

DUCHAMP

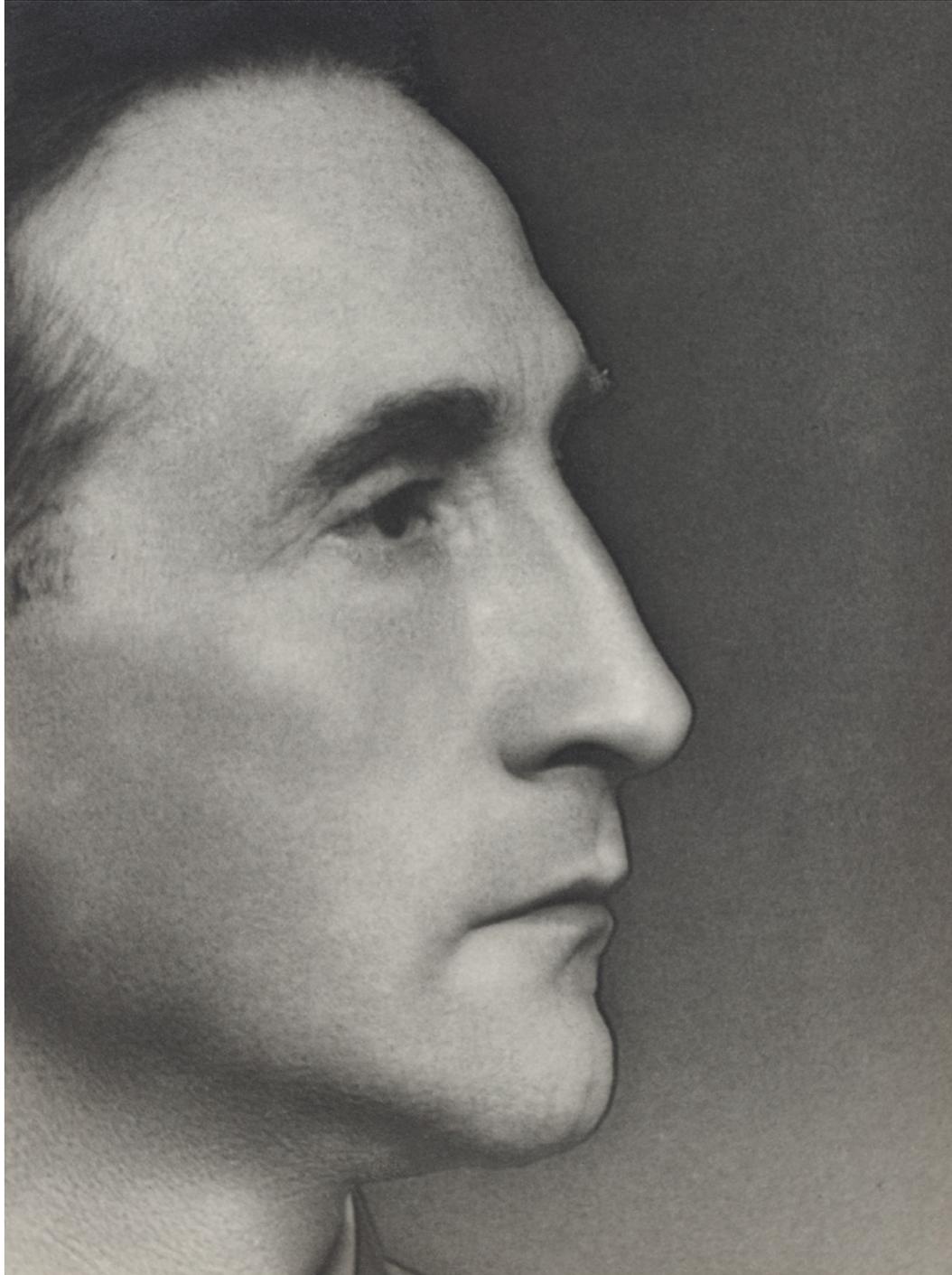
A Biography



Calvin Tomkins

MoMA

DUCHAMP



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Calvin Tomkins

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TO DODIE

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FOREWORD

This revised edition of Calvin Tomkins's *Duchamp: A Biography* arrives fifty-five years after the author's first meeting with Marcel Duchamp. The encounter took place in October 1959 at the King Cole Bar in New York's St. Regis Hotel. Tomkins, a thirty-three-year-old writer and editor of international news at *Newsweek*, had been assigned to interview the eminent seventy-two-year-old artist despite the fact that the former knew little about art and the latter was known to be exceedingly reticent. *Newsweek's* pages rarely featured art topics, yet in this case the magazine's timing was impeccable: Duchamp's career, largely unnoticed or dismissed for decades, was just being discovered by a new generation of artists who would make his work a touchstone for the art of their time. Chance tossed Tomkins into this exciting arena, and as has been true for his artist peers, the cardinal importance of Duchamp to his work has not faded since.

The assignment from *Newsweek* was auspicious: shortly thereafter Tomkins left for *The New Yorker*, where within a couple of years he commenced the remarkable art-world profiles that he continues to write for the magazine today. The first, in 1962, portrayed the Swiss artist Jean Tinguely, who two years earlier had orchestrated the self-destruction of an elaborate assemblage entitled *Homage to New York* in MoMA's Sculpture Garden. Thereafter followed, among others, profiles of John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, and, in 1965, Duchamp; those four essays were united in Tomkins's 1965 book *The Bride and the Bachelors* (in 1968 expanded to include Merce Cunningham as well). Tomkins's Duchamp profile led to his receiving an assignment for a monograph on the artist from the Time-Life Library of Art; *The World of Marcel Duchamp* appeared in 1966.

Duchamp remained for the author not only a subject (and until the artist's death, in 1968, a friend) but a conviction; his "affirmative irony," Tomkins writes, "is still the sound-

est guide to an understanding of twentieth-century art." Around the time of Duchamp's centenary, in 1987, Tomkins envisaged the project of a full-scale biography. The idea was impressively perverse: Duchamp had followed a strict code of privacy, had saved almost nothing, and had described his life's work as merely that of a *respirateur*, a "breather." After provoking scandals with *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) and *Fountain* (1917), he steered clear of the sensational and his course seemed to unfold without drama. Undeterred, Tomkins followed a hunch that still waters run deep. He estimated the task at three years; he watched it swell to nine before it was time to quit. The author may or may not have fully grasped the urgency of his work: the list of essential informants who have died since the book was written is long and sobering.

The Museum of Modern Art is proud to publish this revised edition of *Duchamp: A Biography*. In 2004, Tomkins donated to the Museum's Library and Archives a vast collection of personal papers reflecting more than four decades of research and writing for *The New Yorker* and for eleven books. The archive includes Tomkins's notes, correspondence, transcripts, annotated drafts, all sorts of printed materials, and nearly 500 audiotapes. The most voluminous category by far is that related to the making of the Duchamp biography. Tomkins continues to add to the archive as his writing career proceeds apace.

Tomkins's selection of The Museum of Modern Art as the repository for his archive caps a long and close association with the Museum. When he was still at *Newsweek*, before he began to write regularly on art, he would eat lunch alone on the sixth-floor terrace café and then drift through the galleries, "just sort of inhaling images. I knew nothing about art then, and over the next few years I became one of the thousands of people whose art education took place in those galleries." He recalls stealthily slipping a quarter into a shirt pocket affixed to the surface of one of Rauschenberg's Combines in the 1959 exhibition *Sixteen Americans*, a friendly if illicit response to the artist's own cross-pollination of life and art. When Tomkins went to *The New Yorker*, the Museum's Library became his most important source of information on his subjects, and a place where he could reliably be found ensconced in research on the artist he was about to profile.

Tomkins's gift of his papers to the Library and Archives is a beautiful completion of the circle, as these materials are now primary documents of great value themselves, sure to fuel the research of generations of writers to come. For many, Tomkins's work will serve as a model. As this biography of Duchamp so amply demonstrates, he unfailingly brings a splendid lightness of touch to the weight of his careful and thorough research. With this publication we gratefully salute his outstanding achievement as a peerless chronicler of the cultural epoch we are privileged to inhabit.

—Ann Temkin

The Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis
Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture

PREFACE

about the artist. In recent years, however, more than thirty artists have done works based on *Etant donnés*, and it has become a critical launching pad for new investigations into Duchamp's art.

Contradiction and especially self-contradiction were always part of Duchamp's working process. "I have forced myself to contradict myself," he once said, "in order to avoid conforming to my own taste." In the last two decades of his life, he seemed in some ways to be a very different person from the one he had been before. His marriage to Alexina (Teeny) Matisse, which began soon after his liaison with Maria Martins had ended, struck their friends as being almost miraculously happy. Fame, which had anointed him briefly in 1913 when his *Nude Descending a Staircase* became the scandal of the Armory Show in New York, returned in a gentler and more gradual form during the 1960s, as a new generation of American artists discovered him and he entered what he sardonically called his "sex maniac phase," when he was "ready to rape and be raped by everybody." What never changed was the elusive independence of his mind. Duchamp's freedom, and the way he used it, are his principal legacy to other artists. My hope has been that readers may get a sense of the endless possibilities and dangers that this kind of freedom entails.

—Calvin Tomkins

Marcel Duchamp's energetic afterlife shows no signs of slowing down. The most influential artist of the twentieth century continues to cast his spell over the twenty-first, challenging each new generation of artists to ask the unanswerable but indispensable question: What is art? Uncertainty about art's nature and purpose has been built into the creative process for more than a century now, but the key date is 1913, when Duchamp mounted a bicycle wheel on a stool, converting it into what he would identify, two years later, as a "readymade"—an ordinary manufactured object converted into a work of art by the mere act of his choosing and signing it. Young artists today are still dealing with the repercussions of this act, even though they may not know it. Duchamp's work, Duchamp's thinking, and Duchamp's life are so deeply embedded in the practice of art that their influence is often subliminal, and critics tend to confuse matters by crediting others—Andy Warhol is the current favorite—for changes that Duchamp set in motion. "After Duchamp," as the art historian Roger Shattuck wrote, "it is no longer possible to be an artist in the way it was before."

The continuing fascination with Duchamp has prompted this new edition of his biography. A good deal of information about his life and work has come to light in the eighteen years since the book first appeared. Much of the new material included here has to do with two events in Duchamp's later years. The first was his intense, passionate, and eventually devastating love affair with Maria Martins, which precipitated his last major work, *Etant donnés*, the sculptural "environment" that occupied him, in secret, for the next twenty years. The second was *Etant donnés* itself, which went on public view for the first time in 1969, one year after Duchamp died. For more than a decade, the international art world had surprisingly little to say about this astonishing *tableau vivant*, which seemed to contradict so much that people thought they knew

THE BRIDE STRIPPED BARE

*Bride above—
bachelors below.*

Just under nine feet high and five and a half feet wide, freestanding between aluminum supports, *The Large Glass* dominates the Duchamp gallery in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It is too big to take in at one glance. Your eyes travel over it in random patterns, over it and through it, to other viewers moving and stopping, and to the narrow window in back, which overlooks an outdoor courtyard with its central fountain. Prey to distractions of all kinds, the sexual comedy of the *Glass* verges on farce. Marcel Duchamp called it a “hilarious” picture.

He also insisted that it was not a picture. In one of the working notes that he collected and published in *The Green Box*, Duchamp refers to it as a “delay.” *Use “delay” instead of picture or painting . . . It’s merely a way of succeeding in no longer thinking that the thing in question is a picture—to make a delay of it in the most general way possible, not so much in the different meanings in which delay can be taken, but rather in their indecisive reunion.* Like so many of the *Green Box* notes, this one has been chipped away at and drilled into and bombarded by generations of Duchamp explainers, an international tribe whose numbers increase each year. Laboring to unlock the mystery of that little word, “delay,” they have linked it, among other things, to Henri Bergson’s theory of duration, to the medieval practice of alchemy, and to a subconscious fear of incest on Duchamp’s part. One Duchampian has suggested that it be read as an anagram for “lad[ely],” so that “delay in glass” becomes glass lady. Duchamp adored puns and perpetrated a lot of them, but his were



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

never as heavy-footed as that. Generally overlooked in the ongoing analysis and microanalysis of Duchamp's wordplay is that it is *play*. He played with words, juggling a variety of senses and non-senses and taking pleasure in their "indecisive reunion." As he went on to say in that *Green Box* note, *a delay in glass as you would say a poem in prose or a spittoon in silver*.

The notes from *The Green Box* (italicized here) are essential to any understanding of *The Large Glass*. They constitute the verbal dimension of a work that is as much verbal as visual, by an artist who disdained words as a form of communication but who was fascinated by their other life, in poetry. It should be borne in mind, however, that nobody fully understands *The Large Glass*. The work stands in relation to painting as *Finnegans Wake* does to literature, isolated and inimitable; it has been called everything from a masterpiece to a hoax, and to this day there are no standards by which it can be judged. Duchamp invented a new physics to explain its "laws," and a new mathematics to fix the units of its measurement. Some of the notes are simply impossible to fathom. A good many of the ideas in them were never even carried out on the *Glass*, for that matter, either because the technical problems were too great or because, as Duchamp sometimes said, after eight years of work on the project he simply got bored and lost interest. He stopped working on the *Glass* in 1923, leaving it, in his own words, "definitely unfinished."

Its full title is *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*, or *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. Note the "Even." This sly adverb, thrown in to discourage literal readings, has also been subjected to endless analysis. One explanation is that it should be read as a pun on "*m'aime*," meaning "loves me"—that is to say, the bride being stripped by these anonymous bachelors really loves Marcel Duchamp. The tribe can't resist looking for clues to the man in such discoveries, but Duchamp always maintained that his odd little adverb had no meaning whatsoever, that it was just "fun and poetry in my own way," that "the word *même* came to me without even looking for it." It was simply a humorous aside, something like the "already" in "enough, already."

Less attention has been paid to the word "her" in the title. There are nine bachelors, and the inference is that they belong to the bride—a male harem, servile and inferior in every respect to their peremptory mistress. *The bride has a life center—the bachelors do not. They live on coal or other raw material drawn not from them but from their not them. Although she must appear*

as an apotheosis of virginity, i.e. ignorant desire, blank desire (with a touch of malice), this bride clearly knows the facts of life. Instead of being merely an asensual icicle, she warmly rejects (not chastely) the bachelors' brusque offer. In fact, she does not reject it at all, but rather uses their lust to further *her own intense desire for the orgasm*. One note describes *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* as an *agricultural machine, an instrument for farming*; this seems to suggest fertility, perhaps even birth, but as usual the terms are ambiguous. Other notes establish the bride as a thoroughgoing narcissist, intent on her own pleasure and nothing else.

The notes in *The Green Box* have a cryptic, absurd, self-mocking bite that is unique to Duchamp. Some are no more than a few scrawls on torn scraps of paper; others run on for pages, with precise pseudo-scientific diagrams and calculations in neat script. Most of them date from the years 1912 to 1915, when the ideas for *The Large Glass* were coming to Duchamp one after another, but they are in no particular order; he simply jotted them down and tossed them into a cardboard box that he kept for that purpose. At one time he thought of publishing the notes as a sort of brochure or catalog, to be consulted alongside the *Glass*, but not until 1934, eleven years after he had stopped working on the *Glass* itself, did he get around to reproducing them. The form he chose then was meticulously and enigmatically Duchampian—a limited edition of ninety-four notes, drawings, and photographs, printed in facsimile, using the same papers and the same inks or pencil leads, torn or snipped in precisely the same way as the originals, with the same crossings-out and corrections and abbreviations and unfinished thoughts, contained willy-nilly in a rectangular green box covered in green suede with the title, *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (the same as the *Glass*), picked out in white dots on the front, like a sign on a theater marquee. A typographic rendering of the notes, translated into English by the artist Richard Hamilton and the art historian George Heard Hamilton, was published under the same title in 1960 and since then there have been other versions published in English, Spanish, Italian, German, Swedish, and Japanese, so that almost anyone who wants to can now approach the *Glass* the way Duchamp thought it should be approached, as an equal mixture of verbal and visual concepts. The *Glass*, he said, "is not meant to be looked at (through esthetic eyes); it was to be accompanied by as amorphous a literary text as possible, which never took form; and the two features, glass for the eye and text for the ears and the understanding, were to complement each

other and, above all, prevent the other from taking an esthetic-plastic or literary form.” Eight years of work, in other words, on something that could be thought of as an attempt to answer the question he had asked himself, in a note dated 1913: *Can one make works which are not works of “art”?*

The *Glass* does have a subject, nevertheless, and a rather popular one at that. Sexual desire, or to be more precise, the machinery of sexual desire, is what we are dealing with here, although we might never suspect it just from looking at the *Glass*. Only by reading the notes can we follow the stages of the erotic encounter, which resembles no other in literature or in art. Before attempting that, however, a word of warning: as the French critic Jean Suquet points out, Duchamp’s machinery only works when oiled by humor.

The Bride is basically a motor, Duchamp tells us. She is, in fact, an internal combustion engine, although her components do not conform to any known model. This bride runs on *love gasoline* (a secretion of the bride’s sexual glands), which is ignited in a two-stroke cycle. The first stroke, or explosion, is generated by the bachelors through an *electrical stripping* whose action Duchamp compares to *the image of a motor car climbing a slope in low gear . . . while slowly accelerating, as if exhausted by hope, the motor of the car turns faster and faster, until it roars triumphantly*. The second stroke is brought about by sparks from her own *desire-magneto*. Although Duchamp suggests in two notes, confusingly, that the electrical stripping “controls” the bride’s sexual arousal, he makes it clear in others that the bride herself is in full control. She *accepts this stripping by the bachelors, since she supplies the love gasoline to the sparks of the electrical stripping; moreover, she furthers her complete nudity by adding to the first focus of sparks (electrical stripping) the 2nd focus of the desire-magneto*. The notion of a mysterious female power that is both passive (permitting) and active (desiring) runs through many of the notes on *The Large Glass*. The bachelors, by contrast, are wholly passive. It is the bride’s *blank desire* (with a touch of malice) that sets in motion the fantastic erotic machinery whose purpose is to bring about *the blossoming of this virgin who has reached the goal of her desire*.

The mechanico-erotic language of the notes on the bride has no visual counterpart in *The Large Glass* itself. In fact, the upper glass panel that is the bride’s domain shows nothing that even remotely suggests female anatomy, clothed or unclothed. What we see instead is a group of abstract, vaguely insectile shapes on the left-hand side, connected to a large cloudlike form

that stretches all the way across the top. Each element on the left has a name, although even today, after more than eighty years of study and conjecture, it is hard to pin down exactly which is which. The large form at the top left is the *pendu femelle*, a decidedly unglamorous term meaning “hanging female object”; close examination shows that it does indeed hang from a painted hook at the top of the *Glass*. Underneath that is a *motor with quite feeble cylinders* and its reservoir of *love gasoline*, a sort of *timid-power*, or *automobile*, which, as you will recall, is secreted by the bride’s sexual glands. Just to the right of these forms lies the *wasp*, or *sex cylinder*, a flask-shaped object that narrows at the top and is capped by a pair of snail-like antennae. Under that is the diagonal, sticklike shape of the *desire-magneto*—at least, I think it is the desire-magneto; others have located this vital organ elsewhere in the assembly. Just how all these elements combine to produce the two-stroke internal combustion cycle is not really clear to me nor, I believe, to anyone else, and I do not think that Duchamp meant it to be. The whole process, as he wrote, is *unanalyzable by logic*, and it would not hurt us at this point to suspend our disbelief by a few more notches.

The functioning of the large cloudlike shape at the top is stated fairly clearly. This element, which Duchamp identifies variously as the Halo of the Bride, the Top Inscription, the Milky Way, and the Cinematic Blossoming, is not something that emanates from the bride but is the bride herself, represented “cinematically” at the moment of her blossoming, which is also the moment of her being stripped bare. Three slightly irregular squares of clear (unpainted-on) glass are enclosed within the cloud; these are the Draft Pistons, a sort of telegraph system through which, using a special alphabet invented by Duchamp, the bride issues her *commands, orders, authorizations, etc.*, thus setting in motion the machinery of love-making. *This cinematic blossoming is the most important part of the painting*, Duchamp informs us in a surprisingly didactic note, forgetting his own interdiction against calling it a painting. *It is, in general, the halo of the bride, the sum total of her splendid vibrations: graphically, there is no question of symbolizing by a grandiose painting this happy goal—the bride’s desire; only more clearly, in all this blossoming the painting will be an inventory of the elements of this blossoming, elements of the sexual life of the bride-desiring*.

Moving to the lower half of the *Glass*, the domain of the bachelors, we come into a very different world. The forms here are precisely drawn and not a bit abstract, and their functions are spelled out in terms that often sound

pitying or contemptuous. While the *principal forms* of the bride, according to Duchamp, *are more or less large or small*, the forms of the bachelor machine are *mesurable*, and their relative positions on the glass have been plotted according to old-fashioned vanishing-point perspective. Freedom of choice in the upper half is offset by a grim determinism in the lower half. The bride imagines and commands; the bachelors react and obey.

There are nine of them, ranged in a tight group at the far left of the *Glass*, and they are not even men but moulds of men—"malic" moulds, in Duchamp's coinage, reddish brown in color, looking something like eccentric chess pieces. What we are asked to believe is that if molten lead or some other substance were poured into them and allowed to harden, the result would be nine uniformed mannequins: priest, department-store delivery boy, gendarme, cuirassier, policeman, undertaker, flunky, busboy, stationmaster. Each of these figures has an occupation for which there was (in 1915, at least) no female equivalent, hence the Duchampian term "malic," which does not mean "masculine" (*mâle* in French) but rather "male-ish," with perhaps a touch of the bride's malice and an echo of phallic. Empty husks, then, inert and powerless, which wait stupidly for the signal to perform the basic male function that is required of them here.

Below them and slightly to the right stands the Glider, also referred to as the Chariot or Sleigh, a metallic construction on elliptical runners, with a Water Wheel built into it. Farther to the right, in about the middle of the lower glass panel, is the Chocolate Grinder, a thoroughly realistic rendering of a device that one used to be able to see (and the young Marcel Duchamp did see) in confectionery shop windows in France; it has three roller-drums that turn on a circular platform, supported by three Louis XV-style legs. Ascending vertically from the top of the Chocolate Grinder is a rod called the Bayonet, which supports the Scissors, a horizontal, X-shaped form whose handles connect with the Glider on the left and one of whose blades extends to the far right edge of the panel. Seven conelike shapes, the Sieves or Parasols, form a semicircular arc above the Chocolate Grinder and below the Scissors. At the far right are three Oculist Witnesses, circular diagrams used by oculists to test people's eyesight.

The erotic labors of the bachelors are fueled by falling water and natural gas—two resources whose availability in new apartment buildings in turn-of-the-century Paris was often announced by enamel wall plaques reading EAU & GAZ À TOUS LES ETAGES (WATER AND GAS ON EVERY FLOOR). Duchamp

introduces these two elements in a note, entitled *Preface*, that would become a leitmotif in his life and work:

*Given 1st the waterfall 2nd the
lighting gas . . .*

The waterfall is *A sort of waterspout coming from a distance in a half circle over the malic moulds (seen from the side)*, except that we don't see it because it is one of the elements that Duchamp never got around to executing on the *Glass*. In its invisible state, however, it activates the Water Wheel, whose action moves the Glider. The lighting gas is the substance that animates the Malic Moulds. Where does it come from? Duchamp does not say: it is "given." All we know is that at a certain moment the gas, having filled the hollow moulds, escapes from openings at the top of each one and enters the Capillary Tubes, which run horizontally from each mould's summit to a point of convergence just underneath the first Sieve.

When the lighting gas enters the Capillary Tubes, it solidifies there *through the phenomenon of stretching in the unit of length*. (A Duchampian phenomenon.) As it emerges from the other end of the tubes, though, the now-solid gas breaks up into small needles of unequal length, which Duchamp calls *spangles of frosty gas*. These spangles tend to rise, since they are lighter than air; they are trapped by the first Sieve, although "trapped" may be the wrong term, for another note tells us that each spangle *strives (in a kind of spangle derby) to pass the holes of the sieve with élan*. The spangles are a lively lot. Each one retains *in its smallest part the malic tint*. But as they pass through the Sieves they become *dazed*, they *lose their designation of left, right, up, down etc. They no longer retain their individuality. In their progress through the sieves they change from spangles lighter than air . . . into: a liquid elemental scattering, seeking no direction*. And Duchamp's note on them concludes, *What a drip!*

While this spangle derby is going on, other elements of the bachelor machine are slipping and grinding and groaning into action. The Glider slides back and forth with a jerky motion. It is activated by the waterspout falling on the Water Mill, whose turning raises a Bottle of Benedictine suspended from a Hook; after reaching a certain height, this bottle falls, and its fall exerts the pressure that pulls the Glider. We might be in Rube Goldberg territory at this point, except that the great Rube had not mastered Duchamp's playful physics. The Hook is made of *a substance of oscillating*

density, which makes its weight variable and indeterminate. The Bottle of Benedictine goes to sleep as it is being raised, then wakes up and falls vertically, according to the laws of gravity; however, *By condescension, this weight is heavier going down than coming up*. The Glider's runners are made of *emancipated metal*, which makes them *free of gravity in the horizontal plane*; they slide forward when the bottle falls, then slide back again through *inversion of friction*. The Glider, moreover, sings a melancholy litany as it goes to and fro, a dirge that may express the bacheloric condition:

Slow life.

Vicious circle.

Onanism.

Horizontal.

Round trip for the buffer.

Junk of life.

Cheap construction.

Tin, cords, iron wire.

Eccentric wooden pulleys.

Monotonous flywheel.

Beer professor.

At the same time but apparently quite independently, the Chocolate Grinder is performing its own malic function. The Chocolate Grinder operates according to the *adage of spontaneity*, which is that *The bachelor grinds his chocolate himself*. Does the Glider's onanistic litany trigger this all-too-malic process? We are told only that *The chocolate of the rollers, coming from one knows not where, would deposit itself after grinding as milk chocolate*. But this seems to have no real connection with the labyrinthine voyage of the spangles.

Sucked through the arc of Sieves by a Butterfly Pump, the spangles have lost their identity and become a *vapor of inertia*. In this form they arrive at the Drainage Slopes, where they are whisked by a Toboggan on a sort of corkscrew downhill course, past the area of the Three Crashes, to the region of the Splash—more elements that we have to imagine, for they all exist in the notes but not on the *Glass*. *The splash (nothing in common with champagne) ends the series of bachelor operations*, Duchamp informs us. In fact, the Splash has just begun a spectacular journey of its own, but the bachelors have nothing to do with that, poor devils. The Splash is channeled through

a *mobile Weight with nine holes*, which “dazzles” it upward, through the Oculist Witnesses and into the bride's domain.

What happens next is magisterially unclear. The Splash somehow gets diverted—presumably by action of the Scissors, whose blades move back and forth in sync with the Glider's motion—into two separate streams. One stream, after passing through the Oculist Witnesses, forms a Sculpture of Drops. Each drop in this sculpture is then projected “mirrorially” to the upper right-hand section of the *Glass*, where it makes contact with the Nine Shots—nine small holes drilled in the glass, whose erratic placement Duchamp arrived at by firing paint-tipped matches from a toy cannon. Are the Sculpture of Drops and the Nine Shots in fact synonymous? Are they what we think they are (each bachelor having one shot), and if so, does the bride accept or reject them? Duchamp has no comment on this, nor on many other perplexing questions. The other stream of the divided Splash, meanwhile, rises and hits the Combat Marble, just below the intersection of the upper and lower halves of the *Glass*. This intersection is also known as the Horizon, the Gilled Cooler, and the Bride's Clothes, and it is represented graphically by three strips of glass inserted horizontally between the upper and lower plates. When the dazzled Splash strikes the Combat Marble, it sets off a ridiculously complex operation called the Boxing Match, which, once again, we do not get to see because Duchamp did not put it on the *Glass*. The Boxing Match is drawn and described in a detailed note in *The Green Box*, however; it shows a clockwork mechanism that causes two battering rams to move up and down, loosening as they do so the bride's clothes and causing them to fall. Another, much smaller drawing and note shows a Handler of Gravity, who balances a ball on a tray while he perches precariously atop the loosening and falling clothes of the bride. All this takes place not smoothly but jerkily—*the throbbing jerk of the minute hand on electric clocks*. It is the Boxing Match that brings on the *electrical stripping*, which ignites the first stroke of the bride's motor with quite feeble cylinders, whose action leads in turn to her climactic blossoming.

Many other operations and pseudo-scientific processes are discussed in the notes, some of them far too complicated to summarize. What they all add up to is still an open question. To some dedicated Duchampians, the message of *The Large Glass* is anything but hilarious. It has been described as a deeply cynical and pessimistic work, in which the relationship between men and women is reduced to mechanical onanism for two. The Mexican

poet and Nobel laureate Octavio Paz called it “a comic and infernal portrait of modern love.” To others, though—this writer among them—pessimism doesn’t stand a chance in *The Large Glass*. Running through the notes, in fact, is a high, clear vibration of something that sounds to me like epic joy. Duchamp said that he wanted to “put painting once again at the service of the mind.” Since the time of Courbet, he felt, art had been exclusively “retinal,” in that its appeal was primarily to the eye. Duchamp went beyond the retinal for the first time in 1912, when he painted his famous *Nude Descending a Staircase*; a year later, with his early notes and studies for what would become *The Large Glass*, he entered a new terrain where words and images fused and where the rules of tradition and logic and sensory impression gave way to a state of mind that can only be described as ecstatic. Again and again in Duchamp’s notes, there is the joyous sense of a mind that has broken free of all restraints—a mind at play in a game of its own devising, whose resolution is infinitely delayed. The bride, who is queen of the game (as powerful and as mobile as the queen in the game of chess, to which Duchamp gave so much of his imaginative energy), will never achieve her ardently desired orgasm. Her “blossoming,” Duchamp tells us, is merely *The last state of this nude bride before the orgasm which may (might) bring about her fall*. She is like Keats’s maiden on the Grecian urn, forever in passage between desire and fulfillment, and it is precisely this state of erotic *passage* that Duchamp has chosen as the subject of his greatest work. Sexual fulfillment, with its overtones of disappointment, loss, and “fall” from grace, was never an option. The bride, the bachelors, and by implication the onlooker as well are suspended in a state of permanent desire.

Duchamp, who used to say that the artist never really knew what he was doing or why, declined to offer any such explanations for *The Large Glass*. One of his pet theories was that the artist performed only one part of the creative process and it was up to the viewer to complete that process by interpreting the work and assessing its permanent value. The viewer, in other words, is as important as the artist; only with the viewer’s active participation, after all, can Duchamp’s bride be stripped bare. When he was close to seventy, though, Duchamp said something that cast doubt on his lifelong skepticism regarding the nature and purpose of art. “I believe that art is the only form of activity in which man shows himself to be a true individual,” he said. “Only in art is he capable of going beyond the animal state, because art is an outlet toward regions which are not ruled by space and

time.” The strange thing is that after *The Large Glass*, Duchamp could not seem to find that outlet again. Although his influence on twentieth-century art continued to spread and deepen during the next four decades, he did not produce, until the very end of his life, another work that approximated the scale and ambition of *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*.

The original in Philadelphia deteriorates a little more each year, and the museum’s conservators say that because of the way it was made, it cannot be restored. Shattered in transit sometime after its first public exhibition, at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926, the *Glass* was painstakingly pieced together again in 1936 by Duchamp, who claimed afterward that he liked it better with its network of diagonal cracks. Because the original is too fragile ever to be moved from the Philadelphia Museum, four full-size replicas have been made—two with Duchamp’s approval and two after his death, authorized by his widow; one is in England, two are in Sweden, one is in Japan.

Although very far from being the most famous art work of our century, *The Large Glass* may well be the most prophetic. The *Glass*, together with the “readymades” that were so closely associated with its development—a bottle-drying rack, a snow shovel, and other manufactured items that Duchamp promoted to the status of works of art simply by selecting and signing them—are primary sources for the conceptual approach that has come to dominate Western art in the second half of the twentieth century, an approach that defines art primarily as a mental act rather than a visual one. In the years since his death in 1968, Duchamp has come to be considered a forerunner of Conceptual art, as well as Pop art, Minimal art, Performance art, Process art, Kinetic art, Anti-form and Multimedia art, and virtually every postmodern tendency; the great anti-retinal thinker who supposedly abandoned art for chess has turned out, in fact, to have had a more lasting and far-reaching effect on the art of our time than either Picasso or Matisse. He never really did abandon painting, as the legend has it. Whenever someone asked him about this, he would explain that at a certain point in his career he had simply run out of ideas and that he did not care to repeat himself. In the meanwhile, however, the ideas set loose in the world by Duchamp were quietly spreading among younger artists, musicians, dancers, writers, and performers.

It has been argued that Duchamp’s influence is almost entirely destructive. By opening the Pandora’s box of his absolute iconoclasm and breaking

down the barriers between art and life, his adversaries charge, Duchamp loosed the demons that have swept away every standard of esthetic quality and opened the door to unlimited self-indulgence, cynicism, and charlatanism in the visual arts. As with everything else that we tend to say about Duchamp, there is some truth in this. What could be more subversive than the readymades, which undermined every previous definition of art, the artist, and the creative process? To call Duchamp destructive, however, is to miss the point. What he was interested in above all was freedom—complete personal and intellectual and artistic freedom—and the manner in which he achieved all three was, in the opinion of his close friends, his most impressive and enduring work of art. Heavy-duty art critics who pounce on that claim as a cop-out, a tacit admission of his failure to become a great artist, don't have a clue to the new kind of artist that Duchamp became. Approach his work with a light heart, though, and the rewards are everywhere in sight. Duchamp's work sets the mind free to act on its own.

The Large Glass sheds relatively little light on the mystery of Marcel Duchamp, in spite of unending efforts to locate the man in the work. He was a bachelor for most of his life, to be sure, but there was nothing servile (or hostile) in his relationships with women. Duchamp even acquired a female identity at one point, the blithe and somewhat scandalous Rose Sélavy, who signed a number of their joint works; it was as though, in his quest for complete freedom, Duchamp did not feel obliged to limit himself to the confines of a single sex. Was he sexually ambivalent in his private life, as some amateur Freudians would like us to believe? No, he was not. There is much evidence to suggest, however, that his enormous personal charm derived in no small part from an ability to reconcile, without apparent conflict, the male and female aspects of his complex personality—the MARIée with the CELibataire.

Duchamp is the ultimate escape artist. The *Glass* and *The Green Box* may offer an intriguing portrait of a mind that has been called the most intelligent of our century, but the man himself eludes us and retains his mystery. “The *Glass* is not my autobiography,” he said once, “nor is it self-expression.” And what is this book, then, if we concede at the outset that the subject will never be stripped bare? What else but another link in the long chain of non-forgetting: a delay.

BLAINVILLE

All sorts of unsuccessful tries
marked by indecision.

Smiling photographs of Duchamp are rare. His characteristic expression, in snapshots as well as in formal portraits, is rather somber—not self-conscious but guarded, watchful, unsurprised. A certain gravity must have been part of his nature even as a child, but this was not the part that most people noticed or remembered. What struck close friends and distant admirers alike was how easily he moved through the world. All his life Duchamp traveled light, carrying only enough baggage to sustain basic needs.

In later years, when it was commonly believed that he no longer made art, he told me that he was simply a “*respirateur*,” a “breather,” implying that this was occupation enough for anyone. The French expression *bien dans sa peau*—at home in his skin—fitted him perfectly, in the second half of his life, at any rate, after he had put *The Large Glass* behind him and embarked on his career as a chess player. It was as though the freedom that he had finally achieved in art carried over into his life, so that he could be free of art, too. Interviewers (and there were more and more of these during his last decade, when fame overtook him for the second time) marveled at how easy it was to talk with Duchamp. He replied to their questions in a relaxed, witty, highly quotable style, he never made anyone feel unintelligent, and as a result reporters rarely wrote unkind pieces about him. It was seductive, this lightness of spirit, but it also served to keep others from getting too close. The corollary to lightness was detachment. He put a high value on what he called the “beauty of indifference.”

Not long after his death in 1968, certain art critics and museum people undertook to re-establish Duchamp as a French artist, and not only French but Norman at that. This was understandable, inasmuch as the French had ignored him so thoroughly until then. Only one work by Duchamp had entered a French public collection at the time of his death, and as late as the 1960s, if you mentioned his name in Paris art circles, most people assumed you were referring to the sculptor Raymond Duchamp-Villon, his brother. It can certainly be argued that Duchamp, although he chose to live in New York after 1942 and became an American citizen in 1954, remained all his life, in most respects, a French artist and a Frenchman. The campaign to identify him as a Norman, however, has made little headway. “For my part I shall have to wait until I have met more Normans of this caliber before I decide that we have discovered one of those regional characteristics which Marcel Duchamp himself won’t hear of,” Robert Lebel, one of his closest friends, wrote in his 1959 monograph on Duchamp’s life and work.

Although his mother was Norman-born, his father was not. Justin-Isidore Duchamp, who decided at an early age to jettison his given names and call himself Eugène, came from the Auvergne, near the geographical center of France. Eugène’s parents were quintessential *petits-bourgeois*; they owned a café in the small village of Massiac, not far from Clermont-Ferrand. Like many a thrifty, hard-working provincial couple in those optimistic decades of the 1850s and 1860s, however, the Duchamps expected their children to rise higher in the world than they had. Eugène, the youngest of their four sons (he was born in the revolutionary year 1848), was sent away to be educated at a seminary some thirty kilometers south of Massiac. After graduating, he went to work as a clerk in the registry (tax) office in Fontainebleau. With the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War two years later, he was called into service and quickly rose to the rank of lieutenant with the Army of the Loire. He was captured by the Germans and spent time in a prison camp in Stettin. When the war ended, he returned to the French civil service, but his climb up the bureaucratic ladder was maddeningly slow. In 1874 Eugène was assigned to the tax office in the town of Damville, in Normandy’s Eure valley. This was also the year his father died and the year he married Marie-Caroline-Lucie Nicolle, the daughter of a well-to-do shipping agent in Rouen. The couple’s first two children, both boys, were born in Damville: Gaston in 1875 and Raymond a year later. After five years in Damville the family moved to Cany-Barville, another small town in

Normandy. Their daughter, Madeleine, was born there, just a few months before the family’s move in 1884 to Blainville-sur-Crevon, a tiny village nineteen kilometers northeast of Rouen, where they would remain for the next twenty-two years. Blainville’s notary had recently died, and Eugène, with the help of Lucie’s substantial dowry, had been able to buy the notarial practice there and, by doing so, to ensure his own and his family’s future.

For more than two centuries the notary has been an essential figure in French life—essential and unique, for there is nothing quite comparable in other cultures. In addition to drawing up deeds, wills, and contracts, notaries are civil servants; they collect taxes and arbitrate disputes. In Eugène Duchamp’s day there were few small-town transactions of any kind that did not involve the notary, whose authority extended to giving advice about financial investments and whose intimate knowledge of local affairs allowed him to earn a good deal more from perfectly legal real estate and other dealings than from fees for services. The notary was often a French town’s leading citizen and not infrequently its mayor as well.

Eugène Duchamp seemed born for the role. A small, energetic man with a nimble mind and the alert cheerfulness of a good listener, he possessed in greater or lesser degree most of the traits of a social class that was still dominant in France at that time, traits summed up by the French writer Michel Sanouillet as “discretion, prudence, honesty, rigor of judgment, concern for efficiency, subordination of passion to logic and down-to-earth good sense, controlled and sly humor, horror of spectacular excesses, resourcefulness, love of puttering, and, above all, methodical doubt.” As a parent he was unusually tolerant, even indulgent; although he naturally hoped that his two older sons would continue the family’s upward mobility by joining the ranks of the learned professions, he accepted without too much protest their decisions to become artists instead, and when the son and daughter who were next in line made the same decision, he accepted that, too. Eugène Duchamp, the self-made *bourgeois*, even agreed to help his artist-children while they struggled to establish themselves in their precarious calling, giving them monthly allowances that he meticulously recorded so he could deduct the total from each child’s eventual inheritance.

For the amazing run of bad luck that led four of his six children to become artists rather than doctors or lawyers, Eugène Duchamp might well have blamed his father-in-law. Emile-Frédéric Nicolle, Lucie’s father, had made a good deal of money as a shipping agent during the years when

Rouen, thanks to ambitious dredging operations that enabled large ships to come up the Seine from the Atlantic, eighty-five kilometers to the west, was becoming France's fifth largest seaport. By 1875 he felt wealthy enough to retire from business and devote himself full-time to painting and engraving, his principal interests, which until then he had pursued on weekends and holidays. Nicolle was a first-rate academic draftsman who specialized in picturesque views of his native Rouen. His work sold well in that bustling, rapidly growing city, and his engravings were good enough to be accepted for showing in the Beaux-Arts section of the Universal Exposition of 1878 in Paris.

Emile Nicolle's daughter Lucie also had artistic inclinations, although in her case they were unaccompanied by talent. She painted amateurish street scenes of Rouen and Strasbourg, a city she had once visited, and after her marriage she spent endless hours painting designs on household china. The oldest of four daughters, Lucie took on adult responsibilities at the age of eleven, when her mother died. She looked after her three younger sisters until she married Eugène Duchamp (she was eighteen, he was thirty) and moved away. Born and raised in Rouen, Lucie may well have had difficulty adjusting to life in the small towns of rural Normandy. Although Blainville was only nineteen kilometers from Rouen, the trip took two days—one went by horse cart to the town of Morgny, spent the night, and caught the only train to the city early the next morning. A little less than five kilometers from Blainville lay the town of Ry, which Flaubert had used as the model for Yonville l'Abbaye in *Madame Bovary*. Many of the social attitudes and constrictions that Flaubert set down so indelibly in his novel still governed the lives of men and women thirty years later in the birthplace of Marcel Duchamp.

Henri-Robert-Marcel Duchamp was born at home in Blainville at two o'clock on a hot, dry midsummer afternoon. The date was July 28, 1887. Just a little more than six months earlier, Eugène and Lucie's three-year-old daughter, Madeleine, had died of croup, that merciless child-killer, and there are some indications that Lucie Duchamp was hoping to soften the pain of their loss by producing another baby girl. A photograph of Marcel at three years shows him in a frilly white dress, his hair cut in bangs and worn long on the sides; although it was not unusual for very young French boys to be dressed that way at the time, three years is a little old for it, and in his case the look is more feminine than the norm.

Duchamp rarely talked about his childhood. When he did, he gave the impression that it had been a happy one, with little conflict and much shared affection, but he also made it clear that this affection did not extend to his mother. Lucie Nicolle suffered from a progressive hearing disorder that had made her almost completely deaf by the time Marcel was born, and she dealt with this by withdrawing more and more into a private world of her own. Duchamp described her as "placid and indifferent." He must have learned at an early age to internalize his feelings about her—indifference, after all, would become one of his guiding principles. Duchamp once said that he had "intensely disliked" his mother and that his two older brothers had felt the same way about her. For someone as reticent as Duchamp on the subject of personal relationships, this was a startling admission. He said virtually nothing else about her, though, and Lucie Duchamp, who left no diaries or memoirs, remains a mysterious and silent figure on the fringes of that happy childhood.

For the first two years of his life, Marcel was virtually an only child, both his older brothers having gone away to school in Rouen the year before he was born. If his mother was distant and withdrawn, he nevertheless found a warm ally in Clemence Lebourg, the sweet-tempered country woman who had come to work for the Duchamp family when they moved to her native village of Cany-Barville and who remained with them until Lucie and Eugène died, within a week of each other, in 1925. (A few months after they died, the inconsolable Clemence drowned herself in the Seine.) Marcel "adored" his brothers, who came home for occasional weekend visits in addition to their school vacations, and he often spoke of feeling love and admiration for his father. The family member he was the closest to throughout their childhood, however, was his sister Suzanne, born two years after him in the fall of 1889. The two of them were natural allies. Suzanne, a tomboy with a boisterous sense of fun, became a willing accomplice in the games and activities that her brother's fertile imagination provided for them. Later, when their mother began to devote her attention almost exclusively to the two youngest children, Yvonne and Magdeleine (born in 1895 and 1898), Marcel and Suzanne drew even closer together.

The handsome stone-and-brick house they grew up in was, and still is, the finest in town. Built in 1825, it stands directly opposite the town's fifteenth-century church; the land in back drops sharply to a broad and lovely meadow, through which meanders a branch of the Crevon River. To the left



The notary's house in Blainville.

of the front entrance are the dining room and kitchen, to the right the main *salon*; in the back are two more rooms, where Eugène Duchamp maintained his notarial office. An impressive spiral staircase of polished oak leads to the four bedrooms on the second floor (what the French call *the première étage*), one of which, in Marcel's youth, could not be entered. This locked "green room," by an old tradition, was set aside for the occasional short visits to Blainville of the Baron d'Hachet de Montgascon, who lived in Paris and whose ancestral rights in this region included free lodging in the town's best private residence. Up one more flight was the attic, where Clemence slept.

Marcel and Suzanne went to the one-room school in Blainville. It was in the same building as the *mairie*, where Eugène Duchamp attended meetings of the municipal council—he had been elected to this body within three months of his arrival. The town had fewer than a thousand inhabitants then, most of whom lived within a few hundred meters of the church. Today, although the center of town is virtually unchanged, rows of identical stucco villas on the outskirts have been built to accommodate commuters who work in Rouen, less than half an hour away by car. On the hill behind



Family gathering, 1895. Seated at the table, clockwise from front center: Gaston Duchamp, Lucie Duchamp holding Yvonne, Clemence Lebourg, Eugène Duchamp, Raymond Duchamp, Kettie Guilbert (aunt), Catherine Duchamp (grandmother). Standing, from left: Marcel Duchamp, Fortuné Guilbert (uncle), Suzanne Duchamp.

the Duchamps' house, archeologists are slowly uncovering the ruins of a medieval *château fort*, elements of which date from the eleventh century. The area has been inhabited since prehistoric times. A settlement called Bleduivilla on this site is documented in a deed signed in 1050 by William the Conqueror.

Among the early family photographs is one of Marcel at the age of eight or nine, dressed in a military uniform and visored *képi*, standing in front of a tent. He wears the same costume in a slightly later photograph of the whole family sitting around an outdoor table at which Gaston and Raymond are playing cards. The others include Lucie's married sister, Kettie, and her husband; Eugène's widowed mother, the café owner from Massiac, whose finely chiseled profile was inherited by Marcel; Clemence, the family servant, looking uncharacteristically grim; the nearly bald Duchamp *père* with his full but wispy beard; and Lucie, holding in her arms the latest addition to the family, Yvonne Duchamp, born in March 1895. This was also the

year that Eugène Duchamp became Blainville's mayor. Named to serve out the term of the previous mayor, recently deceased, Duchamp was elected the following May for a five-year term, and he was re-elected in 1900.

Gaston Duchamp, dark-bearded and heavysset in that 1895 family photograph, was then a law student in Paris. After graduating from the Lycée Corneille in Rouen two years earlier, this quiet, gentle youth had demonstrated his filial piety by going to work first as a notary's clerk in Rouen. When Raymond graduated the next year, though, both sons moved to Paris, Gaston enrolling in the Sorbonne's Faculté de Droit and Raymond in its Ecole de Médecine. The liberating energies of the capital soon undermined Gaston's sense of filial duty. He started going to the Cormon art school on the boulevard de Clichy, taking an eight o'clock class that let out in time for him to get to his first law school lecture. By 1895 he was spending most of his free time sketching and drawing, and that Christmas, when he came home to Blainville for the holidays, he announced that he had decided to quit law school and become an artist. This amazing decision, coupled with Gaston's already well-developed facility for catching people and events in quick, fluid sketches, must have made a considerable impression on eight-year-old Marcel. In March, at any rate, Marcel produced the first art work by his own hand that has come down to us: a crude but extremely careful drawing of a uniformed cavalryman, dismounted, whose horse appears to be running away in the distance. At each corner of the drawing the artist has printed the words *La Cavalerie*, and at the bottom is a legend reading: "NOTA: this image should go only into the hands of the Duchamp family."

Gaston's new career plan had to wait until he completed a year of military service. Young Frenchmen then were selected by lot for three years' conscription, but lawyers, doctors, and certain other professions were required to serve for only one year. By luck, Gaston was assigned to the 24th Infantry Regiment, which was stationed in Paris, and his military duties did not prevent him from producing a number of landscapes and portraits. Gaston's early paintings showed little originality. He had adopted the murky palette of the Rouen school of artists, who were just then catching up with Impressionism, and his early oils look derivative and overworked. In watercolors and in quick sketches from life, on the other hand, he had a fresh touch and a sure grasp of subject and mood. In 1897 he began selling some of his drawings to *Le Rire* and *Le Courrier Français*, two of the popular humorous newspapers of that period. Quite a few of these drawings, some



Marcel and Suzanne.

published and others not, were inspired by Marcel and Suzanne's games: Marcel pushing Suzanne in a wheelbarrow (adapted from an 1896 photograph); Marcel at a drawing board, asking his scandalized sister to raise her doll's skirt so that he can draw it "*toute nue*"; Marcel reaching down to touch a glowworm, in spite of Suzanne's warning that "you'll burn yourself." The published drawings were signed "Jacques Villon," the name Gaston had chosen for his newborn artist self. The generally accepted explanation for this name change was that doing illustrations for humorous publications that satirized religion, the army, and other bastions of conventional morality was considered a risqué occupation at the time, and Gaston wanted to spare his father the embarrassment of seeing the family name appear in that dubious context. Marcel once said, however, that his brother felt the name Duchamp (meaning "of the field") was simply too prosaic for an artist. The name he chose reflected his admiration for the fifteenth-century French

vagabond poet, François Villon; it suggests a rebellious spirit that never surfaced in Gaston's life or his work.

In September 1897, the same year that Gaston's drawings began appearing in the papers, ten-year-old Marcel left home to follow in his brothers' footsteps at the Lycée Corneille. He traveled alone, taking the horse-drawn coach to Morgny and the train to Rouen. Aunt Marie-Madeleine, his father's sister, met him at the station and took him to the Ecole Bossuet, a *pension* for students who were not boarders at the *lycée*. This is where he would eat and sleep and where he would meet the two boys who became his closest friends: Ferdinand Tribout, the son of a Rouen piano maker, and Raymond Dumouchel, whose father was a notary. For the next seven years these boys would be locked into an educational regime as demanding and as rigid as any yet invented but one that, unlike the corresponding English model, placed its major emphasis on intellectual development.

The Lycée Corneille was a grim stone fortress situated on the rue de Malevrier at the edge of the old center of medieval Rouen. It had been built as a Jesuit college in the seventeenth century, and among its alumni were such illustrious names as Pierre Corneille, whose statue stood in the central courtyard, Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, Guy de Maupassant, and Gustave Flaubert. Marcel and his fellow sixth-form students were force-fed a heavy diet of Latin, Greek, English or German (Marcel chose German), philosophy, history, rhetoric, science, and mathematics. Although never an outstanding student, Marcel got through these years without encountering any major academic or disciplinary problems. If he questioned the respect for authority that was drilled into every French *lycéen*, he did so only within the circle of his closest friends. He kept a low profile and worked no harder than necessary to get by. The immemorial schoolboy gap between ability and progress is summed up in his case by a school report for the year 1900–1901, which describes him as being “a long way from doing what he could.” His best subject was math. He won the second-place math prize at the commencement ceremonies in 1900 and the first-place award in 1902.

Like his two brothers before him, Marcel took drawing lessons at the lycée from Philippe Zacharie, a veteran who also taught at Rouen's Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Zacharie's own work was exhibited annually at the official Salon des Beaux-Arts in Paris—it ran to large allegorical pictures with titles such as *The City of Rouen Protecting Its Schoolchildren Under the Shield of the Republic*. Although Zacharie did all he could to protect his own students from

the viruses of Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and other, more recent developments, he did not altogether succeed. Rouen's rather large artist community had developed, however belatedly, its own version of Impressionist painting, a version that emphasized expressive color while missing almost completely the great innovators' evocation of light and atmosphere. Two of Duchamp's classmates at the Lycée Corneille, Pierre Dumont and Robert Pinchon, eventually became adept practitioners of the style, especially Pinchon, a “baby Impressionist,” as Marcel described him, who began having regular shows in Rouen before he was eighteen. Dumont and Pinchon, both day students who lived at home, soon joined Marcel's stable of intimate friends, along with a boy named Gustave Hervieu, nicknamed “Poléon” because he supposedly looked like Napoleon. Marcel learned the fundamentals of academic drawing from Zacharie. His real mentor, though, was his brother Gaston, whose fluid and incisive drawing style he admired tremendously and tried hard to imitate.

After a year in the army, Gaston was living the life of an artist in Montmartre. Marcel once said that his older brother was such a natural artist that if he wanted to describe a visual idea and did not have a pencil handy, he would simply outline it with his finger in the air. For many years, though, his painting took a back seat to the commercial work he did for a living. Posters signed Jacques Villon appeared on billboards throughout Paris at the turn of the century, alongside those of Jules Chéret, Alphonse Mucha, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Villon also turned out engravings, aquatints, and lithographs of Paris genre scenes, and he continued to sell his drawings to *Le Rire*, *Le Courrier Français*, and several other humorous publications. None of his commercial activities brought in much money, and for years Gaston continued to receive a monthly allowance of 150 francs from his father. Eugène



Marcel at age thirteen.

Duchamp used to come to Paris once a month on the train to pay his son's bill at Mme Coconnier's restaurant on the rue Lepic, where Gaston took all his meals; the gregarious notary would hardly have gone to the trouble if he had not enjoyed these brief glimpses of the *vie de bohème*, in which he could play a minor but benevolent role.

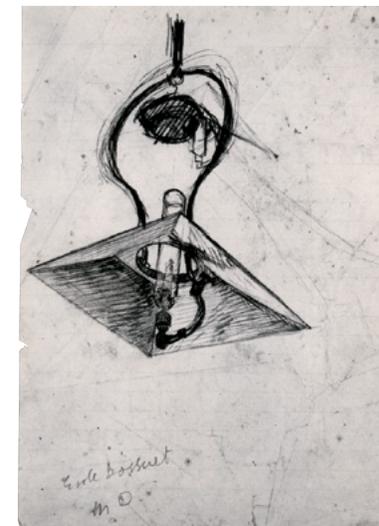
Raymond Duchamp quit medical school in 1900, having made his own decision to become an artist. A serious bout with rheumatoid arthritis had interrupted his last year of medical training. During a long convalescence he had done a lot of sketching and modeling in clay, and after that there was no turning back. His choice of sculpture as a medium, and the enormous strength and authority that he brought to it, indicates how different he was from his patient and contemplative older brother. The name he adopted for himself, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, nevertheless suggests a certain ambivalence—solidarity with his older sibling vying with family pride. To Marcel, Raymond was and would always be the wunderkind, the family's true genius, the hero whose early death cut short a career of unlimited promise. He had his first sculpture accepted by the Salon des Beaux-Arts in 1902. Raymond's early sculptures were highly realistic figure studies that showed the unavoidable influence of Rodin. Not until 1910 would his work take on the dynamic thrust and rhythm that paralleled the latest developments in modern painting.

Home from school for the Easter holidays in 1902, fourteen-year-old Marcel reacted to the artistic influences around him by producing a number of drawings in various media that were his first serious attempts at art. Suzanne was his favorite subject—Suzanne in profile, seated in a red armchair (watercolor); Suzanne washing her hair (monotype in colored inks); Suzanne tying on a roller skate (wash drawing); Suzanne, full face, looking at us over the back of a chair (pencil and watercolor). Although they lack precocious facility, these early efforts have a confident air about them; they resemble Gaston's drawings, their obvious inspiration, in the ability to capture a likeness or a gesture with a few lines. Marcel gave his sister the drawings he did of her, and she kept them all her life.

That summer he did his first paintings in oil. *Landscape at Blainville*, believed to be the earliest, is an Impressionist view of the meadow behind the family house, done mostly in shades of green. Trees reflected in a pool of water dominate the foreground; a small wooden bridge spans the river on the far right; and a row of tall poplars in the background suggests Monet,

“my pet Impressionist at the time,” as he said. (Although Monet had been living since 1883 at Giverny, less than fifty kilometers from Blainville, Marcel knew his paintings only through reproductions.) The picture also introduces a theme—landscape with water—that would occur again and again in Duchamp's work.

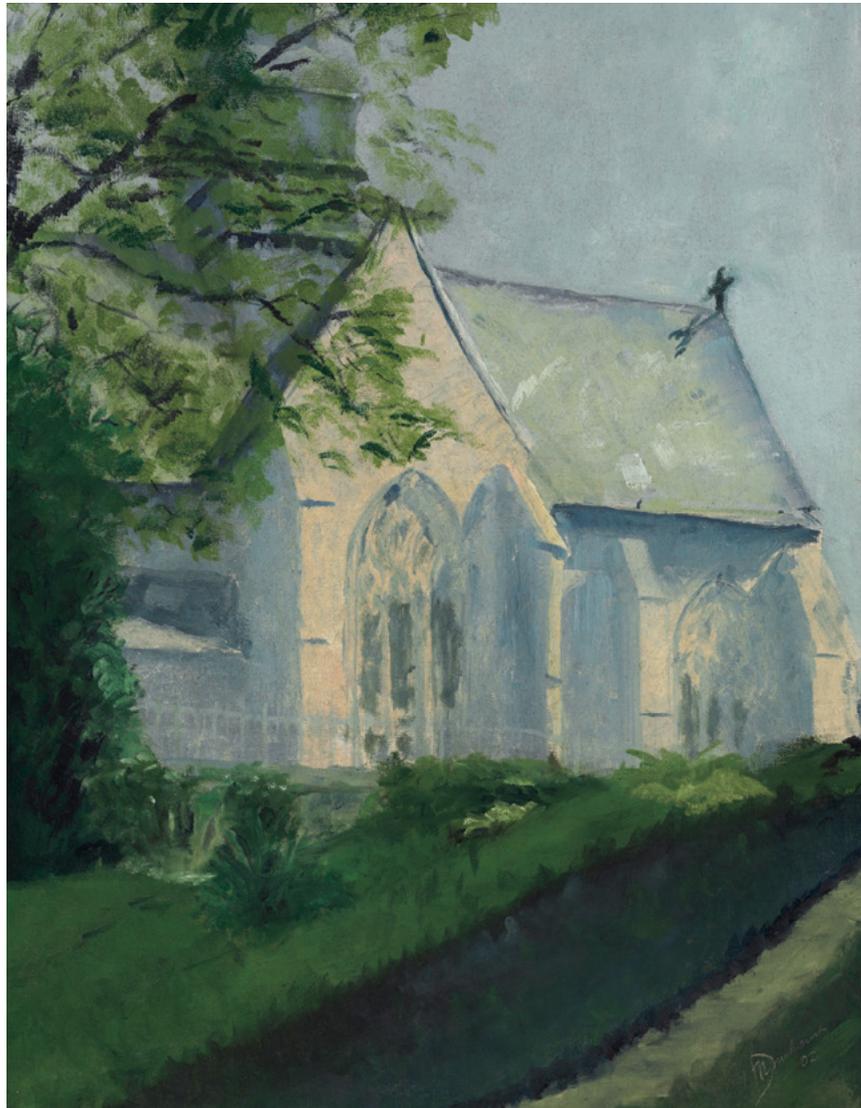
The two other oils he completed that summer show the Impressionist influence: *Church at Blainville*, a rendering of the village church seen in late-afternoon light, with dark shadows falling diagonally across the foreground; and *Garden and Chapel at Blainville*, a more experimental composition in



The “Bec Auer” gas lamp drawn by Duchamp in 1902 or 1903.

which splashy brushwork largely obscures the nominal subject. Ambition had clearly set in; a lot of work went into these paintings. It would be nearly two years, however, before he tried oil on canvas again. Sometime during the fall or winter of 1902–3, at the Ecole Bossuet in Rouen, Marcel made a small charcoal drawing of a hanging gas lamp of the “Bec Auer” type, whose main feature was a vertical glass filament within a four-sided glass shade. Like the theme of landscape with water, this little lamp, so carefully rendered in the 1902 drawing, would turn up more than sixty years later in the astonishing *tableau vivant* that was Duchamp's last major work.

It is not easy to catch sight of Marcel during his seven years as a *lycéen*. Small for his age, with the reddish brown hair and lightly freckled, fair complexion often seen in Normandy but virtually nowhere else in France, he left few distinguishing marks on the school records. In the first round of oral and written examinations for the all-important *baccalauréat*, which he took in the spring of his next-to-last year in 1903, Duchamp received a “*mention passable*”—barely passing. At the prize-giving ceremonies after the commencement address that July, he won a first prize for drawing, but the higher award, the Médaille d'Excellence given annually by the Rouen Société des Amis des Arts, went to his friend Robert Pinchon.



Church at Blainville, 1902.

Marcel tested his approaching maturity that summer by going off alone on a fifteen-day trip to the island of Jersey. He stopped in Saint-Malo, Dinard, and Mont-Saint-Michel on the way home, taking in the sights, and afterward he managed to strike a world-weary note in a postcard to his schoolmate Ferdinand Tribout: “I am glad to be back because a trip like that

is very tiring.” The summer’s main event, however, was Raymond’s wedding. Raymond had fallen in love with a young widow named Yvonne Reverchon Bon, whose brother, Jacques Bon, was an artist. Raymond and Yvonne—she would be known in the family as “*la grande Yvonne*” to avoid being confused with Marcel and Suzanne’s younger sister—were married in Paris that September.

Marcel passed the second part of the *baccalauréat* examinations in June 1904, without honors, and he graduated from the Lycée Corneille at the end of July. At the graduation ceremonies, a mayor of Rouen named M. Lebon delivered not one but two consecutive and lengthy speeches, but when the time for the annual award of prizes finally came around, the long wait turned out to have been worthwhile. In a reversal of the previous year’s results, Pinchon received the first prize for drawing while Duchamp was awarded the medal of the Société des Amis des Arts. The award put an official seal of approval on his own recent decision to become an artist.

Marcel spent part of the long summer vacation visiting his grandmother in Massiac. She still presided over the Café de la Paix there, situated by the bridge over the Alagnon River—in Massiac, she and her late husband had always been known as “Duchamp du pont.” Back home in Blainville, he continued to sketch his sisters and brothers, and it was probably during this summer that he painted his first portrait in oils. The subject was Marcel Lefrançois, Clemence’s nephew, who used to visit his aunt from time to time and who was almost exactly the same age as Marcel. Many years later Duchamp would explain that this picture “was already a reaction against the Impressionist influence . . . I wanted to try out a technique of the Renaissance painters consisting in painting first a very precise black and white oil and then, after it was thoroughly dry, adding thin layers of transparent colors.” The result was not very impressive, and he abandoned the technique after that one effort and moved on, as he put it, “to direct my research towards all sorts of unsuccessful tries marked by indecision.”

Duchamp was no wunderkind. He had the great advantage of knowing what he wanted to do, however, and he had the additional advantage—which was also to some extent an obstacle—of having the way prepared for him by his older brothers. In the fall of 1904, at any rate, with his father’s blessing, Marcel left the family home for good and went to live with Gaston at 71, rue Caulaincourt, in the heart of the Montmartre artists’ quarter.

SWIMMING LESSONS

I understood at a certain moment that it wasn't necessary to encumber one's life with too much weight . . . And I understood that, fortunately, rather early.

Montmartre at the turn of the century was a sprawling village, largely untouched by Baron Haussmann's efforts to transform Paris into a modern city. A row of six-story apartment buildings had recently gone up on one side of the rue Caulaincourt, but across the street was a semi-rural landscape of scrub undergrowth and meandering footpaths between jerry-built shacks, many of which had kitchen gardens and pens for goats, chickens, donkeys, and other domestic animals. This undeveloped *maquis*, as it was called, ran all the way up the hill to the Basilique du Sacré Coeur, whose white dome (completed in 1910) could be seen from the front windows of Gaston's apartment.

For more than fifty years Montmartre, with its steep, narrow streets, cheap rents, and raffish nightlife, had been a magnet for artists. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec moved there in 1885 and rarely left the quarter until his death in 1901. When Pablo Picasso came to Paris for the first time, in 1900, he and his friend Carles Casagemas went first to Montparnasse, where a Spanish friend of theirs had a studio on the rue Campagne-Première. They put down a deposit on a vacant studio in the same building, then hiked across Paris to visit another Spanish friend who lived in Montmartre; he persuaded them that they would be much better off living there

instead—he was leaving in a few days, so they could have his flat. Back they went to the rue Campagne-Première, where they persuaded the landlord to return part of their deposit, borrowed a cart to carry their belongings, and set off once again across Paris. Struggling wearily up the rue Lepic for the second time, Picasso and Casagemas passed Duchamp's older brother Jacques Villon, whom they had met earlier in the day and who assumed that the young Spaniards with their cartload of baggage were doing what penniless artists so often did—skipping out on the rent somewhere else. “Villon's mocking laughter made this misapprehension all too obvious,” according to John Richardson, who tells the story in the first volume of his monumental *A Life of Picasso*. “Picasso's Spanish pride was wounded; years later he still held this laugh against Villon.”

Villon was working mainly as a commercial artist, but he showed his paintings at the annual Salon des Indépendants, and he never wavered in his ambition to be a serious painter. Marcel's priorities were not that clear. He had realized very early, he said, “how different I was even from my brother [Villon]. He aimed at fame. I *had* no aim. I just wanted to be left alone to do what I liked.” The freedom to do what he liked was certainly one of the central motives, if not *the* central motive, in Duchamp's life, but was art for him merely a means to this end? He said as much on several occasions, and he often expressed scorn for overinflated artistic egos and for the “religion of art.” At the outset of his career, however, the seventeen-year-old Duchamp suffered a humiliating setback that may have had some bearing on his skeptical attitude. In the spring of 1905, a few months after moving to Paris, he took the examination for the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and failed it. The fact that he took the exam at all—something neither of his brothers had done—suggests that he may have been more ambitious than he let on. The Ecole des Beaux-Arts was still the principal gateway to recognition as an artist, and its two-year regimen was not something one embarked on lightly.

Duchamp, to be sure, had been fairly cavalier about his courses at the Académie Julian, the private art school in which he had enrolled the previous November. With studios in four different locations around Paris, the Académie Julian was a flourishing institution whose traditional teaching methods, supervised by the reigning *maître*, Alphonse Bouguereau, emphasized drawing from live models and from plaster casts. Duchamp paid in advance for morning classes at the branch at 5, rue Fromentin, a ten-minute walk from where he lived, but he soon found that he preferred to spend

the mornings playing billiards at his local café. His main artistic activity during this period was jotting down quick visual impressions in a pocket sketchbook. “That was the fashion among artists,” as he recalled it. “You had to have a sketchbook in your pocket all the time, ready for action at any provocation from the physical world.” One of the few surviving Duchamp sketchbooks shows quick pencil impressions of his brothers and sisters, of Jacques Villon’s dog, and—interestingly, in the light of his future *Large Glass*—several pages of pencil-and-watercolor drawings of working-class Parisians in the distinctive uniforms or work clothes of their occupation: policeman, knife grinder, gas man, vegetable peddler, street sweeper, funeral coachman, undertaker.

For Duchamp, who valued his freedom so highly, the new conscription law passed by the legislature that spring came as an unpleasant surprise. Instead of three years’ military service for a relatively few individuals who were selected by lot, the new law made all healthy young Frenchmen subject to a two-year enlistment—with the exception of doctors, lawyers, and some others who were engaged in what the inscrutable French state considered essential professions, and who could get off (as Gaston Duchamp had done because he was a law student) with serving only one year. One of these essential professions happened to be “art workers” (*ouvriers d’art*)—not artists, but printers, engravers, and other skilled technicians in what we would call the applied arts. Faced with the prospect of two years in uniform, Duchamp decided to become an *ouvrier d’art*. He cut short his paid-up classes at the Académie Julian and left Paris in May to go to work as an apprentice at the Imprimerie de la Vicomte, a well-established print shop in Rouen. Why Rouen? The main reason was that his parents had recently moved there. Eugène Duchamp, financially secure after twenty-two years as Blainville’s notary and ten as its mayor, had retired early in 1905, sold the house and the notarial practice, and taken a comfortable two-floor apartment on the rue Jeanne d’Arc in his wife’s beloved city of birth. Here Marcel settled once again into family life.

Five months later, having mastered the techniques of etching, engraving, and typesetting, he took an examination in his new trade. The examining board in Rouen “was composed of master craftsmen,” he recalled, “who asked me a few things about Leonardo da Vinci. As to the written part, so to speak, you had to show what you could do by way of printed engravings.” Duchamp had procured for this purpose one of his grandfather Emile

Nicolle’s copper plates of *The Hundred Towers of Rouen*, a very popular series in its time, and he pulled from the press a print of this plate for every member of the jury. “They were enchanted,” he said. “They gave me 49 out of a possible grade of 50.” With his certificate as an *ouvrier d’art* in hand, Duchamp presented himself to the military authorities on October 3 and reported for duty the following day with the 39th Infantry Regiment in Rouen.

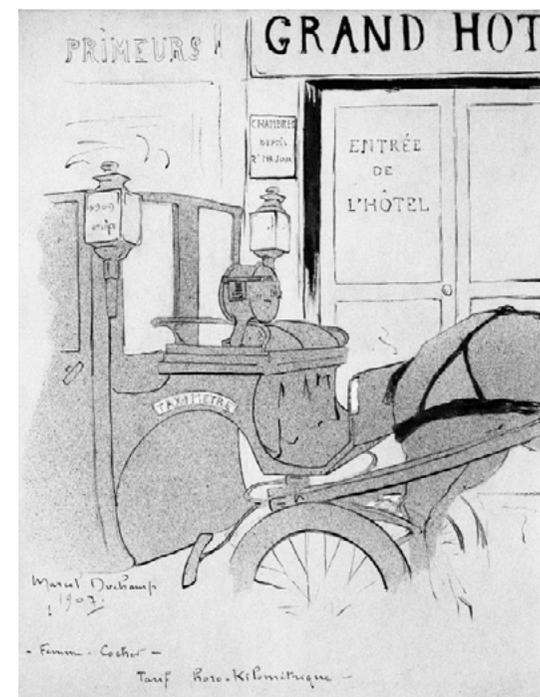
Very little is known about his military service other than that he was stationed not far from Rouen in the town of Eu, promoted to corporal in April, and discharged in October 1906. He headed straight back to Paris, where he rented a bachelor flat at 65, rue Caulaincourt, a few doors down the hill from Gaston’s former lodgings. For the first time he was completely on his own, both his brothers having recently moved to the quiet rural suburb of Puteaux, just across the Seine from Neuilly on the city’s western outskirts. Jacques Bon, Raymond’s artist brother-in-law, had discovered a group of inexpensive “pavilions with artist’s studios,” with a shared garden in back, at 7, rue Lemaître in Puteaux. Gaston took one of them, Raymond and Yvonne took another, and the Czech artist Frantisek Kupka, a former neighbor of Gaston’s on the rue Caulaincourt, moved into a third, creating on the spot an artists’ colony that would give Puteaux a place in art history. For Gaston—or Jacques Villon, as he wished to be known and will be known from now on in these pages—the move was a lifesaver. The Bohemian atmosphere of Montmartre had never agreed with his easily imposed-on good nature. “The worst thing for me was when my friends started to encroach on me,” Villon told Pierre Cabanne. “They came over to smoke their pipes, brought along their women, and stopped me working. I had to make up at night for the time they wasted during the day.” He lived in Puteaux for the rest of his life, virtually ignored by the art establishment until, in his seventies, the fame that he had long since stopped thinking about sought him out at last.

Duchamp’s year in the army gave his recovered freedom a delicious savor. Instead of re-entering the Académie Julian, he slipped easily into the role of a *flâneur*—a detached observer of the passing scene, whose artistic leanings required no undue expenditure of effort. He saw a lot of his former classmate Pierre Dumont, who was also living the artist’s life in Montmartre, and he formed a lifelong bond with Gustave Candel, the son of a prosperous cheese merchant, who lived with his parents at 105, rue Caulaincourt.

The elder Candels took a great fancy to Marcel and invited him to dinner at least once a week. Among the would-be artists flocking to Montmartre in ever-increasing numbers was a young Spaniard named Juan Gris, with whom Marcel often played billiards at the café on the corner of the rue Caulaincourt and the rue Lepic. Gris was already an acolyte of Picasso; he lived in the Bateau Lavoir, a dilapidated house in a seedy and rather dangerous neighborhood on the other side of Montmartre, where Picasso had settled in 1903. Picasso's reputation was spreading beyond Montmartre at this point—the German collector Wilhelm Uhde and the Americans Leo Stein and his sister Gertrude had started buying his work in 1905, and young artists in Paris spoke of him with a certain awe. Although Duchamp saw quite a lot of Gris, he steered clear of Picasso then and later, perhaps because he valued his own independence too highly.

He did not steer clear of his brothers—far from it. Nearly every Sunday Marcel went out to Puteaux, where in good weather the artists and their friends spent the day playing *spiroballe* (a racquet game with a ball on a long string attached to a post) and enjoying long, slow lunches at a table in the garden. Usually there would be a chess game in progress. Villon had taught Marcel to play chess when he was eleven, and all three brothers had a passion for the game.

At this point Duchamp seemed to have set his sights on becoming a humorist. A successful illustrator could make good money in those days, and Adolphe Willette, Lucien Metivet, Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, Jean-Louis Forain, and other widely published satirists were minor celebrities. (As a young art student in Barcelona, Picasso had been so impressed by Steinlen and Forain that he imitated their signatures over and over in his sketchbook, an act that John Richardson interprets not as forgery but shamanism—an attempt to assimilate their powers.) The circle of Paris artist-humorists met regularly at Manière, a café-brasserie on the ground floor of Marcel's building at 65, rue Caulaincourt. Duchamp and Juan Gris, who both hoped to join their illustrious ranks someday, used to take their own drawings around to the offices of *Le Courrier Français*, *Le Rire*, and other papers, but it would be two years before either of them sold one. In the spring of 1907, however, Duchamp had five of his drawings accepted for exhibition in the first Salon des Artistes Humoristes, organized by the editor of *Le Rire* and held in a popular ice-skating arena called the Palais de Glace. Only two of these drawings have survived. *Femme-Cocher* was a topical reference to the first



Femme-Cocher, 1907.

women hack drivers in Paris; it shows a horse-drawn cab, sans driver, pulled up in front of a hotel, where the driver and her fare have presumably gone for activities unrelated to transportation. *Flirt*, the other surviving drawing, is more old-fashioned—it depends on an involved pun contained in several lines of dialogue between a stylish young woman playing the piano for her male admirer: *She*—*Would you like me to play “On the Blue Waters”?* *You’ll see how well this piano gives the impression suggested by the title.* *He (witty)*—*Nothing strange about that, it’s a watery piano.* (In French the words for grand piano, *piano à queue*, sound like *piano aqueux*, or “watery piano.”)

Duchamp was living on the 150 francs a month (about seven dollars at the existing rate of exchange) that he received from his father. Duchamp *père*, in his affluent retirement, could easily afford the monthly subsidies that he still gave to all three of his sons. He could also afford to rent a seaside villa for family vacations. Starting in 1907 and for the next four summers, Duchamp spent most of the month of August with his parents and sisters at Les Peupliers, a red brick cottage in the village of



The summer group at Veules-les-Roses in 1911. Duchamp is at the far left.

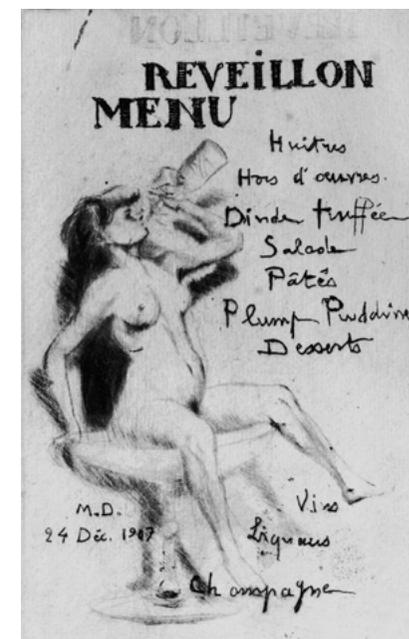
Veules-les-Roses, on the Normandy coast between Dieppe and Le Havre. Less fashionable than Deauville and not as spectacular as nearby Etretat, whose high chalk cliffs and eroded rock formations appear in so many Impressionist paintings, Veules-les-Roses attracted summer visitors from Paris as well as from Rouen. Marcel and his sister Suzanne became part of a lively group of young people there who met regularly to play tennis, go on bicycle rides and picnics, and dance each evening at the local casino. Duchamp, who did not dance, gained a reputation for being charming, witty, and somewhat aloof.

He also started to paint again. Several *plein air* landscapes and a view of high chalk cliffs and sea, all done in the summer of 1907, show him dipping a tentative toe into Fauvism. Two years earlier Duchamp had visited the Salon d'Automne in which the violently colorful paintings by Henri Matisse, André Derain, and Maurice de Vlaminck had lead the critic Louis Vauxcelles to refer to these artists as “wild beasts [*fauves*].” It was an important event in his life. “[Matisse’s] paintings at the 1905 Salon d’Automne really moved me,” he said, “particularly his big, flat-tinted red and blue figures . . . it was at the Salon d’Automne that I decided I could paint.” If so, he was in no hurry to act on the decision. Not until 1908, when Fauvism had been

largely abandoned by its founders, did he experiment freely with the bold, unmodulated colors of the Fauves in paintings such as *Peonies in a Vase* and *Red House Among Apple Trees*—paintings that also showed the gentler influences of Pierre Bonnard’s intimate late Impressionism.

Duchamp was making headway as an illustrator. Four of his drawings appeared in the second annual Salon des Artistes Humoristes, in March 1908, and in November he published his first drawing in *Le Courrier Français*. By this time, however, he was no longer living the life of an urban *flâneur*. He had been evicted from his new apartment (he had recently moved from number 65 to number 73, rue Caulaincourt) because of a wild Christmas party the previous December that went on for two days and infuriated the neighbors. Under French law, evicted tenants were given six months to find new lodgings. Instead of renting a new flat in Montmartre, Duchamp had moved to 9, rue Amiral-de-Joinville in Neuilly, a short walk from his brothers’ place in Puteaux and only a few blocks from his godmother Julia Pillore’s apartment on the avenue Victor Hugo. Family ties were still very important in Duchamp’s life. But the main reason for his move to Neuilly was probably a desire to get away from the distractions of Montmartre so that he could concentrate on painting. Over the next five years, at any rate, living in Neuilly and spending a lot of time with his brothers, he would catch up with and assimilate most of the quickening currents and crosscurrents in modern art.

Jacques Villon was on the executive committee of the 1908 Salon d’Automne, the important annual exhibition that had been established in 1903 as a complement to the spring Salon des Indépendants, and Raymond Duchamp-Villon served on its sculpture jury. Unlike the increasingly derided Salon des Beaux-Arts, which was restricted to members of the official



Duchamp’s Christmas Eve menu, 1907.

Académie des Beaux-Arts, the Indépendants and the Salon d'Automne were open to anyone whose work gained the approval of their annually elected painting and sculpture juries; after a third acceptance, an artist became a *sociétaire*, which meant that the jury's approval was no longer required. In 1908 the Salon d'Automne's painting jury, whose members were Henri Matisse, Albert Marquet, and Georges Rouault, voted to hang three paintings by Marcel Duchamp. The jurors who gave Duchamp his Paris debut as an artist rejected the paintings submitted that year by Georges Braque—paintings that Matisse described as being made of “little cubes.” When these same pictures were shown at Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler's tiny gallery on the rue Vignon soon after the Salon d'Automne closed, the critic Louis Vauxcelles echoed Matisse by writing disdainfully in *Gil Blas* that “Braque reduces everything to geometrical forms, to cubes.” Cubism had been born, but for the moment few people noticed.

The pictures that Duchamp showed at the 1908 Salon d'Automne—*Portrait*, *Flowering Cherry Tree*, and *Old Cemetery*—drew no comment from any critic. (*Flowering Cherry Tree* may have been the painting known today as *Red House Among Apple Trees*; the other two have not survived.) The critics also ignored two Duchamp canvases that were accepted by the Salon des Indépendants the following spring, although to Duchamp's great surprise, he found at the close of this exhibition that one of his submissions, a now-vanished townscape entitled *Saint-Cloud*, had been sold to an unknown buyer for one hundred francs. The price was insignificant—less than five dollars—but that was beside the point. In those years, when the Paris avant-garde was unaware of its own imminent triumph, only the despised artists of the academy entertained any ideas of earning a living through their art. Artists who looked for new paths were treated like pariahs, as Duchamp said, and “We were delighted to be pariahs.” What counted was the opinion of other advanced artists—especially if they happened to be your brothers. In his paintings that summer at Veules-les-Roses, Duchamp experimented with a more restrained palette. Three of his new pictures were accepted by the jury for the 1909 Salon d'Automne, and one of them, a nude study described at the time as a “nude on a couch,” was sold. The buyer this time turned out to be Isadora Duncan, then approaching the zenith of her fame, who let it be known that she planned to give it to a friend for Christmas. The friend was never identified; the picture has disappeared.

Female nudes painted in the Fauve style, with heavy black outlines and arbitrary colors, occupied Duchamp for several months in 1910. This was his first serious attempt to deal with a subject that would soon become a primary interest for him, but the results were not impressive. In spite of the thick impastos of the paint handling and the voluptuous contours of the models, who are seen close-up in shallow space, there is a tentative, uncertain quality to these pictures. Areas of paint laid down with a palette knife alternate with roughly brushed passages and even some patches of bare canvas, in the manner of Cezanne, but the overall effect is clumsy rather than daring, and the paintings have very little erotic charge. Guillaume Apollinaire, who had recently emerged in Paris as the primary spokesman and promoter of the latest artistic developments, nevertheless took note of two Duchamp nudes at the 1910 Salon des Indépendants—he described them in *L'Intransigeant* as “*très vilains*” (“very ugly”), which may well have been a compliment. Duchamp and Apollinaire did not know each other at this point, but the poet-critic's enthusiasm for Fauvism and for the early Cubist dislocations of Picasso and Braque made him well disposed to work that lay outside traditional canons of beauty.

Duchamp exhibited four pictures at the Indépendants that year, which was also the year of the Boronali hoax. An artist named Joachim-Raphael Boronali, founder of the new school of “Excessivism,” was revealed to be none other than Lola, a donkey belonging to the owner of the famous Montmartre café the Lapin Agile; photographs were circulated of Lola, with a brush tied to her tail, “painting” the large picture that hung in the salon, and thousands of visitors flocked in to enjoy the joke—a joke on the Salon that many took to be a joke on modern art.

Although Duchamp had abandoned Montmartre for Neuilly, he went to all the important exhibitions in Paris and often stayed to make a night of it with his artist friends or with Ferdinand Tribout and Raymond Dumouchel, his former schoolmates at the Lycée Corneille, both of whom had recently finished medical school and moved to Paris. Duchamp had a new friend that spring, a young German art student from Munich named Max Bergmann, who was visiting Paris for the first time. Bergmann's diary records more than a dozen meetings with Duchamp during March and April, including one all-night adventure that began with a hearty supper at Mme Coconier's restaurant on the rue Lepic (where Eugène Duchamp used to pay for Villon's board), continued at the Bal Tabarin and then the elegant Taverna



Jeanne Serre, circa 1910.

Olympia on the boulevard des Capucines, and wound up after midnight, back in Montmartre, at a well-known, elaborately decorated brothel on the rue Pigalle.

Three weeks later, at the Salon des Beaux-Arts in the Grand Palais, Duchamp introduced Bergmann to a pretty young woman named Jeanne Serre, who had recently moved into an apartment just across the street from Duchamp's in Neuilly. Twenty years old, married but estranged from her husband, she had decided to escape her restricted background by becoming an artist's model—perhaps with Duchamp's help. Bergmann was quite struck by his friend's dark-haired “new conquest,” whom he met again ten days later when the three of them spent an evening together on the town.

There was no hint, however, of anything binding or exclusive about the liaison. Duchamp, at twenty-three, had already taken on the wariness of a dedicated bachelor. His attitude toward marriage was suggested by a grim drawing he did in 1909 called *Dimanches (Sundays)*, which shows a soberly dressed suburban couple, the husband pushing a baby carriage, the wife heavily pregnant, both looking terminally miserable. It was an attitude he would never completely abandon. “The things life forces men into,” he said forty years later, “—wives, three children, a country house, three cars! I avoid material commitments. I stop. I do whatever life calls me for.” If life called upon him to be an artist, he felt, then marriage was to be avoided at all cost.

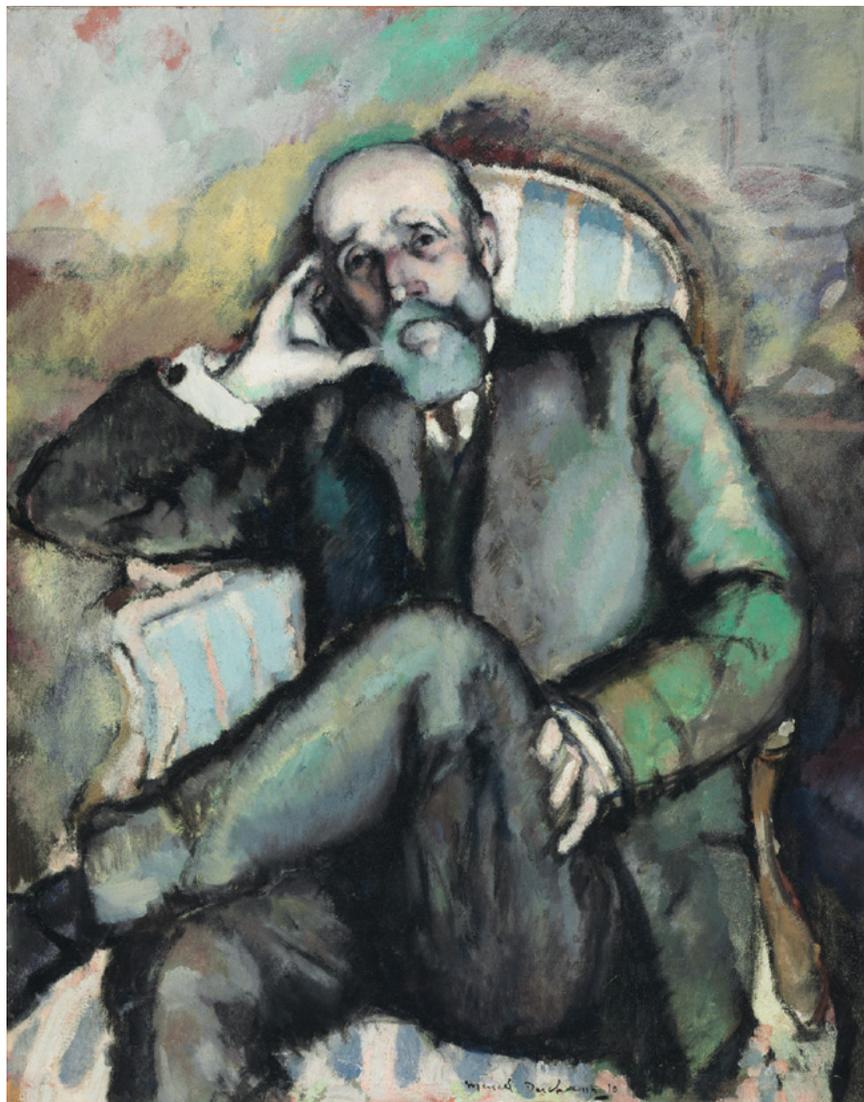
The influence of Cézanne appeared—somewhat belatedly—in Duchamp's painting for the first time in 1910. The Cézanne retrospective at the Salon d'Automne in 1907, one year after the artist's death, had come

as a revelation to many painters in Paris. Picasso would soon call the reclusive Aix master “the father of us all,” and countless others found in Cézanne's solid pictorial structure the necessary antidote to Impressionist looseness and sentimentality. Duchamp later made conflicting statements about Cézanne's influence on him. He told Pierre Cabanne that in the circle of humorist artists he frequented, “The conversation centered above all on Manet,” not Cézanne, and he went on to say that his own discovery of Matisse had been much more of an event in his life than his discovery of Cézanne. At other times, however, Duchamp spoke of himself as being under the influence of Cézanne for two years or more, and he cited his 1910 portrait of his father as “a typical example of my cult of Cézanne mixed up with filial love.” The *Portrait of the Artist's Father* that he referred to is clearly Céannian in its balanced structure and its use of somber earth tones rather than Fauvist color; it is also the best painting of Duchamp's early career, a penetrating psychological study of a shrewd yet thoughtful man, who sits in his armchair, legs crossed, one hand supporting his head, his deep-set eyes gravely interrogating the viewer.

Duchamp painted several other portraits in 1910, including a very strange one of his friend Dumouchel. The young doctor is shown in three-quarter-length profile against a background of Fauve colors. The head, which is too large for his body, is surrounded by a shimmering violet aura, or halo, and so is the left hand, which Dumouchel holds in front of him with the fingers splayed. On the back of the canvas, which Duchamp gave to Dumouchel, he wrote: “à propos de ta 'figure,' mon cher Dumouchel” (“apropos your 'face,' my dear Dumouchel”). A number of theories have been advanced regarding the halos, many of them centering on the wave of

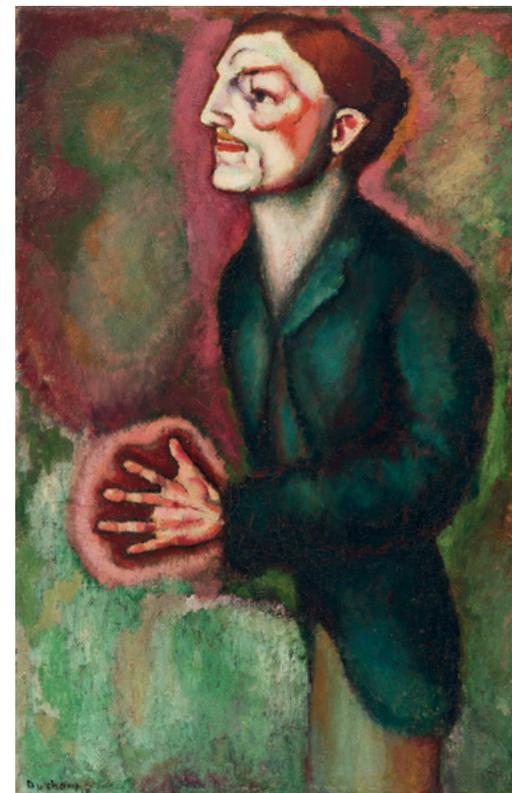


Dimanches (Sundays), 1909.



Portrait of the Artist's Father, 1910.

popular interest in extrasensory perceptions and “emanations” that was set off by Wilhelm Conrad Roentgen’s discovery of X rays in 1895. It has been pointed out that when Raymond Duchamp-Villon was an intern at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris in 1898, he had been in contact there with Albert Londe, one of the pioneers in X-ray research; scholars have



Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel, 1910.

also noted that Marcel and Dumouchel’s schoolmate Ferdinand Tribout would go on to become a major figure in the field of radiology. Duchamp never said anything to bear out such speculations. What he did say was that the picture, which has the look of a caricature, represented his first attempt to inject humor into his painting. Much later, when his friend and patron Walter Arensberg asked him specifically about the halo around Dumouchel’s head, Duchamp replied that it was “*not* expressly motivated by Dumouchel’s hand” and that “it has no definite meaning or explanation except the satisfaction of a need for the ‘miraculous.’” That “need for the miraculous” would find expression, as we will see, in several other paintings done in 1910 and 1911, paintings that remain—in the light of Duchamp’s well-developed skepticism—as mystifying as the *Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel*.



The Chess Game, 1910.

Duchamp's most ambitious painting in 1910—and his largest to date—was done that summer in the garden at Puteaux. Called *The Chess Game*, it shows his two older brothers hunched over a chess board at an outdoor table, and their wives in the foreground—Gaby Villon sits at a table laid for tea, Yvonne Duchamp-Villon reclines on the grass. There is no attempt at psychological portraiture here; the men are virtually featureless, the women locked away in their separate and isolated reveries. A memory of Cézanne's *Card Players* seems to hover over the scene, but the painting has none of Cézanne's monumental solidity. The figures inhabit the shallow space awkwardly; the composition is inert. Duchamp showed the picture and four other recent canvases at the Salon d'Automne in October; since this was his third consecutive appearance at the salon, it qualified him as a *sociétaire* who could show there in the future without having to submit to the jury's approval. There were no sales this time, and no critic mentioned Duchamp's entries.

Up to this point, the most perceptive art critic could have found little to write about in Marcel Duchamp's paintings. He was still in the phase of what he would later call his "swimming lessons," moving restlessly but tentatively from Post-Impressionist landscapes to Fauve nudes to Cézanne-influenced portraits and figure studies. He had shown evidence of originality and talent but no great dedication—compared to other artists, his output was meager. Nothing in Duchamp's work prior to 1911 prepares us for its meteoric trajectory over the next four years.

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