

EXHIBITION LEARNING NOTES:

Francis Picabia



Francis Picabia in his atelier, Avenue Charles Floquet, Paris, France, 1912. Photo: Archives Comité Picabia

About Francis Picabia?

Francis Picabia (1879 – 1953) was a French artist, writer and publisher known for his restless, experimental approach to art. Over the course of his career, he moved fluidly between styles and movements, including Impressionism and Cubism.

He was closely associated with the Dada movement—an international network of artists and writers who rejected traditional values in art and society, particularly in response to the devastation of the First World War—though he never remained committed to any one group for long.

Picabia lived and worked in Paris and the South of France and traveled extensively, engaging with a wide range of cultural contexts. Throughout his life, he resisted the idea of a fixed artistic identity, instead embracing change, inconsistency and reinvention as central to his practice.

What does the exhibition look like?

Paintings

Picabia's painting practice is defined by constant stylistic shifts. His early works include Impressionist-inspired landscapes, followed by Cubist-related compositions that break forms into fragmented geometric structures. He later produced figurative paintings, abstract works and deliberately kitsch or provocative images.



Francis Picabia, Untitled, 1902. Courtesy Rennie Collection, Vancouver. Photo: Blaine Campbell

A key body of work is the 'Transparencies' series from the late 1920s and 1930s. These paintings layer multiple images drawn from mythology, religion and art history. Faces and figures overlap and merge into compositions where no single image fully dominates, creating ambiguity and inviting multiple interpretations.

Picabia often worked from found images, reproductions or visual references rather than direct observation. Copying, repetition and reworking were central to his process.

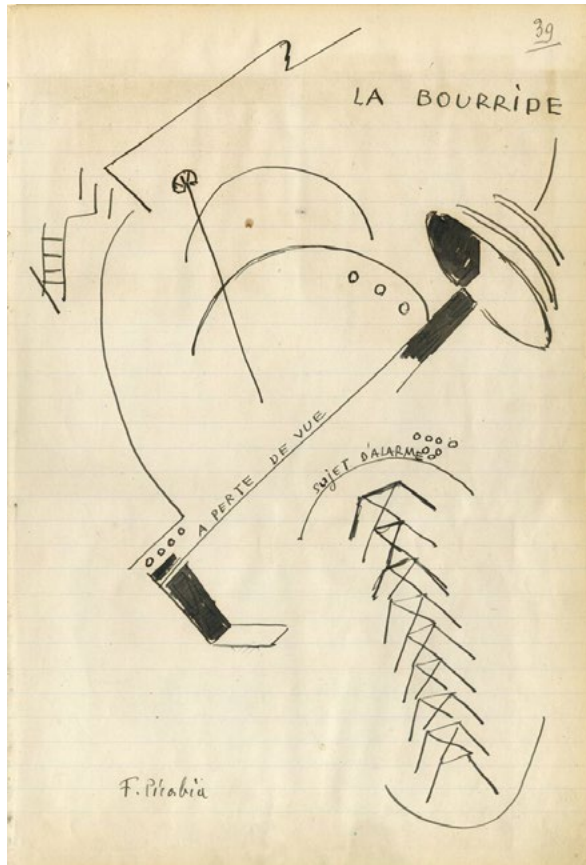


Francis Picabia, Transparence, ca. 1930 - 1933. Private Collection. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth Collection Services

Mechanomorphic works

From 1917 – 1924, Picabia created a series of drawings and paintings that depicted machines as anthropomorphized figures. Known as mechanomorphic works, they use diagrams and industrial forms, as well as text, to represent human relationships and emotions.

These precise, diagrammatic images resemble technical plans while remaining open in meaning, with disparate words creating a poetic dimension. They reflect a fascination with modern technology and an interest in finding new forms of representation.



Francis Picabia, La Bourride, 1919. Courtesy Galerie 1900 – 2000, Paris.
Photo: Damian Griffiths

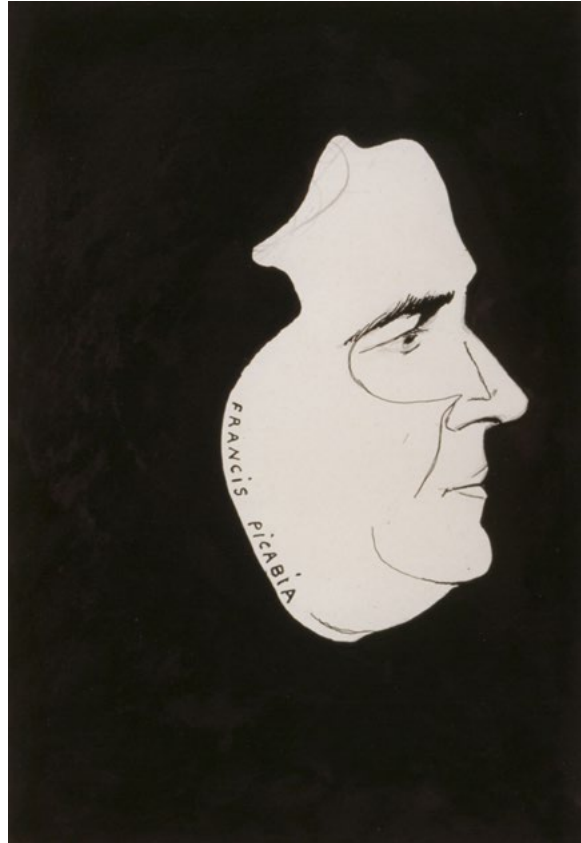
Publishing and printed works

Publishing was central to Picabia's practice. He founded and edited the magazine '391', bringing together artists, writers and poets connected to the Dada movement. Combining text, image and experimental layout, it reflected his interest in collaboration and exchange.

Through print, Picabia circulated ideas quickly, often using satire and disruption. The magazine challenged traditional formats and blurred the boundaries between visual art and writing. Printmaking and reproduction also played an important role in his work.



Francis Picabia, Trèfle à une feuille (One-Leaf Clover), ca. 1946 - 1947.
Photo: Alex Delfanne



Francis Picabia, Francis Picabia, ca. 1924

What are the main themes in Francis Picabia's work?

Change and contradiction

Picabia's work resists consistency. Moving between styles and approaches in ways that can feel abrupt or unexpected, his shifts in style challenge the idea of a single, recognizable voice in favor of shifting artistic positions.



Francis Picabia, Les rochers rouges (The Red Rocks), ca. 1942 - 1943.
Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zürich



Francis Picabia, Transparence, Portrait de femme (Transparency, Portrait of a Woman), ca. 1937 - 1939.
Photo: Jon Etter

Photography

He grew up with his grandfather, who was an early practitioner of photography—a new medium that began in the 19th Century in France. Throughout his practice, Picabia used photographic sources for his paintings and drawings that came from cheap museum and church guidebooks, magazines and postcards, a revolutionary approach in the early 20th Century.

Technology and modern life

His mechanomorphic drawings and paintings explore relationships between humans and machines and how identity may be shaped by technology, especially in an era of rapid expansion in automotive and aeronautic industries.

Layering, perception and ambiguity

In the 'Transparencies,' Picabia explored how images can overlap and coexist. Overlapping imagery creates multiple possible readings, shifting meaning depending on how the work is viewed.

Questions for discussion

- Picabia's 'Transparencies' layer multiple images, making it difficult to focus on a single interpretation. How do you approach an artwork with no clear focal point?
- He frequently changed style throughout his career. Does an artist need a consistent style, or can change itself be a defining approach?
- If an artist works from a photograph of a landscape rather than the landscape itself, does it change the viewer's relationship to the artwork?

Additional information

- [Artist page](#)
- 'Francis Picabia. Expanding Horizons,' Hauser & Wirth London, 2026
- 'Francis Picabia. Eternal Beginning,' Hauser & Wirth Paris, 2025
- 'Francis Picabia: Eternal Beginning' (2025) Hauser & Wirth Publishers, in collaboration with Comité Picabia
- 'A Veritable Voyage,' Beverley Calté on Olga Picabia. Ursula, Issue 12 (2025)
- [391 magazine](#)