

The Museum of Modern Art

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DUCHAMP RETROSPECTIVE AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

"Not painting but language...not color theory but chronophotography and the concept of a fourth dimension caught his imagination....Duchamp was...a jack-of-all trades, and perhaps a poet as well. His contribution was to the broad field of art itself, a field that under his intelligent scrutiny and subversive methods expanded, destroyed itself, and occasionally exploded in all directions." -Anne d'Harnoncourt*

"Growing up in a well-educated family with two artists as older brothers, caught up in discussions on mathematics, physics, aesthetics, music, and literature, Marcel Duchamp early came to associate art with an active play of intelligence rather than a passive filtering of experience....He was to fulfill a vocation more radical and more important than the artist's as usually conceived.... He looked at everything with new eyes and made extraordinary connections...."
-Kynaston McShine*

The most comprehensive exhibition ever devoted to Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), whose life and work changed the history of modern art, and whose influence is rivaled only by that of Matisse and Picasso, will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from December 28 through February 24. Co-directed by Anne d'Harnoncourt, Curator of 20th Century Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Kynaston McShine, Curator of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the exhibition is a joint presentation of the two institutions and was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Duchamp, born in Normandy in 1887, spent his life half in Paris, half in New York; half in art, half in chess, and died a modern legend at the age of 81 in 1968.

Nude Descending a Staircase (1912), which won Duchamp widespread notoriety, has remained his most famous work, although its impact on other artists has been negligible, Anne d' Harnoncourt observes. However the Large Glass (1915-23) and an assortment of enigmatic objects and concise gestures exerted an ever-expanding influence upon successive generations of the avant-garde. His notes for the Large Glass, among the most arcane and difficult texts of this century, had been

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translated into Swedish and Japanese (as well as English, Spanish, Italian and German) before his death, and his attitude as well as his work had become a touchstone for artists, many of whom had never seen so much as a drawing from his hand.

The more than 200 works in the show include several versions of the famous Nude Descending a Staircase, readymades such as With Hidden Noise--a ball of twine and brass plates--the color reproduction of the Mona Lisa to which Duchamp added a beard and moustache, numerous studies and related works for the Large Glass and the last piece, Etant Donnes, motorized constructions, books, replicas, posters and films. Among the oils are The Chess Players (1911), the Coffee Mill (1911), Sad Young Man in a Train (1911), Tu m' (1918), and Genre Allegory (George Washington) (1943). Two major pieces by Duchamp, The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (the Large Glass) and his last work (1946-66), Given: (Etant Donnés) 1. The Waterfall 2. The Illuminating Gas/, are permanently installed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art and are represented in the exhibition by full-scale photographs.

Describing Duchamp's influence on 20th-century attitudes toward art

Kynaston McShine says:

"Like the Bachelors who never really meet the Bride face to face, the spectator is constantly set apart, 'delayed.' Duchamp almost forces us to be voyeurs. The windows and doors (Fresh Widow, Bagarre d'Austerlitz, 11 rue Larrey and Etant Donnes) reinforce the idea that we can only look at his work, not enter it. We can only imagine the object in With Hidden Noise, and we must avoid falling over Trébuchet... (but) The spectator has to play the game with Duchamp. This of course means that the spectator must become an artist--and, perhaps more important, a thinker. It is this revolutionary challenge to his audience that has made Duchamp the embodiment of the truly avant-garde figure and a symbol of modernism....Although restoring some of the magic and mystery essential to the meaning of art he has also extended that meaning--but only through maintaining his individuality and guarding his secrets."

The retrospective opened in Philadelphia in September and will be shown at the Art Institute of Chicago later this spring. The New York installation, which includes some loans not available for Philadelphia, was designed by Kynaston McShine. Many works are from the pioneering collection in the Philadelphia
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Museum formed by Louise and Walter Arensberg, who became close friends when Duchamp first arrived in New York in 1915. A major private lender is Madame Marcel Duchamp, who now lives in France.

Duchamp's sequence of moves toward a unique position in the history of modern art was compressed into the space of four crucial years. At the start of 1910 he was producing Fauve-influenced paintings with an eye to Cézanne and Matisse; by the end of 1914 he had passed through experiments with Cubist fragmentation of space and studies for his great project, The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (the Large Glass), he had ceased to paint in any conventional sense, and he had purchased an ordinary household object (a bottlerack) from a Paris department store and signed it as if it were sculptured by his own hand.

Duchamp, with his friends Picabia and Apollinaire, had begun to develop radical and ironic ideas before the official founding of Dada in Zurich in 1916. Another important friend and collaborator was Man Ray, whom he met in New York in 1915. By 1917 he had been a founding member of The Society of Independent Artists, Inc., and had resigned when his readymade Fountain was rejected for the first annual exhibition. It was a urinal signed R. Mutt.

Between 1914 and 1921, two or three objects a year were selected, signed and occasionally altered by Duchamp-- the famous "Readymades" His own notes reveal his conviction that art can be made out of anything at all, from the most ephemeral or mundane materials (air, shadows, chocolate, shaving soap) and by the most complex processes (physics, photography, perspectival calculations) or by the simplest acts ("buy a pair of ice-tongs as a Readymade").

Duchamp's passion for chess, which he learned at the age of 13, was particularly serious during the 20's when he was supposed to have abandoned painting.

He was a member of the Committee of French Chess Federation and its delegate (1931 - 1937) to the International Chess Federation. He had joined the Marshall

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Chess Club in New York in 1920. In addition to paintings and drawings related to chess, two sets of chess men and boards are included in the exhibition.

The developement of motorized disks and other optical experiments as well as film occupied his time during the last decades along with arranging exhibitions, doing publication layouts and cover designs, writing and giving an occassional lecture. Meanwhile for 20 years, from 1946 to 1966, he worked in secret on his last major work.

An adjunct to the exhibition are a number of portraits of Duchamp by other artists.

Photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director,
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