

QUICK VIEW:

Synopsis

Once known as 'Papa Dada,' Francis Picabia was one of the principle figures in the **Dada** movement both in Paris and New York. A friend and associate of **Marcel Duchamp**, he became known for a rich variety of work ranging from strange, comic-erotic images of machine parts, to text-based paintings that foreshadow aspects of **Conceptual art**. Even after Dada had been supplanted by other styles, the French painter and writer went on to explore a diverse and almost incoherent mix of styles. He shifted easily between abstraction and figuration at a time when artists clung steadfastly to one approach, and his gleeful disregard for the conventions of modern art encouraged some remarkable innovations even later in his career, from the layered *Transparencies* series of the 1920s, to the kitsch, erotic nudes of the early 1940s. Picabia remains revered by contemporary painters as one of the century's most intriguing and inscrutable artists.

Key Ideas

- In the 1910s, Picabia shared the interests of a number of artists who emerged in the wake of **Cubism**, and who were inspired less by the movement's preoccupation with problems of representation than by the way the style could evoke qualities of the modern, urban, mechanistic world. Initially, these interests informed his abstract painting, but his attraction to machines would also shape his early **Dada** work, in particular his 'mechanomorphs,' images of invented machines and machine parts that were intended as parodies of portraiture. For Picabia, humans were nothing but machines, ruled not by their rational minds but by a range of compulsive hungers.
- Picabia was central to the Dada movement when it began to emerge in Paris in the early 1920s, and his work quickly abandoned many of the technical concerns that had animated his previous work. He began to use text in his pictures, and collage,

- and to create more explicitly scandalous images attacking conventional notions of morality, religion and law. While the work was animated by the Dada movement's rage against the European culture that had led to the carnage of WWI, Picabia's attacks often have the sprightly, coarse comedy of the court jester. They reflect an artist with no respect for any conventions, not even art, since art was just another facet of the wider culture he rejected.
- Figurative imagery was central to Picabia's work from mid 1920s to the mid 1940s, when he was inspired by Spanish subjects, Romanesque and Renaissance sources, images of monsters, and later nudes found in soft porn magazines. Initially he united many of these disparate motifs in the *Transparency* pictures, complexly layering them and piled them on top of each other to provoke confusion and strange associations. Some critics have described the *Transparencies* as occult visions, or **Surrealist** dream images, and although Picabia rejected any association with the Surrealists, he steadfastly refused to explain their content. Picabia always handled these motifs with the same playful and anarchic spirit that had always animated his Dada work.
 - Picabia learned early on that abstraction could be used to evoke not only qualities of machines, but also to evoke mystery and eroticism. This ensured that abstract painting would be one of the mainstays of his career. He returned to it even in his last years, during which - as he had always done - he attributed his inspiration to the obscure recesses of his mind.

DETAILED VIEW:

Childhood

Francis Picabia was born in 1879 in Paris, the only child of a Cuban-born Spaniard, Francisco Vicente Martinez Picabia, and a Frenchwoman, Marie Cécile Davanne. Both his parents came from prominent European families, and Picabia was raised in an affluent household. Throughout his life, the family fortune allowed him to study, travel and enjoy a luxury lifestyle. However, at the age of seven, his mother passed away of tuberculosis, and the following year his grandmother died. These losses ensured that Picabia's childhood would be a lonely one, and he was left in the care of his father, the chancellor to the Cuban Embassy; his uncle, Maurice Davanne, a curator of the Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève; and his maternal grandfather, Alphonse Davanne, a wealthy businessman. Their house was known as the house of *quatre sans femmes* (four without women).

His uncle was an art lover and collector, who facilitated young Picabia's interests by surrounding him with works by classical French painters such as Félix Ziem and Ferdinand Roybert. His grandfather, a devoted amateur photographer, taught Picabia about photography, and Picabia would later use a camera to aide with his work.

Early training

In 1895, Picabia started attending the prestigious École des Arts Decoratifs, where recent alumni included Van Gogh and Toulouse Lautrec. He studied under Fernand Cormon, Ferdinand Humbert and Albert Charles Wallet for two years. He then worked at Cormon's studio with his classmates, Georges Braque and Marie Laurencin, for the next

four years. During this time, he produced mostly watercolors and exhibited only once at the Salon des Artistes Français. He quickly left painting traditional watercolors and transitioned towards Impressionism, influenced by **Camille Pissarro** and **Alfred Sisley**. He believed that "paintings should not represent nature, but the emotional experience of the artist", and he believed that Impressionism was a tool to represent his ideals.

Picabia held his first solo show in 1905 at the Galerie Hausmann in Paris. The show exhibited 61 landscape paintings and received substantial acclaim. After the show, he became widely popular in the art scene, showing solo in Paris, London and Berlin. However, in 1909, he abandoned the style that brought him fame and moved towards more avant-garde styles, including **Fauvism**. This caused a break with his representation with Galerie Hausmann. In the same year, he married Gabrielle Buffet, a musician, who brought music into his life. Through her, he saw the possible link between art and music; she also encouraged his interest in more avant-garde styles.

From 1909 to 1913, Picabia once again struggled to find the style best suited to express his developing concerns for the emotional and the intellectual, as well as the inner experience and the outer form. He jumped from one style to another, experimenting with Fauvism, Cubism and abstract art. The attention from the art world that used to surround him decreased dramatically during his exploration. Despite his unstable prospects as an artist, Picabia and Gabrielle started a family, having their first child in 1910 and a second the following year. Picabia and Gabrielle joined the Société Normande de Peinture Moderne, which met to foster and promote the theory of *correspondance* and the interdisciplinary relationship between all arts. It held annual exhibitions and other events creating opportunities to network and socialize with other artists. In 1911, Picabia met **Marcel Duchamp**, beginning a long friendship that played a major role in both their lives and careers.



Mature Period

By 1912, Picabia shifted to the more radical style of Cubism, painting from his memories and experiences rather than drawing inspiration from nature. Attending the Armory Show in New York, he presented *Danses à la source I*, *Souvenir de Grimaldi*, *La Procession Seville*, and *Paris*. His works received mixed reviews, with some journalists dismissing his "color harmonies" as "a hoax". Despite the criticism in America, he overstayed his two-week visit and acquainted himself with **Alfred Stieglitz** and his Gallery 291.

When WWI broke out, Picabia left France to seek refuge in Barcelona, then New York and the Caribbean. The war pushed him to find yet another style that would represent the era of industrialization. He showed the first of his machine paintings in 1916 at the Modern Gallery in New York. His relationship with his wife began to fall apart when he met Germaine Everling in 1917. His mental and physical health deteriorated into depression.

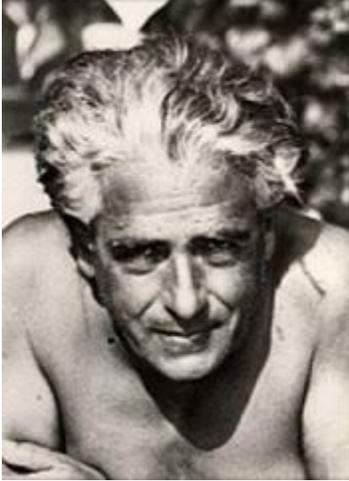
During his recuperation, Picabia shifted his focus from painting to writing. He published his poems in 1917 under the title *Cinquante-deux miroirs* and began publishing a review, titled *391* after Stieglitz's 291 Gallery. *391* became Picabia's outlet for Dadaist writings and visual representation of its ideals, though he also contributed to other Dadaist publications, like André Breton's *Litterature*, and the *Dada revue*, and published three volumes of poetry, *Poèmes et dessins de la fille née sans mère*, *À L'athète des pompes funèbres* and *Rateliers platoniques*. In 1919, Picabia and Buffet officially separated. By this time, his machinist style paintings were already well known through these avant-garde publications. In 1920, Dada had reached its peak and the visions of Dadaist "happenings", exhibitions, books, articles and magazines became more defined.

After years of promoting itself as a movement of anti-art, Picabia felt Dada had become just another system of established ideas. In 1921, he attacked other Dadaists in a special issue of *391*, *Phihaou-Thibaou*. After the break from Dada, he focused on exhibiting his paintings again. And in 1922 he had a show at Salon d'Automne of his machinist paintings alongside more figurative pictures inspired by Spanish themes. After leaving his colleagues of past ten years, and in the search of new life with his new common-law wife, he left Paris for the south of France in 1925 and stayed on the Cote d'Azur for twenty years. Germaine and Picabia settled into a home in Cannes and hired a governess for their son, Lorenzo. Picabia fell in love the governess, Olga Mohler, and left Germaine soon after. They officially split in 1933.

Late Period

In 1928, Picabia presented his *Transparency* paintings at the Galerie Theophile Briant. Film critic, Gaston Ravel, called them "sur-impressionism" as the paintings were said to have the neo-romantic look of superimposed film images. The *Transparency* series received warm acclaims from his peers, especially Duchamp. His then art dealer, Leonce Rosenberg, who described it as, "the association of the visible and the invisible... It is this notion of time added to that of space which precisely constitutes the doctrine of your art. Beyond the instantaneity towards the infinite, such is your ideal".

While living in Cannes he was quite the celebrity with the locals, receiving frequent visits from his famous friends, Jacques Doucet, Marthe Chenal, Pierre de Massot, and Duchamp. Picabia also enjoyed his wealth during his time, taking pleasure in collecting luxury cars and yachts.



When WWII started in 1939, the devastation reached Picabia and his lifestyle became quite modest. For the first time in his life, his primary source of income was from the sale of his paintings. In 1940, Picabia and Olga Mohler married. As it did whenever a major event occurred in his life, his painting style transformed once again. Many say that his paintings from the 1940s were purely for commercial value. He painted popular imagery from "girlie" magazines of movie stars and romanticized couples in a realistic style.

At the end of his long career, Picabia once again changed directions, painting in abstract forms. He continued to exhibit his work in prominent Parisian galleries and published his writings until 1951, when he suffered from arteriosclerosis and could no longer paint. He died in 1953.

Legacy

Picabia did much to define Dada in Paris and New York, and his reputation as one of the movement's father-figures has stayed with him. But it is perhaps the spirit that the movement encouraged in him - his anarchic spirit, and his disrespect for conventional abstract modern art - that has yielded his greatest legacy. Because it is this spirit that shaped the *Transparencies* series of the 1920s, and the erotic nudes of the 1940s, both of which have proved hugely influential - the former on artists such as **David Salle** and **Sigmar Polke**, the latter on figures such as **John Currin**. When many artists thought abstract and figurative art should be separated, Picabia seemed to combine them; when others felt that the nude should remain a noble subject, he debased it. Picabia seems to have had a light-hearted and often cynical attitude to art-making, and while this put him at odds with many of his more serious peers, it is this attitude that seems so resonant to contemporary artists who not only have less faith in art's ability to change the world, but also have an attitude to museums and galleries that sways between the tolerant and the sceptical.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES:

Below are Francis Picabia's main influencers, and the people and ideas that he influenced in turn.

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
 <p>Camille Pissarro</p>	 <p>André Breton</p>	 <p>Impressionism</p>
 <p>Pablo Picasso</p>	 <p>Marcel Duchamp</p>	 <p>Cubism</p>
 <p>Georges Braque</p>	 <p>Man Ray</p>	 <p>Dada</p>
 <p>Henri Matisse</p>	 <p>Alfred Stieglitz</p>	 <p>Realism</p>
 <p>André Derain</p>	 <p>Guillaume Apollinaire</p>	 <p>Abstract Art</p>

INFLUENCES
ON ARTIST



Francis Picabia
Years Worked: 1905 – 1951



INFLUENCED
BY ARTIST

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
 Andy Warhol  David Salle  Sigmar Polke  Gerald Murphy  Konrad Klapheck	 Marcel Duchamp	 Futurism  Pop Art

Quotes

"New York is the cubist city, the futurist city. It expresses modern thought in its architecture, its life, its spirit."

"The world is divided into two categories: failures and unknowns."

"Only useless things are indispensable."

"If you want to have clean ideas, change them as often as your shirt."

"Artists, so they say, make fun of the bourgeoisie; me, I make fun of the bourgeoisie and the artists"



Content written by:

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Major Works:



Title: Portrait de Mistinguett

Description: The style of this portrait, with its simplified forms and flat colour, blends aspects of Symbolism and Fauvism, and is typical of Picabia's maturing style as he began to try his hand at different approaches. Painted at a time when he was slowly building a conventional, successful career as an Impressionist, it might be taken as a sign of Picabia's frequent later habit of striking out in new and surprising directions. The model for the picture, Mistinguett, was a successful actress and singer, was one of Picabia's first famous friends from the entertainment industry (she was at one time the lover of Maurice Chevalier). Independently wealthy, Picabia enjoyed the life of the *bon viveur*, and was often drawn to music halls, nightclubs, circuses and the cinema. He met Mistinguett during one of his visits to the Parisian revues. Instead of painting a realistic portrayal of her, he was much more interested in revealing the mood of the time using dramatic color and composition.

Year: 1907

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Collection



Title: *Dances at the Spring (La Danse a la Source)*

Description: Picabia met Marcel Duchamp around 1911, and *Dances at the Spring*, which echoes Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912), points to the important impact this meeting would have on him. It is considered one of the best examples of Picabia's abstract art, expressing his inner experience through geometric forms. He sought to represent the balance between the figurative and abstract, the static and dynamic. Using vivid colors and fragmented angular planes, he painted the motion and the excitement of a peasant dance while he was on his honeymoon in the countryside of Italy. Two versions of the picture were painted, but one is lost; this version was exhibited at the important Armory Show in New York in 1913.

Year: 1912

Materials: Oil

Collection: Philadelphia Museum of Art



Title: Très rare tableau sur la terre (Very Rare Picture of Earth)

Description: After WWI broke out, Picabia became fascinated with the idea of industrial objects as a pictorial source. He once wrote that "the machine has become more than a mere adjunct of life. It is really a part of human life...perhaps the very soul...I have enlisted the machinery of the modern world, and introduced it into my studio." His goal, he said, was to invent a "mechanical symbolism," and this piece is one of his most important examples, since critics have read it as an image of a sexual act rendered in mechanical terms. Although, at first glance, it might be hard to read in these terms, Picabia may well have been inspired by his friend Marcel Duchamp to bury sexual references in images of machines. This work is also significant in that it is Picabia's first known collage (hence, as the title suggests, "very rare") since it contains two mounted wooden forms, and the frame is integral to the piece.

Year: 1915

Materials: Oil and metallic paint on board, and silver and gold leaf on wood, including artist's painted frame

Collection: Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice



Title: *Parade Amoureuse* (Love Parade)

Description: Picabia's mechanomorphic pictures suggest analogies between machines and the human form. To contemporary viewers they were scandalous in their rejection of the idea of the human soul, and their emphasis instead on instincts and compulsions - both often erotic. In this work, Picabia blended male and female: the upper part in red might be considered female, the lower part in blue, male. The viewer can imagine the sound of hammering and the idea of a "sonorous sculpture", or a musical instrument.

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Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Private Collection



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Title: *Deux femmes nues au bulldog (Women and Bulldog)*

Description: Picabia always had a fascination with popular imagery, often employing it as a means to undermine the grave seriousness and formal concerns of modern art. In this painting, part of a notorious series of realistic and erotic nudes that he painted in the early 1940s, he used pin-ups from 1930s "nudie" magazines. Though many believe they were painted for money (they were sold through an agent in Algiers), his close friends have maintained that Picabia always painted what he wanted, and that they cannot be dismissed as anomalies in his career. Curators after the war often did put them aside in favor of celebrating Picabia's Dada years, yet since the 1980s these pictures have been an important influence on artists ranging from David Salle to John Currin, who have been fascinated by their embrace of kitsch.

Year: 1941-1942

Materials: Oil on cardboard

Collection: Collection Centre Pompidou