

Beginnings, 1905–1911

Picabia first made his name as an after-the-fact Impressionist painter, enjoying critical praise for his work in a mode pioneered by older artists such as Claude Monet and Alfred Sisley. On the occasion of his second solo exhibition, in 1907, one reviewer ecstatically declared, “Never would we have dared imagine that M. Picabia could arrive so quickly at this maturity, this mastery.” Unlike his predecessors, however, Picabia is believed to have worked from photographic postcards rather than immersing himself in nature and painting outdoors. In this, he travestied the original spirit of Impressionism and that style’s *en plein air* (in the open air) techniques.

Whispers of Picabia’s reliance on photography were already swirling when he emerged on the Paris art scene in 1905. The Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro, for one, called this practice “shocking.” Picabia’s penchant for dispensing with established norms and appropriating readymade images would become a constant in his career, and these strategies would continue to elicit shock from critics and audiences alike. More and more, Picabia would relish courting controversy and drumming up publicity for his latest scandal. He left Impressionism behind soon after his well-received 1907 exhibition, cycling through a rapid succession of styles—another through-line in Picabia’s practice.

Abstractions, 1912–1914

In the summer of 1912, Picabia turned to abstraction, as seen in paintings such as *The Spring* and *Dances at the Spring* [II]. These works were exhibited that fall at the Salon d'Automne, along with abstract canvases by František Kupka and Fernand Léger, and marked the arrival of non-objective painting in Paris. Critics reviled Picabia's new work as "incomprehensible," "a heap of red and black shavings" resembling "encrusted linoleum." Several months later, the Armory Show opened in New York with four of Picabia's abstractions on view, including *Dances at the Spring* [I]. Picabia, who had made the transatlantic crossing for the exhibition, gave numerous interviews and was received as a "high priest" of modern art.

When he returned to Paris in the summer of 1913, Picabia began work on a pair of large-scale canvases that would become *Udnie (Young American Girl; Dance)* and *Edtaonisl (Ecclesiastic)*. Unveiled at the Salon d'Automne that fall, they were hung above a staircase landing and almost universally mocked by critics. After World War II, however, they were heralded as early precedents for postwar abstract painting. Restored and displayed at the Musée national d'art moderne in Paris in 1948, they were sought by American and French museums alike. They are displayed here together for the first time in this country.

Mechanomorphs and Dada, 1915–1922

During World War I, Picabia's lifestyle was peripatetic. He was eligible to serve in the French army but avoided military service by seeking exile in New York, Barcelona, and Switzerland.

Picabia painted, drew, and became active as a writer at this time, but the mainstay of his activity was contributing to and editing journals. His engagement with the mechanics of journal production coincided with the appearance of the machine in his work, as subject and as model for a newly hard-edged, precise, and impersonal approach. "Mechanomorphs" is a term commonly used to describe his works that incorporate machine imagery.

The Dada movement was born in 1916 in neutral Zurich; Picabia met the Dada impresario Tristan Tzara there in 1919, shortly after the war ended. A few months later, Picabia was back in Paris, where he was soon joined by Tzara and other Dadaists. They waged an all-out assault on the culture of rationality that they held responsible for the war. In 1921, at the Salon d'Automne, Picabia presented an iconoclastic group portrait of Paris Dada: a canvas bearing the signatures of almost sixty friends and acquaintances. The following year, at the Salon des Indépendants, he presented an empty frame strung with yarn between which phrases were suspended. Both works functioned simultaneously as irreverent in-jokes and as attacks on the grand European tradition of painting.

Dalmau, *Littérature*, and Salon Ripolins, 1922–1924

On November 18, 1922, the *Exposition Francis Picabia* opened at the Galeries Dalmau in Barcelona. It featured almost fifty works on paper believed to have been created for the show. Archival photographs of the installation capture a dizzying array of styles: “portraits” of doe-eyed Spanish women hung alongside optical abstractions and geometric drawings inspired by mechanical diagrams. The present installation pays homage to Picabia’s original display, which made evident that he considered abstraction but one style among many rather than an enduring avant-garde goal.

During these same years, Picabia continued to submit paintings to the Paris salons. Instead of traditional oils, he used commercial enamel paints (commonly referred to by the brand name Ripolin) and worked on an imposing scale intended to attract attention, creating works in both abstract and figurative modes. The bold graphic character and sinister eroticism of *The Spanish Night* and *Animal Trainer* carry over to the contemporaneous black-and-white covers Picabia designed for the journal *Littérature*. Picabia’s sinuous contours and lines and pseudo-classical figuration satirize the dominant postwar aesthetic, which held up the art of the French nineteenth-century painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres as a model for the nationalist “return to order.”



Installation view of *Exposition Francis Picabia*, Galeries Dalmau, Barcelona, November 18–December 8, 1922. Photograph by Josep Brangulí Soler. © Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya/Brangulí (Fotògrafs)

Ciné-Theater-Dance, 1924

The composer Erik Satie approached Picabia about collaborating on a ballet in January 1924, assuring him of “total liberty.” Almost from the start, Picabia had the idea of also producing a film, which he imagined as “a parody of cinematic action.” The collaboration, which expanded to include René Clair, a filmmaker, and Rolf de Maré, the director of the Ballets Suédois, resulted in the humorously titled ballet *Relâche* (which loosely translates as “day off” or “no performance”) and the film *Entr’acte* (intermission).

Relâche premiered on December 4, 1924, although it had been advertised to begin earlier, on November 27. That performance had been abruptly canceled, leading the attendees waiting outside the theater to wonder if this was Picabia’s latest hoax. Cinema and dance interacted spectacularly. An approximately ninety-second portion of *Entr’acte*, in which Picabia and Satie fire a cannon at the audience, was screened as an “overture”; the rest of the film played, appropriately, at intermission. During the performance, dancers preceded from seats in the audience to the stage and undressed to reveal mirrored bodysuits before a backdrop of occasionally blinding lights. *Entr’acte* is screened in this gallery; also on view are publicity photographs of Picabia’s sets and costumes and various related drawings by Picabia, including portraits of people involved in the ballet’s production.

Collages and Monsters, 1924–1927

In January 1925, Picabia left Paris for the south of France, where he settled in a villa in Mougins, overlooking Cannes. The move precipitated an intensely productive period of painting, as Picabia began his so-called Monsters: pictures of embracing couples and carnival characters, rendered in the acidic colors and saturated sheen of commercial enamel paint. These works seemed to simultaneously indulge in and mock the fashionable high society in which Picabia found himself. He described them as “confetti paintings in which the richness of 40-sous silk is expressed by Ripolin.”

Although Picabia had used commercial enamel paints like Ripolin periodically since the late 1910s, his use of them intensified in the mid-1920s, as did his experimentation with other unorthodox materials and processes. Collages from this period incorporate things like matches, hairpins, dry pasta, and feathers. Picabia also revisited older paintings with increasing frequency. Commercial enamels, designed to provide even, opaque coverage, proved admirably suited to amending, adjusting, covering over, and canceling out prior works, as seen in *The Lovers (After the Rain)*, which Picabia painted over an earlier abstraction.

Transparencies, 1927–1930

Of the works in this gallery, the poet Jean Van Heeckeren remarked that “Picabia has made an extraordinary discovery in painting, which consists in superimposing several figures ‘par transparence.’” The type of “superimposed” paintings Van Heeckeren referred to came to be known as Transparencies. Working in his large new studio in Mougins, Picabia created his Transparencies by alternating layers of paint with layers of resinous varnish. This process allowed him to lay linear motifs atop one another while keeping them distinct. These richly layered, multi-referential compositions interweave an often dizzying array of contour images drawn from such diverse sources as Renaissance painting, Catalan frescoes, and the popular culture of the day.

Picabia’s Transparencies originated with his reworking of a group of Spanish-themed watercolors that were first shown in Cannes in 1927. Over these naturalistic depictions of Spanish women and toreadors, Picabia added schematic renderings of fantastical creatures based on Catalan Romanesque imagery. In 1930, Picabia’s style shifted, as the complex imagery of earlier paintings like *Sphinx* gave way to the masterful refinement of *Aello*, *Mélibée*, and *Salomé*.

Eclecticism and Iconoclasm, 1934–1938

During the mid- and late-1930s, Picabia worked fitfully. He moved from his villa in Mougins to a yacht and rented a studio on the boardwalk. This was a period of intense material experimentation and reworking. In 1936, a show of his recent paintings opened at the Arts Club of Chicago. It was a commercial failure, and most of the works were returned, unsold, to Picabia. He painted over almost all of them, including *Portrait of a Doctor*, on view here. Other works seem to have been created with the goal of provoking signs of deterioration. The pimpled surface of *Portrait of a Woman*, for example, was likely a deliberate effect, produced by layering different blends of paint and varnish. “Perhaps I made painting sick,” Picabia wrote in 1939, “but how entertaining to be a doctor.”

Paintings like *Fratellini Clown* and *The Spanish Revolution* are symptomatic of the troubling malaise and sense of creeping doom that was spreading throughout Europe, as the threat of fascism and totalitarian ideologies took center stage. Despite the political unrest and looming threat of war, Picabia continued to organize lavish galas at the municipal casino for Cannes high society; he also created facial superimpositions and photo-based portraits, including one of his friend the author and art collector Gertrude Stein.

Photo-Based Paintings, 1940–1943

Throughout World War II, Picabia remained in the south of France, which soon came under the control of Philippe Pétain's collaborationist regime, centered in Vichy. He continued to paint, creating works that combine kitsch subjects, popular culture, and politics in an unsettling mix. Many of Picabia's wartime paintings recombine images lifted from photographs published in late-1930s soft-core pornography magazines. Picabia often preserved those photographs' artificial studio lighting, their soft focus, and the optical distortions created by the camera lens, leaving the photographic trace formally visible in the paintings.

Picabia exhibited a number of his photo-based paintings in Cannes in 1941, and subsequently in Algiers and Constantine. Soon after, these works effectively disappeared from the historical record for more than thirty years. This may be partly explained by the fact that figurative painting fell out of favor after the war; abstraction became dominant, and Picabia himself embraced it after 1945. But his kitschy Occupation-era nudes have remained controversial for other reasons, including the way that their mimetic, quasi-naturalistic style seems to flirt dangerously with that of artists officially sanctioned by the Third Reich. Picabia was, however, far from a Nazi propagandist. His wartime paintings remain open to interpretation, bearing witness to the moral ambiguities of this dark historical moment, and to the intricacies of an individual's response to seismic political change.

Postwar Abstractions and Points, 1946–1952

“Figurative art is dead,” Picabia said in an interview in November 1945. With these words, he announced his return to abstraction. The paintings that followed took diverse forms: many have thickly encrusted surfaces or display suggestive, erotic shapes. A later series known as the Points finds Picabia at his most reductive; many bear titles drawn from Friedrich Nietzsche. Picabia had been an enthusiastic reader of the philosopher since the late 1910s, but he only began to make extensive use of his writings in the postwar years, even incorporating Nietzsche’s aphorisms into his own poetry and personal correspondence, a selection of which is on view [here](#).

Picabia painted into his last years. Thanks to a friendship with Pierre André Benoit, a poet, editor, and publisher, he also published a number of small illustrated books. He suffered from a stroke in June 1951, and although his health never recovered, he continued to send Benoit poems and drawings for publication. Picabia died on November 30, 1953, in the same house in Paris where he had been born. Never one to shy from the spotlight, he had quoted Nietzsche in completing an artists’ survey a few months earlier: “Where art ends, where life begins, I am the poet of my life.”