The Machinist Style of Francis Picabia

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The signs of the accelerating Industrial Revolution had not failed to excite some nineteenth century artists, but only in the twentieth century were the industrial sites, the machines and machine-made products of the modern world seized by artists as truly important subjects—subjects which, moreover, were perceived as sources of new aesthetic systems and associated with fundamental attitudes toward life.

The machinist style of Francis Picabia is one of the most interesting examples of this phenomenon. His machinist paintings are intriguing in themselves, but beyond that they express a remarkable attitude toward our highly mechanized twentieth century society; they comprise a major contribution to Dada, they had an invigorating influence on diverse American and European painters around 1915 to 1923, and during the past decade many young artists have found their work and lives stimulated by the example of Picabia and his good friend Marcel Duchamp. Recently, Duchamp in particular has attracted increasing attention, most of which has expanded our knowledge about this man and his work. Picabia has fared less well. Despite a revival of interest in him, biographical data and commentary on his work have become almost standardized at a relatively superficial level. Picabia himself is partly responsible for this situation. He discouraged scholarly inquiry into his work and contributed a number of inaccurate "facts" about his life. Moreover, he baffled everyone with the variety (and often the coexistence) of styles in his career, and with the rapidity and unpredictableness of their succession. But above all, Picabia has mystified his audience with the forms and inscriptions in his machine paintings. Too often when confronted with these improbable machines and seemingly cryptic inscriptions, authors have assumed a "dada complex," suspended critical analysis, and dismissed the paintings as "absurd machines that had no function except to mock science and efficiency." Since Picabia disdained explanations and his family and close friends have offered none, the privacy of these paintings has hardly been disturbed. Nevertheless, statements by Picabia and the paintings themselves discredit the popular notion that his machines are deliberately senseless, defiant contraptions. Most of them have a definite function and content, and efforts to determine this are not foolish iconographical exercises. Indeed, the function of the machine is often a vital element of the painting, coordinated with the formal properties of the work and in harmony with aesthetic-philosophical convictions held by Picabia throughout his life.

Accordingly, a fresh consideration of Picabia's machinist style is needed, for the popular misconceptions engulfing this period of his career not only misrepresent Picabia, but they taint our view of Dada and the entire question of the machine in twentieth century art. In this article I offer a new assessment of Picabia based on the origins and chronology of his machinist paintings, a description of their considerable variety, an interpretation of their content, and a brief consideration of their influence. Confusion surrounding the beginning of Picabia's machinist style is largely dispelled by his statements in a little-known interview conducted in Duchamp's New York apartment during 1915: "This visit to America...has brought about a complete revolution in my methods of work...Prior to leaving Europe I was engrossed in presenting psychological studies through the mediumship of forms which I created. Almost immediately upon coming to America it flashed on me that the genius of the modern world is in machinery and that through machinery art ought to find a most vivid expression." Picabia's machinist style began, then, in New York in the summer of 1915, and it was one of the sudden changes in his career which have caused many critics to question his seriousness. Though the shift in style was radical, the content and aesthetic preoccupations of Picabia's paintings remained much the same so that his machinist style was not a frivolous or provocative maneuver, and cannot be properly assessed with-
out knowledge of his earlier work. Neither can Picabia's machinist style be evaluated apart from the milieu in which he lived, for his claim that it merely "flashed" upon him that machinery was a source of vivid expression in art is not acceptable. Picabia's machinist style was nourished by artistic precedents and its very existence depended on a mental climate so imbued with the triumphs of science and technology that the term "machine age" has been employed to characterize the era.

Descriptions and dates for the machine age are not easily formulated, but a survey of popular newspapers and journals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provides a revealing general impression. Such publications show a rapid increase in the presence of machines and a heightened interest in science and technology which becomes so accelerated by the early twentieth century that it is impossible to overlook the reality of a machine age.7 Siegfried Giedion and Reyner Banham refine this general image of the machine age as mass concern for omnipresent machines. They concur that after long maturation it was finally realized during the second decade of the twentieth century, and further agree that it was characterized by a stage of mechanization in which an abundance of machines that altered everyday life (typewriters, telephones, electrical appliances and automobiles) came to be owned and operated by the middle classes.8 No class was unmarked, however, by the impact of industrial exhibits at world fairs, by exhilarating advances in such popular fields as airplanes, automobiles and the cinema, or by startling developments in science including the discovery of new atomic theories, X-ray and the emission of rays from radium.9

Reaction to such "progress," however, was often ambivalent. Many people were confident that industry, technology and science had carried the twentieth century to the threshold of a new and superior age which would dispatch the future needs of man with unprecedented efficiency. But others, stirred by the fundamental mystery of life, looked upon the triumvirate of science-technology-machine as a false and pompous trinity.

Prior to the development of his machinist style, Picabia was exposed to such ambivalent attitudes and to their expression in the art of his contemporaries. From 1912 onward he was familiar with the Italian Futurists who glorified the modern machine-dominated world in their manifestos and strove in their paintings (though they rarely depicted machines) to express emotions exacerbated by the simultaneous experience of the speed, power and noise of that machine age. A determination to cope with and to express a new era also marked some of Picabia's colleagues in the "Section d'Or," and is apparent in the work of the poets and writers—Blaise Cendrars, Guillaume Apollinaire and Henri Martin Barzun—associated with those painters.10

But Picabia's first moving encounter with the concept of a machine age came on the occasion of his initial visit to New York in 1913.11 The vitality of that great urban and industrial environment was unforgettable for him, yet more important still were the friendships he established with Alfred Stieglitz, Marius de Zayas, and other members of 291. Stieglitz, founder and director of 291, is perhaps best known in the history of art for his almost single-handed endeavor to introduce modern European art to America before the Armory Show; that, however, was an aspect of a larger ideal concerned with determining the relationship of art and photography and their relevance to modern American society. Stieglitz was convinced that machines could produce not only articles of high quality but art as well—as he labored to demonstrate with a machine, the camera. His associate, Marius de Zayas, was on the verge of concluding that science and scientific methods of inquiry in all fields of knowledge would offer final answers to the problems of art.12 Stieglitz and De Zayas were resolving these ideas when the Armory Show opened and Picabia appeared, charming, vital, and excited about the possibility of a "language" of abstract art. Broad common interests immediately united him with the members of 291 in a friendship that endured for years. Animated meetings occurred daily at 291, and before Picabia departed Stieglitz organized a one-man exhibition of the paintings he had executed in New York.13

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7 Most standard newspapers and illustrated magazines reflect this trend, for example in France and America, New York Times, Le journal, La semaine, and Le figaro illustré.
8 Reyner Banham, Theory and Design in the First Machine Age, New York, 1960, 9-12, sets 1912 as the beginning of full mechanization and specifies the automobile as its symbol. Siegfried Giedion, Mechanization Takes Command, New York, 1948, 41-44, finds the conditions of full mechanization about 1918 to 1920, and offers a broader basis for describing the machine age.
10 Picabia's colleagues in the Section d'Or (Galerie de la Boëtie, Paris, October 10-30, 1912) who exhibit concern for the machine age include Duchamp, Léger, Villon, Jean Marchand, Duchamp-Villon, and Archipenko. Cendrars exalts the modern industrialized age in "Pacques à New York" (1912) and "Contrasts" (October, 1913), and a similar spirit is expressed by Apollinaire in "Zone" (Les soirées de Paris, No. 11, December, 1912, 301-307). For the convictions of the poets and painters associated with Henri Martin Barzun on the review Poème et drame see Henri Martin Barzun, Orphée, New York, 1956, 15-20.
11 Picabia went to New York to witness the Armory Show and to promote abstract art. He arrived about January 20, 1912 (American Art News, New York, 12, No. 16, January 25, 1913, 4) and remained until April 10 (letter from Alfred Stieglitz to Arthur B. Davies, April 11, 1913, ASA, YCAL).
12 For a succinct account of this aspect of Stieglitz' work see William B. McCormick, "Patrons Vote to Decide Fate of Photo-Secesssion Gallery at No. 291 Fifth Avenue," New York Press, October 4, 1914, 6, and an unsigned article, "'291' the Mecca
Back in Europe during 1913–1914 Picabia encountered anew the work of the Italian Futurists and the rayonist-futurist paintings of Goncharova and Larionov. He knew the robot-like figures in Léger's paintings and in Archipenko's relief constructions; he was familiar with the symbolic locomotives in De Chirico's canvases, and the curious machine forms created by Marcel Duchamp. He probably saw Villon's collages which incorporated reproductions of real machines clipped out of journals, and followed the visual and functional analogies between animal and machine that Duchamp-Villon evolved in the Horse of 1914-1915. Picabia may also have known the work of the Vorticists who attributed to machinery a crucial role in the burgeoning dehumanization of society and developed a machine-inspired aesthetic which rendered man and nature alike in dynamic, semi-abstract compositions of hard, sharp-edged, and vaguely machine-made forms.14

While it is probable that Picabia was modestly indebted to all these men and movements for directing his attention to the machine age, he was not significantly influenced visually or theoretically by any of them save one, Marcel Duchamp. His literary and philosophical debts, however, are broader, including, among others, Bergson, Nietzsche, Alfred Jarry, Raymond Roussel, as well as Duchamp.

Bergson's concept of the constant flux of life appealed to Picabia, who bore an inherent need for unrestricted thought and action and resisted anything that threatened to impose routines or boundaries on his life. Nietzsche's concept of the superman who lived outside bourgeois standards of law and morality provided life-long support for Picabia whose effort to live by similar convictions generated frequent social, moral and legal turmoils in his life. Here again the trip to New York was a critical event, for his previous admiration of Nietzsche was rekindled by Benjamin de Casserres, a member of 291 and a flamboyant disciple of that philosopher. De Casserres' articles in Camera Work exactly express Picabia's ideal of life:

In poetry, physics, practical life there is nothing . . . that is any longer moored to a certainty, nothing that is forbidden, nothing that cannot be stood on its head and glorified. The infinite, the uncertain, the paradoxical, is the scarlet paradise of intellectual intoxication.

Anarchy? No. It is the triumph of discrimination, the beatification of paradox, the sanctification of man by man . . .

Nothing which lasts is of value . . . That which changes perpetually lives perpetually. Incessant dying and renewing, incessant metamorphosis, incessant contradiction . . .

I desire as many personalities as I have moods . . . I desire to be ephemeral, protean . . .

I find my supremest joy in my estrangements . . . I desire to become unfamiliar to myself . . . I cling to nothing, stay with nothing, am used to nothing, hope for nothing. I am a perpetual minute.15

More directly influential were Jarry, Roussel and Duchamp, who employed pseudo-scientific procedures, mathematics and fantastic machines to mock the follies of man—often by means of a theme which devalued sexual love. Picabia delighted in their ridicule of man's excessive dependence for security on either superhuman guidance or such hallowed institutions, systems and ideals of man as governments, churches, reason, love, morality, patriotism, law and science.

Alfred Jarry founded a new science, pataphysics, "la science du particulier." He dedicated pataphysics to the study of "les lois qui régissent les exceptions," and utilized this science for such projects as the mathematical proof of God, whom he fixed algebraically as "le plus court chemin de zéro à l'infini."16

In Le surréalisme, Jarry presented sexual intercourse as a scientific experiment in a manner than not only devaluated one of the most intimate human experiences but also mocked science and technology, and portrayed man as a creature devoid of reason and love.17

Raymond Roussel excelled in the creation of elaborate rituals and demonstrations centered about either humans who perform with mechanical perfection, or about fantastic machines whose operation depends equally on magic and extraordinary scientific-technological knowledge. In matter-of-fact

and the Mystery of Art in a Fifth Avenue Attic,” The Sun, New York, October 24, 1915, 6. For De Zayas’ aesthetic and philosophical convictions see his articles in Camera Work (“Photography” and “The Evolution of Form-Introduction,” No. 41, January, 1913, 17-20, 44-46) and the booklet, A Study of the Modern Evolution of Plastic Expression, New York, March 1, 1913, written in collaboration with Paul Haviland.

Stieglitz operated a Fifth Avenue gallery named “The Little Gallery of the Photo-Secession” but popularly referred to by the address of the building, 291. In 1915 this number was adopted as the title of a magazine (291, Nos. 1-12, New York, March, 1915-February, 1916) edited by Stieglitz and De Zayas in addition to Stieglitz’ older publication, Camera Work (Nos. 1-50, New York, 1903-1917).

Little Gallery of the Photo-Secession, Picabia Exhibition, New York, March 17–April 5, 1913.

14 Picabia's contact with the above-mentioned artists came through old friendships and his close association with Apollinaire and the artists and writers who contributed to Les soirées de Paris. To date no documents have been discovered which verify that Picabia knew the Vorticists, but he probably knew about them through Marius de Zayas who interrupted his summer of 1914 with Picabia in Paris (letter from Marius de Zayas to Alfred Stieglitz, June 11, 1914, ASA, YCAL) to interview artists, photographers and art critics in London while the Vorticists were prominent on the London art scene.


16 Alfred Jarry, Gestes et opinions du Docteur Faustroll in Oeuvres complètes, Lausanne, n.d. (1948), 1, 217, 337-20. Jarry was often discussed in the circle of artists and writers at Les soirées de Paris, and his letters were published in several issues of that journal during 1914.

17 Ibid., 31, 197-220.
descriptions of the awe and delight with which the characters of *Impressions d'Afrique* viewed the alternately absurd, cruel, or miraculous machine performances, Roussel attained a level of irony irresistible to Duchamp.18

In the formation of his machine style, Duchamp has repeatedly stressed the intellectual stimulation of Roussel and Jarry and his disgust over the propensity of artists to become enamored with their genius in the merely physical manipulation of pigments.19 By employing mechanical drawing instruments and the modern materials of glass and metal, Duchamp did create forms which appear amenable to (if not the result of) mass production. He thereby eliminated the mark of the facile artist and expanded the challenge to conventional media of art issued by Braque and Picasso in their collages. However, Duchamp's adoption of a machine style was more than a desanctification of the media and techniques of art and the role of the artist. Roussel enabled him to see that the visual properties and mechanical operation of machines poignantly expressed two basic aspects of his personality and his art: his preoccupation with movement and change; and his experience of man's isolation, of the absence of meaningful human bonds or communication, which suggests in turn the absence of any order to life and the futility of man's systems. Duchamp tends to express these concerns in a sexual idiom that becomes increasingly apparent from *Sonata* and *Sad Young Man on a Train* of 1911 through such major works of 1912 as the *King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes*, the *Bride*, the *Virgin*, and the *Passage of the Virgin to the Bride*. By 1913 he eliminated from his oeuvre those exquisite organic-mechanical forms and began to construct an anti-rational universe peopled by magical machines and governed by absurd physics and metaphysics that culminates in the *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, or as it is known by its short title, the *Big Glass* (Fig. 1).

It is not necessary to probe deeply into the complex, enigmatic content of the *Big Glass*, but it should be noted that it is an intricate philosophical statement about life expressed through the theme of sexual love—a view which is not only supported by Duchamp's notes but dependent upon them, since the forms of the *Big Glass* are not explicit in themselves.20 By correlating Duchamp's notes and the *Big Glass*, it becomes evident that he has stripped the sexual act of all love, intimacy and delight by making its procedure preposterous and by frustrating its consummation. And this devaluation of love, devastating as it is, is only a piercing means to the larger comment that man is not a creature distinguished by powers of reason and love. Outwardly, man, as represented by the malic molds, is determined by (and often judged by) his uniform or mold; inwardly he is activated by biological drives which function with the relentless rhythm of a machine, and taunted from above by woman, an erotic motor whose parts and their relationships are incommensurable.21 Duchamp perceived in machines not the beauty of logic and economy that thrilled Léger, nor the speed and power glorified by the Italian Futurists; he dealt with animated mechanisms that operated without will, intelligence or passion—mechanisms fraught with visual, functional and psychological analogies to his view of life as a folly-ridden affair wanting meaningful communication on earth and knowledge of any final goal.

Familiarity with the fundamentals of Duchamp's work is essential since Picabia's machinist paintings often suggest a visual debt to Duchamp, or seem to reflect even the themes and spirit of his work. Vast differences, however, mark the characters of these two friends, and close comparison of their work indicates that ultimately Picabia's machinist style is his own, consistent with his view of life and his preceding art, and distinct in its sources, variety and purposes.


The numerous mechanisms in Roussel's *Impressions d'Afrique* (Paris, 1912) include a painting machine that satirizes Impressionism (pp. 195-209) and an apparatus that mocks color organs and the concept of synesthesia (pp. 52-61). Michel Carrouges describes some Roussel inventions as celibate machines in his important study, *Les machines célibataires*, Paris, 1954, 65-92. He extends this interpretation to Jarry's *Le surmulé* (pp. 93-104) and to Duchamp's *La mariée mise à nu par ces célibataires, même* (pp. 27-59).

19 Duchamp, "Eleven Europeans in America," 20f.


21 The Bride is also subject to directions beyond her control by an "inscription du haut" that Duchamp had not included in the *Big Glass* by 1913, but which is mentioned in his notes. See Marcel Duchamp, *Marchand du sel* (écrits de Marcel Duchamp réunis et présentés par Michel Sanouillet), Paris, 1958, 49.


23 In all the published studies of Picabia from 1920 to this date, only one short article (Philip Pearlstein, "The Symbolic Language of Francis Picabia," *Arts*, 30, January, 1966, 25-43) seriously considers the matter of mechanical symbolism.

24 In catalogue prefaces for Picabia's one-man exhibitions of impressionist paintings (Galerie Hausmann, Paris, February, 1907, and Galerie Georges Petit, Paris,
Picabia clearly stated the aim of his machinist paintings shortly after he began to develop them in New York during 1915:

I have been profoundly impressed by the vast mechanical development in America. The machine has become more than a mere adjunct of life. It is really a part of human life . . . perhaps the very soul. In seeking forms through which to interpret ideas or by which to expose human characteristics I have come at length upon the form which appears most brilliantly plastic and fraught with symbolism. I have enlisted the machinery of the modern world, and introduced it into my studio.

Of course, I have only begun to work out this newest stage of evolution. I don’t know what possibilities may be in store. I mean simply to work on and on until I attain the pinnacle of mechanical symbolism. 22

The mechanical symbolism of Picabia’s machinist style has been almost totally ignored. 23 Yet symbolism is evident in the paintings, his statements about this matter are clear, and his preoccupation with human-machine correspondence springs directly from aesthetic convictions which had guided his work since 1905 or 1906. At that time he was introduced to the theory of correspondance, and from then on through periods visually indebted to Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism and Orphism, Picabia remained dedicated to the uninhibited manipulation of form and color to express emotional responses to nature and to events in his personal life. 24

Prior to 1913 Picabia expressed himself in personal versions of styles fashioned by others; during 1913–1914 he developed a completely personal art which sought to express psychological states by abstract pictorial equivalents. The content of many of these paintings (though reminiscent of themes found in the work of Duchamp and Jarry) is based on events in his private life and continues to characterize many of his machinist paintings.

The foremost example is I See Again in Memory My Dear Udnie (Je revois en souvenir ma chère Udnie, Fig. 2), an enormous and striking canvas, but one which is visually disturbing and thematically bewildering. 25 The name “Udnie” refers to an exotic dancer of Picabia’s acquaintance, and his memory of her seems to deal with a sexual experience. 26 However, far from enshrining a memory of sensual pleasure, Picabia has made a statement of futility and frustration. Limited sexual excitement may be granted to the lighter, warm-colored female forms in the lower center of the canvas, but the probing male forms are denied satisfaction. Shifted to a philosophical level, Picabia’s statement suggests that life is denied fulfillment and has no order; and these ideas are intimately embodied in the forms, space and colors of this composition: thermogenetic colors, a labyrinthine space which compels exploration yet leads nowhere, and forms which create a half-visceral, half-animated plant landscape of vaguely anthropomorphic forms that beg to be identified yet remain tantalizingly out of reach.

Faint suggestions of Picabia’s later machinist paintings can be found in several canvases of 1913–1914, especially in Udnie (Fig. 3) where icy colors and hard, sharp-edged color planes evoke qualities of finely rolled steel. There is even one small watercolor, Mechanical Expression Seen Through Our Own Mechanical Expression (Fig. 4), which predicts the form and spirit of the machinist paintings of 1915. However, this is a minor and solitary work; no other machinist paintings or drawings can be securely assigned a date prior to the summer of 1915 when Picabia said he began to produce them, and the metallic qualities of paintings like Udnie do not prepare one visually for the appearance of Picabia’s machine style. The exhibition, Picabia’s self-portrait as a soldier, which he finished just before going to the front (New York Herald, January 19, 1915). The concentric circles and undulating lines in these two paintings are features present only in documented works of 1914. Presently there are no known paintings by Picabia in the months preceding these paintings and his first machinist drawings.

26 The theme of Udnie refers to Mlle. Napierkowska, an exotic dancer present on the vessel which carried the Picabias to New York in 1913 (Buffet-Picabia, “Picabia l’inventeur,” L’oeil, No. 19, June, 1956, 35). The word “Udnie” is one of several created by Picabia at that time for paintings inspired by his New York trip, for example, Edisons (Art Institute of Chicago), whose alternate letters form a compound of “dans” and “Etoile” (Philip Pearlstein, The Paintings of Francis Picabia, unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, New York, 1955, 109), referring again to Mlle. Napierkowska whom Picabia commemorated in two watercolors of 1913 as the Danseuse étoile sur un transatlantique (collection Mme. Simone Collinet, Paris) and Danseuse étoile et son école de danse (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Various solutions are possible for Udnie, but the most likely is an adaptation of Undine.
links between the works of 1913–1914 and the machinist paintings of 1915 are not visual; they exist on the level of content and of aesthetic means.

Mechanical symbolism is not evident in one of Picabia’s first quasi-machinist drawings of 1915, Fille née sans mère (Fig. 5), but it does introduce at the outset of his machine oeuvre a theme which preoccupied him for years—the machine as a female being produced by man, that is, a “daughter born without a mother.”27 An additional insight into this conception of the machine as the creation and extension of man is provided in a contemporary statement by Picabia’s associate on 291, Paul Haviland:

We are living in the age of the machine.

Man made the machine in his own image. She has limbs which act; lungs which breathe; a heart which beats; a nervous system through which runs electricity. The phonograph is the image of his voice; the camera the image of his eye. The machine is his “daughter born without a mother.” That is why he loves her. He has made the machine superior to himself. That is why he admires her. Having made her superior to himself, he endows the superior beings which he conceives in his poetry and in his plastique with the qualities of machines. After making the machine in his own image he has made his human ideal machinomorphic.28

In some of Picabia’s first machine paintings this correspondence of man and machine is expressed in terms as simple as those employed by Haviland when he associated the phonograph with man’s voice and the camera with his eye. In a portrait of Haviland, Voilà Haviland (Figs. 6, 7), Picabia merely selected an advertisement for a common portable electric lamp, copied it, eliminating a few unnecessary details and inscriptions, and submitted this simplified image as a symbolic portrait of his friend. Although it is possible to perceive the lamp as an upright figure, Picabia was primarily interested in functional analogies, that is, Haviland and the lamp correspond as sources of light. An inscription added to the portrait by Picabia, “La poésie est comme lui,” supports this interpretation, and even Picabia’s use of a portable lamp was deliberate. Haviland was preparing to leave for Europe and therefore about to become a mobile or “portable” light.29

Picabia’s portrait of Alfred Stieglitz (Fig. 8) seems as simple and perhaps more comprehensible than the electric lamp used for Haviland, but certain details and inscriptions in this drawing are perplexing without knowledge of the conditions which prevailed among Stieglitz and his younger associates. Stieglitz believed the Armory Show had concluded the work he had sought to accomplish at 291, and since 1913 he had looked for an opportunity to terminate his gallery.30 Haviland and De Zayas disagreed; they believed that much remained to be accomplished and that Stieglitz, despite his “faith and love,” had failed to realize his ideal of discovering America and helping Americans to discover themselves through art and photography. De Zayas expressed this exact view in a summer issue of the gallery publication, 291, and a pictorial equivalent of his statement formed the cover of that issue—Picabia’s portrait of Stieglitz as a broken, exhausted camera which had failed to attain its ideal.31

No one has probed beyond these obvious machine sources despite that fact that as early as 1921 a journalist discovered and published Picabia’s use of an engineering diagram as the model for a more enigmatic painting, Les yeux chauds.32 By no means do all of his canvases have such sources, but the quest for them is advisable since many paintings can be traced to machines or to mechanical diagrams, and often enough those sources are significant.

Concurrent with the appropriation and slight adjustment of simple machines to serve as symbolic images, Picabia reduced machines to highly abstract compositions whose precision and geometric simplicity were related to the rising sensitivity for machine aesthetics. This is particularly evident in Fantaisie (Fig. 9) which seems to represent an extreme reduction and aesthetic adjustment of an early nineteenth century horizontal-beam steam engine (Fig. 10).33 Picabia’s primary interests in this painting lie, however, neither with machine aesthetics nor with antique machines, but with symbolism—symbolism which is apparent when one coordinates the visual image and its accompanying inscriptions, the title “Fantaisie” and a subtitle, “L’homme créa Dieu à son image.” Contrary to many authors who see no association between the images and inscriptions in Picabia’s paintings (except an intent to mock and mystify), Picabia said that they were intimately related: “In my work the subjective expression is the title, the painting is the object. But this object is nevertheless somewhat subjective because it is the pantomime—the appearance of the title; it furnishes to a certain point the

27 Fille née sans mère is recorded at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a work of 1912, and several authors consider it an important drawing of 1913 which initiates Picabia’s machinist style (Pearlstein, “The Symbolic Language of Francis Picabia,” 39, and Sanouillet, Picabia, 26f.). The drawing is not dated, but the fact that it is on the reverse of a sheet of stationery from the Brevoort Hotel (Picabia’s residence while visiting the Armory Show) may have prompted attributions for a date of 1913. However, Fille née sans mère was not exhibited at 291 with the drawings and watercolors known to have been executed in New York during 1913, and it does not figure in any known document of that year. It could have followed rather than preceded I See Again in Memory My Dear Udnie, and Picabia could have stayed at the Brevoort in 1915. Most significantly, Picabia states that he began his machine style in 1913 in New York, and it is there that we have the first irrefutable evidence of the existence of Fille née sans mère—a reproduction and an important statement (291, No. 4, June, 1915, and Nos. 7–8, September–October, 1915).

28 Paul B. Haviland, statement in 291, Nos. 7–8, September–October, 1915.

29 Haviland sailed to Europe soon after a farewell party on July 4, 1915 (letter from Agnes Ernst Meyer to Alfred Stieglitz, July 4, 1915, ASA, YCAL).

30 Letters from Alfred Stieglitz to Mme. Buffet-Picabia, January 15, 1914, and December 30, 1914; letter from John Weichsel to Alfred Stieglitz, July 31, 1917 (ASA, YCAL).
means of comprehending the potentiality—the very heart of man.”

In Fantaisie the subtitle, “L’homme créa Dieu à son image,” suggests that God is the “Fantaisie” because He has been created by man in his [man’s] own image. And since Haviland and Picabia also believed that man had created the machine in his own image, the following set of equations can be established according to the geometric theorem that the equals of equals are equal:

\[
\text{God} = \text{creation of man in man’s own image} \\
\text{Machine} = \text{creation of man in man’s own image} \\
\text{God} = \text{Machine}
\]

And if God were a machine, what machine could be more appropriate for his symbol than the steam engine, king among machines and path-breaker for the Industrial Revolution?

Picabia continued to employ simple machines and machine parts (both “purified” and relatively realistic) throughout his machinist period, but they comprised only one aspect of his varied oeuvre. During the summer of 1915 he also combined real and fanciful machine parts in complex inventions which might be classified as composite-imaginative machines. De Zayas! De Zayas! (Fig. 11), a symbolic machine portrait of Marius de Zayas, is chiefly derived from schematic diagrams of electrical systems (Fig. 12); however, Picabia has devised his own system incorporating heterogenous items which, moving clockwise from the upper left, can be partly identified as: an empty corset joined by a line from the region of the heart to what appears to be a gigantic spark plug in a ventilating apparatus, a hand crank, and two automobile headlights (lower right and left) with a female plug between them that eventually connects to the empty corset (as does the hand crank) at its point of sex. Given the preceding paintings, one suspects an intelligible content exists here, too, and is tempted to speculate about it. But the content is a private one that will continue to frustrate interpretation until all parts of the machine have been identified and properly associated with each other and the inscriptions.

A less enigmatic example of Picabia’s composite-imaginative machines in the summer of 1915 is Voilà elle (Fig. 13) which was exhibited with De Zayas’ psychotype poem, Elle. One critic reported that “according to the artists’ sworn word these works were portraits of the same woman made at different times and in different places ‘without collusion.’” At a cursory glance the major lines of the typed portrait and the drawn portrait do suggest compositional relationships. This is not sustained upon closer examination, but the content of the two portraits is similar. De Zayas’ poem is a scathing denunciation of the unknown woman as a creature without intelligence and wholly consumed by carnal desires; Picabia’s message is less evident but expresses a similar attitude.

The prominent forms in his machine consist of a mount supporting a pistol, a target, and mechanical linkage connecting them. Sexual symbolism is evident in these objects and their arrangement, for the pistol is clearly a male form and targets are repeatedly used by Picabia in conjunction with the female sex. Moreover, the pistol is accurately aligned with the target so that if fired it cannot miss, and the linkage between gun and target implies that a target hit would cause the pistol to be re-cocked and discharged again, establishing a repetitive, mechanical reaction that characterizes Voilà elle as an automatic love machine akin in theme and spirit to Duchamp’s Big Glass.

Duchamp and Picabia were lifelong friends and few studies have failed to stress the close relationship of these men and their art, especially during the Dada epoch. Voilà elle attests to this relationship, but it also suggests significant differences between the two men. In contrast to the Big Glass, Picabia’s machine images tend to be simpler in both form and content, less marked by painstaking craftsmanship, and less dependent upon external documents—although such documents or biographical information are usually necessary for a full comprehension of his symbolism. Moreover, Picabia’s machines are frequently based on specific persons and events in his private life while Duchamp seems never to have admitted personal mementos into the metaphysical realms of his machines—a phenomenon wholly in accord with their respective personalities. Both ridiculed man’s tendency to attach undue importance to any ideal or institution whether it be reason, love, morality, church, state, art or whatever, but Duchamp did so to free himself from the follies demanded by false gods while Picabia was less concerned about the falsity of those gods than with their power to check the fulfillment of his every impulse. Duchamp possessed uncanny discipline and objectivity; Picabia was an utter hedonist. And in light of this it is interesting to note that Duchamp left the Big Glass unfinished.
ished, thereby abandoning the concerned parties in a state of suspended frustration while Voilà elle appears to be in good working order.

In January, 1916 the Modern Gallery in New York presented an exhibition of Picabia's work which was dominated by his new machinist style in all its variety. The simple machines such as Voilà Haviland were augmented by larger, more complex and private extensions of the composite-imaginative machines, and by yet another mode of painting more closely related to optical art than to machinist art.37

Voilà la femme (Fig. 14), one of the composite-imaginative machines in the exhibition, is a fanciful invention which continues the general theme of Voilà elle and introduces Picabia's use of color with associative and symbolic properties. "Woman" is presented as an upright apparatus resembling a mechanical drawing of some sort of pump or compressor. She is attractively tinted in red, green, blue, brown and black, and set afloat in a brown fog which enhances her formidable presence as an icon-machine or machine goddess. Although her nature and function are not explicit, sexual analogies are suggested by the center shaft, the two receptacles, and a color scheme which reserves the hot reds for what is literally portrayed at the bottom center of the machine as a "door" to "woman."

The large painting entitled Rêvèreence (Fig. 15) is probably not derived from a machine but from a chart dealing with optics or the psychology of perception.38 Characteristic of Picabia, the optical properties of this seemingly precise and ordered composition actually ridicule the sacred dogmas of academic art—balance, stability and clarity of form, space, light, solid and void. Picabia's pursuit of this goal via "pure" forms (the square and the circle), and glittering, non-earthly colors (gold and silver) simultaneously devalues these "pure" forms and colors and elevates his mockery of them into a new law or system. Although the size, shape and arrangement of the forms in Rêvèreence create a symmetrical composition, any mental recognition of balance and stability is undermined by the off-center alignment of the diagonal shaft, the displacement of the smaller circles along this shaft, and the interior lines of the two trapezoids. The two trapezoids match each other exactly in size and position, but the different orientation and modeling of their interior lines alter one's perception of their size and create ambiguous illusions of space and light. As Picabia stated in an inscription along the bottom of the large circle, this painting is an object "qui ne fait pas l'éloge du temps passé," but merits "rêvèreence" for it has taken the cherished values of academic art and placed them at the service of a new order characterized by anti-rationality, tension and "precise ambiguity."

A third painting included in the Modern Gallery exhibition, Les disques or Cette chose est fait pour perpétuer mon souvenir (Fig. 16), lies somewhere between Voilà la femme as a fanciful, symbolic machine, and the optical, aesthetic and philosophical concerns of Rêvèreence. The spectator's attention is captured by this bold composition of precise black, brown, reddish and silver forms against a background of metallic gold paint. Indeed, at close range, the spectator tends to be transfixed, whipped along pipelike forms, and tossed from one circle to another until the dizzying clutch of these discs is broken by the discovery of words painted on the cardboard. A command, printed above the uppermost pipe, directs the spectator to "Lis—c'est clair comme le jour," while a critical comment along the bottommost pipe reads, "Ls tournent-vous avez des oreilles et vous n'entendrez pas." This statement and the black color of the four large circles suggest that the discs represent gramophone records, but the privacy of Picabia's intention in this statement rebuffs attempts to interpret. It is possible, of course, that Cette chose . . . was intended merely to mock and mystify; it can also stand alone as a striking pattern of bold colors and precise forms related to machine aesthetics and optical phenomena. However, the analyses of previous works suggests that an intelligible content lurks in these inscriptions and machine forms, that this machine does "work." Picabia rarely set out to mock machines; our tendency to view his mechanisms as anti-mechanical rests on the neglect of two factors: the visual sources of his machine paintings, and the nature of his mechanical symbolism.

When the visual properties of Picabia's machines are compared with the real machines and machine diagrams on which they were based, it must be conceded that the operation of his inventions is essentially no less convincing than that of real machines.39 Even when confronted with a relatively common machine, one may be unable to determine either its purpose or manner of operation (Fig. 17). This mystery may not be resolved when exterior plates are removed to expose the

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37 At least ten of Picabia's recent machinist paintings were exhibited at the Modern Gallery (New York, January 5-25, 1916) operated by Marius de Zayas and Picabia as a complement to 291.

In this article the paintings associated with "optical" art are not accurately described by that term since responses to them are more of a psychological-philosophical order than of a retinal one. Nevertheless, certain paintings with pronounced "optical" qualities stand out in Picabia's machine oeuvre. They are most akin to a variety of more recent perceptual paintings which William C. Seitz, for want of another name, provisionally designates "optical paintings" (The Responsive Eye, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1965, 18f.), and

38 Contemporary reviews (Christian Science Monitor, "Picabia's Puzzles," Boston, January 29, 1916) establish that Rêvèreence was first exhibited at the Modern Gallery (Picabia Exhibition, New York, January 1916, Cat. No. 3), by this title. Subsequently it acquired the title Dédic d'Amérique and it has recently been confused (Sanouillet, Picabia, 98) with another painting entitled Rêvèreence, probably the watercolor of 1913 formerly at the Galerie Jeanne Bucher, Paris.

39 As Henry Adams remarked when comparing the Virgin with huge dynamos observed at the Paris World's Fair of 1900 (The Education of Henry Adams, Boston and New York, 1918, chap. xxv), there is something miraculous about machines


FEMME!

TU VOUODRAIS BIEN TE LIRE DANS
CE PORTRAIT

ELLE N'A PAS LA PEUR DU PLAISIR

ELLE JOUIT AVEC LES ENDROITS OÙ IL A VECU

13. Picabia, Voilà elle, 1915 (r.) and De Zayas, Elle (l.). Collection unknown (photo: 291, No. 9, November, 1915)
PICABIA


15. Rêverence, 1915. The Baltimore Museum of Art, Sadie A. May Collection

16. Les disques (Cette chose est fait pour perpétuer mon souvenir), 1915. The Arts Club of Chicago, permanent collection
17. Illustration of the Herschell-Spillman tractor engine (photo: Automotive Industries, 42, No. 15, April 8, 1920)

18. Cutaway illustration of the Herschell-Spillman tractor engine (photo: Automotive Industries, 42, No. 15, April 8, 1920)


33. Diagram for Claudel Carburetor (photo: *Automotive Industries*, 42, No. 23, June 3, 1920)


36. *Optophone*, ca. 1922. Thônex-Genève, collection of M. André Napier
motor (Fig. 18), and cross-sectional diagrams of the engine are likely to make its function even less comprehensible. The designing engineers themselves, in order to clarify the operation of their machines, constructed models and reduced complex electrical, chemical and mechanical actions to simple symbols in renderings which rely heavily on number and color codes, labels and directional arrows. Yet the ability of an automobile electric system (Fig. 12) to function is not likely to be questioned, whereas De Zayas! De Zayas! or Voilà la femme are susceptible to immediate classification as fanciful, satirical contraptions.40

These observations are not intended to convince the reader that Picabia’s mechanical contrivances are conceived and function as mere conventional machines. To be sure, Picabia’s machines do not function in an ordinary manner for he was primarily interested in man and commented on man, not on machines. With rare exceptions his machines are symbols which represent not only man, but man’s personality, deeds, concepts and gods, just as Western art from the ancient Greeks onward personified gods, human virtues and vices, war, peace and victory. Accordingly, Picabia’s machines are not properly measured against “real” machines, but when considered for what they are—symbolic representations of man and human situations—then his machines do “function,” for whatever comment Picabia has couched in Voilà la femme is directed at women, not at science, technology, machines, or the value assigned human beings in the capitalistic societies of Europe and the United States in 1915.

An interlude of about eight months occurred in Picabia’s career from late 1915 to mid-1916 as a result of an illness and a voyage to the Caribbean.41 During those months Picabia began to compose poetry, and thereafter painting was only one aspect of his career. Indeed his literary activities between 1917 and 1924 vied with his painting; he became a prolific poet and writer of articles, he edited several Dada journals, collaborated on others, and produced scenarios for ballet and the cinema. As the central figure of Dada in Paris, he was also embroiled in the promotion, defense and explanation of that movement. During the most active period of Dada in Paris (1920–1921) Picabia’s output of paintings diminished and assemblages became as important as his machinist style. However, the machinist paintings continued and although some stylistic modifications evident in them after 1915 merit discussion, they are modest. The general categories and content of the paintings remain much the same.

Picabia and his wife settled in Barcelona from about August, 1916 until March, 1917 when they returned to New York for another visit of six months. Their life in Barcelona was made more pleasant by a band of French friends including Albert and Juliette Gleizes, Arthur Cravan, Maximilian Gautier, Marie Laurencin and her husband, Otto Von Wätgen. But Picabia was bored and he began to publish a provocative little journal entitled 391 inspired by and named after Stieglitz’ 297.42 Picabia’s first published poems appeared in the Barcelona and New York issues of 391 along with reproductions of recent machinist paintings and articles which reaffirm his preoccupation with the theory of correspondance.

The most articulate expression of this aesthetic occurs in an article by Maximilian Gautier, who surely speaks for Picabia:

Le monde des idées et des formes lui apparaît comme un cosmos sympathique, tout en correspondances, rapports et ressemblances. Il aperçoit ce qu’il peut y avoir de commun et de liant entre une fleur et un moteur à explosions, entre une ligne et une idée, une couleur et un souvenir, un amour et un phénomène chimique, un personnage biblique et une doctrine d’art, un piano et un peigne, la mer et un tramway. Ce qu’on peut prendre chez lui pour une affectation de comique, n’est que l’effet d’une ingénuité pure, d’un ferme et sincère désir d’exprimer tout l’humain par les moyens les plus directs. Il n’a pour objectif que de se confier, projeter dans la matière les réalités de son être intérieur.43

Picabia’s Portrait de Marie Laurencin (Fig. 19) is representative of this concept of human-mechanical correspondence. It also shows the stylistic modifications of his post-1915 machinist paintings. Indifferent composition and technique, puzzling inscriptions, and an implausible machine tempt the spectator to regard this painting as a dadaist insult to art and technology; but Picabia was not primarily concerned with either art or technology. He has constructed a symbolic portrait of Marie Laurencin and the conditions of her life in Barcelona. The inscriptions identify the subject of the portrait and refer to Barcelona, to Marie’s dog Coco, and to a “boche” or her German husband whose nationality did cast a “shadow” over their life during the war. The machine forms, though not very expressive in themselves, were selected deliberately. Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia has recalled that in order for Picabia to recover from an illness and to attend to his army mission they left New York for Panama in late 1915 or early 1916 and proceeded to Barcelona about July, 1916 (letter to the author, October, 1965). Picabia is not mentioned in New York after September, 1918 (Alfred Stieglitz-Marius de Zayas correspondence, ASA, YCAL). A Panamanian postcard from Picabia to De Zayas (ASA, YCAL) marked simply “November 22” must date from 1915 since Picabia’s address during November of the adjacent years can be documented. The title of 391 (Barcelona, New York, Zürich, and Paris, Nos. 1-19, January 25, 1917-November, 1924) is explained in a letter from Francis Picabia to Alfred Stieglitz on January 22, 1917 (ASA, YCAL).

40 Fanciful machines need not be non-functional or imply an anti-machine attitude. To the contrary, Rube Goldberg’s droll inventions (contemporary with Picabia’s) are more improbable than Picabia’s—and operate in a manner liberated from function which enables us to become fascinated with them as art.

41 Picabia’s activities from late 1915 through 1916 are not well documented. Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia has recalled that in order for Picabia to recover from an illness and to attend to his army mission they left New York for Panama in late 1915 or early 1916 and proceeded to Barcelona about July, 1916 (letter to the author, October, 1965). Picabia is not mentioned in New York after September, 1918 (Alfred Stieglitz-Marius de Zayas correspondence, ASA, YCAL). A Panamanian postcard from Picabia to De Zayas (ASA, YCAL) marked simply “November 22” must date from 1915 since Picabia’s address during November of the adjacent years can be documented. The title of 391 (Barcelona, New York, Zürich, and Paris, Nos. 1-19, January 25, 1917-November, 1924) is explained in a letter from Francis Picabia to Alfred Stieglitz on January 22, 1917 (ASA, YCAL).

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Buffet-Picabia recalls in fact that Picabia associated the freshness and gaiety of Marie Laurencin with the effect of a ventilator—the major form in the portrait.\(^{44}\) In terms of style, an asymmetrical balance prevails in this composition in contrast to the bilateral symmetry that characterized the 1915 paintings. This feature is sometimes accompanied in the post-1915 paintings by a grand indifference for technical refinement or by the cultivation of a deliberately sketchy, painterly style—although many of the later machinist paintings, especially those from 1918 to 1922, are carefully executed and participate in a Picabian way in the rising interest in machine aesthetics.

While Picabia’s use of a highly personal idiom of symbolic machine forms seems beyond dispute, the efficacy of his symbolism is debatable. Frequently symbols have little or no visual relation to the object or idea they represent, although this poses no problem once the symbol has become standardized and familiar to its audience. With a few exceptions, however, Picabia’s symbolic forms were never fixed. Even after prolonged examination employing visual and literary, internal and external evidence, the Portrait de Marie Laurencin fails to convey an intelligible statement or emotion to anyone except Picabia and a few initiated spectators.\(^{45}\)

This criticism is not valid for all of Picabia’s machinist paintings. Two important composite-imaginary machines of 1916–17, Prostitution universelle (Fig. 21) and Parade amoureuse (Fig. 22), reflect modifications in style similar to the Portrait de Marie Laurencin, but their content is open to a universal audience and is expressed largely by the forms themselves.

The content of Prostitution universelle is harsh and it is stated with brutal clarity in a bleak composition dominated by two machine forms whose appearance and accompanying inscriptions identify them as an upright male and a supine female. As verified by a related drawing (Fig. 20), these machines are engaged in the act of love, but Picabia has made this act an impersonal, mechanical function, stripped of all that is intimate and sacred. The machines are connected solely by two wires, and they seem almost unaware of and unconcerned with each other’s presence. Though powdered with metallic silver paint, the female machine is a drab creature, functioning only as an indiscriminate, emotionless receptacle. She has her “sac de voyage” and is poised like a mechanical cricket, ready to snap her connections in a moment and spring to the next unconnected male. Her indifferent partner is more handsomely arrayed in black and gold metallic paint, but he lacks mobility and exercises only one function. Even that function seems to be not of his own volition, but—reminiscent of Duchamp’s Big Glass—a function directed from above as indicated at the upper left by a dotted line to the center contact on the male machine.

The content of Parade amoureuse is less evident, but initially one is less concerned about the “meaning” of this brightly painted, disarmingly droll construction set against a textured ground with thin lines that suggest a curious interior space. Temptation to speculate about the noise and movement of this gangling machine in operation is irresistible, and the possibilities seem hilarious until the title of the painting and sexual imagery in its forms infiltrate our consciousness. Once the presence of content beyond that of a delightful anti-machine is admitted, the ambiguous forms and improbable operation of Parade amoureuse assume different values, and one is impelled to identify the gender and function of various parts. Ready answers are thwarted, but the title suggests that Picabia has made a show of sexual love, placed it on “parade” by lining up the forms for display and providing them with color, noise and action. But this is only “show” for the apparatus simply cannot function effectively. Should it be activated as a love machine, the frenzied flailings of its connecting linkage would appear as a not-so-comical expression of the machine’s inability to accomplish its function, to transmit or release its power.

Although such symbolic machines dominated Picabia’s machinist oeuvre, he also developed a decidedly different manner of machine—the “painterly” machine that may harbor symbolic forms but appeals as a painting per se, unburdened by symbolism and literary or biographical data.

Étude pour novia (Fig. 23), an important and recurring

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44 Mme. Albert Gleizes, who was portrayed as a machine about the same time, reports that Picabia attached great importance to those portraits and considered them “tres ressemblants” (unpublished memoirs quoted from an authorized type-script by courtesy of Mr. Daniel Robbins).

45 Picabia sometimes repeated themes utilizing similar forms in the same context, for example Novia in Figs. 23 and 34. However, an inventory of his machines yields not a catalogue of set symbols but a vast array of forms and compositions which can rarely be “explained” by reference to other paintings.

46 Many of the painterly machines appear to be contemporary in date—particularly those that are executed with the blue and black water color and ink used in Étude pour novia. None presently known are dated, but Étude pour novia suggests a date of ca. 1916-17 since this theme is documented by a similar machine entitled Novia on the cover of 391, No. 1, Barcelona, January 25, 1917.

47 Joseph Stella, Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler and John Covert should also be mentioned. Stella had sketched Pittsburgh’s industrial scenes in 1908 and painted in a Futurist-inspired idiom since 1912, but he did not seize bridges, ships and airplanes as subjects until after his close association with Duchamp beginning in 1915. The Precisionist styles of Sheeler and Demuth which began to emerge in 1916 and 1917 respectively are indebted to several sources including Cézanne, Gleizes and their own previous work. Picabia and Duchamp must also be cited in this respect, both from the standpoint of machine aesthetics and, to a lesser extent, their irreverent, debunking attitudes. See Forbes Watson, “Charles Demuth,” The Arts, 2, No. 1, New York, January, 1923, 78. For John Covert see George Heard Hamilton, “John Covert: Early American Modern,” College Art
subject in Picabia's work, illustrates the painterly machine. *Novia* is a beguiling, beautiful machine, a sweetheart—not because of traits which would endear her to Léger, such as a mass production personality, streamlined construction, precision and efficiency, but because she is the antithesis of that, an irresistibly soft, helpless, impossible female machine.\(^{46}\)

Although Picabia produced a number of painterly machines, most of his machinist paintings after 1915 incline in style toward the precision and simplicity of machine aesthetics. The theme of *Machine tournez vite* (Fig. 25) is sexual—a code in the lower left corner labels the smaller wheel “*Femme*” and the larger gear “*Homme*.” Nevertheless, a spectator is first attracted by the design in bold blue and gold forms against a contrasting black background, and in the final analysis these visual properties may override Picabia's symbolic intentions.

This dual appeal of machine aesthetics and provocative, intellectualized content in the work of Picabia and Duchamp accounts for their considerable influence on diverse American artists who frequented the Arensbergs' New York salon from 1915 to 1920, notably Man Ray and Morton Schamberg.\(^{47}\)

In both style and content there is an aura of Duchamp and Picabia about Man Ray's *Danger-Dancer* (Fig. 24).\(^{48}\) But it is also a convincing personal work, for despite the fact that contact with the two Frenchmen was decisive for his career, Man Ray was not a mere follower. He alone among the Americans fully shared their dadaist spirit. Indeed there were signs of a dada temperament and of a modest inclination toward machine aesthetics in his work before Duchamp and Picabia reached New York in 1915—and by 1916 Man Ray was a full-fledged member in the New York dadaist group, a member whose genius with materials and techniques was surpassed by none of his colleagues.

At the same time, Duchamp and Picabia were catalysts for the vastly different machinist style of Morton Schamberg. Schamberg's mitre box and plumbing pipe construction entitled *God* indicates he was not impervious to the dadaist mockery of Duchamp and Picabia, but his real sensitivity resided in machine aesthetics.\(^{49}\) Schamberg also seemed to be pointed in that direction before the arrival of the Frenchmen, but their presence stimulated his development of an exquisite style exemplified in *Machine* (Fig. 26) which harbors neither symbolism nor dada buffoonery, but does demonstrate a perception of beauty and order in machinery which preempts similar “purist” tendencies in Europe both in date and in sensitivity.

The specific individual influences of Picabia and Duchamp among these American painters are not easily distinguished, but Duchamp was more influential partly because he learned English and established a closer relationship with them. He also remained longer in New York, whereas Picabia was constantly moving. In the fall of 1917 he left America permanently, returning to France via Spain. A recurrent illness prompted him to move again in early 1918 to seek rest and the care of a neurologist in Switzerland. Owing to that illness and to an incredibly involved personal life, most of 1918 was a turmoil and Picabia painted relatively little.\(^{50}\) However, he wrote a great deal and it was a volume of poems which came to the attention of Tristan Tzara that led to Picabia's contact with the Zurich dadaists—first by correspondence and then in person during January, 1919.\(^{51}\) His collaboration with the Zurich dadaists was celebrated by a unique example, *Reveil matin* (Fig. 27), of another variant within his machinist style. Picabia, with the assistance and delighted audience of Arp and Tzara, dipped the parts of a dismantled alarm clock in ink, pressed them on a paper, and then finished the composition by adding a framework of lines enlivened by small circles and the customary inscriptions.\(^{52}\)

Although the Zürich dada artists were stimulated by Picabia's work, they were not reshaped by it. Arp, Sophie Täuber, Janco, Richter and Egling all continued to explore the organic and geometrical abstractions which characterized their work before Picabia's arrival. Nevertheless, the union of Picabia and the Zurich dadaists was a critical event. It sparked a mutual excitement immediately apparent in their publications and activities; it led to the opening of the incomparable dada cell in Paris; and it established machinist paintings as an important feature of dada art. Several German and French dadaists developed machinist styles—in Cologne, for

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\(^{48}\) Man Ray was more likely to paint with the aid of a machine (his air gun) than he was to paint machines; *Danger-Dancer* is one of the few paintings where he depicted machines or machine parts. It suggests a relationship to Picabia's *Machine tournez vite* (Fig. 25) and *Reveil matin* (Fig. 27) without being dependent upon them. The date of *Danger-Dancer* is not documented but could be as early as 1917 since it (or a duplicate) was incorporated in the assemblage, *L'impossibilité*, exhibited in 1921 (Librairie Six, Exposition Man Ray, Paris, December 3-31) as a work of 1917-20.

\(^{49}\) Schamberg was assisted in the creation of *God* (ca. 1918, Philadelphia Museum of Art) by Else Von Freytag Loringhoven.

\(^{50}\) In November, 1917 Picabia met Germaine Everling who became his devoted companion for over a decade. The complicated marital relations which ensued for almost two years aggravated his neurasthenic condition and disrupted several lives.

\(^{51}\) Tzara wrote to Picabia seeking his collaboration on August 21, 1918, and they met in Zürich in late January, 1919 (Tzara-Picabia correspondence in Sanouillet, *Dada à Paris*, 466, 478). They must have heard of each other before this time since Tzara and De Zayas met in the fall of 1916 and exchanged copies of *Dada* and *291* (Tzara-De Zayas correspondence, Sanouillet, ibid., 569, 572). Tzara was also mentioned in *291*, No. 5, New York, June, 1917.

example, Max Ernst and Baargeld were influenced by Picabia’s work, and in Paris, dada painting was identified with the paintings of Picabia and his colleagues Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, Jean Crotti, and Suzanne Duchamp-Crotti.

During a trip to Munich in 1919, Max Ernst saw dada publications from Zürich which prompted the development of a machinist style that dominated his work for a short time and remained an important aspect of his career until the mid-1920’s. His earliest machinist drawings such as the Roaring of Ferocious Soldiers (Fig. 28) are clearly indebted to Picabia in terms of composition and in the use of inscriptions and actual machine diagrams, but almost from the start Ernst attained a personal expression. His inscriptions describe a different temperament, his technique is more delicate and precise, and within a year he was producing such machine-like beings as Deux figures ambigus (1919) prophetic not only of his distinctive later machines but of the animated growths and enigmatic spaces of his surrealist paintings.

In the company of Duchamp and Picabia during 1915-1916 in New York, Jean Crotti developed a machinist style which initially owed a good deal to his two friends. Virginité en déplacement (1916) is indebted visually and thematically to Duchamp’s Bride, and Les forces mécaniques de l’amour en mouvement (Fig. 29) was once mistaken for a work by Picabia. Nevertheless, Crotti realized a sensitive, personal style which contributed significantly to the small but vital group of dada artists in Paris who agitated the public at each Salon des Indépendants and Salon d’Automne from 1919 to 1922. He was supported in that activity by his wife, Suzanne Duchamp-Crotti, who in 1915–1916 also began to construct machinist assemblages which were perhaps less sensitive but often more provocative than Crotti’s paintings. One of the best of her assemblages, Un et une menacés (Fig. 30) shares the spirit of Duchamp and Picabia, yet is marked by an inventiveness, delicacy, and humor which make it a first-rate work in its own right.

Duchamp and Picabia abhorred the idea of becoming the founder of a school or movement in art. With few exceptions the influence of their work was a liberating force, not a demanding, confining one. Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes was an exception among Picabia’s painter colleagues. The subject matter, droll mechanical forms, indifferent technique, and awkward lettering of his Jeune femme (Fig. 31) demonstrate a dependence on Picabia not present among the other dada painters. An engagingly irreverent, roguish sense of humor enlivens many of his machinist paintings, but dada polemics, not painting, enlisted the zeal of Ribemont-Dessaignes, who became Picabia’s most enthusiastic and versatile colleague.

While Picabia held a central role in Paris Dada, the output of his machines was appreciably reduced to make way for a number of intriguing assemblages, experiments with ink blots, and an endless succession of dada publications, festivals, and exhibitions. In some of his writings and in a few of the ink blots and assemblages at that time, Picabia participated in the stream of nihilism and anti-art prominent within the complex phenomenon of Dada. In one respect, Picabia’s activity in this realm of Dada appears to be only a change of degree in the attitude he had held for several years, but in fact such nihilism was incompatible with his convictions about art. Painting was for him such a natural and necessary means of expression that to deny it would be almost equivalent to renouncing the ability to speak or write. Moreover, there were signs that Dada was becoming organized, serious and ambitious. In May, 1921 Picabia publicly announced and explained his separation from Dada.

The machinist paintings Picabia produced during the heyday of Dada in Paris generally continued the practice of human-mechanical correspondence and the trend towards machine aesthetics noted in several paintings of 1915–1917. Both of these characteristics are evident in L’enfant carbureateur (Fig. 32). Picabia’s perception of beauty in machines is undisputable before this striking composition of gold, black and silver forms harmonized in pattern and in color with the unpainted plywood support. Nonetheless, an artful arrangement of precise forms, hard planes, and metallic colors hardly comprises the total significance of the painting. Symbolism is rampant, and though its precise nature is elusive the machine parts themselves suggest sexual analogies which are fortified by the inscriptions and the subject matter.

The only noteworthy modification in Picabia’s machinist

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53 Editor’s notes in Max Ernst’s “An Informal Life of M. E.” reprinted in The Museum of Modern Art, Max Ernst, New York, 1961, 11. The identity of the dada publications is not known, but it is probable that they included one or more copies of Dada containing machinist drawings by Picabia (No. 3, Zürich, December, 1916, and Nos. 4-5, Zürich, May 15, 1919).


55 Like the American artists previously discussed, the Crottis worked out their own direction. During the dada days of Paris the baiting forms, materials and content of their work gave way to abstract geometrical compositions suggestive of solar systems visually indebted to the precise forms of their machinist paintings but quite different in aim. In 1921 they proclaimed the new development “Tabu,” a form of art they considered a non-materialistic and even religious expression made possible by the purgative work of Dada. Jean Crotti, “Tabu,” Little Review, New York, spring, 1922, 45.

56 Picabia’s “Manifeste Cannibale Dada” published in Dadaphone, No. 7, Paris, March, 1920, is one of his most deliberately insulting statements. It is matched by his ink splotch entitled La Sainte-Vierge (301, No. 12, Paris, March, 1920), and an assemblage consisting of a toy monkey mounted on a support inscribed with an infantile scrawl: “Portrait de Cézanne,” “Portrait de Renoir,” “Portrait de Rembrandt.”


58 Picabia’s Child Carburetor is based on an automobile carburetor (Fig. 33), that is, the part of a gasoline motor which achieves a proper mixture of volatile gas and air to assure maximum firing of the cylinders. Accordingly, the role of the carburetor is a vital one—in a conventional internal combustion engine or in a...
style during the dada years was, ironically, a modest response
to the climate of machine aesthetics propagated by such inde-
pendent but kindred groups as L’Esprit Nouveau, De Stijl, the
Bauhaus and the Russian Suprematists and Constructivists.
Frequently from about 1918 to 1922 Picabia recast earlier
themes, Novia for example (Fig. 34), into more austerely geo-
metrical forms with hard planes and flat colors that participate
in the purist-classicist trend of much French painting after
the war. This is particularly prevalent in his work of 1922, a year
also distinguished by new subjects and sources (electrical
symbols, wave graphs, and geometrical or astronomical dia-
grams) perhaps suggested to Picabia by his French, German
and Russian colleagues. Nevertheless, Picabia was not
absorbed by the milieu. Indeed, in terms of content his machines
challenged and parodied the grand designs of L’Esprit Nouveau
and related phenomena elsewhere in Europe.

Astrolabe (Fig. 35) is named for an instrument once used to
observe celestial bodies, and the configuration of forms and
lines does suggest a solar system—but a much unruly one
which may harbor a Picabian view of the universe. Optophone
(Fig. 36) asserts more emphatically the continuity of Picabia’s
temperament to the very end of his machinist style. A female
nude is superimposed on a diagram of a static magnetic field
in which optical properties are more important than machine
aesthetics. Neither optics nor machine aesthetics, however,
override Picabia’s proclivity to perceive human (and usually
sexual) analogies everywhere. Here the nude, so placed that
her point of sex falls over the center of the magnetic field,
becomes in electrical parlance either a “charged body” or the
“conductor” of the charge.

A large one-man exhibition of these late machinist paintings
in November, 1922 marks a turning point in Picabia’s career.60
In 1923 he abandoned his machinist style as rapidly as he had
developed it in 1915.60 Considering his devotion to change
and the frequent jumps in his career, this sudden desertion of
a style is less surprising than the fact that it had endured
eight years. During that period he never faltered in his de-
votion to human-mechanical correspondence, but in terms of
style his oeuvre was varied. Simple machines and machine
parts coexisted with composite-imaginary machines, mecha-
cal diagrams and optical patterns which could be executed in
relatively realistic terms, in a painterly manner, or with an
emphasis on machine aesthetics and perceptual effects.

Since Picabia’s concept of mechanical symbolism has been
ignored by previous authors, its naïveté has escaped criticism,
but the confounding content and uneven technical quality of
his machinist paintings has evoked criticism for being trivial,
excessively literary, deliberately provocative or mystifying,
and indifferent to craftsmanship and beauty. Although at one
time or another all of this criticism is justified, it represents a
partial and prejudiced evaluation of his machinist oeuvre. A
just evaluation involves the totality of his work and consider-
ation of Picabia the man who sought a life unfettered by any
sort of restrictions or responsibilities which thwarted his im-
placable demand for freedom of thought and action. He went
further than most men to live by his personal ideals, and he
expressed them in his paintings and in scores of poems, letters,
statements, and articles published in journals and newspapers
from 1917 onward.61

Voyez-vous, l’ennui est le pire des maladies et mon grand
désespoir serait justement d’être pris au sérieux, de devenir un
grand homme, un maître . . .62

Ce qui me donne des certitudes, c’est que je sais qu’il est
impossible d’arrêter le mouvement . . .

Il faut être nomade, traverser les idées comme on traverse
les pays et les villes . . .63

Il faut traverser la vie, rouge ou bleu, tout nu, avec une
musique de pêcher subtil, prêt à l’extrême pour la fête . . .64

Picabia’s art was an inseparable aspect of his life. It was
called upon to express his thoughts and emotions without
distinction between those which were grand or trivial, simple
or complex, urgent or enduring. To function as a form of ex-
pression as personal and natural as speech, his art could not
be burdened by commercial need, by desire for fame or by an
ambition to produce something important or beautiful. Spon-
taneity and flexibility were necessarily vital (though not ex-
clusive) elements in Picabia’s art as they were in his life.

Consequently he tossed off many drawings and paintings
clumsy in technique and trivial in content—mementos of his

Picabia invention where motors are usually female beings activated by “love
gasoline.” In addition to the title and signature, inscriptions on L’enfant carbura-
teur read: “Détruire le Futur,” “Sphère de la Migraine,” “Flux et Reflux des
Résolutions,” “Dissolution de Prolongation,” “Méthode Crocodile,” and “Value
en Jaquette.”

60 A few machine drawings occur later in Picabia’s career, notably the machine
portraits of his collaborators on the ballet Relâche and the film Entr’a"-ce
(Room in Paris, November 21, 1924, 4).

61 A complete bibliography of Picabia’s writings from 1917 to his departure from
Paris in 1922 exceeds the scope of this article. A list of the basic works would
include nine volumes of poetry or major poems; two dadaist reviews (391 and
Cannibale); major contributions to most of the dada publications, to Littéra-
ture et to the Little Review; a series of articles for Comœdia, L’ère nouvelle, and
Paris-Journal; the ballet Relâche and the film Entr’a"-ce, produced in collaboration
with René Clair and Erik Satie.

63 Picabia, “M. Picabia se sépare des Dadas.”
64 Francis Picabia, “L’idéal doré par l’or,” 391, No. 5, New York, June, 1917, in
Picabia, 391, 42.
personal life as short-lived as the thought or event that inspired them. However, this criticism cannot be charged against Parade amoureuse, L'enfant carburateur, or dozens of other canvases which express his attitude toward life in images that are technically proficient and visually effective. Picabia did intend for some of his paintings to insult and mystify, but his machinist oeuvre is no more dominated by such works than it is by overly literary paintings or by such beguiling objects as the Motherwell Novia. Finally, it is evident that Picabia's machinist paintings were no more anti-art than they were anti-machine. To be sure he delighted in deflating art's hot air balloon: "je voudrais fonder un école 'paternelle' pour décourager les jeunes gens de ce que nos bons snobs appellent l'Art avec un A majuscule. L'Art est partout, excepté... dans les temples d'Art, comme Dieu est partout, sauf dans les églises..." Nevertheless, Picabia advocated and demonstrated a freedom in his life and art which can be matched by few artists between 1913 and 1925. As an artist and as a personality his example exerted a positive, liberating influence then, which during recent years artists, authors and collectors have experienced anew.

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65 Picabia, "L'œil cacodylate."