



# A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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- Welcome. This is one of over 200 talks on the history of Western Art. I have arranged the talks chronologically starting with cave art through to art produced in the last few years.

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## 46-02 MARCEL DUCHAMP

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Marcel Duchamp,  
*Fountain*, 1917

- This is Section 46 on Dada and this is the second talk is on Marcel Duchamp. In last weeks talk on Dada I showed a number of work by Duchamp which I omit from this talk except for this work, *Fountain*. But in this talk I introduce new information about the work.

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Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Portrait of the Artist*, c. 1917, Various sizes, Multiple collections

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Portrait of the Artist*, June 21 1917, Various sizes, Multiple collections

- **Henri-Robert-Marcel Duchamp** was born on 28 July 1887 in **Blainville-Crevon**, a small village near Rouen. His father, Justin Isidore Duchamp, worked as a notary. His mother, Marie Caroline Lucie Nicolle, came from a prosperous shipping and trading family. Wealth allowed the family to encourage artistic pursuits.
- Marcel was the **fourth of seven children**. His maternal **grandfather** Émile Nicolle had been an accomplished painter and engraver. His elder brothers Gaston and Raymond both became artists, adopting the names Jacques Villon and Raymond Duchamp-Villon respectively. His sister **Suzanne Duchamp-Crotti** (pronounced "kroh-TEE") played a significant role in the development of Dadaism. This created an intensely creative household environment.
- He showed early talent for drawing. At fifteen, he began formal art training at the **Académie Julian** in Paris. However, he never completed a traditional academic programme. Instead, he worked as a cartoonist for newspapers, creating humorous illustrations to earn money. These commercial jobs taught him to work quickly and economically.
- By 1904, he was dividing his time between Paris and Rouen. He painted in an **Impressionist style** initially, influenced by his brothers' work. **He experimented with Post-Impressionism and Fauvism**. In 1908, he exhibited at the Salon d'Automne for the first time. Critics barely noticed his submissions.

- His **military service** began in 1905 but lasted only one year. **Poor health** exempted him from longer duty. This physical vulnerability would shape his approach to art, favouring **intellectual concepts** over manual labour. By 1911, he had moved **permanently to Paris**, living in Montmartre amongst the artistic avant-garde.
- In this photograph he **subverts traditional portraiture** by using a hinged mirror to show himself from five viewpoints simultaneously. He then turned it into readymade by printing it as a commercial postcard using Broadway Photo Studio in New York..

## NOTES [1]

- Duchamp's siblings were also artists perhaps inherited from their maternal grandfather who was a painter and engraver. His sister Suzanne Duchamp-Crotti played a significant role in the development of Dadaism.
- Duchamp early work was Impressionist and he later distanced himself from what he called "retinal art", that is eye that pleases the art. He wanted art to engage the brain.
- Duchamp was surprised that *Nude Descending a Staircase*, No. 2 was so controversial. It was accepted by the Society of Independent Artists in Paris but never displayed as it was not Cubist enough. In New York it was displayed and created enormous controversy.
- Duchamp preferred to spend time alone although he became much more sociable in the United States.
- Duchamp worked as a librarian to supplement his allowance from his father. He studied maths and physics and experimented with combining art and science.
- Duchamp was never an avid reader although he read scientific literature, was impressed by poetry and loved wordplay.
- Duchamp was in love with Gabrielle Picabia, the wife of his lifelong friend Francis Picabia. It is believed they did eventually have a relationship after she left her husband.
- Duchamp emigrated to the USA. He felt isolated in France and when World War I broke out and he was exempt from military service because of his heart murmur and left for America in June 2015. He learnt English by teaching French to those that knew some French already.
- Duchamp didn't like *Tu m'* (1918), regarded as one of his masterpieces. The

title means "you and me" and he felt it didn't advance his research ideas and it was his last painting on canvas.

- Duchamp was a master of wordplay, for example his alter-ego was Rrose Sélavy. At first, she was simply Rose Sélavy, which in French sounds like as *Eros, c'est la vie* (translating as *Eros, such is life*), where Rose was chosen as a banal French name for a girl. He later added another R to the name, so his alter-ego became Rrose Sélavy..

## PERSONAL LIFE

### Marriages

- Lydie Sarazin-Levassor (1927–1928): Duchamp married the daughter of a wealthy automobile manufacturer in June 1927. The marriage was notoriously brief, lasting only six months before they divorced in early 1928. Legend suggests Duchamp spent their wedding night playing chess with friends rather than with his bride.
- Alexina "Teeny" Sattler (1954–1968): After decades as a bachelor, Duchamp married "Teeny" Sattler (the former wife of art dealer Pierre Matisse) in 1954. This marriage was described as happy and "harmonic," lasting until his death in 1968.

### Children

- Duchamp had one daughter, Yvonne "Yo" Sermayer (later known as Yo Savy), born in 1911. Her mother was the artist model Jeanne Chastagnier Serre. Yo was born while Jeanne was married to another man, and she was raised without knowing Duchamp was her father. Duchamp did not officially recognize her until much later in life, finally meeting her when she was 55 years old in 1966. Like her father, she became an artist.

### Lovers and Mistresses

- Duchamp was known for his charm and had several long-term partners:
- **Mary Reynolds** (1929–1946): A long-term liaison that spanned nearly two decades.
- **Maria Martins** (1946–1951): An artist who was his mistress for several years and served as the model for his final masterpiece, *Étant donnés*.
- **Other Liaisons:** He was also romantically linked to **Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia** (wife of Francis Picabia), though their relationship was at times considered platonic.

## TRAVEL TO USA

**First period** (June 1915–1918): He lived mainly in New York, becoming a leading figure in the New York Dada movement.

**Subsequent trips** (1920s–1930s): After a period in Buenos Aires and France, he made several shorter return visits to the U.S. during the 1920s and 1930s.

**Permanent residency** (1942): With Europe engulfed in World War II, he settled permanently in New York in 1942. He later became a naturalised **American citizen in 1955**.

## PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Blainville-Crevon: BLAN-veel KREV-on Académie

Julian: ah-kah-day-MEE zhew-lee-AHN

Salon d'Automne: sah-LON doh-TONN

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Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968),  
*Joueur d'échecs (The Chess Game)*, 1910, 114 x 146.5 cm,  
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Joueur d'échecs (The Chess Game)*, 1910, 114 x 146.5 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art

- This is one of his **earliest** paintings *The Chess Game*, painted in 1910 when he was 23. At this stage he was painting in a conventional, Impressionistic style but I wanted to talk about chess.
- Duchamp was a central figure in 20th-century art and the "founding father" of Conceptual art but he famously stepped away from a thriving art career in the 1920s **to focus almost exclusively on chess**. He viewed chess not just as a hobby but as a "**purer**" **form of art** that remained uncorrupted by commercialism and engaged the "gray matter" rather than just the eye.
- He reached the level of a **Chess Master** in 1925 after finishing at the French Chess Championship with a 50% score. He represented France in four Chess Olympiads between 1928 and 1933 and he drew a game against World Champion Frank Marshall in 1930 and famously defeated future Grandmaster George Koltanowski in just 15 moves in 1929.
- While radical in art, he was a "**conformist**" **in chess**, adhering to classical theories and studying the games of grandmasters. Experts describe him as having "tactical brilliance" but occasionally playing too passively. He wrote a book on rare endgame positions.
- In 1963, at his first art retrospective, he played chess against a **nude model**, Eve Babitz, as a piece of performance art. In 1968, he played a game against composer John Cage on a wired board where moves triggered musical notes.

- **Duchamp's love of the game was legendary.** During his nine-month stay in Buenos Aires (1918–1919), he spent nearly all his time studying chess literature and playing in clubs. His obsession reportedly so frustrated his first wife, Lydie Sarazin-Levassor, that she glued his chess pieces to the board while he slept during their honeymoon; the couple divorced shortly thereafter.

### **QUOTATIONS**

- "While not every artist is a chess player, not every chess player is an artist."
- "Chess is much purer than art in its social position... It cannot be commercialised."
- "The chess pieces are the block alphabet which shapes thoughts."



Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, 1912, 146 × 89 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, 1912, 146 × 89 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art

- We now come to one of his most famous works, his final major canvas, it provoked shock and a scandal and it made his name.
- When he first submitted to the 1912 Salon des Indépendants in Paris, the hanging committee—including his **own brothers**—**rejected it**. They found the title too literary and the work **insufficiently Cubist**. Albert Gleizes told him the nude was "**too Futurist**" for their Cubist section. **Duchamp withdrew it immediately, furious at the censorship.**
- He **shipped** the painting to the **1913 Armory Show in New York**. American critics **erupted**. One reviewer called it "**an explosion in a shingle factory**". Another described it as "**an elevated railroad stairway in ruins after an earthquake**". **The scandal made Duchamp instantly famous in America**. The work sold for \$324 to a San Francisco lawyer.
- It shows a figure fragmenting through sequential motion down a staircase. Brown and ochre tones dominate. The figure appears as overlapping geometric planes suggesting movement through time and space. It shocked audiences who expected recognisable human forms.
- At this time, he was working as a **librarian at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in Paris**, earning a modest income. He spent evenings playing chess obsessively. The painting's mechanical quality reflects his growing interest in machines and industrial processes. He later said, "**My aim was a static**

**representation of movement."**

- The rejection by his brothers stung deeply. It marked his growing disillusionment with the art establishment. Within months, he would begin questioning whether traditional painting held any future at all. **This work was his final major canvas.** So what did he do next?

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève: bee-blee-oh-TEK sant zhuh-nuh-vee-EV

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Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968),  
*Bottle Rack*, 1914, 64 cm height,  
replica, multiple versions in  
various collections

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Bottle Rack*, 1914, 64 cm height, replica, multiple versions in various collections

- A **galvanised iron bottle-drying rack** purchased from a Parisian department store. Sixty-four metal prongs radiate from three tiers. It originally held **wine bottles upside down** for draining. He bought it at the BHV bazaar and **placed it in his studio** without modification. This was **his first "pure" readymade**—a mass-produced object designated as art through selection alone.
- He inscribed a phrase on the original, now lost. No record survives of what he wrote. When he moved to New York in 1915, his sister Suzanne **threw it out with other rubbish**. He did not seem bothered. **In 1936, he authorised replicas** for an exhibition. By then, the readymade concept had become central to his legacy.
- **War was approaching.** In early 1914, Paris felt the tension of impending conflict. **Germany mobilised** troops. **France prepared** for invasion. He remained **oddly detached** from political events. When the Great War **began in August 1914**, three of his brothers were called to fight. **His heart condition kept him exempt** from service. The details are not clear, it was minor and he did live till the age of 81 but he did die of a heart condition.
- His choice of a bottle rack was deliberately banal. **It possessed no aesthetic qualities whatsoever.** Critics later found **symbolic meanings—phallic shapes, crown of thorns, torture device**. He dismissed such interpretations. "**I was not trying to make a work of art,**" he insisted. The point was to **question what**

**made something art at all.**

- His readymades **attacked the notion of the artist as skilled creator**. They eliminated the "hand" from handicraft. A signature and a decision became sufficient.
- **This idea would explode through twentieth-century art like a delayed bomb.**

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Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Fountain*, 1917, 36 × 48 × 61 cm, original lost, replicas in multiple collections, photograph by Alfred Stieglitz at the 291 (Art Gallery) following the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibit, with entry tag visible. The backdrop is *The Warriors* by Marsden Hartley, the original work of Duchamp is lost or destroyed and the negative of the Stieglitz photograph

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Fountain*, 1917, 36 × 48 × 61 cm, original lost, replicas in multiple collections, photograph by Alfred Stieglitz at the 291 (Art Gallery) following the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibit, with entry tag visible. The backdrop is *The Warriors* by Marsden Hartley, the original work of Duchamp is lost or destroyed and the negative of the Stieglitz photograph

- A porcelain urinal turned ninety degrees and signed "R. Mutt 1917" in black paint. He purchased it from the J.L. Mott Iron Works plumbing supply company on Fifth Avenue in New York. He submitted it to the Society of Independent Artists exhibition under a **pseudonym**. The organising committee—despite a rule that everything would be accepted—rejected it.
- The committee debated behind closed doors. They argued it was **plagiarism, immoral, and not art**. Walter Arensberg and Duchamp defended it vigorously but failed. The urinal was hidden behind a partition during the exhibition. Alfred Stieglitz photographed it before it disappeared. **That photograph is all that survives.**
- He had arrived in New York in **June 1915 to escape the war**. Americans adored him after the Nude scandal. He found New York more exciting than Paris. "**The art of Europe is finished**," he declared. He lived in a studio on West Sixty-Seventh Street. He supported himself through French lessons and occasional sales.
- The name "**R. Mutt**" referenced Mott plumbing and the comic strip characters **Mutt and Jeff**. It also sounds like the German word "**Armut**" meaning **poverty**.

He later wrote anonymously in ***The Blind Man*** magazine defending the work: "**Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it.**"

- **This single gesture changed art history.** It declared that art was a matter of **context and designation**, not craftsmanship or beauty. The original vanished, possibly destroyed. He authorised **seventeen replicas in 1964**, which now sell for millions.

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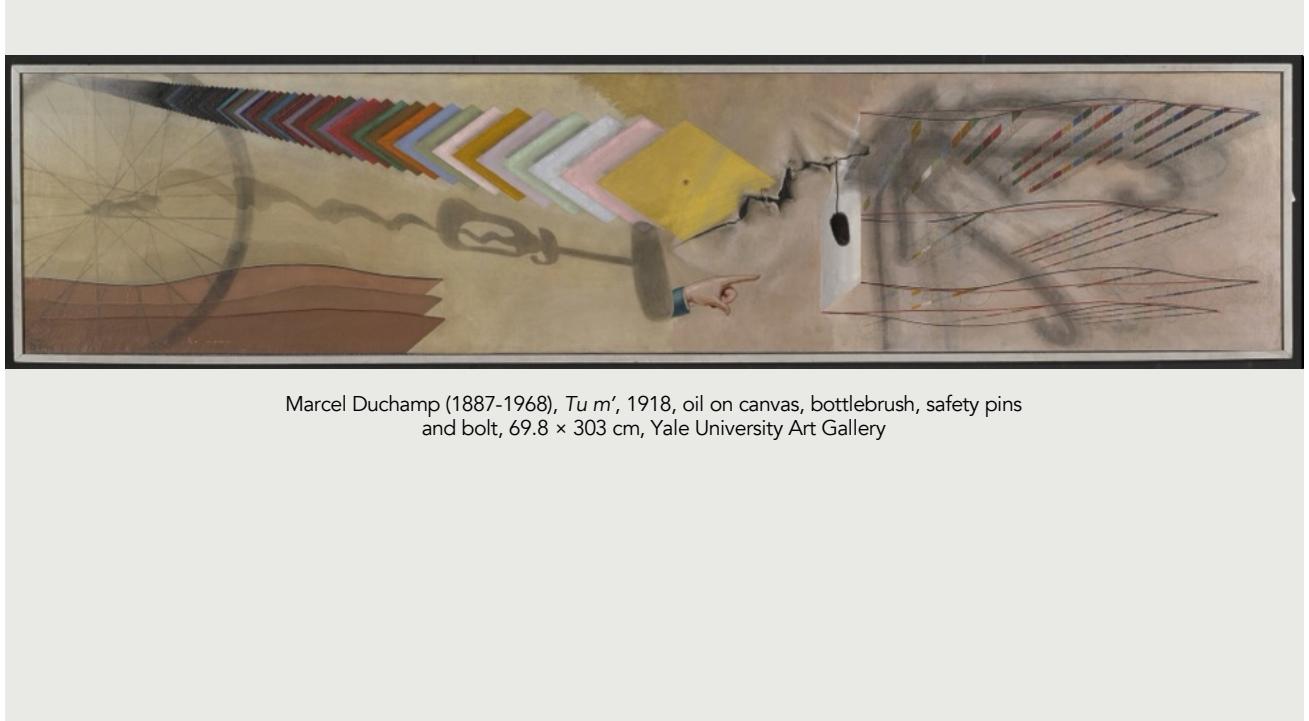
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Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Tu m'*, 1918, oil on canvas, bottlebrush, safety pins and bolt, 69.8 × 303 cm, Yale University Art Gallery

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Tu m'*, 1918, oil on canvas, bottlebrush, safety pins and bolt, 69.8 × 303 cm, Yale University Art Gallery

- Duchamp was **never happy with this work** as he felt it did not advance his ideas. It is the last canvas he produced. It was a commission from the artist and collector Katherine Dreier and it is long and thin as it was to be hung over a bookcase in her library.
- We see the **shadows cast** by three of his readymades, a bicycle wheel, a corkscrew and a hat rack. There is an **illusionistic hand** with a pointing finger and **real objects**, a bottlebrush, safety pins and bolt. He is investigating different ways an object can be represented as a shadow, imitation and the real object.
- The title *Tu m'* means "**you and me**" but it has been suggested that it is short for the French "tu m'emmerdes" (**you annoy me**) or "tu m'ennuies" (**you bore me**), both of which express his attitude toward the painting as he cast it aside and never painted another oil on canvas.

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Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968),  
Fresh Widow, 1920, 77.5 x 45 cm,  
Museum of Modern Art New York

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Fresh Widow*, 1920, 77.5 x 45 cm, Museum of Modern Art New York

- A **miniature French window** painted green with eight **panes of black leather** instead of glass. He signed it "**Rose Sélavy 1920**". The title puns on "**French window**" as "**Fresh Widow**". The leather panes block any view through. It sits on a small wooden sill. This was his first three-dimensional readymade made to his specifications.
- **Rose Sélavy** became his female alter ego. The name puns on "Eros, c'est la vie" (Eros, that's life) and "**arroser la vie**" (**to toast life**, or to make life wet).
- (CLICK) **Man Ray photographed him** dressed as Rose in 1921 wearing a fashionable hat and fur collar. He used this persona to sign works and exhibit under a female identity.(CLICK)
- In 1920, he was living between Paris and New York. He stayed with the collector **Katherine Dreier** in Manhattan. She supported him financially. Together they founded the **Société Anonyme**, America's first museum dedicated to modern art. The organisation promoted **Kandinsky, Klee, and other European avant-garde artists** to American audiences.
- The work plays with **transparency and opacity**. Windows normally allow vision and light. These leather panes prevent both. He called it an "**assisted readymade**"—a manufactured object requiring some modification. The **sexual innuendo** is obvious. "**Fresh Widow**" **suggests recent bereavement and available women**. The blackened windows **imply mourning** and closed

opportunities, **frustration**.

- He had a **carpenter construct it** to his design. He refused to build it himself. Manual labour remained beneath his interest. Ideas mattered; execution did not. This separation of concept from creation became fundamental to conceptual art decades later.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Rose Sélavy: rohz say-lah-VEE

Eros, c'est la vie: eh-ROHS say lah VEE

Société Anonyme: soh-see-ay-TAY ah-noh-NEEM

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Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915-1923, 277.5 × 175.9 cm, Oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, and dust on two glass panels, Philadelphia Museum of Art

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915-1923, 277.5 × 175.9 cm, Oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, and dust on two glass panels, Philadelphia Museum of Art

- This is *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, the culmination of his move from retinal art to intellectual art. The work is so complex there are extensive notes provided which are needed to understand all the complex, humorous and ironic narratives. It is a monumental, personal, and intellectual statement, arguably his most significant artistic achievement in its depth and complexity.
- Overall, we see a symbolic machine which shows the bride stripping is an unattainable goal for the bachelors, representing the barrier to try intimacy.
- Two panels of glass house painted elements, lead wire, foil, dust, and varnish. The upper panel contains the "Bride" domain with abstract mechanical forms. The lower panel shows nine "Bachelor Machines" including a chocolate grinder, water mill, and glider. The two realms never touch. He worked on this for eight years, then declared it "**definitively unfinished**" in 1923.
- The work operated as a **diagram of desire**. The **Bachelors perpetually attempt to reach the Bride** above. Their efforts remain **eternally frustrated**. He created an elaborate mythology **explaining every element**. He published notes describing the mechanical operations, chemical processes, and erotic implications. These notes became as important as the visual work itself.
- In 1915, he began sketches in New York. He gathered materials slowly.

Katherine Dreier provided studio space. He supported himself through French lessons and chess tournaments. **By 1918, he was working on it intensively.** He used unconventional techniques including dropping string to create random patterns and **allowing dust to accumulate** on the glass for months.

- **Man Ray photographed the accumulated dust in 1920**, creating "Dust Breeding"—an image resembling an aerial view of a desert landscape. He fixed some dust permanently onto the glass with varnish. The rest he cleaned away. These chance operations introduced randomness into his systematic plan.
- **The glass cracked during transport in 1926.** He repaired it in 1936, deciding the **cracks improved it**. He said, "**I like the cracks,] they are not like shattered glass. They have a shape.**" The accidental damage became integral to the work's meaning.

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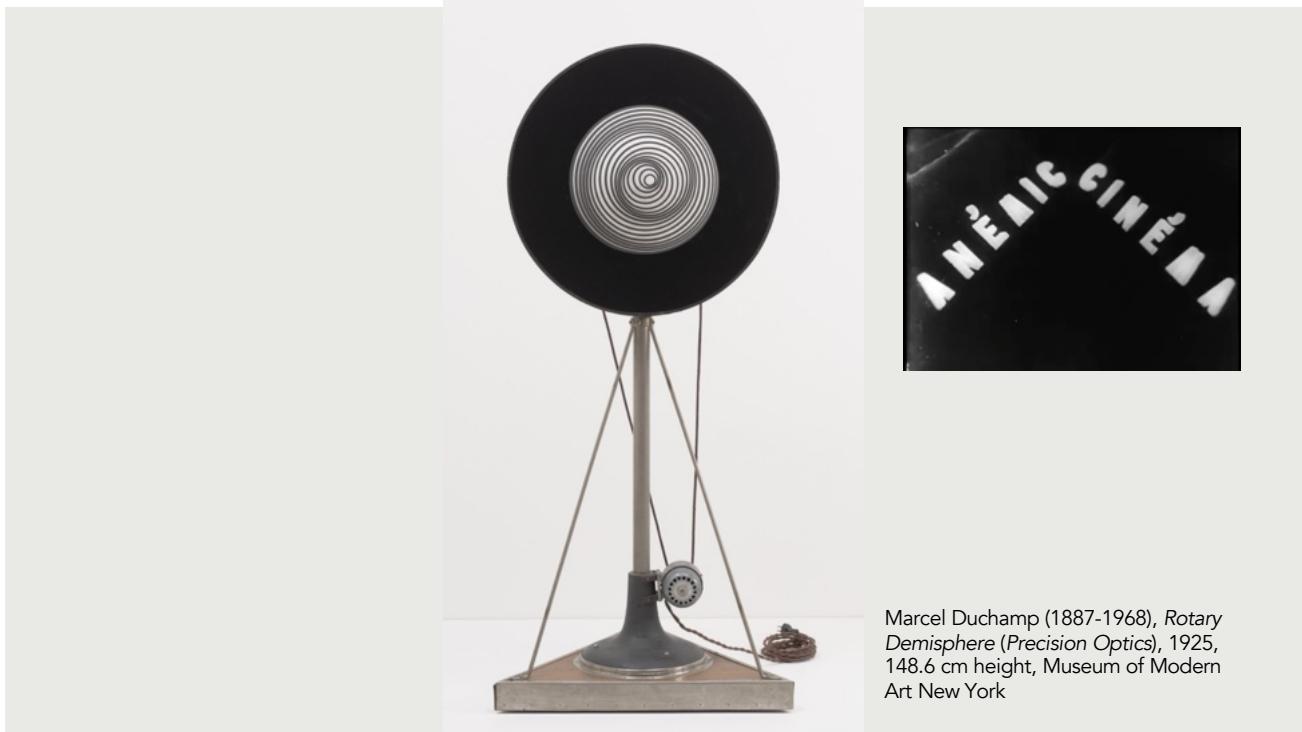
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Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Rotary Demisphere (Precision Optics)*, 1925, 148.6 cm height, Museum of Modern Art New York

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Rotary Demisphere (Precision Optics)*, 1925, 148.6 cm height, Museum of Modern Art New York

- A **motorised device** with a painted demisphere mounted on a stand. Black and white concentric circles cover the curved surface. When spun by an electric motor at **forty-six revolutions per minute**, the circles create an **optical illusion of three-dimensional spirals** advancing and receding. He created this to explore optical phenomena and retinal perception.
- **He made six of these machines with Man Ray.** They intended to sell them commercially as novelty items. The venture failed completely. Nobody wanted spinning optical devices in their homes. He abandoned commercial ambitions and returned to art contexts. **One machine nearly killed him** when a belt snapped and flew past his head during testing.
- In 1925, he was living in Paris full-time. He spent most **days playing chess competitively**. He had joined chess clubs and competed in tournaments. His obsession grew so intense that his **brief marriage** to Lydie Sarazin-Levassor collapsed within six months. She complained he played chess constantly, even during their honeymoon. She was so frustrated that one night she crept down and stuck the chess pieces to the board. His devotion to the game exceeded his commitment to marriage.
- This machine represents his interest in movement, optics, and the limits of perception. It was **not ready-made** but constructed. It required engineering skill and technical precision. He collaborated with his brother Raymond's son Jean

Crott on the mechanical aspects. The rotating spirals **hypnotise viewers**, creating sensations of depth on a flat surface.

- He filmed the rotating discs in 1926 for his short film "Anémic Cinéma". The film alternated spinning discs with rotating text spirals containing puns. These optical experiments influenced later Op Art and kinetic sculpture movements.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

demisphere: DEM-ee-sfeer

Anémic Cinéma: ah-nay-MEEK see-nay-MAH

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Marcel Duchamp  
(1887-1968), *Boîte-en-valise*, 1935-1941,  
40.7 × 38.1 × 10.2 cm,  
multiple editions,  
various collections

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Boîte-en-valise*, 1935-1941, 40.7 × 38.1 × 10.2 cm, multiple editions, various collections. Leather valise containing miniature replicas, photographs, colour reproductions of works by Duchamp, and one "original" drawing

- A portable leather suitcase containing **sixty-nine miniature reproductions of his works**. It unfolds to reveal **tiny replicas**, photographs, and colour reproductions. He called it a "**museum in a box**". He produced multiple editions, each assembled by hand. The first edition took **six years to complete**.
- He created **every miniature himself** or supervised their production. Tiny replicas of *Fountain*, *Bicycle Wheel*, and other readymades sit alongside photograph reproductions of paintings. Some elements were hand-coloured. Others used collotype printing. The box transforms his entire artistic output into a portable, personal collection.
- In 1935, he began this project while **living quietly in Paris**. War was approaching again. By 1940, Nazi Germany occupied France. **He fled to Marseille, then to Spain, eventually reaching New York in 1942**. He smuggled early versions of the Boîte with him. The project became a way to preserve his legacy during wartime uncertainty.
- The concept **anticipated museum gift shops** and artist monographs. It **democratised access** to his work whilst maintaining control over his artistic narrative. **Each box was unique** despite being part of an edition. This contradicted traditional ideas about originals and copies, mass production and

individual authorship.

- He produced **approximately three hundred boxes** over several decades. Some he sold. Others he gave to friends and collectors. The labour was meticulous and tedious. He enlisted help from his dealer Peggy Guggenheim and others. Creating miniature art about his own art became a conceptual loop—art about art about art.
- Today they sell for several hundred thousand dollars although in 2023 a Series A version was offered for \$1.8-2.5m.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Boîte-en-valise: bwaht-on-vah-LEEZ

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Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Prière de toucher*, 1947, 23.8 × 19.7 cm, catalogue cover, various collections

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Prière de toucher*, 1947, 23.8 × 19.7 cm, catalogue cover, various collections

- A **foam-rubber breast mounted on black velvet** inside a pink satin lining. This was the cover for the exhibition catalogue "**Le Surréalisme en 1947**" organised by **André Breton**. The title *Prière de toucher* means "**Please Touch**", inverting museum warnings against touching artworks. The tactile invitation was deliberately provocative.
- The breast was **moulded from a real woman's body**, though her identity remains unknown. He placed it beneath text reading "*Prière de toucher*". The combination of flesh-coloured rubber, luxurious fabric, and imperative text created an **erotically charged object**. It existed in an **edition of 999 copies**, though many were destroyed or lost.
- In 1947, he was **living permanently in New York**. He had become an **American citizen in 1955**. His **reputation was growing** among younger artists. The **Surrealists still claimed him as one of their own**, though he **maintained distance** from group politics. He collaborated occasionally but remained fiercely independent.
- This work exemplified Surrealism's fascination with desire, touch, and the body. Traditional art demands visual contemplation from a distance. He offered tactile engagement instead. However, **few people actually touched it**. The invitation felt transgressive. Museum etiquette proved stronger than explicit permission.
- He was also **secretly working** on his final major piece, "**Étant donnés**", which

remained hidden in his studio for twenty years. Nobody knew about this project. He appeared retired from art-making. The catalogue cover seemed like a minor commission, a favour for old friends. His major creative energy went elsewhere.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Prière de toucher: pree-AIR duh too-SHAY

Le Surréalisme en 1947: luh soor-ray-ah-LEESM on meel nuf son kah-RONT set

Étant donnés: ay-TAHN doh-NAY

## **REFERENCES**

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Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Torture-morte*, 1959, variable dimensions, installation, multiple versions

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Torture-morte*, 1959, variable dimensions, installation, multiple versions

- **Torture-morte** (Tortured-Death), is a **conceptual sculpture and pun** that subverts the tradition of still-life painting. Its variable dimensions refer to the different iterations of the work, rather than a single large installation.
- It is a plaster cast of a **human foot with fake flies attached** to the underside. The sculpture is displayed in a wooden and glass reliquary box.
- The title is a **play on the French term for still life**, nature morte, which translates to "**dead nature**." Duchamp's title, *Torture-morte*, twists this phrase to mean "tortured death," transforming the traditional subject matter into something more visceral and unsettling.
- By placing the plaster cast of a foot (a "dead" object) in a reliquary box, Duchamp invokes associations with **sacred relics**. The **trompe-l'oeil flies**, a technique used in traditional painting to show skill, here suggest **decay**, creating an unsettling ambiguity between reverence and disgust.
- Art historian George Bauer has interpreted *Torture-morte* as a commentary on art history, representing Duchamp's anti-aesthetic position and his use of wordplay, continuing his fascination with art as an idea rather than a purely "retinal" (visual) experience.
- In the 1950s he continued **playing chess regularly**. He served on the **board of the American Chess Federation**. His interest in art was primarily historical. Younger artists revived interest in **readymades**. **Pop Art and Minimalism** cited

him as a **crucial influence**. He accepted this attention with characteristic detachment.

### **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Torture-morte: tor-TOOR

mort nature morte: nah-TOOR mort

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Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968),  
Étant donnés: 1° la chute  
d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage  
(Given: 1° the waterfall, 2° the illuminating gas), 1946-1966,  
242.6 x 177.8 cm,  
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage* (Given: 1° the waterfall, 2° the illuminating gas), 1946-1966, 242.6 x 177.8 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art

- We now come to his final and perhaps most enigmatic piece. He worked on this secretly for twenty years. Nobody knew it existed until after his death in 1968. Instructions for its installation were found in his studio and the Philadelphia Museum of Art **assembled it** according to his specifications. The revelation shocked the art world. Everyone believed he had **abandoned art-making** decades earlier.
- We see a weathered wooden door with two peepholes installed in a brick doorway. Viewers peer through the holes to see this:
- (CLICK) A life-size nude woman lying on her back holding a gas lamp. Behind her, a luminous waterfall flows in a landscape. Her face is hidden. Her legs are spread. The scene is three-dimensional, constructed from various materials in forced perspective.
- The title literally means “**Given: 1. The waterfall, 2. The illuminating gas.**” That is we are given a **flowing natural element, the waterfall** in the background and a **man-made invention, the gas lamp**. The body is not mentioned in the title. The headless body, its posture implies and position on the grass **implies violence**. The work can be read as a **critique of the twentieth century's belief in progress**. While **technology promises enlightenment**, here it illuminates an **act of violation**. The female body is the battleground on which the conflict

between nature and technology is fought. The viewer becomes a **voyeur** not just of the female body but of a **deeper cultural truth: the modern world has lost its innocence**, it is **divorced from nature** and everything has been reduced to **eroticised violence**.

- **Between 1946 and 1966, he lived quietly in New York.** He **played chess**, dealt art, and attended social functions. Friends assumed he was **retired**. Meanwhile, he **worked daily in his studio** on this elaborate tableau. He used leather, velvet, wood, metal, glass, linoleum, and other materials. He moulded the body from his neighbour and lover, Maria Martins, a Brazilian sculptor.
- The work connects to ***The Large Glass*** thematically. The bride has been **stripped bare literally**. The waterfall and illuminating gas reference the full title of *The Large Glass*. This diorama completes ideas he began fifty years earlier. The peepholes force individual viewing. Each person must look alone. The experience is voyeuristic and uncomfortable.
- He died on 2 October 1968 in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, at age eighty-one. Duchamp died unexpectedly of heart failure on October 2, 1968, at the age of 81. He collapsed and died instantly in his studio following a dinner with friends. His last words reportedly were, "**There is no solution because there is no problem.**" This work remained his final statement, hidden until posthumous revelation. It ensured his legacy would include perpetual surprise.

## **NOTES**

- The model was **Maria Martins** (1946–1951) an artist who was his **mistress for several years**.
- Through the peepholes you see a startling, meticulously arranged scene:
  - A nude female figure, headless and armless, lies on a bed of twigs, leaves, and grass. Her skin appears eerily realistic, made of parchment, leather, and wax.
  - Her legs are spread, and she holds a gas lamp upright in her left hand, the flame glowing—this is the “illuminating gas” of the title.
  - In the background, beyond the figure, a glowing painted photographic landscape shows a waterfall and a luminous sky—the “waterfall.”

- Soft lighting and carefully hidden mechanisms make the water shimmer, giving the scene a strange stillness, both natural and artificial.
- The entire tableau is framed by the jagged edges of the broken brick wall, intensifying the sense that the viewer is illicitly peering into a private, almost voyeuristic environment.
- The effect is unsettling: hyperreal and dreamlike, intimate yet theatrical. Duchamp spent twenty years constructing the piece in secret, and its revelation after his death shocked many who knew him only for his earlier, cerebral readymades.

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Étant donnés: ay-TAHN doh-NAY

a chute d'eau: lah shewt DOH

le gaz d'éclairage: luh gaz day-klay-RAHZH

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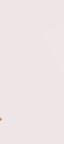
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Marcel Duchamp,  
*Etant donnés*, 1946-  
1966, Philadelphia  
Museum of Art

- Marcel Duchamp is arguably the most influential artist of the twentieth century. He revolutionised art by shifting the focus from aesthetics to ideas through his "readymades"—ordinary objects like the urinal, *Fountain* were recreated as art by being chosen—challenging the definition of art, the artist's role, and the art market by prioritising intention over craftsmanship. He therefore paved the way for many modern and contemporary art movements.
- Thank you for your interest, time and attention and I look forward to recording the next talk in my overview of Western Art.



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