

Fig Leaf

Hot Eyes, or in French *Les Yeux Chauds*, created a controversy in the press when it was first exhibited at the Salon d'Automne, Paris, in November 1921. It was painted by Francis Picabia, one of the most charismatic and unpredictable of the group of artists and writers that made up the Paris dada movement in the early 1920s. With its hard-to-understand title and baffling combination of words and imagery, visitors to the Salon judged it a dadaist provocation, all the more so when it was revealed by a newspaper that the painting was based on a diagram of an air turbine.

Nearly two metres high and painted in a graphic style, *Hot Eyes* was a striking and, owing to the press controversy, well known work. But within a few months Picabia chose to paint over it. Today the original composition – a circular shape, a hand and some phrases – is known through only this poor quality black and white photograph in a newspaper and some tell-tale traces in the surface of the repainted work.

The story of *Hot Eyes* is bound up in Picabia's (short-lived) involvement with the Salon d'Automne. Founded in 1903 in opposition to the more conservative Paris Salon, the Salon d'Automne was an annual exhibition of new art which was held at the Grand Palais in Paris. It provided an occasion at which artists, whether or not they also had dealers, could show and sell their latest works. The Salon d'Automne had a reputation for being generally supportive of new art. Although he was bitterly opposed to many of the conventions and traditions surrounding art and the art market, Picabia was invited, somewhat surprisingly, to join the 1921 Salon's hanging committee. (Through his position on the committee he was able to rescue the works of the dada group from a stairwell and ensure that they were shown in a more prominent position near the exhibition entrance.)

When preparing *Hot Eyes* for inclusion in the 1921 Salon Picabia wrote 'Thanks to the Salon d'Automne' on the left of the huge canvas as an obviously humorous (and hollow) nod towards ingratiating himself with the Salon committee. Equally, his inscription 'Homage to Franzt Jourdain' on the 'eye/disc' in *Hot Eyes* may have been a joke about the well known beliefs of the founder and president of the Salon in the importance of good design to educate the 'eye' of the masses. Or, it may just have been another piece of over-the-top flattery and signal that obsequiousness was a necessary characteristic of artists' relationships with the Salon.

To heighten expectations about the appearance of his new work at the Salon, Picabia published a self-promoting leaflet that managed to repeat his name several times in different sized fonts and often underlined. It also included a list of wildly discrepant

terms for himself: he was an imbecile, an idiot and a pickpocket, but also a Spaniard, rich, poor, ‘the only complete artist’ and – this was repeated twice – a ‘funny guy’. Down the sides of the leaflet were two sentences that together capture the alternatively dark and mercurial aspects of Picabia’s personal philosophy:

*Men covered in crosses [war decorations] make you think of cemeteries.
If you want clean ideas, change them as often as your shirts.*

Somehow or rather – surely Picabia was to blame – a wild rumour circulated that Picabia intended to hang an ‘explosive picture’ in the Salon. The patient Jourdain was obliged to make a statement to the press: ‘All the paintings have been carefully inspected and none has been found suspicious. The visitors, therefore, may attend the opening of our Salon with the fullest assurance of safety.’

Alongside *Hot Eyes* Picabia submitted to the Salon d’Automne a second canvas, *The Cacodylic Eye* 1921, but one that could scarcely be called a painting. He had had a bout of ophthalmic shingles that had been treated with sodium cacodylate (hence the title). During his recuperation he painted a large eye near the centre of an otherwise bare canvas and invited friends and visitors to his studio to sign the work. In this painted equivalent of a Facebook page, some left affectionate and wry comments; others affixed small photographic portraits. A compendium of Picabia’s circle, the work was complete when nothing further could be squeezed on. In submitting this patently multi-authored work to the Salon d’Automne Picabia was testing the limits of what could be considered a work of art. The reference to a sick or ‘cacodylic eye’ and to ‘hot eyes’ in the titles of the two works can be seen as suggesting that the visual sense was being discomforted, at the very least, by contemporary art in general and his paintings in particular.

But this discomfort was as nothing compared to the controversy stirred by a press revelation (again, who was the source of this?) about *Hot Eyes*. On 9 November 1921 *Le Matin* carried on its front page a story about the source of the imagery. Comparison of the painting and a diagram of a turbine engine in a popular science magazine made it clear that Picabia had borrowed the essentials of the composition and even a phrase (‘action du vent’, wind action), adding only for his part the image of a hand and the other phrases. In fact, Picabia rarely, if ever, painted from life. Instead, he took inspiration from, and sometimes directly copied, reproductions in books and magazine but this was revealed only for the first time in the row over this work.

The gist of *Le Matin*’s article was that Picabia, for all his dadaist bravura, was nothing but an unoriginal copyist. Picabia – who in borrowing the imagery had totally transformed its meaning – responded with heavy sarcasm the next day: ‘I congratulate the newspaper *Le Matin* not only for having discovered the secrets, but for understanding them.’ He added with shovel-loads of irony: ‘Picabia copies an engineer’s sketch instead of copying apples. To copy apples, that is comprehensible to everyone. To copy a turbine, that’s idiotic.’ Although he admitted this act of appropriation, Picabia

kept remarkably silent throughout his career about the fact that he routinely borrowed imagery from printed sources. The full extent of his borrowing – based on a highly original disregard for originality – was only discovered by art historians after his death.

Perhaps Picabia had not enjoyed the controversy; or perhaps he delighted in the prospect of re-submitting the same work in a different guise to the Salon d'Automne. Whatever the reason, Picabia covered *Hot Eyes* with an entirely new composition, sometime between the ending of the exhibition in December 1921 and May 1922. Over the previous decade he had produced abstract or machine-related imagery and dada compositions, but, surprisingly, he now created an almost classically rendered masked figure in black, wearing a green figleaf. Paint analysis shows that, strangely, he painted this figure first, and then painted the white background, bringing the white up to the black contours.

The target of this second composition was no longer the Salon d'Automne but a new trend in contemporary art favouring neo-classicism and 'correct' drawing as expressions of a French tradition in art. Artists formerly known for avant-garde styles, such as Picasso and Léger, were leading this fashion and finding favour among rich clients. Picabia mocked this tendency with *The Fig Leaf*, basing the pose of the figure on that of the Oedipus in the well-known 1808 painting *Oedipus and the Sphinx* by the great neo-classical painter Ingres, and by the words 'DESSIN FRANÇAIS' (French drawing), highlighting the nationalistic undertones in the renewed attention to the quality of line, associated with French artists such as Ingres. Censorship and prudery were also favourite targets of Picabia, and the eponymous fig leaf not only drew attention to the presence of male genitals artfully hidden from view in the nineteenth-century painting but also suggested that such art was itself something of a polite fiction covering up unpalatable realities. However, if Picabia was hoping to create a second storm with this new painting, he was quickly disappointed. *The Fig Leaf* was shown in the 1922 Salon d'Automne but in what one critic described as the highest, dirtiest, most obscure vault of the hallway, where it failed to attract much comment.

Picabia went on to overpaint many canvases but *Hot Eyes* was one of the first to be lost to his habit of erasing past efforts and starting afresh. It also appears to have been one of the earliest pictures painted not with artist's oils but household paint. Recent analysis of *The Fig Leaf* – in particular, cracks in its surface – by conservator Annette King has shown that the background colour of *Hot Eyes* was close to a pale baby blue while the hand was a hot pink colour, discoveries that bring us a little closer to the lost work. These colours, and the use of housepaint, would have given the painting a disconcertingly brash quality. In 1926 his close friend and fellow dada artist Marcel Duchamp wrote that Picabia 'loves the new, and his canvases ... have this aspect of fresh paint, which keeps the intensity of the first moment'. Picabia's love of the new was central both to the creation of *Hot Eyes* and to its almost immediate loss under an even more topical composition.