

Duchamp's *Fountain* and the Role of Information

In the spring of 1917, a store-bought urinal was submitted to the American Society of Independent Artists for display in its first exhibition. The Society's board of directors voted to reject the urinal from the exhibition, stating emphatically that it was not artwork. Their decision challenged the Society's democratic policy of accepting all submissions. Although it was signed and dated "R. Mutt 1917," the satirically titled *Fountain* was the work of Marcel Duchamp. It was one of Duchamp's first readymades, ordinary objects transformed and elevated by his choice to separate them from their mundane context and present them as art. The rejection of *Fountain* ignited a debate in the art world over the definition of art. Today, a century after Duchamp both shocked and delighted his peers, we still debate what constitutes art. This lesson encourages students to challenge first impressions and their own ideas about art by providing a context for the iconic readymade. By reading and reflecting on information about the *Fountain* scandal and Duchamp's larger body of work, students will gain deeper understanding and insight.

Grade Level

Grades 6–12

Common Core Academic State Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2](#)

National Visual Arts Standards

- Responding: understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning
- Connecting: relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context

Art Images Required

Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website.

- [Fountain](#), 1950 (replica of 1917 original), by Marcel Duchamp

Supplementary Images (all works by Marcel Duchamp unless otherwise noted)

- [Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel](#), 1910
- [Nude Descending a Staircase \(No.2\)](#), 1912
- [Chocolate Grinder \(No. 2\)](#), 1914
- [Bicycle Wheel](#), 1964 (replica of 1913 original)
- [Bottle Rack](#), 1961 (replica of 1914 original)
- [Comb](#), 1916
- [Brillo Boxes](#), 1964, by Andy Warhol
- [Gray Bird with White Tail](#), date unknown, by James Castle



Fountain, 1950 (replica of 1917 original)
Marcel Duchamp (American, born France)
Porcelain urinal
12 x 15 x 18 inches (30.5 x 38.1 x 45.7 cm)
125th Anniversary Acquisition. Gift (by exchange) of
Mrs. Herbert Cameron Morris, 1998
1998-74-1
© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP,
Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Apply background information to understanding and interpreting artwork.
2. Reflect on how different pieces of information relate to each other and can influence our overall understanding of an individual artwork.
3. Express and support an opinion based on observation and information.

Essential Question

1. What is art?
2. What role does information play in our understanding and appreciation of artwork?

Materials Needed

- Screen for projecting images
- Notecards or paper to make notes on background information
- Information Cards and Worksheet (provided at the end of this lesson)

Lesson Process

1. Display Duchamp's *Fountain*. Ask students to look at the image thoughtfully for a minute, and then ask them what they see. Guide students toward describing rather than expressing an opinion at this point in the lesson.
2. When students have had a chance to share their observations, ask them whether or not they would call *Fountain* a work of art, and why. What qualities of art do you see in this object, if any? What reasons could an artist have for presenting this as artwork? Why do you think the artist titled this piece *Fountain*? After hearing student responses, tell them that *Fountain* is considered by many to be one of the most groundbreaking pieces of contemporary art ever created, but that others have disagreed.
3. Have students form small groups of four. Tell them that each group member is going to receive a different piece of background information that helps to place *Fountain* in context (see attached Information Cards). Students will read their cards independently, consider *Fountain* again, and then complete the first section of the supplied worksheet. Circulate and assist, or answer questions, as needed, but allow students to think independently as much as possible.
4. After students have read and reflected on their own information cards, the group members will come together and share what they learned. What do you know now that you didn't know before? How has this information influenced the way you see *Fountain*? How do the pieces of information fit together to form a complete picture? Has your thinking changed at all?
5. Finally, bring the whole class back together to review all the information. What did you learn that challenged your point of view and made you see or think differently? Does putting *Fountain* in context help you better understand or appreciate it? How does our discussion and hearing the opinions of your classmates influence your thinking?
6. At the end of the lesson, students should complete the second section of the worksheet, reflecting on how their thinking changed over the course of the entire lesson.

Assessment

1. Have students create and display their own readymades in a class gallery. Instruct students to select an ordinary, store-bought object to present as art. Students may choose to alter or personalize the object in some way, or they may make an artistic choice in the way the object is displayed. They will write a gallery label for the object, including a title and a brief explanation of how the artwork expresses something meaningful to them. Encourage students to approach this task creatively and thoughtfully. To generate discussion, display the finished objects for the class without their labels. Distribute labels randomly, and challenge students to match the title and text with the correct object.
2. Recreate the *Fountain* scandal in your classroom by “submitting” an image or object that will spark debate. Suggested artworks by Andy Warhol and James Castle are listed in the Supplementary Images section. Inform students that the piece has been submitted to their class gallery for display in an exhibition. They will have to vote on whether or not to accept it. Ask students what they would need to do and what information they would want to have in order to make an informed decision. Each suggested artwork has an associated Teacher Resource that will provide background information. Following a class debate, have each student record his or her vote and write a justification based on the information provided.

Information Cards and Worksheet

- Attached are four different Information Cards, one for each member of a group. If you have an odd number in a group, you may pair two students to read together or give one strong reader more than one card.
- Cards #3 and #4 have accompanying images that can be printed separately.
- Print and cut out as many sets of the Information Cards as you need for your class.
- The last page of this lesson plan is a worksheet. Prepare one for each member of your class.

INFORMATION CARD #1: DUCHAMP CHALLENGES THE SOCIETY OF INDEPENDENT ARTISTS

Marcel Duchamp was a founding member of the American Society of Independent Artists in New York. The Society was meant to be an open and democratic space for contemporary artists to exhibit their work. They had a “no jury, no prizes” policy. This meant that the artwork would not be officially judged, and no one artist would be awarded above others. Anyone could pay six dollars to submit and display artwork. Duchamp himself was in charge of the group that decided how artists’ work would be displayed. He thought that art should be hung alphabetically, by the artists’ last names, instead of according to the preferences of one or more members.

Duchamp and his friends wanted the Society to be different from traditional artists’ groups in Europe. There, some members judged the work of others and decided whether or not they could be part of an exhibition. The European groups valued some types of artwork more highly than others. Duchamp had recently moved to New York from Paris. In 1912, he had submitted one of his paintings, titled *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*, for display by an artists’ society. At first the society accepted his painting, but the members soon decided that the title and subject matter were indecent. They convinced Duchamp to withdraw his painting from their show. This experience changed the way Duchamp thought about art and the art world. He wanted the American Society to be open and accepting of all kinds of work. He submitted *Fountain* to the first exhibition of the Society in part to test that spirit of openness, but the board of directors rejected it. They said that *Fountain* was not a work of art and did not belong in an art exhibition.

INFORMATION CARD #2: DADAIST ARTISTS DEFEND AND CELEBRATE *FOUNTAIN*

Marcel Duchamp was a well-known artist in New York in 1917 and was part of the Dada movement. Dadaist artists were more interested in how artwork could express an idea than in traditional values of beauty and skill. They were also fascinated by the ways technology and industry shaped modern culture. When Duchamp decided to submit a store-bought urinal, which he called *Fountain*, to the first exhibition of the American Society of Independent Artists, he did it anonymously. He signed the urinal “R. Mutt 1917” so that no one would know the piece was his. He was worried that his fame as an artist would influence the board members’ opinions of the piece.

The board rejected *Fountain* on the grounds that a urinal was indecent and couldn’t be considered art, but not everyone agreed with them. The photographer Alfred Stieglitz published a photograph of the urinal, with the caption “THE EXHIBIT REFUSED BY THE INDEPENDENTS” in the Dadaist magazine *The Blind Man* (*The Blind Man*, New York, no. 2, May 1917, p. 4). An article accompanying the picture celebrated *Fountain* and compared its rounded form to other notable artworks. The writer responded to those who said R. Mutt’s *Fountain* wasn’t art: “I reply simply that the *Fountain* was not made by a plumber but by the force of an imagination” (Louise Norton, “Buddha of the Bathroom,” *The Blind Man*, New York, no. 2, May 1917, p. 6). The Dadaists didn’t need *Fountain* to conform to a traditional definition of art. It was the idea behind the piece that counted.

INFORMATION CARD #3: DUCHAMP'S ARTWORK BEFORE 1917

Here are some examples of other artwork created by Marcel Duchamp before he made *Fountain* in 1917. His earlier artwork showed the influence of different styles of contemporary art that were popular in Europe at the time, such as Cubism and Fauvism. Duchamp admired the work of other artists and sometimes painted in their styles. You can also see Duchamp's interest in machines and mechanical drawings. His work and artistic interests changed over time.

Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel, 1910: Notice the rough, patchy dabs of paint in strong, almost neon colors. The portrait of Duchamp's childhood friend isn't natural or true to life but is the artist's bright and energetic impression of the man. This style is called Fauvism, after the French word for a wild animal.

Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2), 1912: The figure walking down a flight of stairs in this painting is a collage of overlapping planes and geometric shapes, rather than a naturalistic body. This gives the viewer an impression of arms, legs, and hips moving in space. This style is called Cubism, after the artists' use of geometric figures.

Chocolate Grinder (No. 2), 1914: Duchamp painted this chocolate grinder, a machine used to make chocolate from cacao beans, after seeing one displayed in a store window. He was fascinated by the simple beauty of mechanical parts working together. He began making art that recalled an engineer's diagram for a machine.

Images Needed for Information Card #3



Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel, 1910
Marcel Duchamp (American, born France)
Oil on canvas
39 1/2 x 25 7/8 inches (100.3 x 65.7 cm)
The Louise and Walter Arensberg
Collection, 1950-134-508
© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York /
ADAGP, Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp



Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2), 1912
Marcel Duchamp (American, born France)
Oil on canvas
57 7/8 x 35 1/8 inches (147 x 89.2 cm)
Framed: 59 3/4 x 2 inches (151.8 x 93.3 x
5.1 cm)
The Louise and Walter Arensberg
Collection, 1950-134-59
© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York /
ADAGP, Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp



Chocolate Grinder (No. 2), 1914
Marcel Duchamp (American, born France)
Oil, graphite, and thread on canvas
25 3/4 x 21 3/8 inches (65.4 x 54.3 cm)
The Louise and Walter Arensberg
Collection, 1950-134-70
© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York /
ADAGP, Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp

INFORMATION CARD #4: DUCHAMP'S READYMADES

Fountain is an example of what Marcel Duchamp called a readymade. Readymades were mass-produced, ordinary objects of contemporary life that were transformed by an artist's imagination. Something useful but boring, like a plain men's hair comb, could become a work of art through the act of choosing it, taking it out of a useful context, and giving it a title. Many artists have since created artwork using ordinary found objects, but Duchamp was the first to gain attention for this style.

The original *Fountain* disappeared not long after Duchamp made it. He tried to exhibit it in an art show, but the organizers would not accept it as art. No one knows what happened to *Fountain* after that. Duchamp came to believe that one of the most important things about readymades was that they could be replicated, or copied, by purchasing another example of the object. The examples of *Fountain* that we can see displayed in museums today are copies of the original. The same is true for *Bicycle Wheel* and *Bottle Rack*, which Duchamp originally made in 1913 and 1914. When Duchamp created miniature collections of his work later in life, he included tiny versions of *Fountain*.

Here are some examples of other readymades created by Duchamp:

- *Bicycle Wheel*, 1964 (replica of 1913 original)
- *Bottle Rack*, 1961 (replica of 1914 original)
- *Comb*, 1916

Images Needed for Information Card #4



Bicycle Wheel, 1964 (replica of 1913 original)
Marcel Duchamp (American, born France)
Wheel, painted wood
Diameter: 25 1/2 inches (64.8 cm) Base height: 23 1/2 inches (59.7 cm)
Gift of the Galleria Schwarz d'Arte, Milan, 1964-175-1
© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp



Bottlerack, 1961 (replica of 1914 original)
Marcel Duchamp (American, born France)
Galvanized iron
19 5/8 x 16 1/8 inches (49.8 x 41 cm)
Gift of Jacqueline, Paul, and Peter Matisse in memory of their mother, Alexina Duchamp, 1998-4-23
© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp



Comb, 1916
Marcel Duchamp (American, born France)
Steel
1 1/4 x 6 1/2 inches (3.2 x 16.5 cm)
The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950-134-72
© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp

Worksheet: I Used to Think... Now I Think

For use with "Duchamp's Fountain and the Role of Information" lesson plan

Directions

- Complete Section 1 after reading and reflecting on your individual Information Card.
- Complete Section 2 at the end of this lesson.

SECTION 1

What I used to think about *Fountain*:

What I now think about *Fountain*:

SECTION 2

What I used to think about *Fountain*:

What I now think about *Fountain*:
