

# The Blood of France: Joan of Arc and Francis Picabia's *La Sainte-Vierge*

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Francis Picabia's blasphemously titled drawing *La Sainte-Vierge* first appeared in the twelfth issue of his journal 391 (fig. 1). Originally published in May 1920, Picabia's iconoclastic gesture is now canonical. An icon in its own right, *La Sainte-Vierge* continues to serve as the ubiquitous visual shorthand for Dada's nihilistic, anti-art tendencies within general accounts of modernism, despite the existence of a large body of specialist literature that expands the significance of the drawing well beyond these persistent clichés. Indeed, *La Sainte-Vierge* has been subject to such wide-ranging interpretations that George Baker has complained that it is in danger of becoming the Rorschach blot of art history (38). For Baker, it seems the drawing solicits projection rather than analysis, the semantically virgin work irresponsibly impregnated with meaning by iconographic and contextually minded historians. While it is easy to see how *La Sainte-Vierge's* indeterminacy of form might result in over-determined explanations, there are some broad points of convergence within the scholarship. Many of these recurrent interpretive themes, most of which can be traced back to the drawing's original reception, are already mentioned by William Camfield in his foundational Picabia monograph.

Camfield's claim that *La Sainte-Vierge* is "unmodified by aesthetic considerations," for example, anticipates Baker's insistence on its *informe* properties (Camfield 141). Picabia's splash is also widely regarded as symbolising bodily fluid. Tears and lactation, urine and excrement, have been all been suggested, but it is blood and semen that are the most persistent references. Here, Camfield merely hints at the drawing's sexual nature (141). Criticizing his timidity regarding this theme, David Hopkins has provided the definitive account of *La Sainte-Vierge* in terms of sexual defloration (*Dada's Boys* 15-41 and "Questioning Dada's Potency" 317-33). *La Sainte-Vierge* is, quite literally, a stained sheet. With connotations of both ejaculate and blood, the splash signifies the collective residue – the combined "sexcrement" – of the virgin's first sexual encounter and forms a scurrilous critique of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Building on Hopkins's insights, Elizabeth Legge has further developed the drawing's religious associations, expanding the range of bodily fluids under consideration (218-42).

In what follows I question not only the extent to which the drawing is unmodified by aesthetic concerns but also the degree to which the drawing acts as a critique of the Immaculate Conception, a reading premised on the assumption that the titular virgin saint is Mary. The second half of this essay considers the magnitude of Picabia's aesthetic indifference and his use of chance in the construction of *La Sainte-Vierge*. Through a close formal reading of its *informe* qualities, I deduce the likely process of its production from its finished form, exploring the evolution of the image from the original drawing to its final presentation in 391. As late as 2007, when the last substantial texts to critically engage with the *La Sainte-Vierge* were published, the original drawing was considered lost.<sup>1</sup> Its re-emergence in 2008, when it was acquired by the Centre Pompidou, provides new visual evidence about the evolution of *La Sainte-Vierge* which to date has not been considered in the scholarship. The form of *La Sainte-Vierge* will then be tied to the wider discourse of the Return to Order before being used to explore new links between Picabia's work and that of Marcel Duchamp. First, however, I want to consider another candidate for the role of virgin saint.

Although it is an entirely natural supposition that *La Sainte-Vierge* refers to Mary, and the arguments developed from this assumption are sophisticated and compelling, the designation virgin saint alone is not enough to substantiate Mary as the sole referent. The Catholic Church recognizes over fifty virgin saints. Here I will argue that the drawing also refers to a second blessed virgin: Joan of Arc. This shift from Mary to Joan provides a new framework for addressing *La Sainte-Vierge*, but one that helps continue existing conversations around the themes of Catholicism and bloodshed within the scholarship.<sup>2</sup> In particular, this saintly substitution both develops and substantiates Legge's claim that the ink stands "metonymically for blood" and that the drawing alludes to the carnage of World War I (232). By embedding *La Sainte-Vierge* within the nationalist discourse of the Return to Order and its postwar cult of Joan of Arc, a more historicized interpretation of these themes can be provided, concretely grounding the drawing in the period's conflicted cultural politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Both Hopkins and Baker, who published their important commentaries in 2007, seem unaware of the existence of the original drawing, which Hopkins refers to as "lost" (*Dada's Boys* 222).

<sup>2</sup> Hopkins has also revealingly traced *La Sainte-Vierge's* myriad connections to Duchamp, contextualizing the drawing in a shared homosocial dialogue around androgyny, gender, and crossdressing (*Dada's Boys* 29-32). In this regard it should be noted that substituting Mary for Joan, undoubtedly the most famous crossdresser in French history, potentially supports rather than distracts from his arguments. As Mary Lousie Roberts has shown, the Joan of Arc haircut gained in notoriety in the first half of the 1920s, with the *garçonne* citing Joan as a precedent for her perceived mannish looks (63-87). Always a dapper dresser, Picabia's was friendly with some of the leading fashion designers of his day, and both his wife and mistress favoured contemporary looks. Picabia's close friend Christian (Georges Herbiet) even inscribes the name Antonine de Paris – the man who revived the haircut – on his drawing *L'oeuf pourri* (1921), a work that closely relates to Picabia's *L'oeil cacodylate* (1921).

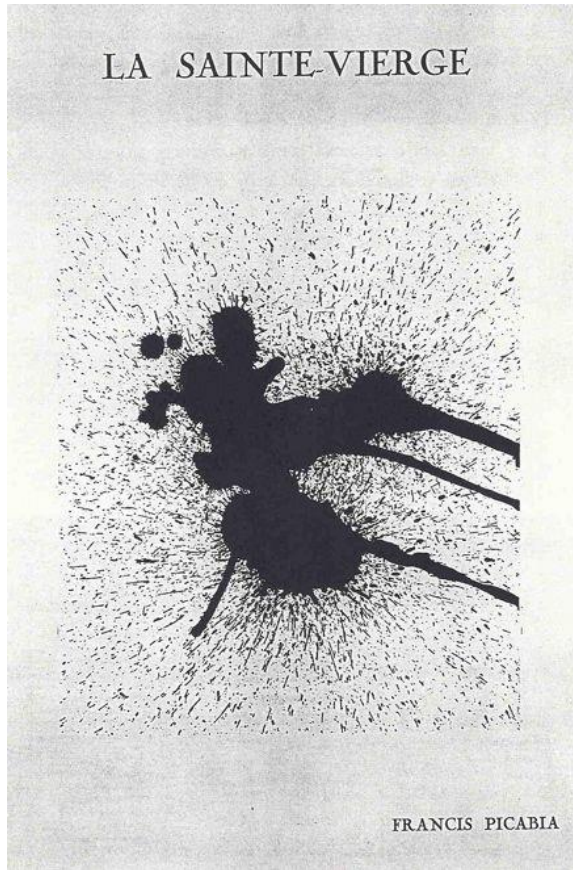


Figure 1: Francis Picabia, *La Sainte-Vierge*, as reproduced in 391, no. 12, 1920.

Picabia's writing supports the contention that *La Sainte-Vierge* relates to Joan of Arc. In his poem "Chimney Sperm," which appeared in the same issue of 391 as *La Sainte-Vierge*, Picabia makes a revealing reference to Joan. Midway through the poem we find the incongruent line "Joan of Arc ink bottle" (202-03). The close presence of this phrase and its obvious implications for our understanding of *La Sainte-Vierge* has not previously been considered.<sup>3</sup> If Joan of Arc is an ink bottle, then the splashing of its contents would symbolise *her* blood and by extension that of the nation, Joan having claimed to be the blood of France. Furthermore, if the production of the drawing utilized, as is almost certain, an ink dropper inserted into a bottle, then *La Sainte-Vierge* would enact its sexual metaphors – both

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<sup>3</sup> Legge has mentioned this poem in relation to *La Sainte-Vierge*, but she makes no reference to this particular line (220).

penetration and ejaculation – in the process of its making.<sup>4</sup> At the very least, the accumulation of innuendos within “Chimney Sperm” operates to cast doubt on the Joan of Arc’s purity. Undoubtedly, Mary makes for a more scandalous target, one more fitting with Picabia’s characteristic love of shock and lack of restraint, but questioning Joan’s virginity has both precedent and period logic.

### **Blood and Soil: Joan of Arc and the French Far Right**

Even within her lifetime, Joan’s virginity was a contentious issue. Inspected by both the court of Charles VII before her departure to battle and by the Burgundian faction following her capture, the verification of her maidenhood became tantamount to establishing her sanctity. Inevitably, over-concern in this matter made for easy burlesque. Voltaire’s scandalous *La Pucelle d’Orléans*, for example, was unflinching in its satire of Joan’s nocturnal temptations (Heimann 13-43). *La Saint-Vierge* can, therefore, be situated in a lineage of polemical satire that extends at least as far back as the Enlightenment. As Voltaire’s parody indicates, the modern origins of this satire emerge from a Republican critique of the *ancien régime* and Catholicism. By 1920, however, virtually the whole spectrum of political opinion had appropriated or made appeals to Joan, attempting to articulate her as a symbol for their rival brands of post-revolution nationhood. If the Far Left proved the notable exception, the Far Right provided the staunchest defenders of Joan’s legacy. Ultra-nationalist Charles Maurras, Far Right Republican Maurice Barrès, and proto-fascist political theorist George Sorel all aligned Joan with their causes. So did Maurras’s associate George Valois, the future founder of the short-lived fascist party *Le Faisceau*. In the years prior to the publication of Picabia’s drawing it became part of the rhetoric of Maurras’s Action Française to insist on Joan’s impeachable virginity, contrasting it with the sullied reputation of the Republic’s Marianne. By situating *La Saint-Vierge* against the increasing politicization of Joan’s virginity and the prevalent public discourse around her in 1920, a strong case emerges for considering her a pertinent reference for the drawing.

In 1920 Joan of Arc was an issue of topical and political importance in France. The long, arduous process of her canonization was coming to an end. Fifty-one years and three popes since the campaign calling for her sanctification had first been launched the Vatican finally completed the hundred eighty-degree turn that saw the once excommunicated heretic and former whore of Armagnac become officially recognised as a virgin saint.<sup>5</sup> With the issue of her virginity settled during

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<sup>4</sup> After numerous attempts to recreate this drawing, I believe this is the most likely way it was produced.

<sup>5</sup> The first petition for Joan’s canonization was initiated by Dupanloup, Bishop of Orleans, and presented to Pius IX on 8 May 1869. The Devil’s advocate’s case lasted from 1888-1920

the Devil's advocate's case against her, Pope Benedict XV presided over her canonization on 16 May 1920, in a widely publicised ceremony attended by approximately 30,000 people.

In the same year, another long-running campaign also came to fruition: the Third Republic finally legislated a public holiday honouring the Maid of Orleans, first agitated for in 1884. The near simultaneous resolution of these two campaigns was hardly coincidental. The war had accelerated both processes, with Joan being called upon to unite the flock and the nation against the twin dangers of socialism and atheism. Cynicism and political expediency, as much as belief and benevolence, were the motivating factors as the secular and the sacred staked their rival claims to symbolic ownership of the saint. It was against the backdrop of these debates, with her canonization pending, that Picabia produced *La Sainte-Vierge*.

As an empty signifier, Joan had long been a contested figure. Elements of the Left were drawn to her peasant origins, seeing in her the prototype of the Revolution's Liberty. Anti-clericalists and Protestants seized upon her condemnation by Catholic trial. Catholics viewed her as a devout and inspired mystic; and for monarchists, especially the Orleanist factions, she was a loyal knight of the king. Appropriated by republicans and royalists, squabbled over by Catholics, Protestants, and atheists, by 1920, when the "apogee of her cult was reached" (Warner 239), Joan was an overcharged and overdetermined icon in French culture.<sup>6</sup> In her valuable examination of the historiography of the saint, Nadia Margolis points out the central importance of the writings of the secular historian Jules Michelet (1798-1879) in both reviving and reconstructing Joan's post-revolutionary legacy ("Rewriting the Right" 59-104). Already referred to as a saint by Michelet, his writings "spawn virtually all of Joan's future political and artistic incarnations" and largely set the terms of her political contestation throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (60). After Michelet, Joan was no longer a provincial figure but an unstable trinity, part revolutionary symbol of nationhood, part blessed virgin in the model of Mary, and part Christian martyr in the model of Christ; the "Christ of France," as Alexandre Dumas would later call her. Napoleon tried to use her secular and saintly connotations to help reconcile Church and State, but throughout the Second Empire and the Third Republic she was a highly contested figure.

During Picabia's lifetime, it was ultimately the Right that proved most successful at articulating Joan as a symbol for its ideological causes.<sup>7</sup> During the

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after the Vatican inaugurated the official process at the behest of Leo XIII. On 6 January 1904 Pius X, declared Joan "venerable" and then "holy" in 1909, when she was officially beatified.

<sup>6</sup> For a wider discussion of these issues see Warner (255-57) and Heimann (Chapters 1 and 5).

<sup>7</sup> On Joan's appropriation by the French Right see Margolis ("Rewriting" 59-104 and "The 'Joan Phenomenon'" 265-87), Kilgore, and Martha (215-39).

Third Republic, strands of conservative nationalism and proto-fascism epitomized by Maurras, Barrès, and Sorel revered Joan. Subsequently, the neo-Catholic revival that was underway following the separation of Church and State in 1905 was increasingly inflected by anti-parliamentarianism. In particular, Action Française monopolized Joan for its cause, placing her on almost equal footing with the king (Margolis, "Rewriting" 69). In 1910 *Action Française* published Charles Péguy's *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc* as part of a patriotic revival of interest in the saint. It was warmly received by Barrès and Sorel, for whom Joan's harsh Catholicism expressed "the eternal soul of France" (M. Antliff 83).

The material realities of the Right's ideological claim to be the exclusive legislators of Joan's social meaning would become unmistakably apparent in 1909. Following reports that Sorbonne professor Francois-Amédée Thalamas had questioned Joan's sanctity, military prowess, and virginity, he became a target for the Camelots du Rio, a proto-fascist youth movement assembled from the street vendors of *Action Française*. The Camelots du Rio attacked the imprudent educator, disrupting his Wednesday classes and those of other Jewish professors for the remainder of the year. Action Française celebrated this violence and provided financial support for those imprisoned for their part in it (Hanna 222). Their campaign of intimidation only dissipated with the stationing of armed guards outside the Sorbonne.

The Thalamas Affair resonated with wider concerns about educational standards following the separation of Church and State. More crucially, it became caught in the slipstream of the ongoing fallout of the Dreyfus Affair, the ramifications of which marked the political fault lines of pre-war French politics. Not only had Dreyfus recently been exonerated in 1906, but Émile Zola's famous defender, Anatole France, had just published his book, *The Life of Joan of Arc* (1908), which once again derided the saint. The proximity of these events ensured that any critique of Joan became synonymous with a pro-Dreyfus position, feeding the Far Right's paranoia of an international Jewish plot aimed at undermining the French military. As Mark Antliff notes, "Maurras never tired of contrasting Joan, as the embodiment of plebeian, Catholic France, with the wealthy, rootless cosmopolitanism of the Jew" (91). With the defence of Joan now becoming the Right's self-appointed task, "From 1908-1914 the *Action Française* sought to establish unequivocally Joan of Arc as the symbol of non-Republican France" (Martha 217).

The First World War intensified the cult of Joan. The European conflict accelerated the Catholic revival as people struggled to find explanation and comfort for the horrors and sacrifices of the war years. There was also an attendant rise of diverse forms of spirituality and religious practice outside of the Church's control. Virgin sightings and virgin cults flourished. While these were typically Marian, there was also a growing adoption of St. Thérèse and Joan of Arc as favoured saints (Winter 66). The Vatican's rapid post-war canonization of both Thérèse and Joan registers the desperate attempt to bring these cults under official,

ecumenical control. In particular, Joan, the Warrior Saint, became the unofficial patron of the French army. Her image was carried into battle. Planes were named in her honour. Even the reflection of a German spotlight on a cloud was reportedly misinterpreted as a sign of her divine presence.

During this period Joan was also an increasingly prevalent figure within French popular culture. The five hundredth anniversary of her birth fell in 1912, producing a growing interest in the saint and a popular appetite for her cinematic and literary representation. This momentum continued throughout the war, but not without rearticulating her meaning in the process. Films, such as Cecil B. DeMille's *Joan the Woman* (1916), whose prologue depicted contemporary soldiers discovering the remnants of her sword in a trench, help illustrate how quickly Joan became a "metaphor of France's martyrdom during World War I" (Warner 270). A contemporary postcard, a version of which is tellingly captioned by Barrès, also indicates the extent to which Joan had become emblematic of anti-German unity and the symbolic defender of the *Union Sacrée* (fig. 2). Barrès, in particular, became closely associated with the saint, authoring a book endorsed by Maurras, *Autour Jean d'Arc* (1916), which he dedicated to the Federation of the War Wounded.<sup>8</sup> Following the war, the Right consolidated its hegemonic control over the saint's conflicting legacies. Re-proposing a national day of celebration in her honor, Barrès resumed a cause he had first agitated for as president of the League of Patriots in 1914. As numerous publicity photographs testify, Barrès maintained a highly visible connection with the saint (fig. 3).<sup>9</sup>

By 1920 Paris Dada's enemies were lining up behind Joan of Arc. Neither Maurras, Barrès, nor Benedict XV's public appropriation of Joan could be convivial to Dada. The group had metaphorically attacked the Pope at the beginning of the year.<sup>10</sup> Action Française had complained about the dadaists in February 1920, eliciting a response from Picabia.<sup>11</sup> More importantly, Barrès's association with the Maid alone would be enough to condemn her in the eyes of Paris Dada. Sentenced in absentia for crimes against the security of the mind, Barrès was the accused in the mock Dada trial (13 May 1921), and was a regular target of Dada's tireless

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<sup>8</sup> This was Barrès second work on Joan following his *Le jubilé de Jeanne d'Arc* (1912).

<sup>9</sup> Barrès was photographed by Maurice-Louis Branger standing in front of Frémiet's statue of Joan of Arc in the Place des pyramides during a demonstration by the League of Patriots (14 July 1912). The statue had been a common rallying point for protest since 1894. Barrès also posed for a series of press photographs with Alice Dumars who appeared as Joan at the Joan of Arc fête (8-15 June 1913).

<sup>10</sup> On 26 May 1920 at the Dada Festival balloons were released labelled with the names of individuals suspect to Dada, including the Pope. Phillipe Soupault then attempted to burst them with a knife (Sanouillet 127).

<sup>11</sup> *Action Française* (14 Feb. 1920) included the article "Dada is Only an Inconsistent Farce" as well as a statement by Picabia (Picabia 182).



Figure 2: Sergey Solomoko, *Go Away!* Illustrated French postcard, 1914. (Author's collection).<sup>12</sup>



Figure 3: Anonymous photographer, French postcard depicting Maurice Barrès (seated) with Alice Dumars as Joan of Arc at the Joan of Arc Fête, 1913. (Author's collection).

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<sup>12</sup> An alternative version of this postcard exists with a caption by Barrès: "France was lost when an angel of heaven appeared. A young girl who brought hope. Joan of Arc is the miracle of her country. She predicts any invader will always be driven from our soil" (my trans.).



invective. The Barrès trial may have acted as a catalyst for Picabia's separation from the movement, but it would be wrong to assume he held any sympathy for Barrès.<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, Barrès's virulent nationalism was anathema to Picabia, who, having managed to avoid seeing action in the First World War, now found his dubious war record subject to unwelcome public scrutiny. This public suspicion of Picabia was further compounded by his mixed national origins, for although Picabia's mother was French, his father was of Spanish descent.<sup>14</sup> Picabia's war avoidance, however, had nothing to do with any rival national allegiance. Rather it testifies to his political commitments and desire for self-preservation.

Picabia subscribed to an extreme form of anarcho-individualism. Philosophically, his libertarian world view was grounded in the work of Max Stirner and Friedrich Nietzsche, who justified his natural self-centeredness and provided a precedent for his polemical aphorisms.<sup>15</sup> Politically, however, Picabia remained forever under-informed and over-opinionated. Arrogance compounded ignorance and Picabia often made highly unfortunate public statements. Naturally, Picabia's pronounced individualism meant he loathed collective politics, yet it also inoculated him against the nationalist rhetoric of the *Union Sacrée*. Picabia's brand of egoism rejected any diminution of individual power, seeing in every moral standard a coercive mechanism for subjugating the individual and curtailing personal freedom. The Third Republic's preaching of Joan's "zeal for the Fatherland as an antidote for . . . egotism" was antithetical to Picabia's egotistical philosophy (Snipes-Hoyt 1141).<sup>16</sup> Picabia had little investment in any of the terms Joan of Arc was said to embody. For him, God and Nation were

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<sup>13</sup> Picabia found the idea of Dada courts and sentencing, even in the form of a parodic mimicry of the State apparatus, contrary to the spirit of the movement. Ever restless, he was already growing bored of organized Dada. His interest and influence were declining and the homosocial bonds that united the group starting to strain.

<sup>14</sup> On the hostility to Picabia's "Spanishness" during the Return to Order see my "Francis Picabia est un espagnol!"

<sup>15</sup> Theresa Papanikolas notes that Picabia also wrote for the anarchist periodicals *Les humbles* and *La forge*. Her work is the most significant general account of the influence of anarchism on Paris Dada (8). Regrettably, however, she makes little attempt to discuss how Picabia's politics related to his visual practice. Picabia's interest in Stirner and Nietzsche is discussed by numerous authors: Rensburg (361-77); Allan Antliff ("Making Mischief" 209-11 and *Anarchy and Art* chapter 3); Borràs et al. (20-21); Naumann (59-76); Green and Daehner (7-9); Hayden (41-67). Details of Picabia's appropriations and references to Nietzsche in his own writing can be found in the accompanying commentary and footnotes to Picabia, *Beautiful Monster*.

<sup>16</sup> For a wider consideration of Joan's place within French education see Snipes-Hoyt (1141-54) and Darrow (263-91).

unfortunate constructs that ultimately acted as instruments of domination. Contemptuous of the military and the rhetoric of duty and self-sacrifice, Picabia was naturally antagonistic to the abstract idealism of crown, cross, and country. "One dies as a hero or as an idiot," he memorably claimed, adding caustically "which is the same thing" (204). This scathing caveat, exemplary of the Picabia's habitual insensitivity as much as his beliefs, poured scorn on the post-war cult of the dead.<sup>17</sup> Accusatively Picabia continued, "You like death for others. Death, death, death" (204). The timing of this pronouncement is significant. It appeared in *Dadaphone* (issue 7 of *Dada*), a journal whose publication was deliberately timed to coincide with that of 391 and the public reception of the *La Sainte-Vierge* (Sanouillet 152). This triplicated repetition of death confirms that *La Sainte-Vierge's* most obvious connotation, bloodshed, preoccupied Picabia at the time.

A more exact understanding of Picabia's attitude to Joan of Arc though emerges in another of his contemporaneous writings. On 10 June 1920, Picabia completed his scandalous, semi-autobiographical novel-cum-manifesto, *Jesus Christ Rastaquouère*, just four months after *La Sainte-Vierge*. It is not unreasonable to assume that Picabia was working on the book at the time he produced the drawing. The blasphemous titles link the two works, and the novel also questions the Virgin's sexual purity.<sup>18</sup> Writing in the *Rasterquouère* Picabia makes explicit reference to Joan:

Evil for evil's sake, the cerebral lobes of Joan of Arc, those of Marshal de Rais, on the field azure or the gray matter, the Maid and the maidens, and finally the monks of madness: don't you think we need to leave all of that on some street corner? I much prefer the mystifications of Jesus Christ Rastaquouère (229).

Here Picabia places his veiled alter ego, the eponymous Rastaquouère, in opposition to both Joan of Arc and her companion-in-arms Marshal de Rais. A scandalous figure in French history, the Baron Gilles de Rais became famous as a celebrated defender of France in the Hundred Years War but infamous as a practitioner of ritual child sacrifices. The discovery of corpses of multiple children on his land led to his confession of mass infanticide and subsequent execution in 1440.

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<sup>17</sup> This is a consistent theme in Picabia's writings and one only aggravated by Apollinaire being awarded the Legion of Honor. About military honors Picabia claims, "they've just created an order for the dead. Every ten years a commission will open the coffins and the corpses best preserved against maggots will be decorated with the white cross. They'll pin it in place of their nose" (299). He also quips that "Men covered in crosses bring cemeteries to the mind" (279).

<sup>18</sup> "THE BLESSED VIRGIN DANCES THE TANGO WITH THE GREAT PIMP . . . the Blessed Virgin is in fact the true proprietress of prostitutes" (239).

In evoking Joan of Arc and the Baron at this moment in French history, Picabia is far from innocent. There are highly charged resonances to this coupling. Picabia implicitly asserts a continuity between the soldier-serial killer and the saint. In doing so, he also suggests a link between the contemporary veneration of Joan of Arc as a symbol of France and the recent death of many of her sons. Joan, the Catholic motherland's most famous warrior, concisely embodies for Picabia the unpleasant entanglement of religion, nationalism, and violence.

For the anti-parliamentary, pro-Catholic Right, Joan too acted as a convenient symbol of national and religious martyrdom, a symbol of a collective history that its adherents appealed to in the construction of a contemporary identity. Inevitably comparisons were drawn between the supreme sacrifice of the French soldiers and the story of Christ. The centrality of the sacrificed son within the Christian narrative of redemption and resurrection not only served the understandable need to memorialise the war dead but, more problematically, dovetailed with Far Right rhetoric. As Mark Antliff points out, fascist leader George Valois compared the "combatant's spiritual transformation to that of Joan of Arc, and even to that of the Virgin Mary as expressed in the Magnificat" (249).

As stated, this combination of nationalism, Catholicism, and militarism was repugnant to Picabia. His extreme individualism and belief in the ultimate self-serving nature of authority led him to mock the incredulity of "all the madmen of the world, . . . all those who believe in the Blessed Virgin, or Joan of Arc" (276). Like Valois, but with an antithetical evaluation, Picabia brings Joan and Mary into alignment.

If the persistent readings of *La Sainte-Vierge* are correct, then, in linking the drawing with bloodshed, it may not be the hypothetical defloration of the Virgin Mary that best links the two terms but their simultaneous embodiment in the figure of Joan the Virgin Warrior. Blood, of course, has a privileged place in the lexicon of the extremism, signifying the national purity Picabia lacked. Bloodshed was also a key part of the rhetoric of the French Far Right, which preached the necessity of violence in the process of national regeneration, lauding Joan as the personification of its militant Catholicism.

### **Blood and Semen: Horizontality and the *Informe***

Before continuing to discuss bloodshed, it is first of all necessary to consider the form of *La Sainte-Vierge* and in particular how liquidity operates in the construction of the drawing. George Baker has forcefully argued that the form of *La Sainte-Vierge* acts as a meditation on the conditions of drawing (33-50). In an inventive reading, Baker compares *La Sainte-Vierge* to another Picabia drawing, *Jeune Fille* (Young Girl, 1920), a simple circular hole cut out of a blank piece of paper. Contrasting the former's inimitable, chaotic accident with the latter's repeatable, mechanical geometry, Baker argues that this pair represents Picabia's attempt to map the formal limits of drawing. Baker's attention to the neglected issue of the

form of *La Sainte-Vierge* is salutary and his caution against anthropomorphizing the image salient, but his argument has significant limitations.

As appealing as it is, Baker's reading is premised on the internal coherence of Picabia's oeuvre and the flat rejection of iconographic interpretation. Despite the merits and originality of his thesis, Baker's pairing of splash and hole seems to unavoidably reinstate the very sexual connotations that he sets out to avoid. Such a formalist reading also divorces the drawing from any wider history and contentiously brackets out the title, which forms a significant part of its meaning. This ahistorical approach is in danger of becoming unhistorical, attributing to Picabia an understanding of medium more characteristic of a later period of modernism. Tacitly, Picabia is reinserted into – recuperated for – the standard narrative of mainstream modernism premised on an understanding of the formal autonomy of the medium. Not only does Picabia's career largely fall outside of this trajectory, but this model of modernism has historically acted as an intellectual straightjacket that limits our understanding of the rich complexity of Picabia's work.

Moreover, a purely formal reading of *La Sainte-Vierge* misses how the very language of art history and artistic innovation – creation, production, genius, patronage – is biological, indeed sexual.<sup>19</sup> From Aristotle's belief that procreation was the result of semen acting on menstrual blood to Nietzsche's claim that there is a link between "the creative instinct of the artist and the distribution of semen in his blood" (424), the two substances most persistently associated with *La Sainte-Vierge* have been discursively entwined with notions of creation and creativity. For two thousand years, blood and semen have been intermittently regarded as the formless precursors to form. Any exclusively formal reading of *La Sainte-Vierge* is automatically compromised by the fact that the *informe* is always already discursively associated with the bodily abject.<sup>20</sup>

Even if it were possible, it would not be desirable to separate *La Sainte-Vierge's* formal and connotative properties, nor to settle on a singular reading of the drawing as either blood or semen. As we have seen, both substances have long been equated with the formless. The transition of one into the other is also a recurrent theme of Western thought, again dating back to the earliest post-Socratic philosophers. Aristotle, for example, held that menstruation was the result of a women's inability to convert blood into semen, an idea that reoccurs both in alchemical and mystical traditions. In Christianity, the blood of Christ is tied to the

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<sup>19</sup> On the relationship between gender, form, and the terminology of art history, see Summers (384-411).

<sup>20</sup> The same may be said of *Ungestalt*, the German equivalent of the *informe*. Valentine Groebner notes that "the wounded and dead on late-medieval battlefields were described as *ungestalt*, referring to the extreme violence that made humans formless" (12). It might also be noted, given Picabia's use of dropped ink, that cadaver comes from the Latin *cadere*, to fall.

notion of resurrection and rebirth. Gnostic sects even consumed semen as a substitute for Christ's blood.

Interpreting Aristotle's ideas for medieval Catholicism, Archbishop Giles de Rome reiterated the philosopher's belief that procreation was the result of semen acting on menstrual blood. Giles was fascinated by the ability of these formless liquids to transform themselves into solid human form. Comparing the process of human reproduction to the production of artworks, Giles claimed sperm carved the blood like a sculptor. As Beate Fricke elaborates, contemporaneous medieval painters were also fascinated with Giles's problematic, and in particular by the ability of paint – a liquid substance that is combined and dried to produce mimetic appearances – to allegorize this process (53-69).<sup>21</sup>

Naturally, Picabia was unlikely to be conscious of the Aristotelian origins of this conceptual heritage, although as an alumnus of an elite Jesuit college it is highly likely he was familiar with some of the tradition's Catholic iterations. He was also probably cognizant of some late nineteenth-century variations on the theme, in particular Nietzsche's belief in the reabsorption of semen into the blood.<sup>22</sup> There can be little doubt, however, that Picabia was familiar with the conflation of blood and paint. Apollinaire notes in the *Cubist Painters*, a book Picabia helped finance, that "during the French Revolution, someone painted with blood" (39).

The issue of *La Sainte-Vierge's* form then is worth pursuing in more depth. Two "studies" exist for the 391 image, which I will refer to as *The Virgin Saint I* and *The Virgin Saint II* (figs. 4 and 5).<sup>23</sup> This numbering, which was not given by the artist, could be misleading. The second drawing was designated such following its belated discovery in the archive of Jacques Doucet. It would seem a redundant exercise to make a second version of the *Virgin Saint* once it had received its

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<sup>21</sup> For a further discussion of the historical interrelationship of paint and blood see Dunlop (70-79).

<sup>22</sup> It is also possible Picabia was aware of this theme through his neurasthenia. A medical belief that the testicles were the source of masculinity led to man being conceived as a spermatic economy. Any diminution in testicular functioning was held to inevitability affect creativity and physical and mental health. Consequently, any illness was liable to be treated with injections of testicular extracts. Concoctions such as Spermin of Poehl or Boettcher's Sperm Crystals were all prescribed to treat neurasthenia. Picabia's American neurologist, Joseph Collins, was highly sceptical of such procedures, but notes they were "very considerably used, especially in parts of Europe, in the treatment of neurasthenia" (52). It is possible Picabia discussed this treatment with Collins or either of his two European neurologists.

<sup>23</sup> It is not typical, but not unprecedented, to number the first image. Normally, this drawing is simply titled *La Sainte-Vierge*. In order to minimise confusion in the following discussion I have used *La Sainte-Vierge* to refer the 391 version and *The Virgin Saint I* to refer to the original drawing.

definitive form and public life in 391. More plausibly, the *Virgin Saint II* was produced first and deemed unsatisfactory for some reason before the decisive version was made. The large A in the top right-hand corner of *The Virgin Saint II* certainly suggests it is primary, although the handwriting has not been verified as Picabia's. At the very least, it seems likely that both drawings were made in a single session. As Adrian Sudhalter has recently noted, the paper stock is identical in each drawing (123). Both drawings also exhibit a telling combination of straight and torn edges, indicating that they were cut from a larger sheet of paper. Although their edges do not align, it is quite feasible that both drawings originated on the same leaf. Sudhalter hypothesizes that both drawings may have originally formed opposite corners of a larger sheet and that another two lost drawings may have been created on the same piece of paper (123).<sup>24</sup>



Figure 4 (Left): Francis Picabia, *The Virgin Saint I*, 1920. Ink and pencil on paper, 33 x 24cm. Centre Pompidou. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2018

Figure 5 (Right) *The Virgin Saint II*, 1920. Ink on paper, 32 x 23cm. Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2018

However many drawings there originally were, the process of making *Virgin Saint I* was more involved than is ever given credit. Careful consideration of the image's contours (and how gravity affects liquids) is revealing. The splashes on the paper give a visual record of the ink striking with force, the consensus being that this was most likely caused by ink being dropped rather than being the result of

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<sup>24</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Sudhalter for discussing this with me and for generously making available her unpublished research on the two drawings.

expressive gesture. It is highly unlikely, however, that Picabia only made one application of ink. There are several semi-circular or near circular bulges in the main body of the image, each of which marks the partial circumference of a separate drop of ink. The centrifugal nature of the splashes and the even bleed-out around these circular areas tells us that the paper was horizontal when these formed. This much applies for both studies. Elsewhere though in *Virgin Saint II* the ink does not behave consistently with its sibling. It is noticeable that certain contours of *Virgin Saint I* are crisp. These lines and perimeters were not produced by the ink's impact but by its flow. The rivulets of ink that stream out of the main "body" of the image almost certainly need the paper to be vertical or tilted to form. This is clearly registered by the three lines that run off the paper parallel to each other in the same direction. Following the central of these three lines back through the main body of the image and out the other side we hit a small ink peninsula extending from the main body. This patch noticeably alters course to flow in an orientation consistent with that of the other three lines, again suggesting the paper was tilted. However, elsewhere the ink flows in alternative directions. This is most apparent in the single line that extends towards the top right corner of the page and in the small drip running out of, or into, the main body, which points toward the bottom left-hand corner. As these lines run perpendicular to the set of three, they were produced at a separate point. If there were sufficient ink on the paper to create these drips at the time the three parallel lines formed, they too would have flowed in the same direction (and vice versa). Furthermore, if all the lines were produced in one go by tilting the paper, first one way and then the other, we could reasonably expect at least one line to deviate from its course registering the change in orientation. As we have straight lines flowing in contradictory directions, it is certain that they were produced independently of each other.<sup>25</sup>

What the visual record confirms is that *La Sainte-Vierge* was built up in several stages. Composed is too strong a term, but this is a determined indeterminacy, the often mentioned element of chance used in a minimally mediated way. What is irrefutable, but so far overlooked, is that Picabia cropped the drawing's top and bottom edges – the folds and hatching out are visible in the original – and rotated it to achieve the final form it took when presented in 391, where it appears upside down with respect to the original. The image was resized, reframed, and reprinted, giving it a uniformity that masks the material inconsistencies and different

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<sup>25</sup> Alternatively, and this seems more plausible for the single line running toward the upper right, it could have been created by blowing the ink while the paper was horizontal.

saturation of the ink in the original.<sup>26</sup> Texture and tint of the paper also changed.<sup>27</sup> A new, clean border was added, and the hand-written title and signature rendered typographically, providing a sharper contrast with the central splash. The title and frame form an integral part of the staging of the final drawing as it was presented in 391.<sup>28</sup> Picabia considered the title as a visual element of the work, carefully considering its positioning and presentation. The textual is not a disposable supplement to the visual here. Indeed, Picabia frequently inscribed his titles onto his paintings, setting up a semantic relay between the textual and visual through which his work signified.<sup>29</sup>

If I have labored this description, it is to make the point that we should not talk about the drawing and its reproduction as if they were the same thing. Nor, given the editing, can we say that the 391 image is completely devoid of aesthetic considerations, or produced entirely according to the laws of chance. Finally, if we can, just about, make out a vague figure in the 391 version of *La Sainte-Vierge*, we must recognise that Picabia oriented the image in a way that facilitates this reading. Picabia's inverting of the drawing is one cause of this, but it is the shift from the horizontal axis of its production to the vertical axis of its reception that is key. The spatial transition from horizontal to vertical moves the splash from the realm of the index to that of the icon and helps explain the image's strange ability to be read both as representational and as a refusal of representation.

Building on Leo Steinberg's notion of the flatbed picture plane, Rosalind Krauss makes the important distinction between the horizontal – an optical plane visualised within a vertical surface – and horizontality where a work registers that it was physically prone in the process of its production (“The Crisis of the Easel Picture” 155-79). Associating horizontality with the annihilation of structure, Krauss establishes it as the privileged vector of the *informe*. This distinction is pertinent. Not only does it reinforce the idea of *La Sainte-Vierge* as an attack on draftsmanship, but also makes clear that Picabia's drawing is not about describing

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<sup>26</sup> The original image is 33 x 24 cm. 391 no. 12 measures 38 x 56 cm, with *La Sainte-Vierge* covering 27 x 23.5 cm of this. Unable to consult an original copy of 391, I have taken these measurements from the facsimile edition that replicates the original formatting, included in the deluxe edition of the 1993 catalogue *Picabia* (Ronny van de Velde gallery).

<sup>27</sup> This change is less apparent in reproductions. The original drawing is on a slightly laid, grey tinted paper; the 391 version on smooth paper, which although now yellowed would originally have been closer to white.

<sup>28</sup> It is not unusual for these elements to be cropped from reproductions. It is debatable whether this recurrent exclusion of text rests on a formalist belief in the self-sufficiency of the visual to generate meaning, or, on the contrary, is predicated on a perceived fundamental lack of meaning for the anti-art gesture.

<sup>29</sup> For a counter-history of modernism premised on titling practices, including those of Picabia, see Welchman.



contour or boundary. Rather the drawing records an “operational process” registering an event (Steinberg 950). Central to Krauss’s discussion of horizontality is the work of Jackson Pollock and its reception in post-war North American art (“Crisis” 155-179, *Optical Unconscious* 243-308, *Formlessness* 93-103). Her genealogy though can be extended back through Dada. Here, horizontality functions as what Krauss terms the “medium” of Dada’s experiments with chance (“Crisis” 168). Horizontality is the vector of both Duchamp’s *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913-14) and Arp’s various collages titled *Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance* (1916-17), works which provide the most obvious procedural precedents for *La Sainte-Vierge*.<sup>30</sup> More than either of his colleagues, though, Picabia’s use of horizontality is tied to the *informe*, operating, as in Bataille’s inaugural definition of the term, “to bring things down in the world” (31). Although Krauss has cautioned against flatly conflating the horizontal with the abject, she and Yve-Alain Bois have also connected horizontality to a recurrent baseness and bodily leakage that resonates with *La Sainte-Vierge*’s metaphoric connotation of bloodshed.

Like Macbeth’s “damn spot,” however, *La Sainte-Vierge* speaks not only of bloodshed but also of blame. Artistically blood can register guilt, often through its formless liquidity. In another work tied to the theme of virginity, Caravaggio’s *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1598-99), the blood flows away from Judith, who remains miraculously untainted when she decapitates her would-be rapist. Her virginity preserved, Judith’s dress remains immaculately white during the process of Holofernes decapitation. Contrast this with same artist’s depiction of another beheading, *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist* (1609), where the *femme fatale*’s red throw symbolically covers her in blood. *La Sainte-Vierge*’s themes of bloodshed and guilt were immediately recognized. The same month that Picabia’s drawing appeared in 391, the satirical journal *La Crapouillot* published an article on the fictitious Toutou movement. An obvious parody of Dada, this article was illustrated with a random splat of ink entitled *Justices Pursues the Crime* that blatantly references *La Sainte-Vierge* and directly evokes wrongly spilt blood.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> We should not assume that chance meant the same thing in each case. Arp’s chance works with squares are highly mediated, structured around an implicit grid formation whose residual commitment to platonic form is logically incompatible with the *informe*. Arp’s association of chance with the divine and the unconscious are also largely incompatible with Picabia’s and Duchamp’s concerns. And although Picabia is closer to Duchamp’s pataphysics than to Arp’s metaphysics he lacked the interest or knowledge in speculative science that underwrote his friend’s use of chance.

<sup>31</sup> *Le Crapouillot*, also contains an image described as *Portrait of Saint Joseph*, although this appears to be a parody of Arp’s work. André Breton recognized the article as an attack on Dada and kept a copy for his archive; it can be accessed at: <http://www.andrebretton.fr/file/230226/plain?size=full>

*La Crapouillot* was not the only magazine to respond to 391. In an intriguing afterlife, *La Sainte-Vierge* was reprinted a month later in the paper *Les Hommes du Jour*. Under the title “Deux Écoles” (Two Schools), the article contrasted Picabia’s virgin saint with another by Ingres (fig. 6). Setting Picabia’s drawing on the right-hand side, the run-off from *La Sainte-Vierge* is tellingly positioned to flow away from Ingres’s virgin. Inadvertently, the comparison reiterated a distinction Picabia himself had already made. In the first issue of 391 Picabia mocked Ingres and his privileged place in the work of Picasso and within the revival of French classicism.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the Return to Order Picabia would continue to assault Ingres, appropriating and bastardizing the French master’s work to form the base of own.<sup>33</sup> It is plausible therefore that Picabia was aware of Ingres’s painting *Joan of Arc at the Coronation of Charles VII* (1854) which established the artistic convention of depicting Joan with a halo. As staunch Orleanist and anti-republican, Ingres incorporated a rare self-portrait into the picture, actively associating himself with the Saint (Heimann 132-76). This painting – an “inordinate technical pedantry” in Baudelaire’s summation (cited by Heimann



Figure 6: Anon. “Deux Ecoles,” *Les Hommes du Jour*, 9 April 1920. (Author’s collection).

<sup>32</sup> On Picasso’s relationship to Picabia see: Silver 313; Krauss, *Picasso Papers* 90-210; Aurélie Verdier, “L’Hainamoration”; and Verdier et al., *Picasso-Picabia*.

<sup>33</sup> The most famous examples is Picabia’s *The Fig-Leaf* (1922) based on Ingres’s *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1808). For a wider discussion of Picabia’s use of Ingres as part of his critique of the Return to Order see Pierre 132-56.

171) – was divisive upon its reception, not least because it invited comparison with Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) whose dishevelled, bare-breasted Liberty competed with Ingres's Joan as the rival feminine embodiment of nationhood. It is not implausible that Picabia was aware of this history and debate.

The assertion that *La Sainte-Vierge* responds to Ingres is not only consistent with Picabia's wider practice and frames of reference at the time but can also be substantiated linguistically: Ingres is a near homophone for *encre* (ink). Etymologically, *encre* derives from *encaustum*, a red or purple colored ink that reinforces the connotations of blood. Elsewhere, Legge has drawn our attention to the substitution of ink for blood in the adage about the relative might of the pen and the sword, continuing to argue that Zola's novel *L'encre et le sang* (1866) could also be a possible referent for Picabia's splat (232). In typical Dada wordplay, this could easily become Ingres and blood, a topical combination given that the previous year a major Ingres retrospective was organised for the benefit of wounded veterans.

It is highly feasible then that *La Sainte-Vierge's* anti-drawing was intended as a calculated formal negation of Ingrisme, within the Return to Order. As Kenneth Silver has made clear in his seminal *Esprit de Corps*, the patriotic demands of the period found their ultimate expression not in representational content but at the level of form (62). For Silver, Picasso's adoption of Ingres as a model is paradigmatic of how an elevation of academic technique offset a general lowering of avant-garde ambition. The *informe* of *La Sainte-Vierge* is set sharply against classical harmony and the resurgence of draftsmanship that the Ingres revival celebrated. Parallel to the readymade, which undermines aesthetic value through mass-produced seriality, Picabia here deploys a radical process of deskilling in a way that ironically produces a unique artwork, only to allow it to circulate it as a mechanically reproduced copy.<sup>34</sup> Parodying both the criterion of uniqueness on which value is traditionally based and the contemporary claim that drawing was the art of structure, Picabia's act of deliberate incompetence is a riposte against Ingres's "technical pedantry" and all its connotations. If Baker is correct in suggesting *La Sainte-Vierge* is concerned with the conditions of drawing, it is arguably its discursive parameters, rather than its ontological ones, that most preoccupied Picabia. *La Sainte-Vierge* certainly flaunts the formal limits of the medium, but in doing so, it also positions itself against a contemporary discourse on what constituted French drawing. Within the Return to Order, the formal vocabulary of art was increasingly seen to express and celebrate homogenized, essentialist notions of racial identity tied to the idea of national style. Form,

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<sup>34</sup> *La Sainte-Vierge* is also a joke against those who criticised Picabia for copying machine parts but who held copying from nature or old masters to be acceptable. Louis Aragon notes that "whenever Picabia mentioned the inkblot he signed, he never failed to point out the inimitability of such splatters" (28). The themes of Ingres, ink, and copying come together in 391 no. 14 when Picabia's copies Ingres's signature.

therefore, was a social issue, linked to the project of national, cultural construction just as much as Joan of Arc was. It is not easy, or advisable, therefore, to separate out the levels of Picabia's critique into isolated formal or iconographic readings. *La Sainte-Vierge* is an act of critical debasement operating on a double register. The *informe* acts as a hinge between Baker's anti-mimetic, formal reading of the drawing and Hopkins and Legge's insistence on its bodily metaphors. Horizontality provides the pivot between index and icon, situating the drawing in an indeterminate space between anti-art critique of classical form and signifier of the abject, leaking body.

### **Semen and Soil: Autochthony and the Dialogue with Duchamp**

So far I have prioritized reading *La Sainte-Vierge* as blood. Horizontality, however, has implications for interpreting the drawing's ejaculatory connotations. Horizontality implies that semen is falling on the ground. Consequently, *La Sainte-Vierge* invokes the mythological notion of autochthony (birth from the soil). Greek legend, for example, describes how Erikchthonius was born from the earth after the seed of Hephaestus fell to the floor during a thwarted sexual encounter. Crucially, it is Ovid's description of Erikchthonius as a child "born / Without a mother" (40) that provided Picabia with his frequently used title *Fille née sans Mère* (Daughter Born without a Mother). Convention holds that Picabia simply lifted Ovid's phrase from the pink pages of the *Petit Larousse* dictionary, a strategy he often deployed. Picabia's mobilization of horizontality in *La Sainte-Vierge* suggests a wider awareness of the phrase's origins though, autochthony providing a previously unrecognised link between this drawing and his earlier *Fille née sans Mère* series.

In the context of 1920, Picabia's invocation of autochthony can only be satirical. Due to the scale of casualties in the Great War, French policy was to let the bodies of soldier's rest where they had fallen. This decision was bitterly contested. Grieving parents believed the State had a greater obligation to the sacrificed and demanded their sons be exhumed and re-interred in the local parish. As Picabia himself put it in this year, "Fathers and mothers do not have the right to kill their children, but the Fatherland, our second mother, can sacrifice them as it pleases for the greater glory of politicians" (245). With the State reluctant to undertake the logistical exercise of identifying and returning the bodies for appropriate burial, illegal trade in grave robbing flourished. Finally, in September 1920, after six years of public agitation, the State capitulated and agreed to finance the recovery, return and reburial of French soldiers, reinterring them in the soil they had died defending.<sup>35</sup>

The production of *La Sainte-Vierge* not only coincided with the tail-end of this campaign to have the corpses of French soldiers exhumed but also followed in the

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<sup>35</sup> For a wider discussion of these debates and the culture of grave robbing see Winter 15-28.

wake of one of the most influential visualisations the return of the dead, Abel Gance's film *J'accuse* (1919). The final dream sequence of *J'accuse* presents a fantasy of resurrection in which the war dead rise from the ground and make their way home. There can be no doubt that Picabia knew this scene. As Christopher Townsend has shown, *Entr'acte* (1924), the film Picabia made with René Clair, explicitly references the gesture of one of Gance's soldiers (290). *Entr'acte* centres on an absurd coffin chase from which a dead protagonist ultimately emerges resurrected. A critique of the war and the cult of the fallen, *Entr'acte* is a scathing comment on the war and post-war politics. Mediated by images of death, it offers "a comedic treatment of the political uses made of the French dead of World War One" (Townsend 282).

*La Sainte-Vierge* prefigures *Entr'acte's* critique of the war. "Virgins," Picabia notes, "are like military incompetence" (165). Through autochthony, Picabia parodies the idea of resurrection. The Immaculate Conception is made to connote exhumation; the resurrection is reconfigured as disinterment. Whether we read *La Sainte-Vierge* as semen or blood, its base materialism offers a compatible critique of the sacralization of the war dead.

Picabia's position and his interest in autochthony were likely informed by his ongoing dialogue with Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp's and Picabia's projects were, of course, closely entwined. A pertinent example is Duchamp's *Paysage fautif* (*Wayward Landscape*, 1946), a quasi-figurative splash of actual semen on a black velvet ground that takes *La Sainte-Vierge* as its precedent. *La Sainte-Vierge*, however, itself appears to have been conceived in relationship to Duchamp's *Large Glass* (1915-23). In *Jesus Christ Rastaquouère*, Picabia informs us that "The Blessed Virgin is made of glass," an obvious but apparently unnoticed reference to Duchamp's work (239). In particular, *La Sainte-Vierge* seems to relate closely to Man Ray and Duchamp's enigmatic photograph *Élevage de poussière* (*Dust Breeding* 1920). These two images are not only contemporaneous but have strong formal and thematic affinities.

As is well known, *Élevage de poussière* is a photograph of the dust that accumulated on the surface of the "Bachelor Domain" of the *Large Glass* (1915-23) as it lay flat in Duchamp's studio. The photograph was taken sometime after January 1920, when Duchamp returned to New York from Paris where he had spent six months staying at Picabia's house. Duchamp, like Picabia, here uses horizontality as a medium and *Élevage de poussière* like *La Sainte-Vierge* invites both indexical and symbolic readings.<sup>36</sup>

When *Élevage de poussière* was first published in *Littérature* in October 1922, it was captioned a "view from an aeroplane." Building on this description, David Hopkins has read the photograph as deliberately invoking an aerial view of a war-

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<sup>36</sup> Krauss has given an account of this work in terms of the index ("Notes on the Index: Part 1," 202-06); David Hopkins has extensively unpacked the work's symbolic resonances and wider cultural contexts ("Duchamp's Metaphysics" 117-38).

torn topography. Noting the “uncanny parallel” between Duchamp’s image and reconnaissance war photography, Hopkins argues that the photograph is a “direct allusion to the carnage of warfare,” the breeding dust allegorically standing for the growing dead (“Duchamp’s Metaphysics” 125). Death and dust, he reminds us, have long been associated, not least in the Christian funeral rite’s “dust to dust.”

Elsewhere in his multifaceted reading, Hopkins elaborates how *Élevage de poussière* also stages the “fecund potential” of dust, drawing out the myriad connections between breeding dust and the auto-generating bachelor machines the dust obscures (133). Hopkins surprisingly does not mention it, but a secondary biblical reference is relevant here: “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground,” the autochthonic creation of Adam (Genesis 2:7). Given Duchamp’s conjunction of procreative dust and onanistic *machine célibataire*, it is tempting to speculate that he was familiar with the Spanish euphemism *tirar el polvo*, to throw one’s dust, a colloquial term for ejaculation. Possibly Picabia, who spoke some Spanish, might even have alerted him to it. Certainly, *Élevage de poussière*’s connection of autochthony and bachelor machines parallels Picabia’s allusion to his *Fille née sans mère* machines and the birth of Erikchtonius in *La Sainte-Vierge*. Both *Élevage de Poussière* and *La Sainte-Vierge* reproduce the same double logic. Hopkins’s conclusion that *Élevage de Poussière* “spoke of a paradoxical myth of male fecundity, in the wake of an overwhelming loss of men’s lives” could equally be applied to *La Sainte-Vierge* (“Duchamp’s Metaphysics” 134). Both signify simultaneously on two levels, the deathly and the sexual. Dust cryptically encodes these multiple registers for Duchamp. Joan of Arc, both Virgin Saint and blood of France, performs a related task for Picabia. *La Sainte-Vierge* is Picabia’s multivalent critique of iconolatry, directed at the generalized worship of Joan, the fetishization of artistic form as an expression of national identity, and at the ongoing sacralization of the war dead. The critique of religious art and art as a religion are typically enacted simultaneously by Picabia.<sup>37</sup> *La Sainte-Vierge*, however, is not only anti-art and anti-religion, but also, obliquely but emphatically, anti-war.

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<sup>37</sup> Picabia consistently conflated his critiques of both art and religion. In an “interview” he conducted with himself for *Paris-Journal*, Picabia compares the fabrication of artistic geniuses with the sellers of plaster virgins before asking himself, “You don’t believe in the Holy Virgin?” / “I believe in her only on the day I lost my virginity!” / “You do not believe in art?” / “For me, art is dead like religion” (*Paris-Journal*, 23 May 1924, p. 4; trans. in Camfield 203, n.24).

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