

WISDOM

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE ELDER WISE MEN OF OUR DAY

Edited and with an introduction by

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MARCEL DUCHAMP

Duchamp outraged the American art concepts of 1913 with his "Nude Descending a Staircase"—first seen here in the revolutionary "Armory Show." His advocacy of modern art in the United States is given large credit for its recognition here.

For this conversation, Marcel Duchamp traveled, in late 1955, to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where thirty-five of his works are gathered in the Walter Arensberg Collection. His interviewer was James Johnson Sweeney, director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Duchamp, now 71, talked directly at and about his paintings as he stood in front of them—"The Nude," "The Glass," "The Chocolate Grinder," and other paintings, and at his "ready-mades," and his valises—his portable museums. At first, this seemed like television—mostly pictures, and not for a book. But his conversation was too stimulating and droll, and his convictions too honest, to omit. The photos of his works between pages 130–131 will, even though small, help to illumine the text.

JAMES JOHNSON SWEENEY: So here you are, Marcel, looking at your Big Glass.*

* Editor's Note: The "Big Glass," one of Duchamp's most important works, was the product of a decade's labor. The first sketches were drawn in 1913 and 1914, then were set aside. Little by little, Duchamp painted various motifs on the reverse side of the glass—a chocolate grinder and a sliding machine among them. The paintings were connected and strengthened by wires, then backed by tinfoil to protect them and to make them completely opaque. The

MARCEL DUCHAMP: Yes, the more I look at it the more I like it. I like the breaks, the way they come, the cracks. You remember how the accident happened in 1926? It was in Brooklyn. They put the two panes on top of one another in a flat truck, flat—not knowing what they were carrying—and the glass bounced for sixty miles to Connecticut. The more I look at it the more I like the cracks. They are not like shattered glass; they have a shape. There is a symmetry in the cracking, the two cracks are symmetrically disposed. There is almost an intention here—a curious extra intention that I am not responsible for, an intention made by the piece itself, what I call a “ready-made” intention; and I respect that.

SWEENEY: The “Glass” was one of your biggest undertakings?

DUCHAMP: By far. I worked eight years on it. It is not finished. I do not know whether it will ever be finished. But I will show you some finished things—come along.

SWEENEY: There is “The Chocolate Grinder.”

DUCHAMP: Yes, one of the two I made in that manner. The third one is on the glass itself.

SWEENEY: You had several versions of “The Nude Descending a Staircase” too, didn’t you?

DUCHAMP: Yes, three; but this is the first one, the one that was shown at the Armory Show.

SWEENEY: The one the newspaperman called “an explosion in a shingle factory”?

DUCHAMP: Yes. That was really a great line he wrote. Next, here, is “The Boxing Match”—a drawing that I never used, in fact, for the glass. I felt it was not quite what I wanted.

SWEENEY: It must be a great satisfaction to you to have so many versions and so much of your work in one collection here in the Philadelphia Museum.

DUCHAMP: Wonderful! I always felt that showing one painting in one place and another in another place is just like amputating

glass was finally finished—Duchamp says “it was finally *unfinished*”—in 1923. It was shown in Brooklyn for the first time in 1926. After the exhibition, en route to the Connecticut home of its owner, the glass was cracked. Duchamp repaired it and cemented the glass, cracks and all, between two panes of plate glass. This is the “Big Glass” in its present form—about 110 inches high by 70 inches wide—and in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

one finger each time, or a leg. Here I feel at home. This is my house. I have never had such a feeling of complete satisfaction.

SWEENEY: Marcel, where are your earlier works?

DUCHAMP: The earliest is this one in the corner—the church. That was done in my village, in 1902. I was fifteen. Then I went on.

SWEENEY: It is rather Impressionist, isn’t it? That was the vogue?

DUCHAMP: Yes; it was the only thing we talked about. At that time it was advanced. But when you see these later two paintings, already Impressionism has gone down as a vogue. These later paintings are more structural. Cézanne had been recognized. Cézanne was the great man. I was influenced by Cézanne in those two paintings. These are my two brothers playing chess in their garden, and this is my father.

SWEENEY: The whole family were painters—your sister and brothers?

DUCHAMP: My one sister, Suzanne, paints, yes, but especially my brother, Jacques Villon, paints.

SWEENEY: Did they bring you into this style of impressionism?

DUCHAMP: No, no; that was on my own. It was in the air. My father was very helpful at that time. It was very difficult then, as it is now, to become a painter on your own. How can you expect to live, et cetera, et cetera? He was a good man.

SWEENEY: He looks patient—to have sat that portrait out. There seems to be quite a step between this and “The Nude Descending a Staircase.”

DUCHAMP: “The Nude” was two years later, in 1912. It was after the portrait of my father that I decided to leave the obvious influences of before. I wanted to be living with my day; and my day was Cubism. In 1910, ’11 and ’12, Cubism was in its childhood. The approach was so different from the previous movements that I was very much attracted toward it. And I began being a Cubist painter. Finally, I came to “The Nude.”

SWEENEY: “The Nude” had something of movement in it that the Cubists didn’t seem to be interested in?

DUCHAMP: Yes. There was also Futurism at that time—the Italian Futurism. But I didn’t know about it. The famous Futurist show in Paris was in January, 1912, when I was painting this, but I

hadn't seen the show. There is a coincidence there. Of course, you might say Futurism was in the air, but I didn't intimately know the Futurists. I did this painting with the idea of using movement as one of the elements. The following year I sent it to America at the invitation of the American painters, Arthur Davies and Walter Pach.

SWEENEY: It was an event in American history.

DUCHAMP: At that moment, "The Nude" might have been an explosion; it might have enjoyed a successful week or ten days—then finished and good-by. But we know the painting forty years later. After "The Nude," I had done what I could with Cubism, in my opinion. Immediately I wanted to change. The idea was to change; not to repeat myself. I could have done ten "Nudes," probably, at that time if I wanted to. I decided not to do that. A discussion of that probably will come later. But I went, immediately, to another formula which is the formula of "The Chocolate Grinder." I was in Rouen, and one of the shops was showing, through the glass, a real natural chocolate grinder that the manufacturer had put in the window. It amused me so much that I took it as a point of departure.

SWEENEY: What was different in your point of view than in any normal still life of a chocolate grinder? Was it a mechanical interest, is that it?

DUCHAMP: Of course, the mechanical side of it influenced me. At least, it was the point of departure for a new technique. I couldn't go into haphazard drawing or the splashing of the paint. I wanted to go back to a completely dry drawing, to a dry conception of art. The mechanical drawing, for me, was the best form of that dry form of art. Accuracy, precision—nothing more.

SWEENEY: Any chance values?

DUCHAMP: Chance is another question. This drawing could not be liked by all the people who like Impressionism. It was a new decision by me to get away even from Cubism; after a year of that. "The Chocolate Grinder" was the real beginning for the large glass.

SWEENEY: At the time you did the glass, there was no notion of what was coming?

DUCHAMP: No. But I had already begun to make a definite plan for the whole glass. The chocolate grinder was one point, and then the sliding machine on the side. All the glass was imagined and was drawn in 1913 and 1914, on paper. It was based on a perspective view, meaning complete control of the placement of things. It couldn't be haphazard or changed afterwards. It had to go through according to plan, so to speak.

SWEENEY: I imagine you feel that "The Chocolate Grinder" heralded something in your work, something of that break you have often told me about?

DUCHAMP: It was really a very important moment in my life. I had to make great decisions then. I made a great one by saying to myself, "No more painting, you get a job." I looked for a job in order to get enough time to paint the kind of painting I really wanted to do. I got a job as a librarian in Paris in the Bibliothèque Ste.-Geneviève. It was a wonderful job because I had so many hours to myself.

SWEENEY: You mean you had time free to paint for yourself, not merely to please other people?

DUCHAMP: Exactly. That experience at the library led me to the conclusion that you either are a professional painter or not. There are two kinds of artists: the artist who deals with society, who is integrated with society; and the other artist, the completely freelance artist, who has nothing to do with it—no bonds.

SWEENEY: You mean the man in society has to make certain compromises to please society and to live. Is that why you took the job?

DUCHAMP: Exactly, exactly. I didn't want to depend on my painting for a living.

SWEENEY: Didn't you have a certain income from your father?

DUCHAMP: Enough to live, if you want to say that, yes. My father was very nice about that; he always helped us along.

SWEENEY: All three of you?

DUCHAMP: All three of us. Yes, long after we were of age. And he had a very funny idea. He said, "All right, I will give you what you want but don't forget, you are three sisters and three brothers—so, whatever you get during my lifetime you will not get after

my death as an inheritance." So, all these sums that he had added carefully were deducted, subtracted, from what we got after his death, you see. It was a very amusing French idea.

SWEENEY: Marcel, when you speak of your disregard for the broad public and say that you are painting for yourself, wouldn't you accept that as meaning you are painting for the *ideal* public—for a public which should appreciate you if they would only make the effort to?

DUCHAMP: Yes, indeed. It is only a way of expressing myself—of putting myself in the right position for that ideal public. The danger for me is to please an immediate public—the immediate public that comes around you, and takes you in, and accepts you, and gives you success, and everything. Instead of that, I would rather wait for a public that will come fifty years—a hundred years—after my death. It is the ideal public—the right public—that I want.

SWEENEY: It is a rather aesthetic attitude. But I don't think you ever felt that an artist is justified in retiring to an ivory tower and disregarding the intelligent and sympathetic public.

DUCHAMP: No, it is not an ivory tower I'm thinking about at all. I know there are people today who understand my work.

SWEENEY: I remember a line in an article by Henri Pierre Rochet in which he referred to you, saying that you were always careful to find a way to contradict yourself. I imagine you mean you were trying to avoid repeating yourself. Is this right?

DUCHAMP: You see, the danger is to lead yourself into a form of taste, even in "The Chocolate Grinder"—

SWEENEY: Taste, then, is something that repeats something else that has been accepted. Is that what you mean?

DUCHAMP: Exactly; it is a habit. It is a repetition of the same thing long enough to become taste. If you refuse to imitate yourself, I mean after you have done something, then it stays as a thing by itself. But if it is repeated a number of times it becomes a taste, a style, if you want.

SWEENEY: Good taste seems to be what is approved and bad taste is some repetition which is not approved. Is that what you mean?

DUCHAMP: Good or bad is not really the question because always what is good for one is bad for another.

SWEENEY: How did you find the way to get away from good or bad taste in your personal expression?

DUCHAMP: By knowing the technique—the mechanical technique—where no taste is possible. A mechanical drawing could have no taste in it. There was no style involved.

SWEENEY: Because it was divorced from the conventional expression in painting?

DUCHAMP: Exactly. At least, I thought so at that time and I do think today the same way.

SWEENEY: Was it this divorce from human intervention in drawing or painting that led you to the idea of ready-mades?

DUCHAMP: Yes. It was a sort of conclusion or consequence of dehumanization of the work of art, to such a point that I came to the idea of the ready-mades. I call them ready-mades. Let me show you. This is a ready-made bird cage. If I seem to be having a hard time lifting the cage, it is because these cubes that fit the cage are not sugar. They are marble, and they weigh a ton. That was one of the elements that interested me when I made it. It is a "ready-made" and the sugar is changed to marble. It is a sort of mythological effect. This, next, is a ready-made dating from 1916. It is a ball of twine between two plaques of copper and brass. Before I finished it, Walter Arensberg put something inside the ball of twine. He never told me what it was. I didn't want to know. It was a sort of secret and it makes a noise. We call this a ready-made with a secret noise. Listen to it. I never know, I don't know, I will never know whether it is a diamond or a coin.

SWEENEY: You didn't meet Arensberg until you came to the United States, did you?

DUCHAMP: No. I came in 1915. That was my first meeting with him. Walter Pach took me to Arensberg's house, when I came off the boat. I had a very long-lived friendship with him.

SWEENEY: Was Arensberg himself a painter?

DUCHAMP: No, he was a poet. He was a poet connected with the school of the Imagists, in England.

SWEENEY: HD and Richard Aldington, and that group.

DUCHAMP: Yes. And they had a magazine here—with Alfred Kreymborg and Wallace Stevens—called *Others*.

SWEENEY: Didn't Arensberg publish some magazine himself, a magazine connected with your group, or your friends?

DUCHAMP: Yes, two amusing magazines. Each had only one issue, unfortunately. One was called *Wrong, Wrong*, and the other was called *The Blind Man*.

SWEENEY: They were Dadaist?

DUCHAMP: Yes, they were inspired by Dada.

SWEENEY: Was Dada more a literary movement perhaps?

DUCHAMP: Yes, it was more literary. It had more to do with plastic art as such, and did not concern itself with considerations of technique as had all the schools beforehand. In fact, Dada was a negation—a refusal to accept anything like that, to deny the validity of theoretical interests. So, the Dadaism movement in Paris became completely literary. In fact, it became Surrealism in 1923. Dada brought together a group of people. But they did not stay together very long. After two years or three years, they had enough. They began fighting together; they hated each other. So, they dispersed and became another group assembled on the ashes of Dada: they became the Surrealists.

SWEENEY: But your group in America, I mean the Arensberg group, was associated with several other groups, wasn't it?

DUCHAMP: There was, for example, Katherine Dreier, who was also a patron of art. She started a museum called "Société Anonyme." It was a group formed to bring paintings from abroad . . . to get a sort of communion of art from the two sides of modern art. It was quite successful.

SWEENEY: These several groups, I imagine, laid a certain foundation for an understanding of contemporary European art in this country, much before other institutions entered the field?

DUCHAMP: Yes. It was from then on that modern America was absolutely modern-art conscious; it never had happened before.

SWEENEY: Katherine Dreier owned your large glass which we were looking at a little while ago?

DUCHAMP: Yes. At the time when the Arensbergs, who had the glass for a while, when it was almost finished—it never was finished—in 1920 and 1921—when they left New York for California they didn't want to take the glass along because it was too fragile to transport very easily. So Katherine Dreier bought it from them. She had it all the rest of her life.

SWEENEY: From what you say the glass was never really finished. It remains a sort of unfinished epic, as I see it.

DUCHAMP: Yes. The last time I worked on it was 1923.

SWEENEY: Also for me, it seems to indicate that you were never really dedicated to conventional painting in the ordinary sense of the word. You were happy enough to create this, you were happy enough to leave it. You were happy enough to use bottle racks as ready-mades, and to fill bird cages with marble to deceive those who thought it was sugar. I imagine that there is something broader in your concept of what art is than just painting. Is that what you feel yourself? I don't like to put words in your mouth, but I have often thought about it.

DUCHAMP: I considered painting as a means of expression, not an aim.

SWEENEY: *One* means of expression?

DUCHAMP: One means of expression instead of a complete aim for life . . . the same as I consider that color is only a means of expression in painting. It should not be the last aim of painting. In other words, painting should not be only retinal or visual; it should have to do with the gray matter of our understanding, not alone the purely visual. It is that way with my life in general. I didn't want to pin myself down to one little circle. I have tried to be as general as I could. For example, that is what I did when I took up chess. Chess in itself is a hobby, is a game. Everybody can play chess. But I took it very seriously and enjoyed it because I found some common points between chess and painting. When you play a game of chess, it is like designing something or constructing some mechanism of some kind by which you win or lose. The competitive side of it has no importance. The thing itself is very very plastic. That is probably what attracted me in the game.

SWEENEY: Do you mean by that, chess for you is another form of expression?

DUCHAMP: At least it was another facet of the same kind of mental expression, intellectual expression—one small facet, if you want. But it had just enough difference from painting to make it another facet; and then to add to the body of my life.

SWEENEY: Marcel, you spent quite a bit of time in the late 1930's and the early 1940's on your valises? Do you regard them as a distinct personal expression also?

DUCHAMP: Absolutely. They are a new form of expression for me. I wanted a reproduction of the paintings that I loved so much in a small reduced form—in a small shape. How to do it, I didn't know. I thought of a book, which I didn't like. I thought of the idea of a box in which they would be mounted as in a small museum, a portable museum, so to speak. This is it, this valise.

SWEENEY: They are a sort of ready-made help, as you call it.

DUCHAMP: Ready-made help, yes. See: it opens this way. Practically all my work is in here. I think very few things are missing. You see this roto-relief here? It is a disk—a series; it is twelve different drawings that are based on this spiral—

SWEENEY: To be used on a gramophone or Victrola?

DUCHAMP: Yes, on a Victrola. When you turn these disks at a certain speed, like $33\frac{1}{3}$ turns a minute, you get the effect of a growing form such as a cone or corkscrew or spiral. But they are different drawings. This one, for example, is a glass. It doesn't look like a glass here but when it turns it comes up in third dimension. This one here, that is the Dada period—the Mona Lisa with the mustache and a goatee. That was of course a great iconoclastic gesture on my part, sacrilegious—blasphemous; all you want to say of it. But outside of that blasphemous gesture, I have other gestures of the same kind in the Dada period . . . such as this check. I paid my dentist with this check which was an original check drawn on myself on no bank at all; and he accepted it. He was a very good sport and he accepted it. The funniest part of it is that ten or fifteen years later I saw him again, and I bought the check back for my own collection. And there it is.

This drawing is about a gambling system—a system to win at

Monte Carlo, to break the bank at Monte Carlo. Of course, I never broke any bank with it. I thought I had a system. I sold some shares to different people to raise some capital to try to break the bank in Monte Carlo.

SWEENEY: Did you undertake it?

DUCHAMP: Oh, I did. I sold a few shares, of course.

SWEENEY: But did you win anything?

DUCHAMP: No, I never won anything. Now, this is "The Boxing Match." As you see, the drawing is completely geometrical or mechanical because that was the period when I changed completely from splashing the paint on the canvas to an absolutely precise co-ordinated drawing; and with no relation to artistic handiwork. This drawing was supposed to be in the big glass but was never put in.

SWEENEY: People say you have not been painting lately.

DUCHAMP: I would, if I had the urge—if it came forth. I don't want to repeat what I have done before. I am searching only for a new idea. Maybe, tomorrow . . .

SWEENEY: I've heard you discuss the word "intellectual" from time to time.

DUCHAMP: As you know, I like to look at the intellectual side of things, but I don't like the word "intellect." For me intellect is too dry a word, too inexpressive. I like the word "belief." In general when people say "I know," they don't know, they believe. Well, for my part, I believe that art is the only form of activity in which man, as man, shows himself to be a true individual who is capable of going beyond the animal state. Art is an outlet toward regions which are not ruled by time and space. To live is to believe, that's my belief.