

## Marcel Duchamp *Fountain*

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) was a painter and mixed media artist. His work is characterized by its humor, the variety and unconventionality of its media, and its incessant probing of the boundaries of art. His legacy includes the insight that art can be about ideas instead of worldly things, a revolutionary notion that would resonate with later generations of artists.

Duchamp's readymades are experiments in provocation, the products of a conscious effort to break every rule of the artistic tradition, in order to create a new kind of art — one that engages the mind instead of the eye, in ways that provoke the observer to participate and think.

If you want to break all the rules of the artistic tradition, Duchamp reasoned, why not begin by discarding its most fundamental values: beauty and artisanship. The readymades were Duchamp's answer to the question, How can one make works of art that are not "of art"?

It was an audacious proposal, and to execute it Duchamp employed an equally audacious method: he withdrew the hand of the artist from the process of making art, substituting manufactured articles (some custom-made, some ready-made) for articles made by the artist, and substituting random or nonrational procedures for conscious design.

*Avant-garde –  
experimental;  
innovative; pushes  
boundaries of  
what is accepted  
as the norm.*

The results are works of art without any pretense of artifice, and unconcerned with imitating reality in any way.

Duchamp's most notorious readymade was a manufactured urinal entitled *Fountain*. Conceived for a show promoting avant-garde art, *Fountain* took advantage of the show's lack of juried panels, which invariably excluded forward-looking artists.

Under a pseudonym, "R. Mutt," Duchamp submitted *Fountain*. It was a prank, meant to taunt his avant-garde peers. For some of the show's organizers this was too much — was the artist equating modern art with a toilet fixture? — and *Fountain* was "misplaced" for the duration of the exhibition. It disappeared soon thereafter.

As surely as it was a prank, *Fountain* was also, like the other readymades, a calculated attack on the most basic conventions of art. Duchamp defended the piece in an unsigned article in *The Blind Man*, a one-shot magazine published by his friend Beatrice Wood. To the charge that *Fountain* was mere plagiarism, "a plain piece of plumbing," he replied "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."

At the time, almost nobody understood what Duchamp was talking about. But fifty years later everyday objects would be commonplace in art.

*Readymade – 'a work of art  
without an artist to make it';  
mass-produced objects  
selected and then signed or  
otherwise inscribed; a  
reflection of Duchamp's  
interest in chance and 'letting  
go' of preconceived categories  
of taste, beauty, and function.*

*Juried exhibition –  
individual/group acting  
as judge of submitted  
artwork, selecting which  
are to be shown.*