

THE HAND, 1935/36 BY FRANCIS PICABIA

CRACKLE LAQUER TECHNIQUE AS A STRATEGY FOR DISSENT

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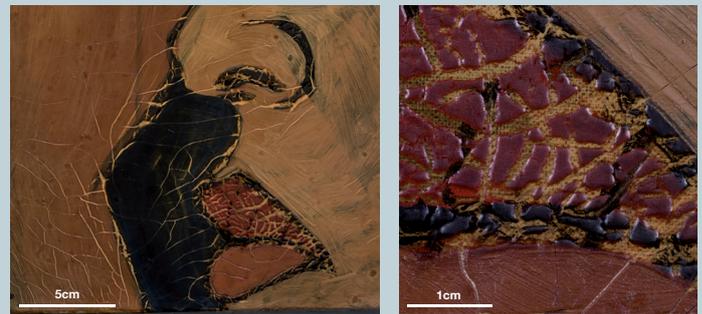


Fig.1 (left) The Hand, 61 x 50cm, Museum of Fine Arts Bern. From left to right side: Overall view and detail of the dark blue garment: Visible light, UV-Fluorescence/Visible light, Infrared reflectography and detail in UV-Fluorescence.

Fig.2 (right) Details, lips of the figure in the foreground (Vis)

Francis Picabia (1879-1953) - became an influential artist for subsequent generations by calling into question any established attitude toward the artistic process. He not only accepted premature shrinkage cracks, but implemented the demanding crackle lacquer technique productively in his later work, around 1935. [1] This has been proven by analysing the materials and technique he used for his painting *The Hand* from 1935/36.

Strategy for Dissent

Employing the "historicism" decorative technique can be interpreted as an about-face from the artist's early, favorably criticized innovations. "His concern for inventions leads him to use Ripolin instead of sanctified tube paints, which, in his view, take on too rapidly the patina of posterity." [2] With the crackle lacquer technique, Picabia both decisively and ironically, harks back to the "patina of posterity". The crackle lacquer is addressed in numerous technical manuals that were published during Picabia's lifetime. Art historically we associate artists' intentional use of craquelé effects with forgery techniques or bad taste. Adopting the technique for his own work - most notably during the backward oriented pre-war era - can be interpreted equally as a strategy for both painting technique as well as artistic dissent. The crackle lacquer technique was neither commented on in the reception of Picabia's work nor was the artist's use of it understood.

Crackle lacquer technique for "The Hand"

The overlapping of the figures and the hand determining the spacial structure of the composition, is emphasised due to these elements appearing to be slightly transparent, revealing the underlying parts of the composition. Looking closely at the surface of the painting and the texture of the layers of paint, an obvious crackle effect is discernable. The cracks make the light ground visible to the eye and take on the appearance of light-colored hatching. Fluorescence photography reveals that a thick, irregular coat of varnish was applied and is

also visible in the formation of wrinkles and deep cracks on the lips of the figure in the foreground. (Fig. 1, 2) This is confined to limited areas and, by contrasting the more transparent, overlapping elements of the composition, steers the attention to a crusted and raw texture.

The paint layer structure leads to the assumption that the pronounced formation of crackle was intentional, resulting from reversing the elementary rule of painting to apply "fat over lean". Fig. 3 reveals that a thick, strongly fluorescent transparent layer was first applied over the ground. This has been coated with a very thin layer of paint. This structure - a layer of a fat binding medium and then a lean, highly pigmented layer - is alternately repeated several times (Fig. 4). FTIR-FPA chemical imaging substantiates this hypothesis. Fig. 5 clearly shows that the resin ratio of the transparent layers progressively increases in the upper layers, while inversely the oil ratio decreases.

Crackle lacquer was widespread in the 1930s in decoration painting and is well documented: "A coat of lean crackle paint with only a small amount of binding agent is sprayed onto a ground of fat

paint ... cracking results from the differences in tension ... Because crackle paint is brittle it is advisable to spray on a transparent topcoat." [3] The above description of the crackle lacquer technique corresponds with Picabia's method of application. Picabia's knowledge of techniques can be ascribed to his fascination for cars, boats, and the techniques used for painting them. For example, according to Koch's *Manual for painters*, 1935 [4] the degree of crackle effect depends on the amount of binding media in the first coat and how much drying time is allowed between applying the second coat of paint. The crackle pattern in the dark-blue garment varies according to this rule. The underlying layer of dark-blue paint reveals a grid of very wide cracks (Fig. 4). Obviously a further transparent fat layer was applied over the underlying layer only shortly afterwards and then another lean coat of paint in a lighter blue hue so that the latter ran into the cracks as well as reduced the extent of the cracking. Francis Picabia adopted a technique that was highly demanding and with it, fabricated craquelure as well as controlled the extent of cracking by varying the drying times, thus integrating this effect in the composition.

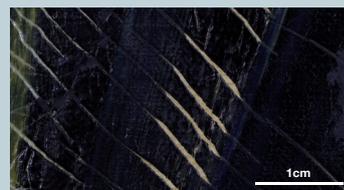


Fig.3 Paint section, UV-Fluorescence, lips figure in the foreground

Fig.4 Detail, visible light, dark blue garment, left lower corner

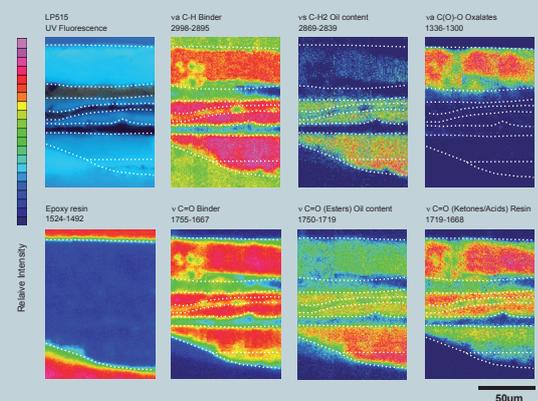


Fig.5 Infrared spectroscopic imaging FTIR-FPA. The numbers specify the integrated spectral window. The images represent the relative intensity of the corresponding compound. All transparent layers contain both oil and resin in variable ratios.



SYMPOSIUM:
PICASSO, PICABIA, ERNST
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[1] Eg.: *Paysage provençal* 1937, 51 x 40cm, Galerie Baubourg Paris; *Portrait de Femme*, 1935-37, 73 x 60cm, Private Collection New York.
[2] Marcel Duchamps as Rrose Sélavy; Preface to an exhibition of Picabia's paintings, Paris, 1926 quoted from: Annette King et al., *The use of Ripolin by Picabia in the Fig Leaf*, in: *Journal for the American Institute for Conservation* 2013, Vol. 52 No. 4, 246-257.
[3] Franz Wenzel, *Handbuch für Maler, Anstich-, lacker- und maltechnisches Nachschlagebuch*, Leipzig 1934, p. 360.
[4] Carl Koch, *Grosses Malerhandbuch, ein Lehr- und Nachschlagebuch*, Zürich 1935, p.631.