



Duchamp, Marcel (1887-1968)

by Julia Pastore

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Considered a genius by some, an irreverent prankster by others, Marcel Duchamp was one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century.

Born on July 28, 1887, near Blainville, France, Henri-Robert-Marcel Duchamp revolutionized how modern art is conceived, made, and interpreted. Above all, his life and art reflect a desire to turn things upside down and to break down all linguistic, sexual, and social restraints.

Closely associated with many of the major artistic movements of his time (Futurism, Cubism, Surrealism, Dadaism), Duchamp never worked within a single aesthetic. He prized creative independence and developed a distinctive anti-art stance, believing that artistic standards of any kind are meaningless.

His best known works, the "readymades," challenge the definition of art itself. By displaying ordinary, mass-produced articles, such as a bicycle wheel or snow shovel (titled *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1915), Duchamp dissolved the boundaries between life and art. Stripped of their functional and commercial value, these mundane, everyday products when labeled and titled as art assumed a new, often sinister aura.

For Duchamp, a piece of art is its own reality, not a mere imitation of an existing one. His most notorious readymade, *The Fountain* (a urinal, 1917), was originally rejected for exhibition by the Society of Independent Artists, an organization he helped to found, because of its indecency.

In the Dadaist spirit of revolt against art, morality, and society, Duchamp added a moustache and goatee to a photograph of Leonardo da Vinci's canonical *Mona Lisa*. Titled *L.H.O.O.Q.* (when read aloud in French, the letters suggest words that translate into "she has a hot ass"), this 1919 work epitomizes Duchamp's break with tradition.

Duchamp's artistic theories have been very influential on other artists and are sometimes seen as anticipating postmodernism. Pop artists, such as Andy Warhol, have been particularly influenced by Duchamp's provocative questioning of the nature of art, particularly the relationships between an original and a copy and between utilitarian objects and works labeled art.

Much of Duchamp's work challenges concepts of identity, gender, and sexuality. Later work is often signed "Rose Sélavy," the name of his feminine alter-ego. Unsatisfied with one identity, Duchamp desired two. He went so far as to be photographed by his friend Man Ray in women's clothing.

He spends most of his time over the *Aube des Bachelors* (1915) of his life working on *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-1923), a wooden door made of wood and painted in the ground. The peering viewer is immediately complicit in the mysterious circumstances responsible for this questionably erotic pose.

His final work is the culmination of this obsession. Although after 1923 Duchamp



Top to Bottom:
1) *Fountain* (1915) by Marcel Duchamp.
2) *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* (1915-1923) by Duchamp.
3) A photograph of Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy created by Man Ray in 1921.
4) Marcel Duchamp (center) with Constantin Brancusi (left) and Mary Reynolds in 1929.
The image of *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* is attributed to "takmoryair" and appears under the GNU Free Documentation License.
The photograph of Duchamp with Brancusi and Reynolds, courtesy McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

Despite the provocative and explicit nature of his work, Duchamp valued the "beauty of indifference" in his private life. His enormous personal charm and easy-going nature attracted many female lovers but few passionate attachments. A brief marriage in 1927 shocked his friends and ended quickly in divorce. A second marriage to Alexina (Teeny) Sattler in 1954 lasted the rest of his life.

Although he lived much of his life in New York City (and became a United States citizen in 1955), Duchamp died in his homeland of France on October 1, 1968. Much of his work is now housed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

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