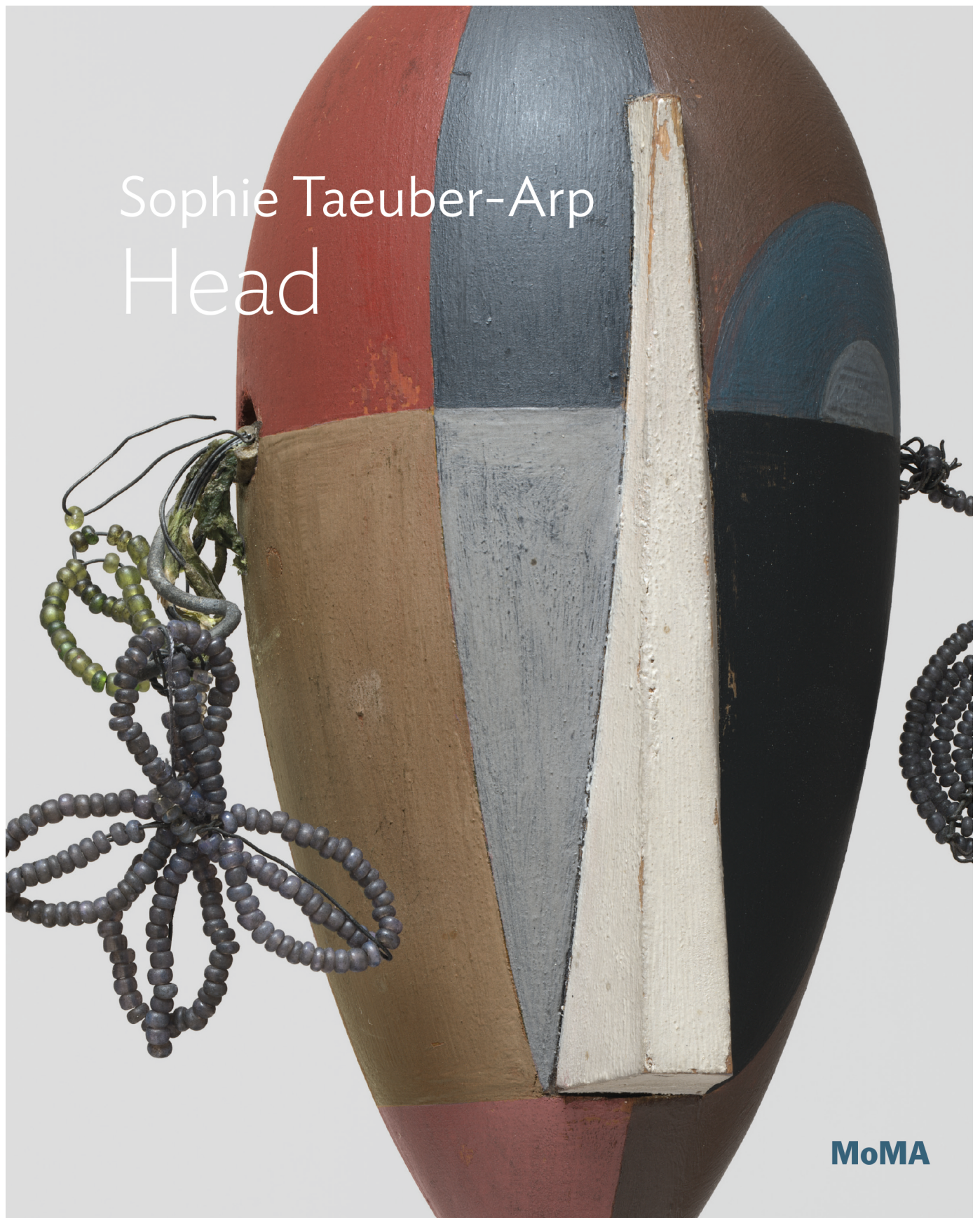


Sophie Taeuber-Arp  
Head



MoMA

# SOPHIE TAEUBER-ARP HEAD

**ANNE UMLAND**

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

**DANCER, DESIGNER, PUPPET MAKER, SCULPTOR, AND PAINTER—SOPHIE TAEUBER-ARP**

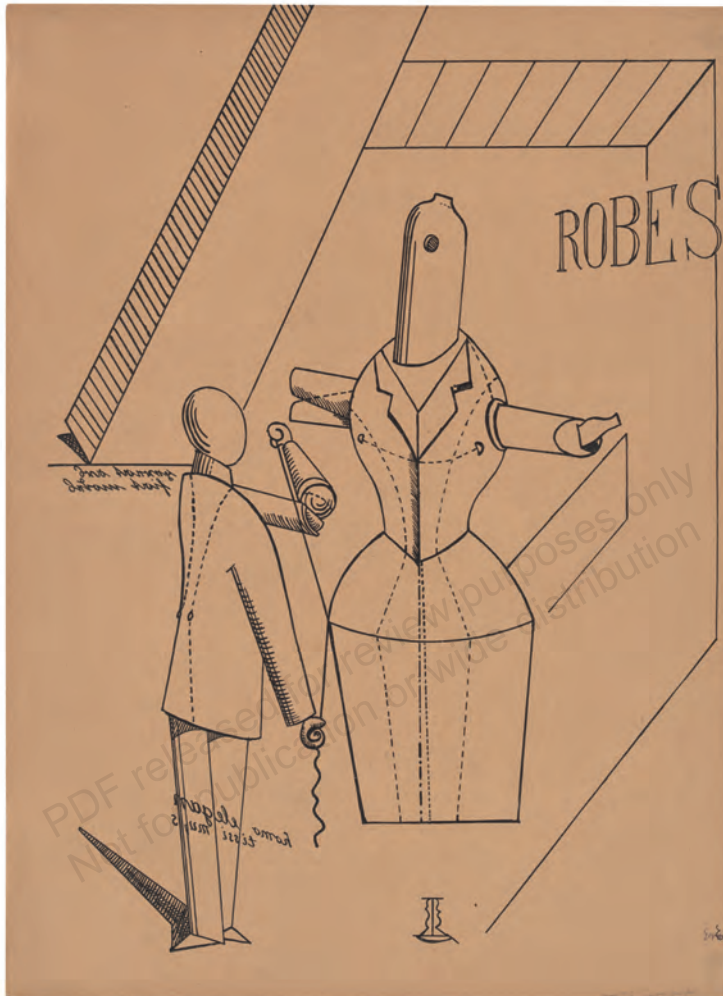
was at the heart of the short-lived Dada movement in Zurich, which protested the culture of rationality that its members held responsible for the unprecedented devastation of World War I. The sheer size of this calamity destroyed faith in the very order of things, from understandings of the body, to the verities of art, science, and religion, to social and political regimes. The mannequin-like character of Taeuber-Arp's *Head* connects it to the automatons and mechanized figures that proliferated in Dada art in the wake of the Great War, from Max Ernst's *Let There Be Fashion, Down With Art* (1920; **FIG. 1**) to Raoul Hausmann's *Mechanical Head (The Spirit of Our Age)* (c. 1920; **FIG. 2**). Yet *Head* defies easy categorization, in keeping with Taeuber-Arp's and the Dada movement's goals of breaking down conventional boundaries between abstraction and representation, the bodily and the machinelike, and the fine and applied arts. At once an abstract sculpture, a playful portrait, and a puppetlike object, it proposes a new type of art that speaks to the moment of its making, a time of profound political and cultural questioning.

*Head* is one of the six painted objects Taeuber-Arp created between 1918 and 1920 that are often referred to as "Dada heads" and count among her most celebrated works. *Head*'s primary wooden components consist of an ovoid head, a trapezoidal nose, a slender cylindrical neck, and a squat, bobbin-esque base. Like the base, the head shape recalls that of an everyday object—in this instance, a darning egg, a seamstress's aide used to stretch and support fabric that is being mended.<sup>1</sup> The neck could also easily double as a carpenter's dowel and

Sophie Taeuber-Arp (Swiss, 1889–1943). *Head*. Zurich, 1920. Painted wood with glass beads on wire, 9 1/4" high (23.5 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. MRS. JOHN HAY WHITNEY BEQUEST (BY EXCHANGE) AND COMMITTEE ON PAINTING AND SCULPTURE FUNDS







**FIG. 1.** Max Ernst (French and American, born Germany, 1891–1976). Plate I from *Let There Be Fashion, Down With Art.* 1920. One from a portfolio of eight lithographs, sheet: 17 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 12 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" (43 x 31.9 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. PURCHASE

functions similarly, in that Taeuber-Arp—or the woodworker who may have assembled this work—used it to hold the structure's head and base together. Most of these forms are products not of traditional sculptural methods like carving or molding but of wood turning, a mechanical process by which wooden pieces are shaped on a lathe. Once assembled, these potentially useful elements cease to serve any practical function. They are transformed from



**FIG. 2.** Raoul Hausmann (German, born Austria, 1886–1971). *Mechanical Head (The Spirit of Our Age)*. c. 1920. Hairdresser's wigmaking dummy, crocodile wallet, ruler, pocket-watch mechanism and case, bronze camera part, typewriter cylinder, segment of measuring tape, collapsible cup, white card bearing the number 22, nails, and bolt, 12  $\frac{13}{16}$  x 8  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 7  $\frac{7}{8}$ " (32.5 x 21 x 20 cm). CENTRE POMPIDOU, MUSÉE NATIONAL D'ART MODERNE, PARIS

something to be manipulated into something to be looked at, crossing the boundary between the applied and fine arts.

Taeuber-Arp used oil paint to apply colorful geometric patterns to *Head*. The work's right side is topped by a gray triangular area and a dark red hemisphere; below these, moving from the nose to the back, are successive curving, light blue, pink, light red, and pale yellow rectangles that wrap around the lower



**FIG. 4.** Sophie Taeuber-Arp (Swiss, 1889–1943). *Head*.  
Photo: Ganz, n.d. FONDATION ARP, CLAMART, FRANCE

portion of the head [FIG. 3]. By contrast, the far more somber left side sports a single eye, composed from light- and dark-blue semicircles, underneath which lies a curved section of deep black; this eye and its shadow are set against a field of brown that continues over the top of the head. Through these compositional and color choices, the artist playfully transferred a pictorial conceit into the three-dimensional realm of sculpture—another instance of fluid border crossings. The right side, with its panoply of hues, appears lit while the other is in shadow.

As a final touch, Taeuber-Arp adorned *Head* with beaded-glass accessories attached where the intersecting bands of color meet. As one can see from a professional photograph Taeuber-Arp likely had commissioned [FIG. 4], the beaded elements have suffered the ravages of time. The bouffant cluster of

**OPPOSITE: FIG. 3.** Sophie Taeuber-Arp (Swiss, 1889–1943). *Head* (detail). Zurich, 1920. Painted wood with glass beads on wire, 9 1/4" high (23.5 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. MRS. JOHN HAY WHITNEY BEQUEST (BY EXCHANGE) AND COMMITTEE ON PAINTING AND SCULPTURE FUNDS



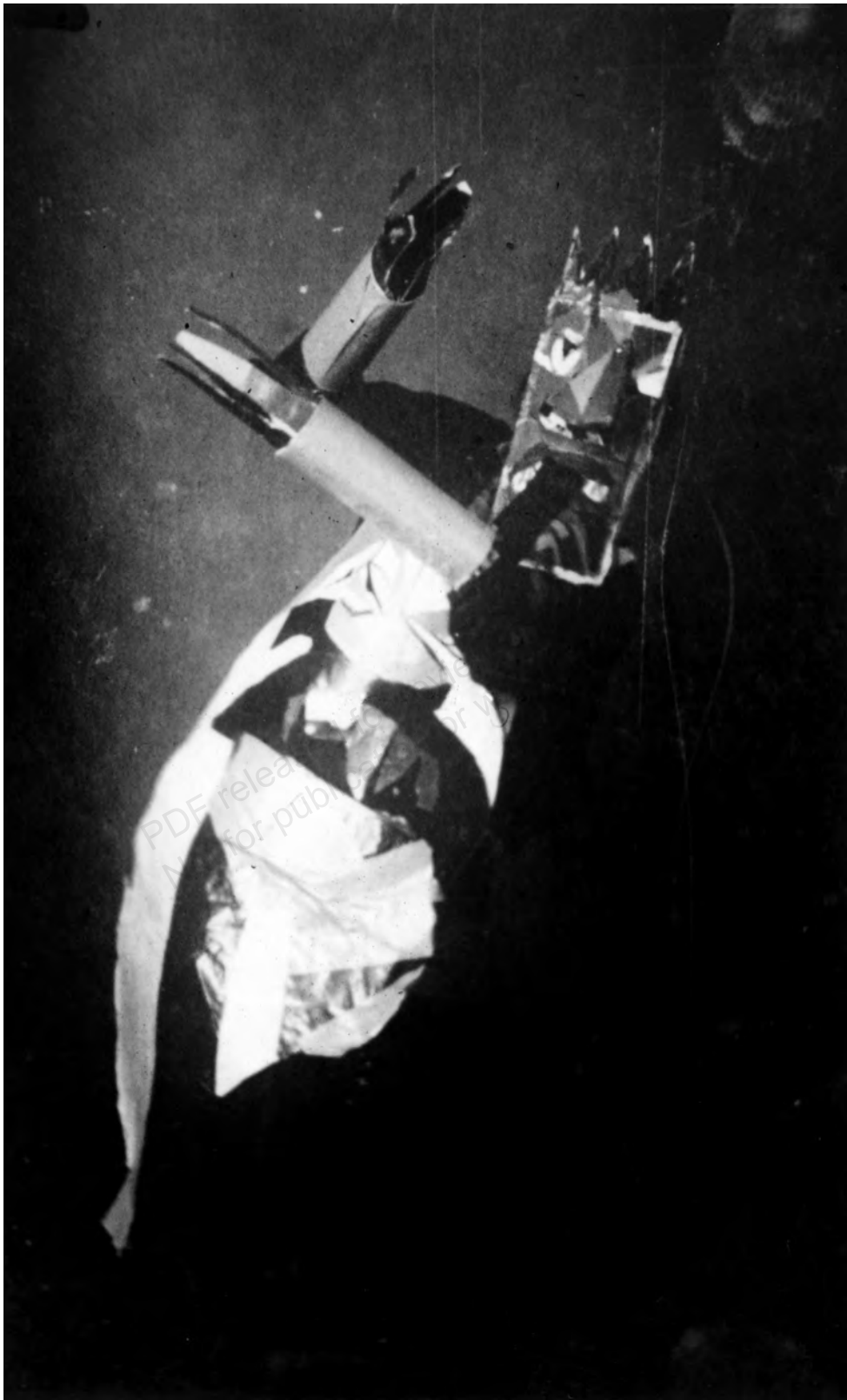
**FIG. 5.** Sophie Taeuber-Arp (Swiss, 1889–1943). *Powder Box*. Zurich, c. 1918. Painted wood, 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 6  $\frac{1}{2}$ " (29.8 x 16.5 cm). PRIVATE COLLECTION, ON LONG-TERM LOAN TO AARGAUER KUNSTHAUS, AARAU



**FIG. 6.** Sophie Taeuber-Arp (Swiss, 1889–1943). *Beaded Bag*. Zurich, 1918. Glass beads and silk, 5  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 2  $\frac{3}{8}$ " (13 x 6 cm). MUSEUM FÜR GESTALTUNG ZÜRICH

sparkling blue-gray spirals on its left has been reduced to a single, solitary representative, while a dangling purple-beaded flower at right has lost several green leaves. Even in their compromised state, these “earrings” contribute to the work’s witty hybridity. In 1920, at the time this sculpture was likely made,<sup>2</sup> Taeuber-Arp was far better known for her arts-and-crafts creations, including textile designs, turned-wood containers [FIG. 5], beaded necklaces, and small handbags [FIG. 6]. The accessories on her *Head* point to this significant part of her practice. By existing across rather than within aesthetic and material boundaries, it asserts that the applied arts and fine arts were equally important.







**FIG. 14.** Sophie Taeuber-Arp (Swiss, 1889–1943). *Freudanalytiker*. Zurich, 1918. Oil paint on turned wood and metal, 24 x 6 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 6 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" (61 x 17 x 17 cm). MUSEUM FÜR GESTALTUNG ZÜRICH



**FIG. 25.** Sophie Taeuber with *Dada Head*, Zurich, 1920. Photo: Nic Aluf. STIFTUNG ARP, E.V., BERLIN/  
ROLANDSWERTH

**OPPOSITE: FIG. 26.** Sophie Taeuber-Arp (Swiss, 1889–1943). *Dada Head*. Zurich, 1920. Painted wood,  
11  $\frac{9}{16}$  x 5  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 5  $\frac{1}{2}$ " (29.4 x 14 x 14 cm). CENTRE POMPIDOU, MUSÉE NATIONAL D'ART MODERNE, PARIS



**FIG. 31.** Sophie Taeuber-Arp (Swiss, 1889–1943). *Dada Head*. Zurich, 1918. Painted wood, 13  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 7  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 7  $\frac{7}{8}$ " (34 x 20 x 20 cm). CENTRE POMPIDOU, MUSÉE NATIONAL D'ART MODERNE, PARIS



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