

## THE ART OF TEACHING

The Escola Massana and Riu Serra are inextricably linked. He started attending the school in 1937–1938 and returned in 1964 to teach there until his retirement in 1986. Being a true follower of Massana, he centred his teaching on craftsmanship. To advance the material to the artist's satisfaction, it was necessary to master the technique and comprehend all its potentialities. Determined to impart his knowledge, he tried to give his students modern teaching techniques, which helped to rethink artistic education at the time. Despite his criticism of some facets of modern artistic practice, he was a discrete and courteous educator who gave his students total autonomy to grow. Because of this, it's clear why his teaching had such an impact on a whole generation of sculptors.

## 7. Maria Rosa Barrera

The career of painter Maria Rosa Barrera (Barcelona, 1924–2006) was short but significant. Her art, which primarily evolved in the late 1940s and early 1950s, is distinguished by a humanist perspective that emphasizes the textures of ordinary life. Influenced by Fauvist painting, she employed a palette of vibrant, vital colours that contrasted with the seriousness of the faces and attitudes of her figures, which were frequently severe or melancholic. Like Riu Serra, whom she married in 1955, she was influenced by so-called primitive art, which emphasized the geometrization and synthesis of her compositions. But above all, her paintings continued to be strongly associated with popular culture. Her art shows that she was a real talent, but sadly, she couldn't reach her full artistic potential. In the social climate of the era, being a woman did little to support her commitment to painting or the distribution of her creations. Consequently, this exhibition endeavours to underscore the significance of reclaiming and examining Riu Serra's work, in addition to her personal connection to the artist.



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# Riu Serra · el futur primigeni

## 1. Introduction

The exhibition is not intended to serve as a retrospective. However, it does provide a broad perspective on the work of Julià Riu Serra (Molins de Rei, 1921 – Barcelona, 2006), a unique and versatile artist who freely explored various artistic mediums. Although he was a very skilled craftsman who worked in printmaking and ceramics, his most notable contributions were in sculpture and drawing.

In the initial stages of his career, Riu Serra was one of the pioneering sculptors who significantly contributed to the revitalization of the artistic landscape in post-war Catalonia. He also brought this artistic vision to public art, architecture, and the applied arts, speaking with ceramics and jewellery about their work.

Furthermore, he was a great draftsman, with a line that was sharp, witty, and deeply ironic. Drawing allowed him to express his thoughts with unusual clarity, despite his natural introversion. His drawings show what is wrong with the world or just how silly life is.

Twenty years after his passing, his drawings, and sculptures still have a powerful impact on us and compel us to consider a humanity that keeps tripping over the same mistake. Maria Rosa Barrera, his wife and a distinguished painter in her own right, is also recognized in this exhibition for her consistent presence. Her work is deserving of renewed attention.

## 2. Returning to the Origin

His teacher at the Escola Massana, the sculptor Pere Jou, encouraged Riu Serra to take up direct stone carving, which emphasized the figurative quality of his work: compact, well-defined volumes that are lightly geometrized, rough, and balanced. His use of volumes and planes to simplify shape is like Cubism, but he quickly came up with his language.

During the years after the Spanish Civil War, when sculptures were still mostly pompous and grand, a new group of sculptors came to Catalonia who were dedicated to renewal. In contrast to the prevailing aesthetic, they pursued an intentionally elemental sculpture that rejected empty virtuosity in favour of a stripped-back volumetric language that sought the essence of reality and progressed toward abstraction.

Riu Serra was a member of this group of artists, who discovered a source of inspiration in so-called primitive sculpture and African art that influenced the formation of their careers. The October Salons provided him, like many of his peers, with an early stage on which to introduce and defend this new aesthetic stance, thus ushering in a new era.

### 3. The Paris Drawings

Riu Serra participated in some of the most forward-thinking social circles of his era from an early age. One of the most significant of these was undoubtedly the Cercle Maillol, supported by the Institut Français, a cultural oasis amid the barrenness of Barcelona at the time. In 1952, through this same institution, he received a grant that enabled him to spend three months in Paris.

During that time, he studied Egyptian sculpture at the Louvre and the Asian sculpture collection at the Musée Guimet. He also met the sculptor Apel·les Fenosa and saw contemporary artists' work up close.

From this journey came some of his best drawings. They show what life is like in Paris's popular neighbourhoods and have a clean, precise line that's full of existential drama. His career took a significant turn after the trip, which resulted in his first exhibition at Sala Caralt and his affiliation with the Jazz Salons and the May Salons due to a revitalized sculpture vision.

### 4. The Consolidation of a Language

Riu Serra had completely abandoned the Noucentista influence of his teacher by this point and had adopted an entirely contemporary sculpture. His interests included the hieratic severity of Egyptian art, votive and ritual expression, and anonymous African sculpture. It was their basic and deeply human nature that drew him to them.

Everything he writes is based on humanism. The human figure remains central, regardless of whether he adopts an existentialist vision, which was so common in the 1950s, or a more observant gaze that is attentive to everyday life. Over the years, his early primitive influences slowly faded, giving way to a stylization of form that became more simplified and closer to abstraction. Concurrently, the serenity and severity of his initial compositions were replaced by a more ironic and playful mode of expression, in which movement and expressiveness were more prominent.

## A Multifaceted Artist

### 5. DRAWING

Riu Serra's drawing is an important part of his work and grew along with his sculpture. From the 1950s on, it has a sharp, repeated, and angular line that makes figures that are long and carefully structured. These beings are troubled, introspective, and sometimes sad, which reflects the rough time they came from. But as time went on, his drawings got less crazy and calmer. The drawings from Paris are sad and dramatic but later works become more ironic and lighter. The figure is still at the centre, but it now seems more dynamic and rounded. While the form becomes more supple, the critique beneath it becomes more acute. The artist no longer begins with real or specific scenes; rather, they create and rework scenarios to convey attitudes and ideas that are rooted in lived reality. By exposing the ridiculousness of society and, of course, the art world itself, Riu Serra satirises everything and everyone.

### APPLIED ARTS

It is impossible to categorize Riu Serra as a jeweller or a ceramicist. Still, he made jewellery and pottery. Though they are sporadic, these pieces demonstrate his adaptability and his capacity to adjust to the needs of the moment by drawing on both his artistic talent and the real-world situations of various life stages. In ceramics, he used the wheel to experiment with the volumetric potential of clay, bringing it into conversation with his drawing's confident, firm line. The sharp lines and bright colours of the late 1950s are very different from the simple, primitive ideas that inspired his art. This unconventional equilibrium captivated interior decorators, who integrated these pieces into their projects and thereby supported the artist's livelihood. By contrast, jewellery was considered a more private and intimate item, frequently remaining within the family circle as a gift to his lifelong companion, Maria Rosa Barrera.

### 6. ENGRAVING

Riu Serra's insatiable curiosity and aspiration to complete every craft motivated him to investigate several engraving methods. He created a significant quantity of prints from the 1950s to the 1990s. Even though he tried various techniques, woodcut was clearly his favourite. He was especially comfortable carving wooden blocks because of his identity as a sculptor and the strong formal language that characterized his work. The defining features of his drawing at each stage of his career are translated into these prints, which demonstrate a masterful command of the contrast between black and white, void and solidity. In addition, his exceptional use of the gouge and the grand scale of his woodcuts distinguish him as a unique figure among the artists of his era.