

Unique?

Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* 1917 is one of the most famous works of modern art in the world. A simple urinal, bought from a sanitary ware store and submitted to the inaugural exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York in April 1917, *Fountain* challenged traditional understanding of what a work of art was. With this piece, Duchamp (though he was not immediately known as the author as he signed it R. Mutt) asserted that anything presented by an artist as a work of art was indeed art, whether or not he or she actually made it. This proposition had an enormous impact on the course of twentieth-century art. Hitherto seen as inextricably linked, an artwork now became regarded as potentially divorced from the actual making of art by an artist; and later generations of artists followed Duchamp's lead in exploiting the creative possibilities of using everyday and already made objects as artworks and in artworks.

However, the artwork with which Duchamp made this point in 1917 seems to have been lost almost immediately (amazingly, no-one is certain how). Until Duchamp decided to authorise replicas of the piece in the 1950s and 1960s, *Fountain* was known chiefly through a single photograph, taken immediately after the work had been rejected by the Society of Independent Artists (the urinal still had the Society's label tied to it). In effect, the history of modern art was changed thus not so much by the artwork but by a photograph of it and the associated debates.

Duchamp had conceived of the idea of presenting mass produced items as already made works of art (or 'readymades') shortly after he escaped the war in Europe and arrived in New York from Paris in 1915 (he had been declared medically unfit and had been exempted from military service). In Paris he had collected objects – a bottlerack and a bicycle wheel mounted on a kitchen stool – that he would later designate readymades but it was only in America, when surrounded by a mass of sometimes unfamiliar consumer goods and rapidly teaching himself English, that he hit upon the new concept with its salacious pun on 'ready maid'.

His first readymade was a snow shovel, an object that had struck him in part because he had never seen one before while living in France. Transforming its status and function, Duchamp made it an artwork by treating it as an item that no longer had a practical use and in titling it. Enjoying linguistic games, he gave the work the perplexing title, *In Advance of a Broken Arm*, a phrase that posed – and left unresolved – the questions of whose arm, why would it be broken and, above all, how could the break be known before it happened.

Duchamp made only a few readymades, most of which are known through photographs alone as they were rarely exhibited and were quickly lost or discarded. One studio photograph that came to light only in 1989 shows Duchamp's determinedly unconventional attitude to these objects: rather than being placed on secure bases, the snow shovel and another readymade called simply *Hatrack* were suspended from the ceiling while *Fountain* was hung from its side wing from the top of doorway, as if these were items in a crowded hardware store rather than sculptures. There is no record of Duchamp's friends remembering seeing the *Fountain* in the studio, hung like this or displayed in any other way, and so it would seem likely that the photograph was taken immediately before Duchamp submitted the work to the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in April 1917.

Duchamp was one of the prime movers behind the creation of this new grouping of artists. Based upon the French Salon des Indépendants, the Society aimed to provide exhibition space for anyone who paid an initial fee of one dollar and annual dues of five dollars. 2,500 paintings and sculptures by 1,200 artists were shown in the first exhibition. However, the Society's much publicised principle of total artistic freedom was immediately tested by Duchamp's covert submission of *Fountain*. An emergency meeting of the Society's directors was called and a heated argument about the aesthetic and moral qualities of the work took place. One director reportedly asked, 'Do you mean that if a man chose to exhibit horse manure we would have to accept it?' Evidently, the majority felt the answer to this was 'no': a vote was taken and the directors rejected *Fountain*.

Duchamp resigned as one of the directors of the Society of Independent Artists in protest at the rejection of R. Mutt's *Fountain* (he was in no hurry to reveal to his fellow directors and patrons that, in fact, he was R. Mutt). The artist Man Ray, who was a close friend, also resigned from the board, though probably without knowing the full story. At some point Duchamp or a friend retrieved the urinal, which had been stored in the exhibition space behind a partition out of the public's sight, and took it to be photographed by Alfred Stieglitz, a leading photographer and promoter of modern art in New York.

Stieglitz positioned *Fountain* slightly off centre on a wooden block in front of (though not entirely parallel to) a 1913 painting by the American artist Marsden Hartley called *The Warriors*, creating a slightly skewed image of the piece. No one knows why Stieglitz chose this background but the painting's central element, a hill, complemented the rounded shape of *Fountain*. Its masculine theme may also have seemed fitting as a backdrop for a urinal. With the object positioned slightly off-centre, and with lighting that created a sense of a shrouded, possible female, shadow figure within it, the photograph was an absorbing image in its own right – and, once the urinal was lost, became the only record of what *Fountain* looked like.

Duchamp took the fight to a broader public but still did not reveal his identity as the author of *Fountain*. The editorial of the second issue of *The Blind Man*, a magazine that

he had founded with his friends Beatrice Wood and Henri-Pierre Roché, was devoted to ‘The Richard Mutt Case’, with a full page given to Stieglitz’s photograph of the urinal ensuring that at least the magazine’s readership came to see this censored piece. No one knows who drafted the editorial section but it can be assumed that Duchamp at least agreed with the views expressed, if he did not write the words himself. Famously, the text includes this explanation:

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.

Eventually, it became known in Duchamp’s circles that he was R. Mutt, and that the name jokingly referred to the comic strip characters Mutt and Jeff (as well as, perhaps, the idea of the work being authored in a mongrel, as opposed to pedigree, way). Duchamp later developed this idea of signing works with an alias, famously presenting a female alter ego Rose Sélavy (a pun in French on ‘eros, that’s life’) as author of many of his artworks and writings and having Man Ray photograph him wearing drag to complete the image of this alternative identity.

Nothing more was heard or seen of *Fountain*, and it is not clear what happened to it. Duchamp later said that a well-known collector acquired it and then lost it but there is no evidence to support this; many suspect it was simply thrown away. It was, after all, a mass produced item.

By the early 1920s Duchamp had ostensibly retired from making art and focused instead on playing competitive chess (he was a member of the French national team in four chess Olympiads). Although he no longer produced artworks as conventionally understood, he remained active and well known within art circles in Paris and New York. His works were included in dada and surrealist exhibitions, and from time to time he was invited to organise exhibitions or contribute to various publications. Duchamp had been an important avant-garde painter before the First World War and was a key figure in the New York dada movement, but it was hard for anyone to have a clear sense of his achievements as he had yet to have a solo exhibition or a monograph devoted to his work, and many of his important early pieces had either been lost or were owned by a handful of private collectors in America. Rejecting the standard format of a book to commemorate his work, Duchamp set about creating ‘portable museums’ of his own works from the mid-1930s through to the early 1940s. Set first in leather attaché cases and later editioned cloth-covered boxes, the work comprised photographic reproductions and miniature versions of sixty-nine of his key works, including a tiny hand-cast ceramic *Fountain*. This entirely novel format allowed Duchamp to define and preserve his legacy, offering if not a broad public, then at least several hundred collectors, an opportunity to gain an overview of his evolution as an artist.

However, those who wanted to promote interest in Duchamp’s work still had to struggle with the fact that, however seminal he was to the history of modern art, he

had not produced many works and that, consequently, there was little available to show or sell. Keen to promote dada and surrealist work in America, the New York gallery owner Sidney Janis asked Duchamp in 1950 if he would authorise another version of *Fountain*. Duchamp tried to find a suitable urinal but could not locate one that looked like the original. Janis eventually tracked down an old urinal in a Paris flea market and Duchamp duly signed it ‘R. Mutt 1917’. Neither the urinal nor the signature were a particularly close match to the original, but this did not seem to matter to Duchamp or his friends: it was the idea of the readymade that counted, though Janis took pains to find a version that looked aged. Duchamp later went on to authorise two other unique versions of *Fountain*, one for an auction to benefit a friend and another for a Swedish museum organising a retrospective exhibition of his works in 1963.

The idea of creating new versions of lost works took root: a number of museum curators and gallerists became interested in the 1960s in making reconstructions and replicas of works by artists who had been active in the early years of modernism and which, for a variety of reasons, were no longer extant. In the early 1960s the Milan-based gallery owner Arturo Schwarz suggested to Duchamp the making of replicas of thirteen of the early readymades, and Duchamp agreed. For *Fountain*, Schwarz did not attempt to find already manufactured urinals, as had Janis, but instead undertook to have specially made clay versions, painted a dense white to imitate the look of porcelain. The replica was based on technical specifications developed from Stieglitz’s original photograph. With this and replicas of the other readymades great pains were taken to recreate objects of the right shapes and dimensions, though no attempt was otherwise made to suggest that the objects were anything other than brand new. Duchamp was not involved in the making of the pieces or the inscribing of the ‘R. Mutt’ signature, but authorised the plans and signed a small copper plate that was attached to each of the editioned replicas.

The exhibition and sale of these replicas in Milan shocked many of Duchamp’s admirers. He had long complained of the tendency of artists to repeat themselves, and for many he seemed to be doing just that in issuing replicas of his early readymades in editions of eight, with an additional four artist and exhibition copies. That the replicas were hand-crafted and not mass-produced everyday items also seemed, bizarrely, to miss the point of the readymades.

Duchamp, however, had long been blurring the boundaries of the concepts of uniqueness, originality and reproducibility in his work, and the replicas – all the more beguiling and collectable because of their close resemblance to the originals – can be seen as testing these ideas again. To have accepted the loss of the readymades as final would have implied their uniqueness. But Duchamp felt that the essential characteristic of a readymade was ‘its lack of uniqueness’, and stated that a replica ‘delivered the same message’.

Significantly, the replicas allowed museums around the world to begin to build representative holdings of Duchamp’s work, cementing his importance not just in the

eyes of artists but also among a broader public. For many today *Fountain* epitomises Duchamp's conceptual brilliance and wit in a period associated with the revolutionary dada movement in New York and Europe. But few remember when looking at one of the 1964 replicas that the original 1917 object – the object that defined a shift in modern understanding of the possibilities of art – was mislaid almost as soon as it was made.

Text—

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