

## The Subliminal Seduction of Marcel Duchamp



Marcel Duchamp, *Female Fig Leaf*, 1950, Bronze,  
90 x 137 x 125mm, Tate Museum

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In the metaphysical world of Marcel Duchamp, *seeing* the unseen took center stage. Many art objects from the Duchampian dream factory were subliminal sexual provocations. The theater of Duchamp was a virtual striptease. There would be no orgasm, no climax, and least of all, sentiment—only artifacts of desire. Wordplay was an aphrodisiac. Duchamp turned the museum into a house of the rising sun, a place where goods were not socially acceptable.

Craig Adcock, in *Duchamp's Eroticism: A Mathematical Analysis* remarks:

Eroticism was fundamental to Marcel Duchamp's artistic production. His use of sexual innuendos, including those of the bizarre mechanical workings of his masterpiece, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, are at least part of the reason for the notoriety of his works and their impact on twentieth century art.<sup>1</sup>

Duchamp's blueprint for eroticism was subliminal. Eros lurked beneath the surface, without romance. When asked about the role eroticism played in his work Duchamp said:

...it was a closed-in eroticism, if you like, an eroticism which wasn't overt. It wasn't implied, either. It's a sort of erotic climate. Everything can be based on an erotic climate without too much trouble.<sup>2</sup>

From Duchamp's earliest experiments to his last great monument to Eros—the seduction was there from the beginning. He would operate on the subconscious mind of the public. Everyone who witnessed a Duchamp would bring a lifetime of experience to the work, making its interpretation a Rorschach test.

### MARCEL DUCHAMP

Marcel Duchamp was born July 28th, 1887 in Blainville, about 80 miles northwest of Paris. Duchamp's father was a man of means, a notary, who raised a family of artists. The early

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Adcock, "Duchamp's Eroticism: A Mathematical Analysis", *Iowa Research Online* No. 16, no. 1 (1987): 149. <https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1208&context=dadasur>

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Cabanne, "Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp," in *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, Translated from the French by Ron Padgett (London: Da Capo Press, 1971), 88.

success of his elder brothers Jacques and Raymond helped pave the way for Marcel's scholarship and career. While observing his Fauvist and Cubist contemporaries, young Marcel began experimenting with drawing and painting. Duchamp's first exhibitions in 1909 at the prestigious Salon des Indépendants were well received. Sales came easily—but there would be a turn of events.

### *NUDE DESCENDING A STAIRCASE*

In 1912, Duchamp's masterwork *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* was refused by the Salon des Indépendants. Scandal ensued and the picture was withdrawn.

The following year saw the inauguration of the Armory Show, the first important exhibition of modern art in America. European curator Walter Pach was well acquainted with the Duchamp family. Pach saved room for all three brothers, featuring four of Marcel's strongest works, including the recently rejected *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. All four paintings sold and *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* became an international phenomenon.

Paradoxically, a Frenchman would soon become an American tour de force. When asked about his contribution to painting Duchamp said "Movement in art, motion in art, had never really been exploited."<sup>3</sup>

That year the inaugural Armory Show would mark the dawn of an American century. New York was smart to embrace what Paris had forsaken.

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Roberts, "From the Archives: An Interview with Marcel Duchamp, From 1968," *ARTnews* (blog) January 18, 2019, <http://www.artnews.com/2019/01/18/archives-interview-marcel-duchamp-1968/>.



Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, 1912, Oil on Canvas, 58 x 35 inches  
Philadelphia Museum of Art

In *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, Duchamp planted the seeds of pornography with a play on words. He led us to believe that we might behold a voluptuous human figure in motion, something painting had never done before. With *Nude*, Duchamp delivered on the promise of movement, to the extent that a painting can express kinetic energy. However, the erotic representation of the human figure would remain a figment of one's imagination.

## *BICYCLE WHEEL*

With the Armory Show behind him, provocateur Duchamp set his sights on a new frontier. From that moment forward, Duchamp abandoned conventional painting to develop an entirely new methodology.

### *The readymade.*

“Duchamp began to create work with a conceptual base and an intellectual complexity that challenged previous notions about both art and art making.”<sup>4</sup> He balanced the wheel of a bicycle on a kitchen stool and called his gesture *Bicycle Wheel*<sup>5</sup>. “The work is, in one sense, the natural heir to *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, because it didn’t try to replicate movement, it moved.”<sup>6</sup> With his first interactive kinetic sculpture, *Bicycle Wheel*, Duchamp redefined the role of spectator as a partner in the creative act.

According to Duchamp, “It’s very difficult to choose an object, because, at the end of fifteen days, you begin to like it or hate it. You have to approach something with indifference, as if you had no aesthetic emotion.”<sup>7</sup>

Other readymades followed, each one more visually indifferent than the next. By authorizing mass produced found objects Duchamp undermined the idea of a unique artwork.<sup>8</sup> Duchamp increasingly eliminated the hand from the art making process, careful to keep mind over matter, often embracing chance.

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<sup>4</sup> Ted Snell, “Here’s Looking at: Marcel Duchamp’s Bicycle Wheel 1913,” *The Conversation*, 3

<sup>5</sup> Annette Lin, “Why Jeff Koons Is a Natural Successor to Marcel Duchamp,” *Artsy*, May 20, 2019, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-jeff-koons-natural-successor-marcel-duchamp>.

<sup>6</sup> Snell, “Here’s Looking at,” 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 48

<sup>8</sup> Snell, “Here’s Looking at,” 5.





Marcel Duchamp, *Bottle Rack*, (1914) 1917 replica, Galvanized Iron

### *BOTTLE RACK*

One year after *Bicycle Wheel*, Duchamp bought a *Bottle Rack* at a department store, and proclaimed it a work of art. *Bottle Rack* shared the same wordplay paradox as *Nude Descending a Staircase*—both titles made a reference to what was *not* present. Cognitive dissonance, the neurological thread that gives Duchamp's work its thrust, was in full force. We were asked to hold two thoughts at the same time, but there was a conflict between the two. A *Bottle Rack* without bottles. A *Nude's Descent* without the nude.

The *Bottle* as phallus was subliminally present as an imaginary seduction, the same way *Nude* lurked in the back of the mind. The circle returned as a structural support—this time, stacked to create an enormous mega-phallus. Conversely, the mega-phallus could be interpreted as a vaginal vault. The tower of galvanized iron was compounded by phallic rows of iron rods for bottle drying. *Bicycle Wheel*, *Pharmacy*, *Paris Air*, *Comb*, *Shovel*, *Fountain*, *Typewriter*, *Bottle Rack*—all Duchamp readymades—no longer served their purpose—in this case, to dry bottles. The ghost of the phallus haunts *Bottle Rack*—the missing bottles.



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917 replica 1964, Porcelain, 360 x 480 x 610mm, Tate Modern

## FOUNTAIN

Adcock brings light to Duchamp's use of inversion, rotation and mirroring—Duchampian devices deployed to express the fourth dimension. *Bicycle Wheel*, *Fountain*, *Mona Lisa*, *Paysage Fautif*, *Rose Selavy* underwent either a geometric, functional or conceptual transformation thereby establishing a new metasexual identity:

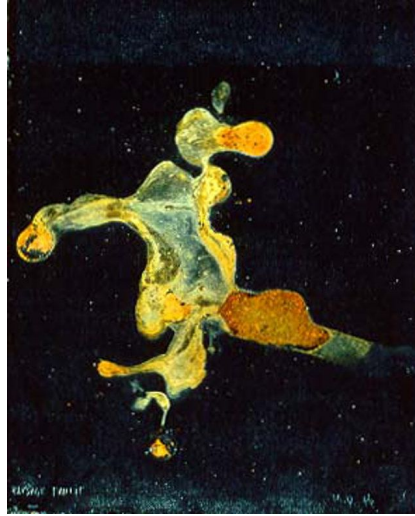
The surface humor of Duchamp's work would have soon paled were it not for the more profound levels that it masks. The eroticism, like the readymades, is first funny, then ironic and then epistemic. Duchamp's bizarre erotic games are intermeshed with other systems of thought, with mathematics and epistemology, and at those levels they are profound.<sup>9</sup>

Much has been written about *Fountain*, and its resemblance to buddha. However, another possibility is the presence of an imaginary missing man, standing at the urinal, holding his fountain in his hand, and relieving himself, even.

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<sup>9</sup> Adcock, "Duchamp's Eroticism: A Mathematical Analysis," 165.





Marcel Duchamp, *Paysage Fautif*, 1946, semen on black satin, Museum of Modern Art Toyama

### *PAYSAGE FAUTIF*

In 1946, at the age of fifty-nine, he produced—or perhaps “issued” is a better choice of words—one of the most original works of his artistic career: *Paysage Fautif* or *Wayward Landscape*, an essentially abstract composition made entirely out of his own semen...When *Paysage Fautif* was made, the use of human sperm for artistic expression was unique within the history of art; today, in more ways than one, the work can be considered seminal.<sup>10</sup>

Art historian Francis Naumann, in *Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, concisely explained the inception of *Faulty* or *Wayward Landscape*. In both *Paysage Fautif* and *Fountain*, we do not see the man. In both cases, Duchamp reverse engineers the thought of male genitalia and masculine performative acts of liberation.

Historically, *Paysage Fautif* was perhaps Duchamp’s most important creation. It maintained the signature visual indifference that kept his work from becoming gratuitous, and subliminally seduced the voyeur into the mental gymnastics of masturbation. He was able to combine the power and weight of the conceptual while maintaining the honesty of abstract expressionism, perhaps more directly than any of his contemporaries.

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<sup>10</sup> Francis Naumann, “Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Choice Reviews Online* 37, no. 09: 381, accessed September 22, 2019



Marcel Duchamp, *Female Fig Leaf*, 1950, bronze, 90 x 137 x 125 mm, Tate Modern



Marcel Duchamp, *Objet-dard*, 1951, bronze, 78 x 197 x 90 mm, Tate Modern



Marcel Duchamp, *Wedge of Chastity*, 1954, bronze, 63 x 87 x 42 mm, Tate Modern

### *FEMALE FIG LEAF, OBJET-DARD AND WEDGE OF CHASTITY*

In the case of Duchamp's more provocative sculptures, *Female Fig Leaf*, *Objet-dard* and *Wedge of Chastity*, Duchamp spoke far more explicitly. He acknowledged his erotic intent in his interview with Cabanne:

**CABANNE:** ...like the *Female Fig Leaf*, a cast taken of the female sexual organs. What is the place of *eroticism* in your work?

**DUCHAMP:** Enormous. Visible or conspicuous, or, at any rate, underlying...I believe in eroticism a lot, because it's truly a rather widespread thing throughout the world, a thing that everyone understands...it's really a way to try to bring out in the daylight things that are constantly hidden—because of social rules. To be able to reveal them, and to place them at everyone's disposal—I think this is important because it's the basis of everything, and no one talks about it.<sup>11</sup>

Duchamp continued to elaborate on how eroticism informed his practice, “Eroticism was a theme, even an “ism,” which was the basis of everything I was doing at the time of *The Large Glass*. It kept me from being obligated to return to already existing theories, aesthetic or otherwise.” Eroticism was hidden, underlying “...always disguised, more or less, but not disguised out of shame.”<sup>12</sup>



Man Ray, *Marcel Duchamp as Rose Selavy*, 1920-1921, Gelatin Silver Print  
8.5 x 7 inches, Philadelphia Museum of Art

<sup>11</sup> Cabanne, “Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp.”

<sup>12</sup> Cabanne, 88.

## *SUBLIMINAL SEDUCTION*

Duchamp excavated the hidden desires of a modern world undergoing a cultural transformation. Instead of making something, he found something and hence, the artworld consecrated something. That “something” was infused with subliminal treasure that the intelligentsia found compelling.

In addition to finding his readymade, Duchamp himself was readymade. A brilliant, charismatic, charming personality who would seduce and be seduced by art connoisseurs, Duchamp explains:

The artist makes something, then one day, he is recognized by the intervention of the public, of the spectator; so later he goes on to posterity. You can’t stop that, because, in brief, it’s a product of two poles—there’s the pole of the one who makes the work, and the pole of the one who looks at it. I give the latter as much importance as the one who makes it.<sup>13</sup>

The turn of the twentieth century spawned the beginnings of a sexual revolution free from puritanical Victorian superstition. Psychology gained separation from philosophy to become a scientific modality, deepening our understanding of the inner workings of the mind. Freud provided the groundwork for Surrealism by interpreting dreams and exploring human sexuality. Modern psychology brought heightened awareness to a public yearning for enlightenment. Beneath the surface of Marcel Duchamp lurked an erotic engine that fueled the man, and in turn propelled his work into the annals of history.

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<sup>13</sup> Pierre Cabanne, “Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp,” in *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, Translated from the French by Ron Padgett* (London: Da Capo Press, 1971), 70.

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