

# MARCEL Duchamp

*“Here, in N.Y., I bought some objects in the same taste and I treat them as ‘readymades.’”*

In a 1916 letter to his sister, Suzanne, Marcel Duchamp explained that he had begun to designate everyday objects as artworks and referred to them for the first time, in the passage cited above, as “readymades.” “I sign them and I think of an inscription for them in English,” he continued, noting “for example, a large snow shovel on which I have inscribed at the bottom: *In advance of the broken arm.*”<sup>41</sup> In June 1915 Duchamp had moved from Paris to New York (a heart condition made him unfit to serve in World War I), and the snow shovel was his first American readymade. Accompanied by the French artist Jean Crotti, his studio mate and future brother-in-law, Duchamp purchased the shovel in a Columbus Avenue hardware store one day in November. The two expatriates were apparently struck by this ordinary object, having “never seen a snow shovel before”<sup>42</sup> since they were not available in France. Back in the studio, Duchamp painted a title, signature, and date on the shovel and hung

it from the ceiling with wire. With this series of simple actions—selecting, naming, signing, and displaying—Duchamp dramatically transformed the definition of an artwork and the role of the artist, redrawing the boundary between art and life for the century to come.

This act of the “dehumanization of a work of art,”<sup>43</sup> as Duchamp later referred to the approach that resulted in the readymade, did not occur suddenly or unpredictably. Having abandoned the classical painting technique he had learned at the Académie Julian in Paris for the avant-garde idioms of Fauvism and Cubism, he then exchanged the still-traditional subject matter of those experimental forms for more mechanistic content.<sup>44</sup> “People living in a machine age are naturally influenced either consciously or unconsciously by the age they live in,”<sup>45</sup> Duchamp later acknowledged, and the progression from the industrial allusions in his paintings of the early 1910s to the use of actual industrial

**45** *In Advance of the Broken Arm.* August 1964. Fourth version, after lost original of November 1915. Wood and galvanized-iron snow shovel, 52 in. (132 cm) high





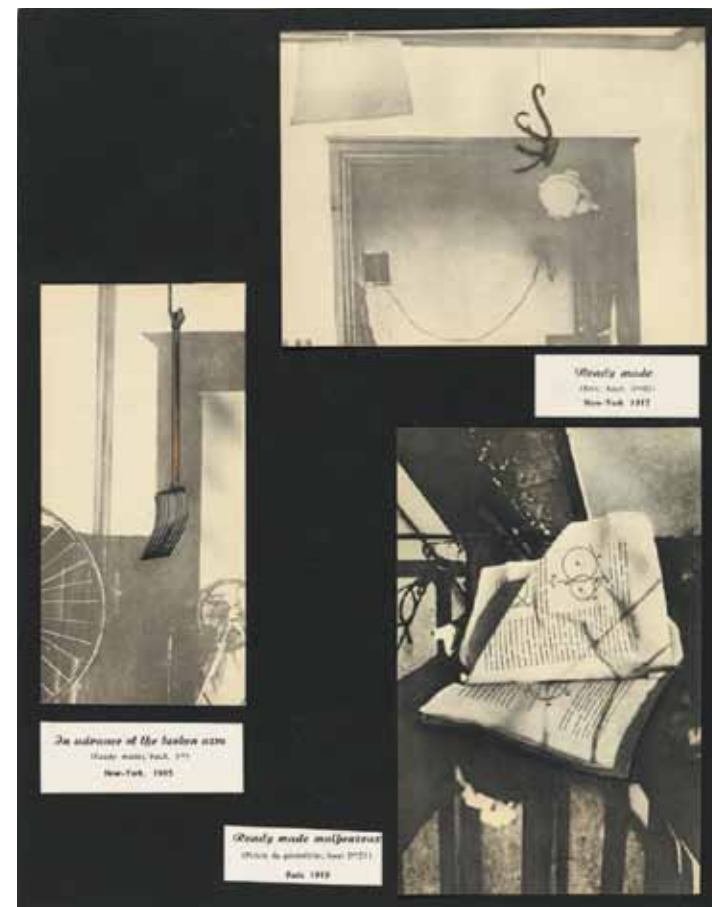
objects was a logical one. Two major readymades preceded Duchamp's immigration to America: his first, *Bicycle Wheel* (fig. 1), is actually an "assisted readymade," for Duchamp not only chose the eponymous object but also altered it, mounting it upside down on a stool. The galvanized-iron *Bottle Rack* that followed in 1914 was the first unassisted readymade, though that designation had not yet been conceived by the artist.

The tremendous philosophical consequences of Duchamp's readymades rely on those relatively few art-making actions that the artist did not relinquish in creating them. By selecting a commonplace object rather than making it himself, Duchamp undermined traditional notions both of authorship—he hoped "to get away from the worn-out cult of the hand"—and of beauty: he maintained that his choices were "never dictated by aesthetic delectation" but were "based on a reaction of visual indifference with a total absence of good or bad taste."<sup>6</sup> By titling the object, Duchamp wedded the ordinary item to a linguistic concept, allowing it to exist in the mind as much as in space.<sup>7</sup> With its new title, for example, *In Advance of the Broken Arm* is no longer just a snow shovel but also the prophecy of a future event. By signing an object, Duchamp called attention to the very condition of authorship that he wished to undermine, imparting artistic value to the same thing that he had deprived of any potential for practical function. The signature on the snow shovel is especially telling: the artwork is "[from] Marcel Duchamp" instead of "by" him—more gift than creation.<sup>8</sup> Finally, by displaying an object—whether suspended in the studio or put on view in an exhibition—Duchamp finalized its exit from everyday life, proving that context is vital to the definition of a work of art.

If Duchamp's acts of selecting, naming, signing, and displaying were sufficient to transform one snow shovel into an iconic work of art, the process could be repeated. Though it was important to Duchamp to regulate the number of each readymade in existence,<sup>9</sup> throughout his life he authorized various additional versions of those objects, like the snow shovel, whose originals were lost. For a 1945 exhibition

• FIG. 1 Marcel Duchamp. *Bicycle Wheel*. 1951. Third version, after lost original of 1913. Metal wheel mounted on painted wood stool, 51 x 25 x 16½ in.

(129.5 x 63.5 x 41.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection



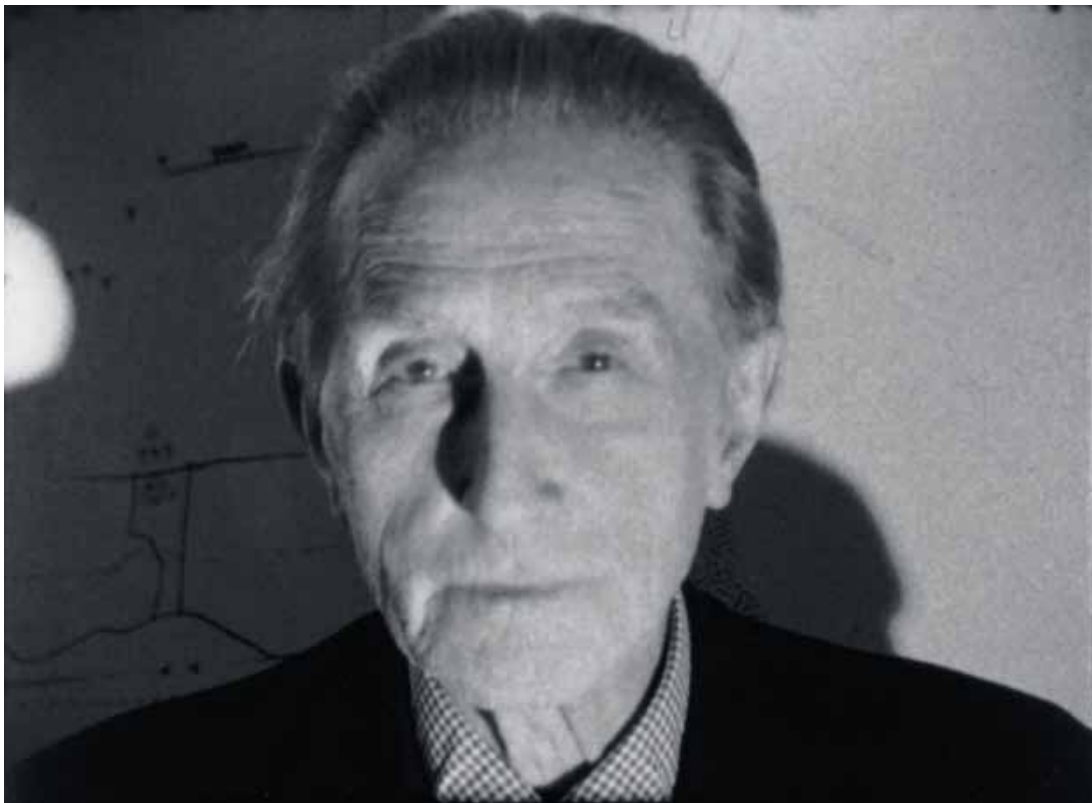
• FIG. 2 Marcel Duchamp. *From or by Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy (The Box in a Valise)* (detail; see plate 46). Published 1966. Leather valise

containing 80 miniature replicas, color reproductions, and photographs of works by Duchamp, dimensions variable. The Museum of Modern Art,

New York. Gift of the artist. At left is a reproduction of a photograph by Man Ray showing the lost original of *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915).

of the Société Anonyme collection at the Yale University Art Gallery, the art historian George Heard Hamilton bought a new shovel, onto which Duchamp once again painted the work's title and signature. According to Hamilton, the shovel caused confusion both on the train from New York to New Haven—where passengers were surprised to see such an implement in April—and when the show toured to Minnesota, where an uninitiated janitor evidently used it in the snow.<sup>10</sup> The present version (plate 45) is fifth in an edition of eight replicas made under Duchamp's supervision in 1964 by the gallerist and scholar Arturo Schwarz in Milan.<sup>11</sup>

A tireless innovator, Duchamp resisted settling into a recognizable style, and in the decades following the early readymades, his practice ranged from complex assemblages with allegorical overtones to kinetic experiments based on the science of optics (see plate 51). But the principle of the readymade—according to which an artist could appropriate a preexisting entity rather than create a new one—persisted throughout and extended to images as well as objects. In Paris in 1919 Duchamp came in contact with artists of the Dada group, whose provocations in art and literature combined social critique with irreverence in a way consistent with his own attitudes. While there, he added a moustache to a postcard of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* plus the initials *L.H.O.O.Q.*—a pun that, when said aloud, sounds like the French for "she has a hot ass."<sup>12</sup> This vandal's act against the idea of a masterpiece is another manifestation of the assisted readymade, and as with the *Bicycle Wheel*, the artist was free to select, name, sign, and display multiple versions (including undoing his own transgressive act: not adding the moustache this time, Duchamp declared the *L.H.O.O.Q.* "rasée," or "shaved"; see plate 47). Duchamp similarly subjected his own oeuvre to reproducibility, undertaking in 1935 a six-year project to assemble a "portable museum" called *The Box in a Valise* (plate 46). This suitcase full of miniature facsimiles of his artworks includes a photograph by Man Ray of the lost original of *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, seen hanging above the first *Bicycle Wheel* in Duchamp's Broadway studio (fig. 2).



It is no accident that MoMA’s versions of *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, and *The Box in a Valise* all date to the mid-1960s, as this was a key moment of renewed critical attention to Duchamp. Thanks in part to the 1959 publication of the first monograph devoted to the artist<sup>13</sup> and to his first retrospective, at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963, a new generation of artists learned the lessons of the readymade. For example, Jasper Johns, whose work was dubbed “Neo-Dada” for his debt to Duchamp and his peers, co-opted the strategy of selection, incorporating into compositions “things the mind already knows,”<sup>14</sup> like flags (see page 150), maps (see plate 107), and numbers (see

plates 108–19). Flags are also present in Johns’s 1985 painting *Summer* (plate 121), a *Box in a Valise*–style digest of his own visual repertory, which in an allusion as much to Duchamp as to Leonardo also features the Mona Lisa. The Pop artist Andy Warhol, perhaps the greatest heir to Duchamp’s legacy, was also the artist’s friend, and he captured his predecessor’s impish expression in a 1966 *Screen Test* (fig. 3). Given the relationship of Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans* (plate 122) and *Brillo Boxes* (plates 131 and 132) to the readymade, it seems particularly appropriate that Warhol himself once owned the very same version of *In Advance of the Broken Arm* that now belongs to The Museum of Modern Art. — SF

• FIG. 3 Frame enlargement from *Screen Test: Marcel Duchamp*. 1966. 16mm print, black and white, silent, 4 minutes, 4 seconds at 16 frames per second. The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh

Epigraph: Marcel Duchamp to Suzanne Duchamp, “15 Janvier environ” (“about January 15,” [1916]), quoted in *Affectionately, Marcel: The Selected Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Francis M. Naumann and Hector Obalk, trans. Jill Taylor (Chent: Ludion Press, 2000), pp. 43–44.

1. Ibid.
2. Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), p. 156.
3. Marcel Duchamp, interview by James Johnson Sweeney, “A Conversation with Marcel Duchamp,” published as “Marcel Duchamp,” in *Wisdom: Conversations with the Elder Wise Men of Our Day*, ed. James Nelson (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958), p. 95, quoted in Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp: Vol. 1, The Text* (New York: Delano Greenridge, 1997), p. 42 n. 2.
4. For a discussion of this transition, see Rosalind E. Krauss, “Forms of Readymade: Duchamp and Brancusi,” in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), p. 72.
5. Duchamp, quoted in Katharine Kuh, *The Artist’s Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 90.
6. Duchamp, quoted *ibid.*; and Marcel Duchamp, “Apropos of Readymades” (talk, symposium on the “Art of Assemblage,” The Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 19, 1961). Unedited text given to Schwarz and quoted in his *Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, p. 41. Later edited and published in *Studies in Modern Art 2: Essays on Assemblage* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992), pp. 118–59; see p. 135 for the quotation cited here.
7. Duchamp invented the term *cer-vellités*, or “brain facts,” to describe works existing in the mind. See George Heard Hamilton, “In Advance of Whose Broken Arm?” in *Marcel Duchamp in Perspective*, ed. Joseph Masheck (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 74.
8. See Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp: Vol. 2, The Plates, Critical Catalogue Raisonné, The Bibliographies* (New York: Delano Greenridge, 1997), p. 636.
9. He wrote a note to himself to “Limit the numb. of rdymades/yearly (?)”; see Marcel Duchamp, *Notes and Projects for the Large Glass* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969), p. 88 n. 53, quoted (with different spelling) in Schwarz, *Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, p. 45 n. 29.
10. See Hamilton, “In Advance of Whose Broken Arm?” p. 74.
11. Schwarz also made two artist copies and two exhibition copies that year, for a total of twelve. In addition to these and the 1945 version discussed above, one other authorized replica was made, by Ulf Linde in Stockholm in 1963.
12. Said aloud, the initials approximate the phrase “*Elle a chaud au cul.*”
13. Robert Lebel, *Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Grove Press, 1959).
14. Jasper Johns, in Leo Steinberg, *Jasper Johns* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1963), p. 15. Originally published in *Metro*, nos. 4–5 (1962) and republished as “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” in Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 17.