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Dada was an artistic and literary movement that began in Europe. It started off as a reaction to the violence of World War I, addressing and calling out the issues of Bourgeois capitalist society, specifically violence, war and nationalism. Artists worked across a wide variety of mediums, expressing “nonsense, irrationality and anti-bourgeois protest” in their works. Two artists that contributed to the movement include George Grosz and Francis Picabia.

George Grosz's painting *“The Pillars of Society”* is a German oil on canvas painting created in 1926. The painting is a sarcastic portrait of the Grosz's representation of the corrupt and bourgeois society of Germany. Another artwork that contributed to the Dada movement is Francis Picabia's *“Fille née sans mère”* [*Girl Born Without a Mother*], a French painting created in 1916-1917 from watercolour, gouache and metallic paint on printed paper.

The Dada movement began during the years of World War 1 as a response from artists in the involved countries expressing their anger and horror at the violence and atrocities that took place. Grosz lived in Berlin under the German empire during this time period and quickly made a name for himself through his witty satirical depictions of the Weimar government. His anger as a response to the war originated under the context of personal experience, as he himself was drafted enough times to observe the horrors of war before being permanently discharged as unfit. He then worked as a member of the Berlin Dada and New Objectivity group during the Weimar Republic, opposing the current German regime and concepts of nationalism and war. All these concepts were clearly reflected throughout his artwork, as the majority of his pieces worked together to create a corrupt, crude image of the Berlin and the Weimar Republic in 1920, often painting corrupt businessmen, wounded soldiers, sex crimes and prostitutes in order to shock and provoke his audience. On the other hand, Picabia was more artistically influenced rather than conceptually. He was strongly inspired by the Impressionist paintings of Alfred Sisley, often using similar subject matter such as lanes, barges, rivers and roofs of Paris. He then fell under the influence of future Cubists and surrealists, inspiring further artistic development.

As most artists were influenced by world war 1, both artists in each given example shows signs of being inspired by different aspects of the war. Picabia chose to be inspired by the machinery and technological developments of the times. *“Fille née sans mère”* explores the comparison of humans and machines; Picabia was often fascinated by machinery. His attraction to machines helped convey his contention that the logic and rationality of human society rendered them nothing more than machines, ruled by compulsive hungers. This aspect is represented in the form and placement of the machine, its form somewhat resembling a humanoid in fetal position. Its sketchy, parchment-like quality may also be a reference to Leonardo da Vinci's *“Vitruvian Man”*, as the spokes form a similar shape to the outstretched limbs of man in da Vinci's famous piece. Grosz, however, expresses his distaste and anger towards the German government that forced him to go to war, as well as the nationalistic and materialistic society he saw as slope that lead to violence and corruption. His piece *“Pillars of Society”* showcases his anger

towards certain representations and figures of people he hold responsible. The sarcastic portrait features a Nazi holding a beer mug and a sword in front of two members of the bourgeoisie, one holding a strained palm leaf and the other with his head open to reveal a steaming pile of excrement. The background contains violent imagery of burning builders, warfare and soldiers with bloody weapons, all being blessed by a seemingly pro-Nazi priest stands in front of them, blessing their actions. Each figure is drawn in a grotesque manner, insulting the character and integrity of each personality as well as portraying them as violent and crude.

Dada artists dealt with the ideas and concepts of rejecting logic, reason and society for nonsense, irrationality and anti-bourgeois protest, using the political climate of World War 1 as their subject matter. Most Dada artists blamed these ideas and concepts as the factors leading up to World War 1 and violence, namely nationalism, materialism which they believed led to corruption, as well as repressive social values and conformity. They also believed that the devastating loss of human life was also related to technological advances in machinery, specifically weaponry and transportation. Picabia often used figurative imagery as his subject matter, such as the machine in "*Fille née sans mère*" as mentioned before. Many Dada artists sought to attack the conventions of morality, law and religion, often using Christianity as their subject matter. This is shown in both mentioned pieces, as Picabia's title, "Girl born without mother" refers to multiple bible stories; both the Virgin birth of Jesus Christ as well as the creation of Eve from Adam's rib. Grosz also sees to mock the blind faith and unquestioning conformity of Christianity during the reign of the Weimar government, as his piece shows the violent actions and chaos of the German army, all being blessed by a priest. The priest is also painted with a red nose, perhaps indicating drunkenness, as well as facing the opposite direction of the German soldiers with his eyes closed, symbolising the church "turning a blind eye" towards the horrors of war that the German soldiers were committing.

The aesthetic qualities of Dada are difficult to describe, as the sole purpose of Dada was to rise against the established traditional aesthetics of normal "art". This led to Dada itself to be described as the first major anti-art movement. This meant that the aesthetic qualities of Dada were often not as important as the message or statement the artwork was trying to make. They often relied on symbolism and metaphors to convey their statement, if there even was a clear statement to make; sometimes the compositional chaos was enough to express a point. In Picabia's "*Fille née sans mère*", he uses the machine as an ironic metaphor for human life, while mocking Christianity in the process. The gold background may also reference certain Renaissance paintings of Jesus Christ. Apart from using symbolism, Dada eventually did end up with its own style, often using dark, depressing colours to represent the capitalist society it so detested, Its fascination with world war two also gave it somewhat of an industrial feel, again shown within Picabia's piece. However, Dada's aesthetic was never restricted to any of these trends; as to restrict its aesthetic to conform to a certain style would have defeated the purpose of the movement.

Ironically, in trying to push the boundaries of aestheticism and conformity , Dada did end up creating its own style and commonly used materials and techniques, often defined by bold, experimental paintings incorporating and involving movements such as cubism, constructivism, futurism, expressionism and absurdism. Its tendency to mock the media and political photos also resulted in many Dada artists resorting to appropriating photos and magazines, using techniques such as collage and photomontage, often cutting out photos and words from newspapers and other forms of media before rearranging them

to convey a nonsensical yet meaningful message. This theme of appropriating the media to create nonsense often supported Dada's message in itself; representing the common materialistic ideas of Dada in the form of nonsense that Dada artists believed in. Picabia uses the idea of appropriating pre-existing material in his work by painting over an illustration of a steam engine in "*Fille née sans mère*". Grosz, too, while not taking any original source material, does choose to appropriate the existing characters in "*The Pillars of Society*", such as the Nazi soldier and the priest.

In conclusion, Dada was an art movement formed as a reaction to World War 1, grounded questioning and criticising the bourgeois society. These themes and values are represented in both Grosz's "*The Pillars of Society*" and Picabia "*Fille née sans mère*".



"Fille née sans mère"[*Girl Born Without a Mother*], Francis Picabia



The Pillars of Society, George Grosz

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