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LEVEL 6 HISTORY OF ART AND MUSEUM STUDIES

# What were Marcel Duchamp's 'Ready-mades' and what impact do you think that they made on twentieth-century art?

In the letter well known to art historians, dated 15th January 1916, and addressed to his sister Suzanne, Marcel Duchamp (Naumann and Obalk, 2000 p.44) described his idea of creating what he called Ready-mades for the first time. He explained that he purchased 'various objects in the same taste,' signed them, and gave them the titles. He asked her to not try 'to understand this in the Romantic or Impressionist or Cubist sense' because there were no associations. He even provided her with detailed instructions on how to create a Ready-made' with his signature on it remotely. Jacob Lund and Jacob Wamberg (2019, p.6) argue that 'This impersonal mode of art-making seems to be fundamental for Duchamp.' He wanted to depart from traditional art which he considered 'retinal'- pleasing only the eye and not the mind. In his opinion, visual art failed by being only a representation. His Ready-mades, on the contrary, had no representational function, they were what they were, the actual objects not the images of them, 'conceived ... as a form of communication devoid of aesthetic enjoyment' (Golding, 1973 p.56). They were his revolutionary response to the established canon of art. This paper will explore what exactly the Ready-mades were and discuss the way they impacted twentieth-century art.

According to John Golding (1973, p.55), Ready-mades can be described as 'a manufactured object, which the artist by virtue of the attention he turns upon it elevates to the symbolic status of a work of art,' Thierry de Duve (1991, p.277) explains that the early ones 'are the classic chosen everyday items with minimal alteration', and Thomas Folland (2020, p.806) maintains that 'Duchamp used mass-produced industrial objects to negate

craft, originality, and authorship in order to question the very idea of art itself.' Ready-mades were neither inventions nor reinventions of Duchamp in the traditional meaning of the creative process which requires artistic skill. They were already existing forms that he chose to be artworks representing the intellectual concept he started to develop about 1913, however, he did not find a generic name for them until he moved from Paris to New York in 1915. The first known Ready-made was a bicycle wheel on top of a kitchen stool- the object that Duchamp found attractive and comforting, he kept it in his Parisian studio and compared watching its movement to the joy of watching flames in the fireplace. Duve (1991, p.249) suggests that its aesthetic structure was characteristic, combined 'humor, pseudoscientific device, and a meditation object', and was followed by many other Ready-mades.

Among the earliest ones were the snow shovel, the *Bottle Rack,* the *Comb*, and the most controversial one- the urinal named *Fountain*. The latter repeated the situation Duchamp had already experienced when his *Nude Descending the Staircase* was rejected by the Salon des Independants in February 1912 and shocked the public during the Armory Show in New York the following year. The *Fountain*, submitted under the nickname R. Mutt, got excluded from the Society of Independent Artists inaugural exhibition opened on 9th April 1917 in New York, even though Duchamp was among the founders and was a member of the Board of Directors of the Society. As Folland (2020, p.812, 815) argues, Duchamp took the *Fountain* immediately to Stieglitz's 291 gallery to get it photographed, which saved the image of this original Ready-made for future generations (Figure 1.), for '[T]he originals were carelessly discarded or destroyed ... having never intended them to survive, save as photographic representations.' However, in 1964, the artist became the subject of another controversy with his decision to reproduce his Ready-mades from the beginning of the century as the authorised replicas and to sell them. Proud of never creating commercial art, Duchamp, as Bradley Bailey (2018, p.348, 349) argues, felt threatened by the rise of the Pop art movement and feared being dethroned by its leader, Andy Warhol not only from his

position of precursor and 'ultimate inventor' of the Ready-mades but also the artist who ended 'the understanding of art as object' and began viewing 'art as philosophy.'

As Duchamp during the 1960s certainly had thoughts regarding his legacy, he could pride himself as one of the artists who had the greatest impact on twentieth-century art. He emerged from Impressionism, experimented with Cubism and Symbolism, and influenced Surrealism and Dada. Folland (2020, p. 806,807,818) maintains that as Duchamp's Ready-mades had a status of anti-art which perfectly suited this nihilistic movement, they became the 'American manifestation' of Dada and Duchamp was 'claimed … as its New York representative.' It is indisputable that Marcel Duchamp was a man of extraordinary intellect, an artist, a true thinker, and a philosopher, also gifted with a profound sense of humor, which allowed him to explore, experiment, question, and break the rules of existing art movements, to push the boundaries, and to open new spaces for creative expression. His Ready-mades, being an idea, a decision, a choice of the artist of what he presents as his art, became the origin and the foundation of the Conceptual art movement which is thriving to this day. Folland (2020, p.806) argues that '[T]he conventional art-historical significance of the readymades has to do with the condition of their creation: the fact that Duchamp did not make these objects lies at the heart of their challenge to a long tradition of studio-based practice.' Ready-mades raised questions regarding what is and what is not art and opened the way for future visioners like Andy Warhol who drew inspiration from Duchamp's ideas when creating the emblematic items of Pop art.

To conclude, this short paper examined what Marcel Duchamp's Ready-mades were and explored their significance for twentieth-century art. The intellectual and philosophical approach of the artist was the source of arguably the most innovative idea, which challenged the long-established rules observed in art by undermining the importance of the artist's training and skills. As suggested by Lund and Wamberg (2019, p.5) 'by minimizing the artist's manual intervention, the readymades ultimately turn artistic creation into a question of

choice.' There would be neither Conceptual art nor Pop art without Duchamp's Ready-mades and the whole art of the past century would have been entirely different from the one we know today.



Figure 1. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, photographed by Alfred Stieglitz in his 291 gallery in 1917, with *The Warriors* by Marsden Hartley in the backdrop.

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