

Introduction

Trained in the Noucentisme tradition, Josep Maria Subirachs (Barcelona, 1927–2014) soon distanced himself from that starting point in order to define his own language. The influence of the international avant-gardes – which he discovered at twenty-four years of age on his first trip to Paris, thanks to a grant from the Institut Français Barcelona – led him to embark on an aesthetic journey in which he developed a personal expressionism from 1953 onwards, especially during his time in Belgium (1954–1956).

In the late fifties, distorted and expressive figures were gradually disconnected from anecdote to cross, almost imperceptibly, the border from figuration to abstraction. Subirachs' artistic discoveries and the formal and conceptual resources endowed his work with a new depth and he became a pioneer of a real iconoclasm that set him apart from the traditional statuary.

For the first time, this exhibition addresses the 'leap forward' that Subirachs' work took towards the western avant-garde currents – to the extent that he created his own perennial visual grammar – and this renovating enthusiasm transformed him into an international reference for post-war Catalan sculpture.

Expressionism

From 1953 onwards, Subirachs makes a radical break from essential Mediterranean classicism – a line in which he had limited himself to mirroring his work in his Noucentist predecessors – and, eager to develop his own artistic personality, he took new paths dominated by more hieratical forms. Subirachs' expressionism emerged in

distorted figures, the deconstruction of angular bodies and, above all, in the treatment of rough grooved surfaces, with stigmas and fossilized traces to mark the passage of time.

Abstraction

Subirachs' creations gradually leave the figurative vestiges behind and expressionism moves on towards abstraction. In the first phase of this stage, he passed from naturalistic and turgid forms to others in which the physical and imaginary features fused together. Those works bring to mind the artist's architectural vocation.

With the introduction of prints and new textures of the materials, the technical and expressive values took on their own meaning and an eloquent artistic vitality.

In this stage, he makes a set of pieces which take inspiration from the morphological richness of Gaudí's helicoids.

Iron

The separation from any reference to figuration became even more evident with the predominant use of iron, in essentially lineal forms with a diversity of rhythms, and an aerial, yet aggressive and hurtful, sense. The space replaced the volume as a result of a process towards an increasingly refined style. In the iron pieces, Subirachs adopts a formal schematization akin to his expressionist figures and his early abstract forms, but in these pieces, matter is reduced to the minimum expression.

Penetrations and tensions

In the midst of experimenting with the abstract language, Subirachs begins the series which the art critic José Corredor-Matheos named “penetrations and tensions”, with fitted wedges and chocks, and straps and iron screws being his most common artistic elements. They are pieces that are characterized by the conjunction of two or more elements, of different materials, that join or come into conflict as one penetrates the other. The various materials are shown highlighting their own values and are treated in a natural way: breakage, erosion and oxidation. The polymaterial assemblages and the direct use of natural elements introduce colour, that of each material, which contributes to creating a new image of Subirachs’ art.

Works in spaces in the public domain

Public works of art gave Josep Maria Subirachs the chance to work on a massive scale and not limit himself to artwork on a smaller scale, that was usually destined for private collections,

His most notable creations are those connected to architecture and urbanism.

In 1957, *Forma 212* was the first abstract sculpture to be installed in a public space in Barcelona, let alone in Catalonia. But the work that really caused a historical impact on public opinion was *Evocació marinera*, located in the Barceloneta neighbourhood and inaugurated in 1960.

From that point onwards, Subirachs continued to leave his mark on many spaces in the public domain throughout the territory: streets, facades and interiors of civil and religious buildings, shops and parks. His monumental work is undoubtedly the one that garnered him a public awareness and recognition.