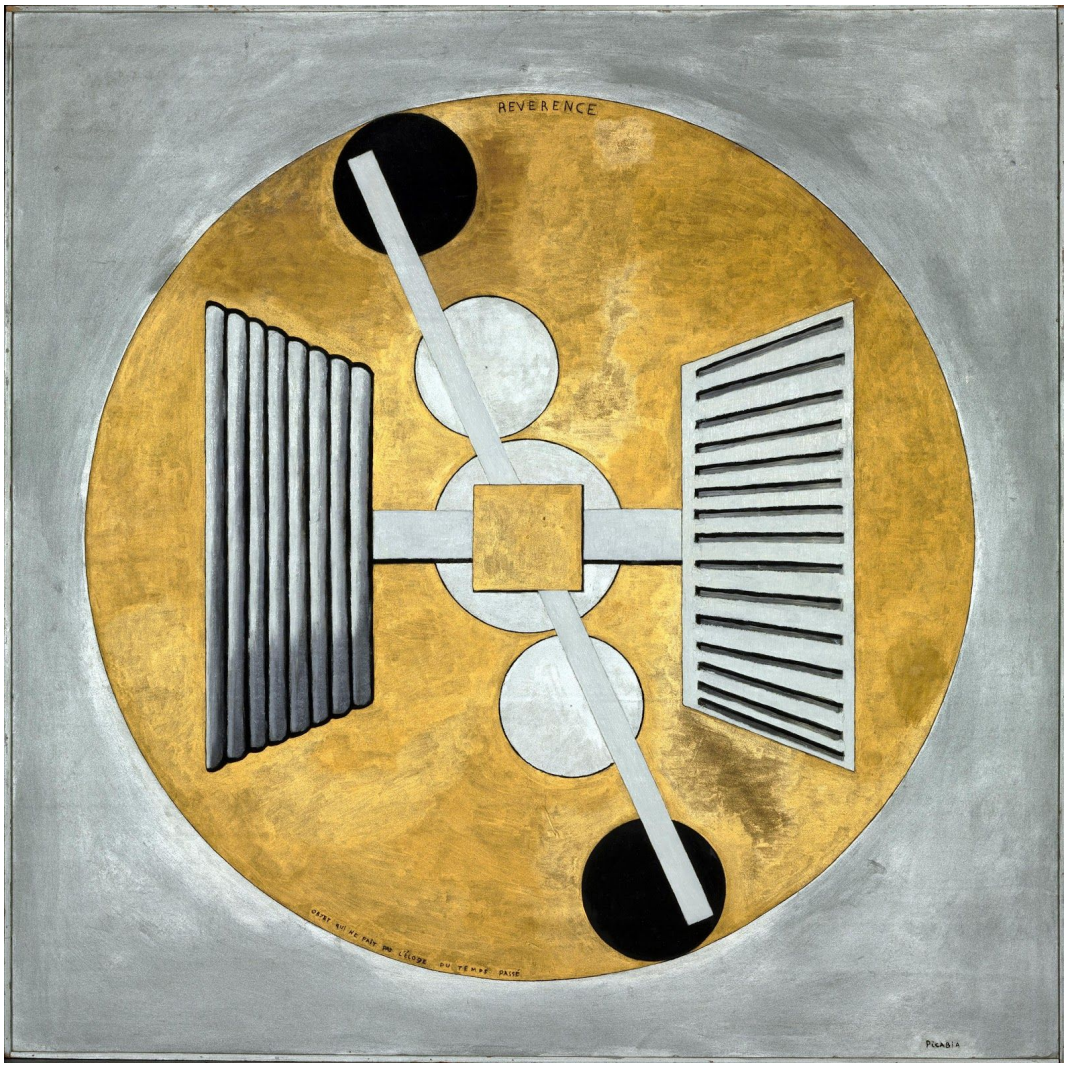
Praising the Future: Picabia's *Révérence*

At The Baltimore Museum of Art, in the Saidie A. May galleries, one can find *Révérence* (1915) by the Dada artist Francis Picabia. It's not an especially beautiful painting. The palette is rather drab, the execution somewhat crude. Yet it stands out just the same, perhaps because it is so odd. It's not exactly abstract, but it's also not clear what its subject might be. The medium-sized picture consists of a perfect square, framing a perfect circle within which appears some sort of machine at the work's center. Whatever it might be, it is rendered in metallic silver and gold, as well as black and white paint. The artist took pains to avoid expressiveness, for the marks are not as gestural as they could be. Yet one can discern the hand of the artist here and there. Picabia did not trace his composition; certain lines are a little off. In some areas, the paint appears to have been hastily applied. But the mark of the artist is not the point of the picture. Rather, the mysterious apparatus at the work's center is the main focus. But what exactly is it?



FRANCIS PICABIA (French, 1879–1953)
Révérence, 1915
Oil and metallic paint on paperboard

The accompanying text panel to *Révérence* suggests that Picabia's picture depicts some sort of antiquated apparatus that "might belong to a dough-making machine." This claim is confirmed by *Francis Picabia: Materials and Techniques*, an online resource of illustrated essays by an international group of conservators and curators published by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). The MoMA publication states that, "[A] possible source for *Révérence* is a photograph of workers attending to a dough-making machine, from the popular French science magazine *La Science et la Vie*," and includes an illustration of the machine at work. [1] However, assuming this claim is true (and it certainly does seem plausible), Picabia has turned the apparatus into an emblem. *Révérence* is not a realist picture documenting laborers at work on a machine. Instead, the machine itself is the subject. Like Jasper Johns' *Flag* (1954–55), which shows not a flag waving in the wind but rather a dead-on depiction of the U.S. flag filling the canvas to its edges, Picabia's *Révérence* makes its subject both the content and form. So in lieu of a picture illustrating the human use of a machine, we have a declaration of the machine itself. But why?

The text panel to *Révérence* goes on to propose that, "Picabia may have meant to parody Leonardo da Vinci's celebrated *Vitruvian Man*. Here, however, the artist inserts a machine as the central subject." Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* (1490), itself an emblem of the humanist spirit of the Renaissance, places man at the center of the universe and makes him the measure of all things. It is perhaps one of the most iconic images of Western art and because of this, has been endlessly reproduced and ultimately parodied. A similar fate befell Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* when Marcel Duchamp, Picabia's close friend, defaced a postcard reproduction of the world's most famous portrait with a drawn on moustache in *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919). In Picabia's *Révérence*, Man is replaced by Machine. That is, his works have taken the place of himself. Inscribed along the upper and lower portions of the circle in *Révérence* appears some text that may provide a clue towards its interpretation. The title itself, *Reverence* (sans accents), is found above the apparatus; and, written in French, at the bottom: *Objet qui ne fait pas l'éloge du temps passé.* Or, in English: "Object that does not praise the past." An object that does not praise the past implies that it may praise the future. Thus, it would appear that with *Révérence*, Picabia references the past through his source material only to point us back towards the future, a future facilitated by machines.

Though it would have been impossible for Picabia to foresee its development, his picture *Révérence* anticipates—both in form and theme—the Golden Records onboard the *Voyager* spacecrafts, launched in the late 1970s. On August 20, 1977, more than six decades after the creation of *Révérence*, NASA launched *Voyager Two* to study the outer planets of our Solar System. Sixteen days later, on September 5, 1977, NASA launched its twin, *Voyager One*. (Though *Voyager One* was launched second, it was part of the mission's plan that it should outpace *Voyager Two* and thus take the lead.) Together, these two unmanned spacecrafts constitute the Voyager Interstellar Mission (VIM), the objective of which is "to extend the NASA exploration of the solar system beyond the neighborhood of the outer planets to the outer limits of the Sun's sphere of influence, and possibly beyond." On August 25, 2012, *Voyager One* became the first human-made object to enter interstellar space, traveling further than anyone, or anything, in history.

Included onboard each of the two probes was a single gold-plated phonograph record, containing sounds and images selected to portray the diversity of life and culture on Earth. Each record contains 116 images, both of nature and human cultures; a variety of natural sounds, such as

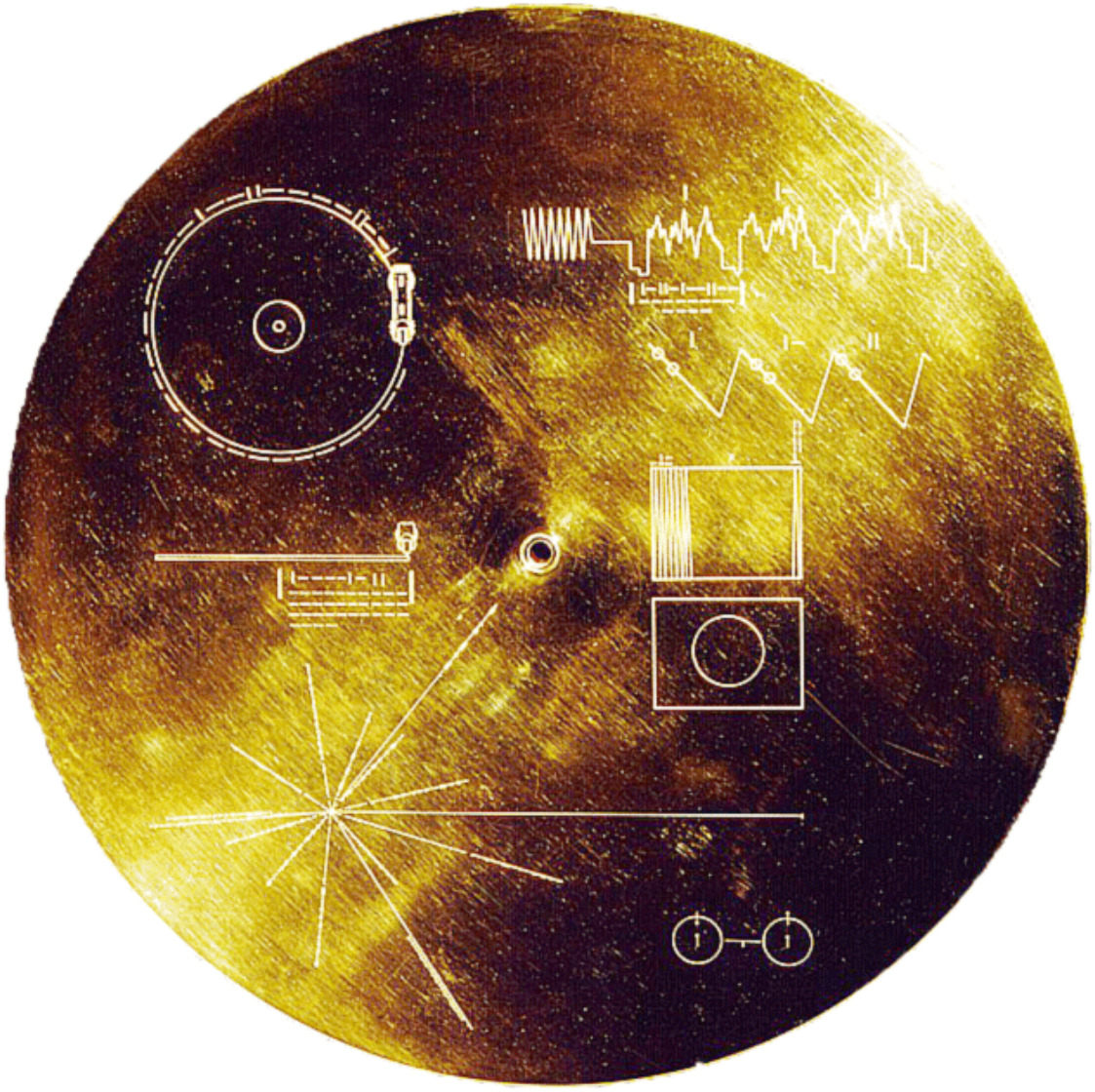
those made by waves, wind, and thunder; and animal sounds, including the songs of birds, whales, and dolphins. The record, which is carried on both *Voyager* spacecrafts, also features musical selections from different cultures and eras, including examples of classical, blues, folk, and world music; spoken greetings in fifty-nine languages; quotidian human sounds, such as footsteps and laughter (the laughter was provided by Carl Sagan who also chaired the committee that selected the contents of the Records for NASA); and printed messages from President Jimmy Carter and U.N. Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim. Here is a portion of President Carter's message on the Golden Record:

> This is a present from a small distant world, a token of our sounds, our science, our images, our music, our thoughts, and our feelings. We are attempting to survive our time so we may live into yours. We hope some day, having solved the problems we face, to join a community of galactic civilizations. This record represents our hope and our determination and our goodwill in a vast and awesome universe.

Seeing as the probes were never meant to return to Earth, and will forever fly through outer space (unless they collide with something or are found by aliens), the Golden Records were included onboard the probes in case any intelligent extraterrestrial life forms, or even future humans, may find them. The Golden Records of the Voyager Interstellar Mission represent a kind of time capsule of the Earth, projected out into space and time forever.

To the planetary scientists involved in the mission, it was the chance to study Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune up close that constituted the true objective of the mission. Indeed, the Golden Records themselves offer no real scientific value. The records and their contents are but messages in a bottle in the vast sea of the cosmos. The chance of them ever being found are close to nil. Yet it was the inclusion of the records that most intrigued the media and captivated the public imagination. The idea that aliens could one day be listening to Bach or Chuck Berry was fascinating.

Of course, Picabia's *Révérence* was not included among the images on the Golden Records. The Dadaist joke would most likely be lost on any aliens or future humans that might one day find one of the probes. Picabia himself died in 1953, a few decades before the Voyager Mission. Nonetheless, while standing in a small gallery of an art museum in Baltimore, looking at his painting, it is interesting to ponder the relationships between and evolutions of art and science, humans and machines. From Leonardo's placement of Man at the center of the Universe during the Renaissance, to Picabia's replacement of Man with Machine centuries later, to NASA's 1977 (unmanned) Voyager Interstellar Mission, a curious progression comes to light. It has often been said that since the Renaissance, the projects of art and science have diverged, that art has become increasingly critical and subjective, whereas science has become more analytical and objective. But with the Golden Records onboard *Voyager One* and *Two*, art and science reconnect. It is somewhat comforting to think that one day, far in the future, someone (or rather, something) might find one of the *Voyager* probes and play one of the Golden Records. What would they think? What would they learn? It's a strange thing to ponder here on Earth in 2019.



NASA
Cover of the Voyager Golden Record, 1977
Aluminum, uranium-238

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