that allows us to have this spiritual experience.\footnote{Tàpies (2001), 24. Translation mine.} The physicality of the object does not simply act as a means to an end, it becomes a necessary part of this process.

According to Tàpies, the meditative aspect of art has become the most important contribution that art makes to the human experience. He claimed that this aspect of art provides the “most essential and positive value of art.”\footnote{Ibid., 18. Translation mine.} This contemplative state then causes other values to emerge from the aesthetic experience, which are “ethical, social and political,” but according to Tàpies, these “values are always derived and secondary.”\footnote{Ibid. Translation mine.} However, it does not follow from this that the meditative aspects of art are to be an end in themselves. On the contrary, for Tàpies, they should be experienced so that they can have a positive influence on everyday life, since the “main value that art has in society … is precisely … that it has the power to illuminate the conscience, always for the purpose of improving our human condition.”\footnote{Ibid., 22-23. Translation mine.} For Tàpies, therefore, the goal of art should always ultimately be to have a positive influence in society.

One of the ways Tàpies presented this concept in his work was through the use of \textit{arte povera}. In \textit{Llull núm VI} (Figure 18), he presented the imagery of glasses, an everyday, banal
object. But they are portrayed in such a way that they become objects that allow the mundane to transcend the everyday. Tàpies placed small white crosses on the left side of the print, and the glasses point toward the circular element in the top right-hand corner. This circle could represent the sun, and perhaps it is reminiscent of Plato’s sun in the allegory of the cave: the sun illuminates the reality outside the cave, and the glasses enable us to see it. With Llull in the title, and combined with the circular sun element as well as the crosses, the glasses are transformed from simple objects to a spiritual metaphor.

Connecting *Llull núm VI* to Tàpies’s work *Lectura (Reading)* (Figure 19) reinforces the interpretation of the glasses as a metaphor for spiritual or meditative sight. In this work, a figure’s right arm and partial torso are depicted on a dark plum background. Above the torso, where the head would be, the background lightens and a black swirl of scribbles replaces the neck. The white sketching of a book floats in front of the figure, and two pairs of glasses numbered “1” and “2” hover above the book. A third pair of glasses numbered “3” hangs down below the book, and all three pair of glasses are connected to the book through quick gestural white lines.

Although the figure’s right hand surrounds the third pair of glasses as if to hold them, all three pairs lack the solidity characteristic of the rest of the work. Tàpies depicted these glasses with thin light strokes and this gives their form an ephemeral and fleeting quality. The numbers “1,” “2,” and “3” beginning at the top of the torso and descending past the book indicate a reference to three levels of understanding. Additionally, the placement of the “3” beneath the book places the understanding of the reading individual past the mere words on a page, into the level of knowledge and understanding.\(^{122}\)

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\(^{122}\) The three numbers in this image also seem to make reference to Tàpies’s levels of understanding (see p. 22), and could perhaps parallel Augustine’s levels of vision (see p. 21).
scratched gestural cross to the right of the figure reinforce the concept of meditation and religious contemplation.

Glasses are ordinary objects, but they allow us to do something fairly extraordinary, to see the world more clearly. Although the glasses can be interpreted this way, they could also be a metaphor for seeing Reality, since for Tàpies, we experience the “pleasure of absolute knowledge, of ultimate reality…and of divine contemplation … through art, in the simplest, most human things.”¹²³ The use of a simple object serves to elevate the mind to a higher level.

Tàpies went so far as to claim that if we were to remove the “sacred aspect of art … this would destroy art itself, for it is not only essential to art, but it is a part of all people in all societies.”¹²⁴ This makes sense considering that for Tàpies, the ultimate function of art is to reveal Reality, and art does this by offering a “wonderful experience that each person must discover,” through this spiritual and meditative event.¹²⁵ Therefore, for Tàpies, art does not simply encompass these elements that previously belonged to the religious realm, art exists because of these elements. Without them, art would have no purpose.

Tàpies was not the first to advocate a system in which art encompasses elements that were previously found in religion. One of the most recent formulations of this concept can be found in Carol Duncan’s research, in which she claims that the modern museum has effectively replaced the church. Tàpies seemed to be aware of some formulation of this theory, stating that some have claimed that “museums can be the substitutes of churches.”¹²⁶ In Duncan’s account, as in Tàpies’s thought, she notes the increased tendency for “critics and philosophers” to “attribute to works of art the power to transform their viewers spiritually, morally, and
emotionally.” She then notes that the development of aesthetics enabled a “transference of spiritual values from the sacred realm in to secular time and space.” Finally, she presents several thinkers who describe the museum experience as a religious experience filled with the “contemplation of truth and beauty” and “profound spiritual revelation.”

Several other modern artists advocated the view of non-religious religion. Marsden Hartley, according to Bregman, considered himself an “irreligious mystic” and sought the “realm of essence,” of “pure Being in its infinite implications,” and was influenced by Christian mysticism and by Plotinus. Barnett Newman was also concerned with the place of art in modern religious experience. In Newman’s essay “The Sublime is Now,” he contrasted modern art with the history of Western art and declared: “Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or life, we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete.” Tàpies found himself in good company when he presented this concept of a secular religion, particularly in regard to the role of aesthetics in this new church.

Tàpies’s emphasis on the meditative aspect of the experience of art focused on a sort of revelation or realization about life. This aspect of Tàpies’s thought intersects his deep interest in Eastern philosophy and religion. His passion for Eastern religion (which included Hinduism and Zen Buddhism) has been the focus of many previous studies. But this interest should not be

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128 Ibid., 480.
129 Ibid., 481. The figures mentioned include Goethe, Hazlitt and Gilman.
130 Ibid., 482.
133 See footnote 2.
considered in isolation. Rather, Tàpies’s project can be understood as a Westernization of Eastern thought: he offered Western equivalents to Eastern thinkers and religious leaders, as well as a Western way of understanding Eastern principles.

Tàpies’s thought and art are still deeply rooted in the Western tradition, but Tàpies offered a traditionally Western way of integrating Eastern thought, not as a foreign influence, but as a deeply rooted and personal tradition through such figures as Ramon Llull. This tendency can be seen in several other Western thinkers and artists, for example in the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer, whose philosophy closely resembles Tàpies’s.¹³⁴ Schopenhauer was also deeply influenced both by the Western tradition, through Plato and Neoplatonism, but he also integrated Eastern thought, and in a sense Westernized Eastern thought.¹³⁵ This process of Westernizing eastern thought and practice remained a non-religious endeavor for Tàpies, since it belonged to his wider concept of untranscendental mysticism.

Tàpies’s promotion of art as belonging to a new secular religion with an emphasis on meditation leads the viewer to appreciate Western art with the same meditative and contemplative approach often employed and deployed in Eastern traditions. In doing this, Tàpies still rooted his art in the Western tradition, but he expanded the Western tradition, as well as what it means for the general viewer and for art in general too.

¹³⁴ Tàpies is aware of Schopenhauer’s thought and writings, and expressed some interest in his ideas, particularly in relation to Eastern thought, stating that “Europe had its contacts with the Orient” which is evident in “recent cases such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger.” See Tàpies (2009), 281.
¹³⁵ Janaway states that Schopenhauer “repeatedly ranks Hinduism with Plato and Kant, saying of his philosophy that it could not have occurred until all three shone their rays into one mind.” See Christopher Janaway, ed. The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 12. In Schopenhauer’s writings, we see a synthesis of Eastern and Western concepts. His ideas mostly relate to the will, and his view of art, like Tàpies’s, claims that the “object [of art] is only the essential, the Idea” and that “every work of art really endeavors to show us life and things as they are in reality.” See Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, E.F.J. Payne, tr. (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 185 and 406.
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

There are clear examples in Tàpies’s art that support his desire for the viewer to reach a deeper meditative state through the observation of his works. However, there seems to be an important tension here when investigating Tàpies’s intentions for the viewer. Tàpies intended that his viewer experience a deeper understanding of Reality through his work. However, the viewer’s actual experiences of the work could be entirely different from the artist’s intentions. This issue directly involves the problem of authorial intent.

To many ordinary interpreters, the artist’s stated intent (when known) becomes the central interpretation for the work. But, this conception of artistic interpretation has been challenged more recently. The most important versions of this view are encompassed in the thought of Monroe Beardsley and of Roland Barthes. In both Beardsley and Barthes’s accounts, the audience ought not to know what the artist intended and the work cannot be considered fully successful unless it can stand alone. One need not take either of these views (authorial intent or total dismissal of the artist) exclusively. While there may be merits to approaching an artwork without any understanding of the artist or art history, further experience and understanding become available to the viewer when giving a more robust background involving the artist’s intentions and conceptual passions.

It is worth considering whether Tàpies’s intention for the viewer can actually be accomplished. The most effective way to test this claim would be to assume the perspective of an educated public and then determine whether their general interpretation is similar to what Tàpies wished for his audience. We have the record of an artistically literate public from the

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commentaries of Tàpies’s main critics. A few of these commentators have noticed the meditative quality of his work, and the concept of contemplation that he advocated. But, very few of these commentators have noted the connection between the viewer’s act of viewing and the experience of Reality. This connection seems only to arise when one studies the comments found in Tàpies’s own writings. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that an audience that has not read Tàpies’s writings could experience the meditative quality of the work. However, Tàpies’s specific intentions regarding Reality probably necessitate further knowledge of his thought.

While some commentators report experiencing the contemplative aspect of Tàpies’s art, this is certainly not the general consensus. It has often been the case (with art generally) that the artist’s intentions for the viewer do not take place in actuality. Therefore, if we follow authorial intent, we are left with several choices: either Tàpies is wrong about what his art and art in general does accomplish for a viewer. Or, his educated audience appears to be very small, and art can only have the “correct” effect on certain people. Perhaps people are not yet ready to see the world as Tàpies envisioned. Tàpies’s work could also have an unconscious or subconscious effect on the viewer, but in this case, this would be very difficult to observe or record. Again, hat Tàpies intended for his audience may be very different from what the audience actually experiences.

This method of viewing art could be interpreted more as a suggestion for how to best approach Tàpies’s work, or as his desire for the viewer to see his work, rather than a description of how even most viewers actually experience his art. Even though most commentators do not

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137 See footnote 2.
138 We do have accounts of commentators reporting this general mood of contemplation surrounding Tàpies’s work. For example, according to Serge Guilbaut, in Tàpies’s work the emphasis has “always been on meditation, on preserving for the viewer a space of concentration.” See Serge Guilbaut, “Deliquescent Bodies with Eyelids: Conjuring Everyday Life in the 1980s,” in Agustí, Volume 5 (1990), 23. However, these concepts of contemplation and meditation in his work are typically discussed in relation to Tàpies’s interest in Eastern thought, rather than his interest in the viewer experiencing Reality.
mention experiencing Reality through Tàpies’s work, most do discuss his work in terms of providing a meditative and spiritual environment for the viewer. This contemplative experience could be considered similar to what Tàpies had in mind when he expressed his desire for the public to experience Reality, and perhaps the lack of discussion of his view of Reality can be explained by an overarching cultural aversion to the concept of “a” Reality.

This thesis paper has established that the relationship between Tàpies and Llull is not merely one of visual influence. Rather, a close and exhaustive study of Tàpies's writings reveals a deeper metaphysical connection to Llull and his Art of Combination. I have argued that this metaphysical influence has been manifested in Tàpies’s creative process and the goal for his art. Through the use of the Art of Combination, Tàpies created a system in his visual work through which the viewer would experience a deeper Reality. By interweaving Tàpies’s detailed written accounts with a close formal analysis of his visual work, I have established a neglected approach to his art. Finally, I have examined Tàpies’s views regarding religious concepts in his work, and have demonstrated that my Lullian interpretation of Tàpies maintains consistency with his wider system of secular religion, where art has supplanted the traditional role of religion in society.
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Figure 1. Antoni Tàpies, *Autoretrat (Self-Portrait)*, 1947. Ink on Paper. 48 x 34 cm. Dr. Friedrich Herlt Collection. Weiden.
Figure 2. Reproduction of Ramon Llull's *Figure A*, in Mark Johnston, *The Evangelical Rhetoric of Ramon Llull* (1996), p. 14.
Figure 3. Reproduction of a Lullian Combinatory Figure (with Revolving Inner Circles), in Mark Johnston, *The Evangelical Rhetoric of Ramon Llull* (1996), p. 14.

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Figure 5. Reproduction of Ramon Llull's Figure T, in Mark Johnston, *The Spiritual Logic of Ramon Llull* (1987), p. 22.
Figure 6. Antoni Tàpies, *El Foc Interior (The Inner Fire)*, 1953. Mixed Media on Canvas. 60 x 73 cm. *A. de C. Collection. Barcelona.*

Figure 10. Antoni Tàpies, Creu i R (Cross and R), 1975. Mixed Media on Wood. 162.5 x 162.5 cm. Telefónica de España, S. A. Collection. Madrid.

Figure 12. Antoni Tàpies, *Tassa (Teacup)*, 1979. Mixed Media on Wood. 65 X 99.5 cm. *Private Collection*. Barcelona
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Figure 19. Antoni Tàpies, *Lectura (Reading)*, 1998. Mixed Media on Wood. 150 cm x 150 cm. *Private Collection*. Barcelona.