In a 1916 letter to his sister, Suzanne, Marcel Duchamp explained that he had begun to designate everyday objects as artworks and referred to them for the first time, in the passage cited above, as “readymades.” “I sign them and I think of an inscription for them in English,” he continued, noting “for example, a large snow shovel on which I have inscribed at the bottom: ‘In advance of the broken arm.’”

In June 1915 Duchamp had moved from Paris to New York (a heart condition made him unfit to serve in World War I), and the snow shovel was his first American readymade. Accompanied by the French artist Jean Crotti, his studio mate and future brother-in-law, Duchamp purchased the shovel in a Columbus Avenue hardware store one day in November. The two expatriates were apparently struck by this ordinary object, having “never seen a snow shovel before” since they were not available in France. Back in the studio, Duchamp painted a title, signature, and date on the shovel and hung it from the ceiling with wire. With this series of simple actions—selecting, naming, signing, and displaying—Duchamp dramatically transformed the definition of an artwork and the role of the artist, redrawing the boundary between art and life for the century to come.

This act of the “dehumanization of a work of art,” as Duchamp later referred to the approach that resulted in the readymade, did not occur suddenly or unpredictably. Having abandoned the classical painting technique he had learned at the Académie Julian in Paris for the avant-garde idioms of Fauvism and Cubism, he then exchanged the still-traditional subject matter of those experimental forms for more mechanistic content. “People living in a machine age are naturally influenced either consciously or unconsciously by the age they live in,” Duchamp later acknowledged, and the progression from the industrial allusions in his paintings of the early 1910s to the use of actual industrial materials was a natural development.
Marcel Duchamp’s readymades rely on those relatively few art-making actions that the artist did not relinquish in creating them. By selecting a commonplace object rather than making it himself, Duchamp undermined traditional notions both of authorship—he hoped “to get away from the worn-out cult of the hand”—and of beauty: he maintained that his choices were “never dictated by aesthetic delectation” but were “based on a reaction of visual indifference with a total absence of good or bad taste.” By titling the object, Duchamp wedded the ordinary item to a linguistic concept, allowing it to exist in the mind as much as in space.1 With its new title, for example, In Advance of the Broken Arm is no longer just a snow shovel but also the prophecy of a future event. By signing an object, Duchamp called attention to the very condition of authorship that he wished to undermine, imparting artistic value to the same thing that he had deprived of any potential for practical function. The signature on the snow shovel is especially telling: the artwork is “[from] Marcel Duchamp instead of ‘by’ him—more gift than creation.” Finally, by displaying an object—whether suspended in the studio or put on view in an exhibition—Duchamp finalized its exit from everyday life, proving that context is vital to the definition of a work of art. If Duchamp’s acts of selecting, naming, signing, and displaying were sufficient to transform one snow shovel into an iconic work of art, the process could be repeated. Though it was important to Duchamp to regulate the number of each readymade in existence,2 throughout his life he authorized various additional versions of those objects, like the snow shovel, whose originals were lost. For a 1945 exhibition of the Société Anonyme collection at the Yale University Art Gallery, the art historian George Heard Hamilton bought a new shovel, onto which Duchamp once again painted the work’s title and signature. According to Hamilton, the shovel caused confusion both on the train from New York to New Haven—where passengers were surprised to see such an implement in April—and when the show toured to Minnesota, where an uninitiated janitor evidently used it in the snow.3 The present version (plate 45) is fifth in an edition of eight replicas made under Duchamp’s supervision in 1964 by the gallery and scholar Arturo Schwarz in Milan.4

A tireless innovator, Duchamp resisted settling into a recognizable style, and in the decades following the early readymades, his practice ranged from complex assemblages with allegorical overtones to kinetic experiments based on the science of optics (see plate 53). But the principle of the readymade—according to which an artist could appropriate a preexisting entity rather than create a new one—persisted throughout and extended to images as well as objects. In Paris in 1919 Duchamp came in contact with artists of the Dada group, whose provocations in art and literature combined social critique with irreverence in a way consistent with his own attitudes. While there, he added a moustache to a postcard of Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa plus the initials L.H.O.O.Q.—a pun that, when said aloud, sounds like the French for “she has a hot ass.”5 This vandal’s act against the idea of a masterpiece is another manifestation of the assisted readymade, and as with the Bicycle Wheel, the artist was free to select, name, sign, and display multiple versions (including undoing his own transgressive act: not adding the moustache this time; Duchamp declared the L.H.O.O.Q. “raste,” or “shaved,” see plate 49). Duchamp similarly subjected his own oeuvre to reproducibility, undertaking in 1935 a six-year project to assemble a “portable museum” called The Box in a Valise (plate 46). Duchamp similarly subjected his own oeuvre to reproducibility, undertaking in 1935 a six-year project to assemble a “portable museum” called The Box in a Valise (plate 46). This suitcase full of miniature facsimiles of his art-works includes a photograph by Man Ray of the lost original In Advance of the Broken Arm, seen hanging above the first Bicycle Wheel in Duchamp’s Broadway studio (fig. 2).
It is no accident that MoMA’s versions of In Advance of the Broken Arm, L.H.O.O.Q., and The Box in a Valise all date to the mid-1960s, as this was a key moment of renewed critical attention to Duchamp. Thanks in part to the 1959 publication of the first monograph devoted to the artist (see page 150), maps (see plate 107), and numbers (see plate 108–110), flags are also present in John’s 1985 painting Summer (plate 121), a Box in a Valise–style digest of his own visual repertory, which in an allusion as much to Duchamp as to Leonardo also features the Mona Lisa. The Pop artist Andy Warhol, perhaps the greatest heir to Duchamp’s legacy, was also the artist’s friend, and he captured his predecessor’s impish expression in a 1966 Screen test (fig. 3). Given the relationship of Warhol’s Campbell’s Soup Cans (plate 122) and Brillo Boxes (plates 131 and 132) to the readymade, it seems particularly appropriate that Warhol himself once owned the very same version of In Advance of the Broken Arm that now belongs to The Museum of Modern Art. — S F

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1. Ibid.
9. He wrote a note to himself to “Invent thousands of ephemeral works” (15 Janvier environs, 1916), one other authorized replica was made, by Ulf Linde in Stockholm in 1949.
10. Said Kool, the初始 approximates the phrase “S’il y a chaud au cul.”