**Readymades**

In 1916, the French artist Marcel Duchamp coined the term ‘readymade’ to describe a body of his own work in which everyday, 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, with *Bottlerack* (1914) and *Bicycle Wheel* (1913); however, Duchamp did not really acknowledge them until his move to New York in 1915. These two works present examples of the two distinct types of ‘readymade’: ‘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 around 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 is in this period that Duchamp’s account of the function of the readymade is consolidated into the now common understanding of an object that is chosen by an artist and declared to be ‘art.’

The term ‘readymade’, in its artistic sense, 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 to 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), 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 simply an unaltered bottlerack (a common household object used for drying bottles), purchased from the Paris department store the Bazar de l’Hôtel de Ville, and exhibited in his studio. Unfortunately, on receiving the letter, Duchamp’s sister had already disposed of the objects. Thus there exist no ‘originals’ of these readymades, only replicas. This replication was to become a theme within the history of the readymade and of Duchamp’s work more generally.

*Pharmacy* (1914), another Parisian-made assisted readymade, comprised 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 widely - is significant to the transformation of the object to ‘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 on which Duchamp painted 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 first publicly exhibited his readymades: he exhibited *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915) alongside another readymade – *Traveller’s Folding Item* (1916), a folded typewriter dust cover – at the Bourgeois Galleries in New York. Alongside 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. There is little information on the response to the exhibition of these objects; 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).

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). Anyone could submit a work on the proviso that they paid the $6 entry fee; Duchamp’s *Fountain* was refused entry. A debate ensued which was 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 for the entry. It was clearly a test of the rules; however, the original discussion in *The Blind Man* tends to focus on the aesthetic qualities of *Fountain*. In her contribution, Louise Norton calls it ‘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 had originally claimed about the readymades. In 1961 Duchamp delivered at talk at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, titled ‘Apropos of Readymades.’ In contrast to earlier musings (which alluded to the aesthetic of the objects), he 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 the new thinking about his readymades; Duchamp is often cited as the progenitor of a ‘deskilling’ in art and a precursor to the shift to conceptual art in the 1960s. The legacy of the readymades further extends beyond modernism through the postmodernist adoption of appropriation art.

**Suggested images**

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)

and

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)

**Selected list of readymades:**

*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

**References and further reading**

Camfield, W.A. (1989), Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917, in Kuenzli and Naumann (eds.) *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century*, Cambridge & London: MIT Press, pp.64-94.

De Duve, T. (1997) *Kant after Duchamp*, Cambridge & London: MIT Press.

Duchamp, M. (1961) ‘Apropos of Readymades’ published in *Art and Artists*, 1:4 (July 1966).

Gaiger, J. (2003) ‘Interpreting the readymade: Marcel Duchamp’s Bottlerack’ in *Frameworks for Modern Art*, New Haven & London: Yale, pp.57-104.

Roberts, J. (2007) *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade*, London: Verso.