

# Marcel Duchamp: “Found” Portraiture

Compiled by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, for the exhibition  
“Inventing Marcel Duchamp: The Dynamics of Portraiture”

**Target Grade Level:** K–12 visual arts classes

## Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be better able to:

- Define “portrait” and identify artistic styles
- Identify and analyze key components of a portrait and relate visual elements to relevant context and artistic significance
- Consider alternative views of portraiture and art in general

## Portraits

- [\*Portrait multiple de Marcel Duchamp\* by an unidentified photographer, 1917](#)
- [\*Tonsure\* by Marcel Duchamp, 1919](#)
- [\*Marcel Duchamp\* by Marvin Lazarus, c. 1962](#)
- [\*M.D.\* by Jasper Johns, 1964](#)
- [\*Untitled \(Duchamp with “Blue Eyes”\)\* by Ray Johnson, 1987](#)

Please visit the “Inventing Marcel Duchamp: The Dynamics of Portraiture” exhibition at <http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/duchamp/>

**\*The teacher should supply students with paper and art materials when necessary.**

## Background Information for Teachers

### *About the Artist*

Although classically trained as a painter, Marcel Duchamp found traditionally realistic styles of art too limited. Instead, he encouraged viewers to see the world around them differently. In his 1912 work entitled *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*,<sup>1</sup> the subject of the painting is the movement of the body, light, and shape, not necessarily the figure itself. Soon after this work was made, Duchamp’s ideologies and artistic priorities shifted. He declared the medium of painting to be dead and called for an “anti-aesthetic” in art. In 1917, in a deliberate act of defiance, Duchamp bought a urinal at a hardware store, signed it “R. Mutt” (his pseudonym), named it *Fountain*, and entered it into an art competition held by the Society of Independent Artists. It was rejected from the show, but with this act Duchamp ushered in a new era of conceptual art in the form of “readymades.” His assertion challenged a tradition of art that had been in place for thousands of years, asking the art world to answer the question, what is art? If the goal of art is realism, what is more real than the object itself? These readymade objects remind the viewer that art in the form of painting is a lie, that real life has little to do with paint and canvas. Moreover, by simply signing the “found” object, Duchamp has reassigned its identity; it no longer functions as it was originally intended. It has been reassigned as art solely through the intent of the artist, thus blurring the boundaries between art and life. Although

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.beatmuseum.org/duchamp/nude2.html>

*Fountain* was rejected from that first show in 1917, this work was gradually embraced by the avant-garde art world, and its legacy permeates art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

### ***About the Exhibition***

The groundbreaking exhibition “Inventing Marcel Duchamp: The Dynamics of Portraiture” casts new light upon Duchamp (1887–1968), one of the most influential artists of the recent past. This show demonstrates that Duchamp harnessed the power of portraiture and self-portraiture both to secure his reputation as an iconoclast and to establish himself as a major figure in the art world. In the process, he played a key role in the reinvention of portraiture, exerting a transformative influence from the early twentieth century to the present. The exhibition showcases approximately one hundred never-before-assembled portraits and self-portraits of Duchamp, ranging from 1912 to the present, including works by his contemporaries Man Ray, Alfred Stieglitz, Francis Picabia, and Florine Stettheimer, as well as portraits by a more recent generation of artists, such as Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Sturtevant, Yasumasa Morimura, David Hammons, Beatrice Wood, and Douglas Gordon.

### **Portrait Activity**

Students compare and contrast the five portraits of Marcel Duchamp highlighted in this lesson.

**Teacher Prep:** Familiarize yourself with the biography of Marcel Duchamp

#### **Portrait Reading Formula for Students:**

1. Look at the two portraits. Analyze the portrait using the *Reading Portraiture Guide for Educators*.
2. Gather facts based on the objects featured in these portraits; construct the context of the sitter’s life.
3. Use web resources and available books to research the sitter’s life as well as his or her artistic and historical contributions.
4. Share and compare the facts gathered from the portrait with the researched facts.

***\*Each of these steps can be done as a class, in small groups, or individually.\****

Have students look at the five portraits as a class or in small groups. Give a brief background on Duchamp.

- Questions to consider:
  - What do you see?
  - What is Duchamp doing in the portraits? How are these portraits similar? How are they different?
  - Why were so many portraits made of the same person?
- For older students: What do each of the portraits reveals about who Duchamp was?
- For younger students: List three adjectives that describe your perception of Duchamp.
- As necessary, add additional information to the students’ conjectures on the significance of the pieces.

## Portraiture and Style

After students compare five portraits of Duchamp that are rendered in different styles, they will create their own portraits of a person who is important in their lives. For younger students (K–2) we recommend the portrait styles “Profile,” “Found Objects,” or “Collage.” For older students we recommend they render a portrait in all five styles.

- Have students brainstorm and choose one person who has made an impact on their lives (examples include family member, friend, or teacher.). That person will be their “sitter,” and they will create portraits of him or her in the following different styles.
- Before students begin working, go over each of the styles:
  - Profile (*M.D.*): Jasper Johns created his first visual response to Duchamp in 1964 with *M.D.*, a profile silhouette of the artist composed of collaged paper and graphite. The work builds upon Duchamp’s *Self-Portrait in Profile* (1957), acknowledging his use of negative space to create the illusion of presence. Using a piece of colored construction paper and a pencil, students should first draw a profile of their sitter.
    - Cut out the profile for younger students
    - Have older students cut out the profile themselvesStudents should mount each of the cut out pieces on a separate piece of background construction paper.
  - Found Objects (*Marcel Duchamp*): Marvin Lazarus’s image captures Duchamp with his artwork: he stands framed within the spokes of his *Bicycle Wheel*, gazing up at his last painting, *Tu m’*, with one arm familiarly tossed around the shoulder of his *Fountain*. Students should bring in a “found object” from home that accurately represents the personality and/or interests of their sitter. Students may combine several found objects or combine one found object with craft materials such as feathers, glitter, ribbon, googly eyes, jewels, etc.
  - Collage (*Untitled [Duchamp with “Blue Eyes”]*): In this portrait, Ray Johnson has filled the silhouette with drawings and collaged elements that reference Duchamp’s work and his conceptual innovations. The twisting fabric, for example, drawn in purple and white, evokes Duchamp’s *Allegorie de Genre*, a collaged portrait of George Washington that, when viewed from another angle, appears to be a map of the United States. Students should use “found images” cut from magazines or newspapers to create a portrait of their chosen sitter. Encourage students to cut out different textures and colors to make the portrait more interesting.
  - Multiple View (*Portrait multiple de Marcel Duchamp*): Duchamp’s multiple portrait, produced on a postcard, shows not one, but five Duchamps. The five-way picture, made by sitting in front of a hinged mirror, had gained popularity by the late nineteenth century and was commonly found in photography studios and at amusement parks. All students should take photographs of their sitter from at least five different angles and collage them together as if at a table (like Duchamp). Another option includes using a computer program to place the different angled portraits together around a table.
  - Symbol (*Tonsure*): Portraits can also come in the form of symbols. This portrait of Duchamp, probably taken by the artist’s friend Man Ray, shows the back of Duchamp’s head with his star/comet tonsure haircut. The motivations for and

circumstances surrounding the haircut remain unclear, but the imagery of the tonsure and star/comet has multiple meanings that were important to Duchamp. Have students create a symbolic portrait of their sitter, identifying a single symbol that gives us insight into the sitter's personality.

- Students should create titles for their portraits. The titles can be descriptive, such as *Profile Portrait of \_\_\_\_\_*, or the titles can contain the puns and double meanings so favored by artists of the Dada movement, such as Alice Hutchins's *Deux Champs* (1991/2006), which translates to "two fields" but sounds like "Duchamp."

#### **Extension Activity: Art Critique**

- Have students hold an art critique as a class. Each student-artist explains to the class why he or she chose that particular person to render, why they chose a particular style, and the significance of the title.
- Have students list three things that they like about the work, and one thing they would do differently.
- Each student should have a turn in front of the class where everyone discusses his or her work, brainstorming ideas for future portraits and reflecting on their artistic decisions.

#### **Extension Activity: Art Exhibition**

Have students brainstorm about other influential artistic or historical figures who have made significant contributions to their respective fields or to history in general.

- Questions to consider:
  - What other historical or contemporary figure has made significant contributions and also deserves many portraits?
  - What styles would best communicate his or her personality and contribution?
- Have students write a letter to the local art museum proposing an exhibition dedicated to this person. In the letter, they should include an explanation describing why he or she deserves celebration, a description of the proposed portraits, and a title for the exhibition.

**For Further Discussion:** Why do you think artists are still making portraits of Duchamp, even though he died forty years ago? Discuss the artistic concepts behind Duchamp's most influential works (such as *Fountain* from 1917) and research the influence Duchamp had on the work of later artists like Yasumasa Morimura, Bruce Nauman, Claes Oldenburg, or Jeff Koons.

### **National Standards for Arts Education**

#### Visual Arts Standards

##### **Grades K-12:**

NA-VA.K-4.1 Understanding and Applying Media, Techniques, and Processes

NA-VA.K-4.1 Understanding the Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures

##### **Grades 5-12:**

NA-VA.5-8.6 Making Connections Between Visual Arts and Other Disciplines

##### **Grades 9-12:**

NA-VA.9-12.2 Using Knowledge of Structures and Functions

## **Key Terms**

**Abstract:** A style of nonfigurative, nonrepresentational art that deliberately does not reference forms found in nature. Abstract art focuses on formal qualities such as color, form, line, and shape

**Anti-Aesthetic:** A reaction against beauty

**Composition:** The way an artist chooses to arrange the components of his or her work

**Found object:** An everyday or banal object chosen by the artist and reassigned as art

**Portrait:** A likeness or symbol of a person, most often showing the face, which is created by an artist in order to give insight into the life, interests, or personality of the sitter

**Profile:** The outline or contour of a face, viewed from the side

**Pun:** A humorous play on words that emphasizes different meanings

**Sitter:** The person who sits for a portrait, or whose personality or likeness is the portrait's focus

**Readymades:** Objects selected by an artist, sometimes modified and presented as art