

Not Just a Neutral Container

David Carrier

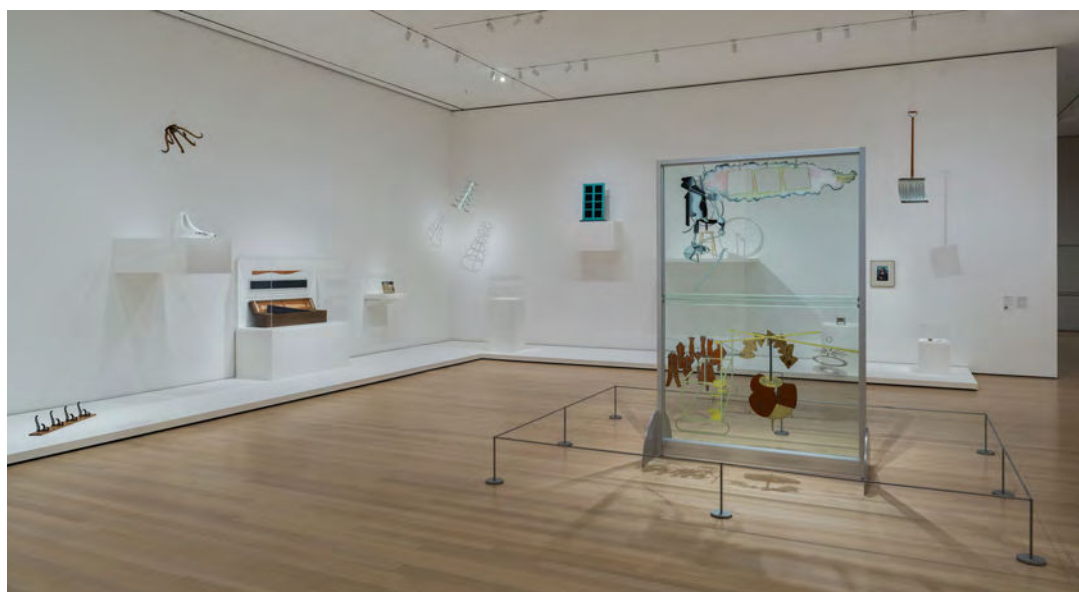
Marcel Duchamp
Museum of Modern Art, New York
April 12 to August 22, 2026

WHEN MOMA PRESENTED A MAJOR MARCEL DUCHAMP exhibition in 1973, the catalogue (as I remember well) noted that he had influenced many otherwise varied younger artists. In a belated response to his early readymades (which originally appeared in 1917, but only attracted attention in the 1960s), Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg found his work of singular importance. (Duchamp had died in 1968, having met and befriended the younger artists.) And it was possible to relate his dealings with commodification and artistic multiples to the concerns of Andy Warhol. That Warhol's first pop art exhibition, in L.A., came at the same moment as Duchamp's first museum retrospective, thus allowing the two artists to meet, seemed singularly suggestive timing. The era of Abstract Expressionism was over, and so we art writers were eager to discern what was coming next.

Now, however, the world has changed drastically, with a new focus on gender, race and multiculturalism; and those concerns have little, it seems, to do with Duchamp. And so, when I saw the MoMA announcement for this major retrospective, I wondered what there possibly was new to say about Duchamp. After all, he is another white male artist. Duchamp's oeuvre is established, his biography has been written, and his aesthetic has become an academic subject. His moment, so it seemed to me, had passed. Walking through this exhibition reinforced that worry. Once you have quickly glanced at a readymade, you've seen it—Duchamp is not Matisse, he is not concerned with contemplation. I understand, of course, that MoMA wants to introduce him to a new, young audience. But I was not excited until I read the conclusion of the catalogue essay, "Duchamp and the Museum."



Installation view of *Marcel Duchamp* on view at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, from April 12 through August 22, 2026. Photo by Jonathan Dorado © The Museum of Modern Art, New York



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A real showstopper, it changed everything. Often an outstanding catalogue illuminates an exhibition, revealing significant visual details that might otherwise go unnoticed. But I cannot recall a prior experience in which a catalogue essay transformed completely and almost instantly the way that I judged a large exhibition as happened to me sitting in the café at MoMA.

To explain why this essay is very important I need to quickly reconstruct Duchamp's now familiar basic concerns. By presenting banal utensils as works of art, the readymades raised a deep, not easy to resolve question: what is an artwork? Traditional definitions of art focused on representational or expressive qualities. A Nicolas Poussin represents its subject, and a Jackson Pollock abstraction is expressive. But a urinal or a bottle rack doesn't do that. And since they are not obviously distinctive in these ways, philosophers need to explain why these objects are artworks.

The urinal, a plumbing fixture, is physically identical with the readymade. And so what follows is that the physical qualities cannot make *Fountain* an artwork. We need to look, then, at its institutional setting. *Fountain* is an artwork because it is displayed in the museum, where it is compared to other, traditional works of art. That argument is familiar. But the catalogue introduces a number of subtle additional claims. Duchamp made copies of some readymades. So, too, with his authorization, did various curators. Because some of Duchamp's original readymades no longer exist, photographs had to be used to make replicas. And sometimes he signed these replicas. Also, copies were made when institutions wanted to own readymades. This last procedure, in particular, seems very strange. The Met cannot add some Pieros to its collection by having replicas made. A replica of a Piero della Francesca painting, however perfect visually, is just a forgery. But these replicas of the readymades that passed through Duchamp's hands or the curators were accepted as full fledged works of art, no questions asked. How far, then, can this process go? If you or I showed up at MoMA with a urinal, I don't think that plumbing fixture would be accepted as an artwork. But I am not sure how to explain why Arturo Schwartz or other curators could add readymades, while you or I cannot. What implicit rules govern this process? Only an ordained priest can conduct a mass. What authority, by analogy, permits some curators to identify readymades? That question is not easy to answer.

To understand what is going on, we need to take seriously the title of the MoMA essay, "Duchamp and the Museum." We value museums because they contain genuine original works of art. This is why the readymades were so challenging. We need to understand how those ordinary utilitarian artifacts could also (at the same time) be artworks. What the readymades achieved was

destabilizing the very system of museum value, aesthetic autonomy, authenticity, and originality, and by engaging the industrialization of culture that was being, at the same time, denounced by artists and critics alike.

Traditionally, a painting was a unique object, made by applying a long sequence of brushstrokes of pigment. But the readymades, which are mechanically produced artifacts, break with that way of thinking. Urinals are mass-produced. And at the same time they can be works of art. The critical question then, if I understand this reconstruction of Duchamp's thinking, is to allow readymades to enter the museum while still preserving that structure of the art museum, which isolates artworks from the world at large.

By confronting institutions with his replicas of replicas and editions of editions, Duchamp flooded the circuits of the museum, rerouting its definition of form and authenticity and authorship and value.

The aim of his radical rethinking of the very nature of art was thus to preserve the museum in our age of mechanical reproduction. His challenge to the museum, as the curators say in a concise summary of their thesis, is

inseparable from his challenge to the very meaning and function of art. And his provocations and transformations took the modern museum as their arena.

I began this by asking why we need a new Duchamp exhibition. Now we are prepared to answer that question. We need this show because it has taken this long to understand the truly radical implications of Duchamp's visual thinking— to grasp the ways that his concern was to transform not only the nature of the artwork, but also the institutions that house artworks, art museums. The art museum is not just a neutral container for art, but a structure that is modified when new forms of art are introduced.

What then is to be done now? Answers to that question lie still in the future. But we can already see that MoMA, so it turns out, was right to think that there is indeed something new to say about Duchamp. ■

Quotations are from the catalogue: *Marcel Duchamp*, by Matthew Affron, Michelle E. Kuo and Ann Temkin, with Danielle Cooke, Alexandra Drexelius, Helena Klevorn and Jullia Vázquez (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2026).