



DEHUMANIZATION

The Machine and the Human Figure in the Art of the Early Twentieth Century

A Survey of 70 Works

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Introduction: Men Made of Machines

Few themes define the art of 1900–1935 as sharply as the changing image of the human being. As factories, assembly lines, machine guns and typewriters reshaped everyday life, artists asked whether the person was being enlarged by the machine or emptied by it. The answers fill this book: soldiers made of cylinders, lovers reduced to engine diagrams, bureaucrats with dials for faces, and a robot woman who is more convincing than her human model. This is the theme of **dehumanization**, sometimes celebrated, more often feared, and frequently both at once.

Its roots lay in industrial modernity. Frederick Taylor's scientific management (1911) and Henry Ford's assembly line (1913) treated workers as interchangeable parts; the word 'robot' entered the language through Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R.* (1920); and psychology and physiology imagined the body as a mechanism. The First World War then made the metaphor literal. Men were fed into artillery barrages and machine-gun fire, and faces were rebuilt by surgeons and covered with masks. Many of the artists here, including Léger, Dix, Grosz and Heartfield, drew directly on that experience.

Artistic responses fall into three broad camps. The Futurists, Vorticists and Constructivists saw in the machine a new, collective, heroic humanity, and gave their figures the hard, shining planes of steel. Dada, in Zurich, Berlin, Cologne, Paris and New York, adopted the machine as a weapon of satire, reducing the bourgeois to an automaton or a puppet and finding comedy and horror in mechanical love. Finally the Metaphysical painters and the early Surrealists transformed the mannequin and the machine-body into a poetic enigma, a figure of dreams and absence. The Bauhaus, with Oskar Schlemmer's dancers, tried to find a middle path in which mechanisation and spirit could coexist.

This book arranges its works in four chapters: *Machine Men*, *Puppets and Automata*, *Mechanical Eros* and *Mannequins, Masks and Dreams*. Several artists (Picabia, Léger, Grosz) have a large number of entries because their careers are organised around the theme. A note on method: the commentary is interpretive, and uncertain dates or identifications are marked 'verify'. Titles are given as they appear in the source list, and some entries cover a group of related works.

I. Machine Men

Fernand Léger

Fernand Léger (1881–1955), a French painter, served in the First World War, and said that the war's machinery, notably the breech of a 75mm gun in sunlight, revealed to him the beauty of the object. His 'tubist' phase treated the human body as polished metal.

Le Fumeur (The Smoker), 1911–12

An early Cubist work in which a smoking figure breaks into cones and cylinders. It marks the beginning of Léger's translation of the human into mechanical form.

Two Figures (Nudes on a Red Background), 1912

The nude, a traditional symbol of humanity, is rebuilt from tubular, contrasting volumes. It is a key image of modern bodies as constructed forms.

Exit the Ballets Russes, 1914

A painting reacting to the Ballets Russes, in which movement and colour are broken into contrasting planes. It shows his turn to dynamic, abstract construction.

Soldier with a Pipe, 1916

A soldier is presented as hard, armoured geometry, painted at or just after his time at the front. It is a celebrated example of the war-made mechanical man.

Soldiers Playing Cards, 1917

Anonymous soldiers, with robot-like bodies, share a moment of leisure. Léger said the soldiers represented a new, universal type of man.

The Bargeman, c. 1918 (verify)

A working figure from the pictures in which the modern labourer is shown as a robust, mechanised type.

Mechanical Element (Élément mécanique), 1918–23

Pistons, discs and tubes in vivid colour, without any human figure. The human has been replaced by the machine as the subject of art.

Fortunato Depero

Fortunato Depero (1892–1960) was an Italian Futurist painter, designer and writer, who with Giacomo Balla signed the manifesto 'Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe' (1915). He designed marionettes, stage sets and advertising.

My Plastic Dances, (verify)

A stage-based work in which dancers and puppets move as mechanical forms; it belongs to Depero's Balli plastici of 1918.

Red and Black Savages, (verify)

A mechanised, primitivising vision of figures, associated with his plastic ballets.

Automaton with a Pipe, (verify)

A robot-like man in geometric parts, in a comic Futurist spirit.

Stage set and costume design for Enhicam of 3000, (verify)

A design for a futuristic stage work, set in the year 3000, which dresses performers as angular machines.

1924 New Futurist Poster, 1924

A graphic in which text and mechanical forms combine, showing how Futurism passed into advertising and design.

Oskar Schlemmer

Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943) was a German painter, sculptor and choreographer at the Bauhaus, who sought to unite the human body with geometry.

Triadic Ballet, 1922

Premiered in Stuttgart in 1922, with performers in padded geometric costumes, moving like puppets in architectural space. It explores whether the human figure can be abstracted without losing its dignity.

Bauhaus Logo, 1922

A stylised profile composed of simple geometric elements. It condenses the Bauhaus idea of man as a rational, constructed form.

Jacob Epstein and Helen Saunders

Jacob Epstein (1880–1959) was an American-born British sculptor, a leading figure with the Vorticists. Helen Saunders (1885–1963) was an English Vorticist painter and a member of the Wyndham Lewis circle.

The Rock Drill (Epstein), 1913–15

A plaster figure mounted on a real industrial drill; Epstein later amputated the torso and removed the drill. The 'Robot' with a foetus inside its ribs is a harrowing image of man and machine fused.

The Rock Driller (Saunders), c. 1915

Saunders' Vorticist response, using angular forms and bold geometry to present the labouring figure as part of the machine. It shows a woman artist's contribution to a male-dominated movement.

Wyndham Lewis

Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957) was a British painter, writer and founder of Vorticism.

The Crowd, c. 1914–15

A bird's-eye view of tiny, geometric figures in a mechanical grid. The individual is lost in the rigid architecture of the modern mass.

Other Machine Visions

The following artists approached the machine-man from Constructivist, Futurist and Orphist positions.

Rodchenko: Construction on White (Robot), (verify)

Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956), Russian Constructivist. Geometric elements assemble a robot-like figure, reflecting early Soviet faith in the engineered new person.

Baranoff-Rossiné: Symphony No. 1, 1913

Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné (1888–1944), Russian-Ukrainian Orphist and kinetic artist, who built an optophonic piano. This work expresses the rhythmic mechanisation of colour and form.

Burliuk: Advent of the Mechanical Man, (verify)

David Burliuk (1882–1967), Ukrainian-Russian Futurist. A Futurist announcement of the coming mechanised humanity.

Kawabe Masahisa: Mechanism, (verify)

Kawabe Masahisa was a Japanese avant-garde artist of the 1920s, little documented in English. The work shows that machine imagery in art was a global phenomenon.

Schamberg: Untitled (Mechanical Abstraction), c. 1916

Morton Schamberg (1881–1918), American Precisionist pioneer who died in the influenza pandemic. He painted machines as if they were portraits.

Belling: Sculpture 23, 1923

Rudolf Belling (1886–1972), German sculptor. A smooth, streamlined form that fuses the human and the geometric.

Stenberg brothers: Symphony of a Great City (poster), 1928

Vladimir (1899–1982) and Georgii (1900–33) Stenberg, Soviet Constructivist designers. The poster for Walter Ruttmann's film reduces the city's masses to dynamic fragments.

Ruth Page: Ballet Scaffolding, 1928–29

Ruth Page (1899–1991), American dancer and choreographer. A dance and costume work that set the performers within mechanical scaffolding.

Fritz Lang: Metropolis, 1927

Fritz Lang (1890–1976), Austrian-German film director. The film's workers are turned into cogs of a giant machine-city, and its robot Maria, played by Brigitte Helm, is cinema's best-known artificial woman.

II. Puppets and Automata

George Grosz

George Grosz (1893–1959), a German Dada and Neue Sachlichkeit artist, portrayed the Weimar establishment as soulless mechanisms. With John Heartfield he served in Berlin Dada.

The Convict (Monteur John Heartfield after Franz Jung's attempt to get him up on his feet), 1920 (verify)

A dedicatory satirical work, in which Heartfield is shown as a mechanical man, an in-joke that reveals the Dada engineer self-image.

Daum Marries Her Pedantic Automaton George in May 1920, John Heartfield Is Very Glad of It, 1920

Grosz's own marriage to Eva Peter is imagined as a union with a mechanical bridegroom. It is both private joke and manifesto on the artist as machine.

Diabolo Player, 1920

A faceless figure plays with a toy, a monument to empty leisure in a mechanised society.

The Middle-Class Philistine Heartfield Gone Wild, 1920

A collaboration with Heartfield, in which the bourgeois is a wild, mechanical collage of fragments.

Republican Automatons, 1920

Two faceless soldier-like figures, with empty gestures, personify the Weimar Republic as a hollow mechanism, one of the most poignant images of dehumanisation.

Der neue Mensch (The New Man), 1921

A satirical response to the idea of the new, rational man. The ideal of technological progress becomes a grim joke.

Raoul Hausmann

Raoul Hausmann (1886–1971) was an Austrian Berlin Dada artist, poet and photomontagist.

The Spirit of Our Time: Mechanical Head, c. 1919

A wooden hairdresser's dummy head carrying a ruler, a pocket watch mechanism and other gadgets. It satirises the empty, measuring mind of modern man, and is one of the iconic Dada objects.

Belly of a Coach, or Dupont-Durand Writes Poems, 1920 (verify)

A Dada work mocking conventional poet-clerks with mechanical parts, in his sound-and-image experiments.

Hannah Höch

Hannah Höch (1889–1978), German Dada photomontage pioneer, examined the new woman and the machine.

Study for Man and Machine, (verify)

A preparatory work in which bodies and mechanical parts are combined, reflecting her exploration of gender and mechanisation.

The Beautiful Girl, 1919–20

A collage of a woman's figure set among logos and machine parts, a commentary on beauty as commodity and brand.

Otto Dix

Otto Dix (1891–1969), a German painter, served as a machine-gunner in the war and made the maimed veteran one of his central subjects.

The Skat Players, 1920

Three disabled veterans play cards with prosthetic jaws, limbs and ear. The wounded men have become half-machines, a bitter critique of the post-war society that forgot them.

Albin Egger-Lienz

Albin Egger-Lienz (1868–1926) was an Austrian painter from the Tyrol, famed for monumental peasants and later war paintings.

1915, 1915 (verify)

Anonymous, heavy and repetitive figures in a monumental style. It is a restrained image of soldiers as faceless mass and fodder.

Umbo (Otto Umbehr)

Umbo (1902–80) was a German photographer who studied at the Bauhaus.

The Roving Reporter, 1926

A photomontage portrait of the journalist Egon Erwin Kisch, with an angular, dynamic, mechanically assembled look. It treats the modern reporter as a fast-moving machine of vision.

Lothar Schreyer

Lothar Schreyer (1886–1966) was a German Expressionist, a theatre director at the Sturm stage and Bauhaus.

Der männliche Intellekt (The Male Intellect), (verify)

A geometric, symbolic composition, possibly of the type of his stage-related designs. It treats the mind as an abstract, impersonal form.

III. Mechanical Eros

Francis Picabia

Francis Picabia (1879–1953), French-Cuban painter, adopted the language of engineering diagrams in 1915–17 to make 'mechanomorphic' portraits in which people, especially lovers, appear as machines. His work for Alfred Stieglitz's 291 magazine helped to introduce this to New York.

I See Again in Memory My Dear Udnie, 1914

A late-Orphic, abstract recollection of the dancer Napierkowska on the voyage to New York. It forms a bridge to his mechanical period.

Comic Wedlock, 1914

A quasi-abstract work on marriage, using sexual symbolism.

American Woman, 1915

Likely the mechanical portrait of an American girl (the 'Portrait of a young American girl in a state of nudity', shown as a spark plug). Sexuality reduced to engine part.

De Zayas! De Zayas! I Have Come to the Shores of the Black Sea, 1915

A mechanical portrait of the Mexican caricaturist Marius de Zayas, rendered as a diagram of parts.

Voilà la femme, 1915

Woman as a mechanical diagram in his series of ironic portraits.

This Has to Do with Me, 1915

A machine-diagram portrait in which the title implies self-identification with the mechanism.

Girl Born Without a Mother, 1916–17

A drawing of a machine-woman in which birth is an engineering process; it is among the most explicit expressions of mechanical reproduction of humanity.

Amorous Parade, 1917

A machine in which sexual acts take the form of pistons and gears. Love becomes an exercise in engineering.

Marie, 1917

A mechanical portrait of a woman figure, rendered in the vocabulary of machine parts.

Prostitution Universelle, 1916–17

A machine diagram for the commodification of sexuality, pointing to a universal market in bodies.

Mechanical Expression Seen Through Our Own Mechanical Expression, 1913–17 (verify)

A title that insists the observer is also a machine, a statement that sums up his outlook.

Intervention d'une femme au moyen d'une machine, (verify)

A mechanical drawing in which a woman's body is bound with machine function.

The Child Carburetor, 1919

A machine-schema of a child, wittily rendered as a carburettor. Humanity's earliest stage is a technical device.

Marcel Duchamp

Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), French-American artist, moved from Cubism to the readymade, and from 1915 to 1923 devoted himself to the Large Glass.

The Passage from Virgin to Bride, 1912

Painted in Munich, the transformation of a woman is depicted in organic and mechanical forms, between flesh and machine.

The Bride, 1912

The bride is depicted as a mechanical-organic apparatus, a complex system of tubes.

The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass), 1915–23

A monumental work on glass, in which a Bride above is courted by nine Bachelors below, via an elaborate machine of desire. It is among the most enigmatic works of the century, and sees love as a mechanism.

Max Ernst

Max Ernst (1891–1976) joined Dada in Cologne after serving in the war.

Self-Constructed Little Machine, 1919

A fanciful drawing of a machine which does nothing, a parody of rational engineering.

The Great Orthochromatic Wheel That Makes Love to Measure, 1919–20

A Dada mechanical fantasy in which love is a calibrated process.

Farewell My Beautiful Land of Marie Laurencin, 1919

A collage of faceless figures from a manual, with a satirical goodbye to Parisian elegance.

Ambiguous Figures (1 Copper Plate, 1 Zinc Plate, 1 Rubber Cloth...), 1919–20

An 'assemblage' of printing plates and tools stamped on paper. The figure is made of its own production materials.

The Hat Makes the Man, 1920

A collage from hat-shop illustrations in which men become hats, commenting on society's obsession with appearance.

Other Mechanical Lovers

These artists belonged to the Dada and Paris avant-garde that explored mechanical love.

Suzanne Duchamp: Un et une menacés, 1916–17 (verify)

Suzanne Duchamp (1889–1963), French painter and Dadaist, Marcel's sister. A work of tense mechanical forms in which a couple faces a threat.

Jean Crotti: Les forces mécaniques de l'amour en mouvement, 1916

Jean Crotti (1878–1958), Swiss painter and Suzanne's husband. The title proclaims love as a mechanical force.

Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes: G.R.D. Dada, (verify)

Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes (1884-1974), French Dada writer and painter. A self-portrait-like work in the mechanical vein of Dada.

IV. Mannequins, Masks and Dreams

Giorgio de Chirico

Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978), founder of Metaphysical painting, replaced faces with dressmaker's dummies and architectural parts.

The Great Machine, 1925 (verify)

A figure assembled from mechanical, architectural pieces. It shows his move from empty piazzas to mannequin-like figures.

The Predictor, 1914–15

A faceless tailor's mannequin as an oracle in a deserted square. The figure is wordless, a human form emptied of identity.

André Breton

André Breton (1896–1966), French poet, was the founder and chief theorist of Surrealism.

Figure, (verify)

A work associated with Breton's creative circle, probably a collage or drawing. It shows Surrealism's playful reinvention of the human form.

Paul Klee

Paul Klee (1879–1940), Swiss-German Bauhaus master, treated figures as marionettes with a poetic wit.

The Beginnings of a Smile, (verify)

A delicate, linear face which at once suggests a puppet and a person, an instance of Klee's balance of humour and tenderness.

Aaron Douglas

Aaron Douglas (1899–1979), the Harlem Renaissance's leading illustrator, designed covers for magazines such as *Opportunity*.

Cover for Opportunity, 1920s (verify)

Silhouetted, geometric figures present a Black modern identity, using abstraction to assert, not erase, humanity. It is a counterpoint to the era's dehumanising images.

Minya Diez-Dührkoop

Minya Diez-Dührkoop (1873–1929) was a Hamburg portrait photographer from a family studio.

Photographs of the Mask Dancers, (verify)

Portraits of masked performers, in which the human face is replaced by a mask. They record the period's fascination with masking and anonymity.

A Note on Sources

The list of works derives from a curated collection titled "Radium Age Art: Dehumanization". The commentary is an interpretive survey written without catalogue checking; items marked "verify" are uncertain. Reproductions are omitted for copyright reasons.