

# L'EQUILIBRI POSSIBLE



Museu de Montserrat

The possible balance  
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Maria Girona (Barcelona, 1921-2015) and Albert Ràfols Casamada (Barcelona, 1923-2009) belonged to the generation of artists who trained in the early 1940's. In the difficult, uninspiring context of the early years of the Franco regime, the two of them struggled side by side, along with many other artists of their generation, to create and revitalise a modern, freer cultural environment. This exhibition explores some of the most significant initiatives of their artistic careers, including the creation of the group *Els Vuit* (The Eight), the "Salons d'Octubre" art contest and the founding of the *Eina* school etc. It also encompasses their shared life experiences, such as their study trip to Paris, on a scholarship from the French Institute, and their summers spent in Calaceit and Cadaqués. It is a depiction of two complementary lives. In fact, it is an in-depth exploration of their artistic origins and their life together devoted to art, as well as the relationships and connections between their works, seemingly contradictory and divergent, but at the same time intimately connected. What is more, this exhibition sets out to highlight the work and character of Maria Girona, who usually remains in the background. Besides creating works of her own of a quality that is often little known, she also played a decisive role in the whole process of the post-war artistic renewal.

## The Ràfols saga

Albert Ràfols Casamada is one of the third generation of a family of artists, the first of whom was his grandfather, Lluís Ràfols Olivella. Albert Ràfols Cullerès (Barcelona, 1892-1986), Ràfols Casamada's father, continued in the family tradition with art work set in a post-impressionist context that was well received by the general public. Ràfols Casamada was initiated into the world of painting by closely observing his father working, accompanying him when he went to paint the area around Capellades. For him, devoting his life to painting was a natural progression.

## Rafael Benet: a shared inspiration

Both Albert Ràfols Casamada and Maria Girona were fortunate to be born into culturally aware families,

with links to the world of art and literary and intellectual interests. In the grey world of the post-war era, unlike many people, they had access to books, magazines and intellectual conversation, the vestiges of the cultural world that the military uprising had dissolved forever. Rafael Benet (Terrassa, 1889 - Barcelona, 1979), Maria Girona's uncle, was fundamental in the artistic training of the two of them and an ever-present influence in their early works.

## The early years: an assimilated language

Girona and Ràfols met at the Tàrrrega Academy in 1945 and from that moment on they shared their whole lives with each other. Despite the art school's uninspiring atmosphere, with its focus on academic teaching, coming into contact with other artists opened up new horizons for them. Their complicity sprang up immediately and they joined forces in their fight to create a new style of painting, distancing themselves from the prevailing dramatic illumination ("tenebrism" a variant of *chiaroscuro*) of the Barcelona art scene of the 1940s. They launched initiatives like the October and May art competitions, which served as a platform to make some artists of their generation known to the world.

## Els Vuit group: a longing for modernity

The works of the group of artists, known as "Els Vuit" (The Eight), were exhibited for the first time in 1946 at the *Galerias Pictòria*. This group was unique, not just because of their style of painting, which contrasted strongly with the official artwork of the time, but also because their work was in a range of media. The group was formed by the painters Ràfols Casamada, Maria Girona, Vicenç Rossell, Joan Palà and Ricardo Lorenzo, the sculptor Miquel Gusils, the poet Jordi Sarsanedas and the composer Joan Comellas. They were the creators of the first post-war production of García Lorca's work "Retablillo de Don Cristóbal" (The Puppet Play of Don Cristóbal). It was staged during the inauguration of the exhibition by the painter Jordi Mercadé at the *Galerias Pictòria*, using puppets they had decorated

and painted themselves. This was how, with a certain naivety, they stepped onto the artistic stage of the day. The group's first work was representative of everything that was to come later and a yearning for change in a stagnant world.

## Paris: city of light

Paris was a revelation to Girona and Ràfols. For the first time they could experience first-hand works they had only previously seen in books and magazines. The French Institute of Barcelona awarded them a scholarship which allowed them to reside there for the whole of the year 1950. They made the most of the opportunity and also visited Belgium and Holland. At the end of this first year they decided to extend their stay and moved into a small "chambre de bonne" at 203, Rue Saint Germain. They shared their time in the city with other artists of their generation, like Joan A. Roda, August Puig, Jordi Mercadé, Francesc Boadella and the painter Xavier Valls, until 1954, when they returned to Barcelona for good.

## The spaces of memory

We all draw a map of experience throughout our lives which, in one way or another, defines us. Moments linked to specific places, physical spaces, but also areas related to the senses, to perception. Both Ràfols and Girona were highly aware of their very recent past and this gives their works an aura of nostalgia. The summers that Ràfols spent in Capellades and those that Girona spent in Tossa, the two apartments they shared in Barcelona, one in carrer Escipió and the other in Avinguda República Argentina, and the houses in Calaceit and Cadaqués where they spent many summers, were the backdrop to their lives and are reflected in their paintings. The azure colours and clear light in Ràfols' works can only be understood as a Mediterranean landscape; Girona's everyday but beautiful objects can only be understood as part of the folk world of Cadaqués and Calaceit. Knowing the places they inhabited in their memories allows us to better understand the roots of their work.

## The private world.

## The public world.

## A free world

The works chosen in this sphere aim to evoke the couple's diverse, rich environment, and so the focus is on the artists' friends from the days of their youth,

moving on to their early students and their closest relatives. It forms a constellation of their intimate, private world, in which art, friendship and the artistic struggle were at the heart of their works. The intimate world of Ràfols and Girona was, however, often paralleled by their public world. Both were cultural activists with a deep sense of commitment. This is evidenced by their participation in the Caputxinada demonstration (1966) and the intellectual sit-in protest at Montserrat (1970), as well as their participation in initiatives such as the "Estampa Popular" travelling exhibition (1965). Their relationships with Josep M. Castellet, Joan Perucho, Oriol Bohigas and Alexandre Cirici were also fruitful in ways beyond the purely artistic.

## The Eina school: a stronghold of modernity

With the founding of the Eina School in 1967, their open, plural and modern idiosyncratic approach was adopted, as an appealing alternative to traditional teaching methods. Unlike the city's other art schools, its aim was to provide not just academic training but also to promote a spirit of criticism, the personality of each individual, as well as giving artists the independence they required to be freely creative. Both Ràfols and Girona were important figures at the school. Once again, they were in the vanguard, responding to the designs of the times they happened to live in. They put their hearts and souls into this project, with a desire to give the younger generations everything that had been denied to them.

## Two distinct identities.

## Affinities and divergences

On the surface it may appear that Ràfols' and Girona's works are diametrically opposed. One of them created abstract works, whilst the other's paintings are figurative and are within the framework of traditional genres. However, although their works are of a personal, contrasting nature, they both stem from the same roots. From the outset, their affinities are evident. With the passage of time, however, their works seem to follow diverging paths, with Ràfols' work moving towards the abstract and Maria Girona remaining faithful to her artistic origins. But in truth, they continued to maintain the hidden bonds that made them kindred spirits. We can often find compositional and chromatic links, common themes and affinities, based on their shared landscape. Even so, they were always able to be two individuals.