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| Readymades |
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| In 1916, the French artist Marcel Duchamp coined the term ‘readymade’ to describe a body of his own work in which everyday and often mass-produced objects were given the status of a work of art with little or no intervention by the artist beyond signing and displaying them. He began to produce these works in Paris, beginning with *Bottlerack* (1914) and *Bicycle Wheel* (1913). (Duchamp, however, did not explicitly acknowledge these works until his move to New York in 1915.) These two works present examples of the two distinct types of readymades: ‘readymade unaided’ and ‘readymade aided.’ The most well known readymade is Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917), which was famously refused entry into an exhibition with no entry conditions. Much later, *Fountain* (1917) became symbolic of the emergent shift from modernism to postmodernism in the 1960s, with the group of artists who gathered around the composer John Cage, including Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, sometimes referred to as the ‘neo-avant-garde.’ It was during this period that Duchamp’s account of the function of the readymade was consolidated into the now common understanding, which is that ‘readymade’ constitutes an object chosen by an artist and declared to be ‘art.’ |
| In 1916, the French artist Marcel Duchamp coined the term ‘readymade’ to describe a body of his own work in which everyday and often mass-produced objects were given the status of a work of art with little or no intervention by the artist beyond signing and displaying them. He began to produce these works in Paris, beginning with *Bottlerack* (1914) and *Bicycle Wheel* (1913). (Duchamp, however, did not explicitly acknowledge these works until his move to New York in 1915.) These two works present examples of the two distinct types of readymades: ‘readymade unaided’ and ‘readymade aided.’ The most well known readymade is Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917), which was famously refused entry into an exhibition with no entry conditions. Much later, *Fountain* (1917) became symbolic of the emergent shift from modernism to postmodernism in the 1960s, with the group of artists who gathered around the composer John Cage, including Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, sometimes referred to as the ‘neo-avant-garde.’ It was during this period that Duchamp’s account of the function of the readymade was consolidated into the now common understanding, which is that ‘readymade’ constitutes an object chosen by an artist and declared to be ‘art.’  The term readymade, in an artistic context, first appeared in a letter from Marcel Duchamp to his sister Suzanne dated 15 January 1916. In it, he asks her to locate and send him a bottlerack and a bicycle wheel attached to a stool which he had left in his Paris studio on leaving for America in 1915. With reference to the bottlerack, Duchamp wrote: ‘I bought this as a sculpture already made’ (‘J’avais acheté cela comme une sculpture toute fait’). Duchamp termed the object now known as *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) as an ‘assisted readymade’ due to the fact that the wheel had to be attached to a stool. *Bottlerack* (1914), however, was an ‘unassisted readymade’ as it was an unaltered bottlerack (a common household object used for drying bottles) purchased from the Bazar de l’Hôtel de Ville (a Parisian department store), and exhibited in his studio. Prior to receiving the letter, however, Duchamp’s sister had already disposed of the objects. There thus exist no ‘originals’ of these readymades, only replicas. Replication, however, became a prominent theme in the history of the readymade, and in Duchamp’s work more generally.  Image: bottlerack.jpg  Figure 1 Bottle rack (1964 replica) National Gallery of Australia  [http://nga.gov.au/international/catalogue/Detail.cfm?IRN=44875](https://owa.dur.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=VhDqaFfd7U-hOo-JO1lTOc056jA9TtEIHtwgWa34rXNZVTZEnJ6TWDhFFTP1f9NOpJsYBUbMz0Y.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fnga.gov.au%2finternational%2fcatalogue%2fDetail.cfm%3fIRN%3d44875" \t "_blank)  *Pharmacy* (1914), another Parisian-made assisted readymade, consisted of a commercial print to which Duchamp added one red and one green dot of gouache paint. Duchamp then titled and signed the print. The signing of the readymade — and the use of text more generally — is significant to the transformation of the object into ‘art.’ Duchamp also used language to create puns and double-meanings within his works. Whilst living in New York, Duchamp produced more readymades. In 1915, he produced *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915), a snow shovel painted with the words ‘In Advance of the Broken Arm/ (from) Marcel Duchamp’ before hanging it from the ceiling of his studio with a piece of wire. In 1916, he publicly exhibited his readymades for the first time: *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915) was exhibited alongside another readymade – *Traveller’s Folding Item* (1916), a folded typewriter dust cover – at the Bourgeois Galleries in New York. Along with three of his paintings and drawings, Duchamp exhibited *Pharmacy* in April of the same year, in a group show with Albert Gleizes, Jean Metzinger, and Jean Crotti at the Montross Gallery, New York. Little information exists regarding the critical reception to this exhibition; Jason Gaiger suggests that the ‘readymades seem simply to have been ignored.’ The following year, Duchamp produced what was to become his most (in)famous readymade: *Fountain* (1917).  Image: fountain.jpg  Figure 2 Fountain (1917/1964 replica) Tate  [http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/blogs/pictures-happy-birthday-marcel-duchamp](https://owa.dur.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=VhDqaFfd7U-hOo-JO1lTOc056jA9TtEIHtwgWa34rXNZVTZEnJ6TWDhFFTP1f9NOpJsYBUbMz0Y.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.tate.org.uk%2fcontext-comment%2fblogs%2fpictures-happy-birthday-marcel-duchamp" \t "_blank)  In 1917 Duchamp allegedly submitted an upturned urinal signed ‘R. Mutt 1917’ to the American Society of Independent Artists. (He later claimed in a letter to his sister that a ‘female friend under a masculine pseudonym, Richard Mutt’, entered the urinal.) While all submissions to the American Society of Independent Artists were apparently to be accepted so long as the six dollar entry fee was paid, Duchamp’s *Fountain* was refused entry. A debate ensued which largely played out in the pages of the second issue of *The Blind Man* magazine, with which Duchamp was affiliated. The unsigned editorial – ‘The Richard Mutt Case’ – provided a statement of intent:  ‘Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view — created a new thought for that object.’  There is much debate as to who actually entered the object into the show, and to the motivations behind the entry. The original discussion in *The Blind Man*, however, focused on the aesthetic qualities of *Fountain* opposed to the intentions motivating the submission. In her contribution to the issue, Louise Norton called *Fountain* ‘The Buddha of the Bathroom’, exclaiming ‘how pleasant is its chaste simplicity of line and colour!’ William A. Camfield has noted that at the time, within Duchamp’s circle, the ‘aesthetic response was the rule, not the exception.’  The gravity of Duchamp’s readymades did not come into prominence until the 1950s when artists such as John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg became interested in Duchamp and his work. Duchamp subsequently altered what he originally claimed about the readymades. In 1961 Duchamp delivered a lecture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York entitled the ‘Apropos of Readymades.’ In contrast to his earlier musings (which alluded to the aesthetic of the objects), Duchamp stated: ‘A point which I want very much to establish is that the choice of these ‘readymades’ was never dictated by esthetic delectation.’ This statement reinforced Duchamp’s new perspective on his readymades. Duchamp is often cited as the progenitor of a ‘deskilling’ in art, and as a precursor to the shift to conceptual art in the 1960s. The legacy of readymades further extends beyond modernism through to the postmodernist adoption of appropriation art. Selected Works *Bicycle Wheel* (1913, aided)  *Bottlerack* (1914)  *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915)  *Comb* (1916)  *Traveller’s Folding Item* (1916)  *Hat Rack* (1917)  *Trap* (1917)  *Paris Air* (1919)  *L.H.O.O.Q.*  or *Mona Lisa* (1919, aided)  *Why Not Sneeze, Rrose Selavy?* (1921, aided) |
| Further reading:  (Camfield)  (Duve)  (Duchamp)  (Gaiger)  (Roberts) |