

Marcel Duchamp

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born July 28, 1887, Blainville, Fr.
died Oct. 2, 1968, Neuilly

French artist who broke down the boundaries between works of art and everyday objects. After the sensation caused by "Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2" (1912), he painted few other pictures. His irreverence for conventional aesthetic standards led him to devise his famous ready-mades and heralded an artistic revolution. Duchamp was friendly with the Dadaists, and in the 1930s he helped to organize Surrealist exhibitions. He became a U.S. citizen in 1955.

Early years

Although Duchamp's father was a notary the family had an artistic tradition stemming from his grandfather, a shipping agent who practiced engraving seriously. Four of the six Duchamp children became artists. Gaston, born in 1875, was later known as Jacques Villon, and Raymond, born in 1876, called himself Duchamp-Villon. Marcel, the youngest of the boys, and his sister Suzanne, born in 1889, both kept the name Duchamp as artists.

When Marcel arrived in Paris in October 1904, his two elder brothers were already in a position to help him. He had done some painting at home, and his "Portrait of Marcel Lefrançois" shows him already in possession of a style and of a technique. During the next few years, while drawing cartoons for comic magazines, Duchamp passed rapidly through the main contemporary trends in painting—Postimpressionism, the influence of Paul Cézanne, Fauvism, and finally Cubism. He was merely experimenting, seeing no virtue in making a habit of any one style. He was outside artistic tradition not only in shunning repetition but also in not attempting a prolific output or frequent exhibition of his work. In the Fauvist style Marcel painted some of his best early work three or four years after the Fauvist movement itself had died away. The "Portrait of the Artist's Father" is a notable example. Only in 1911 did he begin to paint in a manner that showed a trace of Cubism. He had then become a friend of the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, a strong supporter of Cubism and of everything avant-garde in the arts. Another of his close friends was Francis Picabia, himself a painter in the most orthodox style of Impressionism until 1909, when he felt the need of complete change. Duchamp shared with him the feeling that Cubism was too systematic, too static and "boring." They both passed directly from "semirealism" to a "nonobjective" expression of movement. There they met "Futurism" and "Abstractionism," which they had known before only by name.

The "Nude." To an exhibition in 1911 Duchamp sent a "Portrait" that was composed of a series of five almost monochromatic, superimposed silhouettes. In this juxtaposition of successive phases of the movement of a single body appears the idea for the "Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2." The main difference between the two works is that in the earlier one the kangaroo-like silhouettes can be distinguished. In the "Nude," on the other hand, there is no nude at all but only a descending machine, a nonobjective and virtually cinematic effect that was entirely new in painting.

When the "Nude" was brought to the 28th Salon des Indépendants in February 1912, the committee, composed of friends of the Duchamp family, refused to hang the painting. These men were not reactionaries and were well accustomed to Cubism, yet they were unable to accept the novel vision. A year later at the Armory Show in New York City, the painting again was singled out from among hundreds that were

