

# Duchamp: 100 Years Later

## The Posthumous Spectator Speaks

**2017** is a key year for Marcel Duchamp. It is 100 years since he made his infamous 'urinal'. He asked for the opinion of the "posthumous spectator". We are giving that now, 100 years later.

The years **1912 – 1917** were pivotal for Duchamp. He stopped making "retinal paintings" and instead "concentrated on converting his emotion into thought". He made his first iconoclastic works, proclaiming, "anything can be art".

Although barely known to the general public, Duchamp is arguably the most influential artist of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pop Art owed hugely to him as did the YBA Movement, and his influence continues as strongly today through the dominant worldwide art movement, conceptualism. His urinal, *Fountain*, 1917, was voted the most influential art work of all time by 500 art experts in 2004.

Takashi Murakami "Our generation of artists is constantly comparing itself to Duchamp"

But some artists have mixed views: Grayson Perry in 2012 said "While we have so many artists that are very good, since Marcel Duchamp there has been a concept that artists can just point at things and bestow significance on them that has become pretty tired, I think. After all, it's been nearly 100 years since *Fountain* 1917. I hope that artists and institutions will start to think differently about that kind of found object work"

Bridget Riley, "The artist Marcel Duchamp has been an enormous influence on the art world, but not necessarily the most beneficial. His influence affects collectors, dealers, museum personnel and the culturati in general" Sunday Times 5/2/12

Whilst there are thousands of artists today who revel in Duchamp, Richard Hamilton, was hugely instrumental in Duchamp's artistic revival in the 50s and 60s. He said before his recent death "...art is boring now, old hat. It has all been done before. When you think what

Duchamp did for art from 1912 to the 1920s you see that most of these 'new' ideas developed by younger generations are an embarrassing regurgitation of something I've been familiar with and influenced for half of my life."

Duchamp's two elder brothers were highly accomplished and successful artists and like them he began his career painting in the post- impressionist, cubist and futurist styles. Picasso was already a powerful artistic force.

Duchamp was a rebel and wanted to shock, (understandable with this family dynamic). In his opinion, art since Courbet had become purely retinal, and he wanted to invent his own art form based on the mind.

So in 1912 Duchamp made *The Nude Descending a Staircase*. "I think the idea of describing the movement of a nude coming downstairs , while still retaining static visual means to do this, particularly interested me".

Although hard to see why now, this painting scandalised the art world when it was shown in New York in 1913, perhaps because of its nudity. He achieved overnight fame and it was the beginning of the life long love affair between the Frenchman and America.

In the summer of 1912 he began writing notes for the work he began in 1914 and continued to work on over the years but never finished: *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, also called *The Large Glass*.

The works he made in this period have been analysed by the Duchamp authority, Arturo Schwarz, who knew him well. He describes these works as being overtly erotic.

Duchamp began to incorporate the machine into his works, for example in *The Large Glass*, a huge, highly complicated, cerebral work, one element is the chocolate grinder. This is a solitary character (himself) who is grinding milk chocolate (a metaphor for masturbating) in a mechanical way, like a machine. *The Large Glass* is often described as a love machine. Duchamp said "I did not really love the machine. But better to do it to machines than to people or doing it to me".

To describe his interest in using the mind rather than emotion to express his art, he said” I want to grasp things with the mind the way the penis is grasped by the vagina.” The last quote, particularly, supports the theory put forward by Schwarz that Duchamp had incestuous feelings for his sister Suzanne (and this Duchamp never denied).

Duchamp’s incestuous feelings were, I believe, the reason why Duchamp needed to concentrate on the mind, why he wanted, as he described it to “dehumanize” art. His repressed and inappropriate sexual feelings account for his need to move away from expressing emotion in his art. He needed to invent a displacement game with surrogate objects which suffer. It was this secret that caused a revolution in the history of art.

Duchamp’s mathematical, cerebral mind loved chess. He also loved verbal puns. Consider *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, Even is ‘meme’ in French and it is also ‘m’aime’, ie loves me, which supports the incest theory. (His sister Suzanne had recently married). He extended his love of verbal puns to physical puns, so it is one step on from the mechanical chocolate grinder to an everyday object, like a urinal, as a work of art. “I’m not at all sure that the concept of the readymade isn’t the most important single idea to come out of my work.” He said at the end of his life.

Duchamp didn’t want to evaluate art as good, bad or indifferent and so chose a common object, first of all in 1913 *Bicycle Wheel*, and then, very famously in 1917, *Fountain*, a urinal. In 1919 he drew a moustache on Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, and added the pun LHOOQ (She has a hot ass). Humour is still a strong element in conceptual art today.

Like Leonardo da Vinci, Duchamp considered that “art is a mental act” . However, unlike Leonardo he did not balance it with “the eyes are the window to the soul” Quite the reverse, Duchamp wanted to eliminate retinal art, taste and emotion. He wanted, as he described it “to dehumanize art”.

His radical ideas, which allow anything to be art, “It is art if I, the artist, say it is art”, have had a momentous impact on artists all over the world. From that moment on artists have been liberated to think conceptually and to think outside the box. Many of the great works of art over the past century have been made possible because of his legacy. Artists are making innovative works of art which challenge and respond to the human condition and the world in

which we live. A prime example is Damien Hirst's *One Thousand Years*, the one work of his which was widely critically acclaimed at the artist's 2013 Tate retrospective.

However, there is another far less positive unintended consequence of an intellectual art which is designed to exclude emotion and does not require technical skills and does not invite artistic value judgements. The capitalist market system requires monetary value judgments, so in the absence of any artistic judgements it makes them itself. The higher an art work sells for at auction, the more it is validated and the more it is valued as a great work of art. This is openly admitted by the world's most expensive artists "High value, high significance" says Jeff Koons. This is especially inappropriate in an art system where the public and private sectors frequently merge.

Duchamp's advice to artists was "Do not deal in this money society". He also said, "Never repeat". Would he approve of the art world now, stuck in "an end game" of Duchampian repeats 100 years later, sometimes presented by savvy artists, like Koons, who have sussed the art world system.

Duchamp felt the spectator was as important as the artist. He is needed to complete the artwork. He was particularly interested in the views of the "posthumous spectator". Joan Bakewell asked him on BBC television in 1968, "Do you anticipate that your own contribution, when the final reckoning comes, will contribute to something called 'art'?" This astute question flummoxed him. But we can ask it again now. Posterity is now; 100 years on from 1917. We are the posthumous spectator. We are completing his art work, just as he wanted.

ends

*Duchamp: 100 Years Later. The Posthumous Spectator Speaks* happens in 2017 (anniversary of the urinal) at the Aldeburgh Beach LOOKOUT curated by Caroline Wiseman.

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