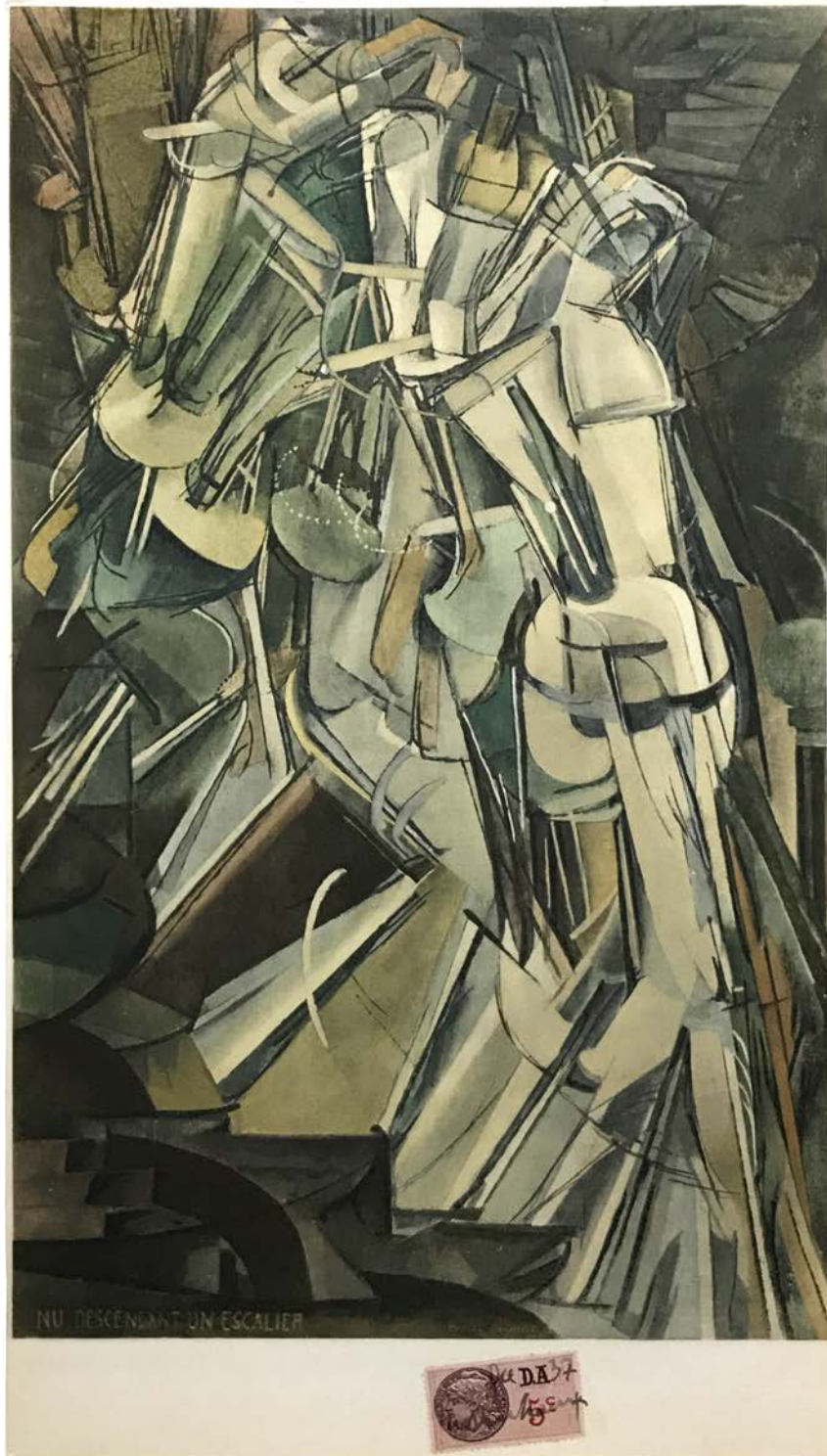


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Marcel Duchamp, Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2, 1937

**ARTIST**

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968)

TITLE

Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2

MEDIUM

Pochoir-coloured collotype and a French 5-centime revenue stamp

DATE

1937

SHEET SIZE

13 7/8 x 7 7/8 in : 35.3 x 20.1 cm

FRAMED SIZE

27 3/4 x 15 1/2 in : 55.0 x 39.5 cm

INSCRIPTIONS

Signed and dated in ink upon the attached French 5-centime revenue stamp

EDITION

From an unknown edition, thought to number somewhere in the teens

PROVENANCE

The estate of Julien Levy, New York
Francis M. Naumann Fine Art, New York
Private Collection, Los Angeles, California

CERIFICATE

This work is accompanied by a certificate from the Association Marcel Duchamp dated Dec 19, 2018.

LITERATURE

Ecke Bonk, Marcel Duchamp, The Box in a Valise, de ou par Marcel Duchamp ou Rose Sélavy, New York, 1989 (another example)
Francis M. Naumann, Marcel Duchamp, The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, New York, 2000, p. 135, illustrated fig.5.20 (another example)
Arturo Schwarz, The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp, New York, 2000, vol. I, no.458, illustrated p.745 (another example)

REFERENCE

A17-57



When revolutionary French artist Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) debuted his transgressive 1912 Cubo-Futurist painting *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* at the 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art (now known as *The Armory Show*) in New York, its reputation preceded it. News had already crossed the Atlantic heralding the semi-abstract painting, with its dynamic Cubist forms cast in a rich, monochromatic palette of brown-ochre hues and muted blue-green undertones, though it had been derided when it was submitted to the avant-garde *Salon des Indépendants* in 1912. The exhibition's jury immediately lambasted the work as an abomination to the sensuous genre it purported to engage: "A nude never descends the stairs," they declared. "A nude reclines."

In response to the intense criticism the painting received, Duchamp subsequently withdrew the painting from the exhibition. Although it made an appearance at the *Salon de la Section d'Or* in Paris later that year, even the boundary-pushing members of the avant-garde *Section d'Or* (also known as the *Groupe de Puteaux*) that organized the exhibition — and with whom Duchamp was closely associated — snubbed the painting's unusual, serial treatment of a curiously multiplying, kaleidoscopic nude in motion, while casting suspicion on Duchamp for satirizing both the tenets of Cubism and the generic conventions of the nude. "What contributed to the interest provoked by the canvas was its title," Duchamp reflected later in his career. Although Edouard Manet had previously challenged the

traditional conventions of the nude with his *Olympia* (1863) and *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe* (1862–63), he barely rocked the boat in comparison to Duchamp's take on the genre. "One just doesn't do a nude woman coming down the stairs, that's ridiculous," Duchamp later said in response to the cold shoulder the painting received in Paris. "It doesn't seem ridiculous now, because it has been talked about so much, but when it was new, it seemed scandalous. A nude should be respected."

Nude was born from Duchamp's aggregate of interests, including the fractured forms of Cubism and Futurism's preoccupation with velocity and motion, the genesis of cinema, and philosophies of time and space, including the prospect of a fourth dimension. He also found inspiration for his *Nude* in the time-lapse motion studies of Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge's blurred chronographs. "The idea of describing the movement of a nude coming downstairs while still retaining static visual means to do this, particularly interested me," Duchamp later said. "The fact that I had seen chronophotographs of fencers in action and horse galloping gave me the idea for the *Nude*."

Although formally trained as a painter and closely associated with the movements of Surrealism, Cubism, Futurism, and Dada, Duchamp was in a league of his own, rigorously subverting and sharply challenging conventional notions pertaining to the sanctity of the art object and the agency of the artist's hand with a radical approach to artmaking and display. As the artist Jasper Johns put it, Duchamp created a space for creating art "where language, thought and vision act on one another." The scandal caused by *Nude* stoked Duchamp's defiance of conventional standards of art and shortly thereafter he unveiled his radically experimental "readymades," striking objets trouvés such as a bottle rack, a bicycle wheel, and his now legendary urinal titled *Fountain*.

Rejecting what he termed the "retinal art" of his contemporaries, which only charmed the eye, Duchamp set out "to put art back in the service of the mind" and after 1912 he rarely produced paintings. Indeed, by 1937 painting had long ceased to be a part of his artistic practice and, apart from his all-consuming chess-playing, he had turned his attention to the more radically experimental readymades. However, during the summer of 1937 Duchamp was prompted to create a miniature retrospective in the form of pochoir reproductions housed in his *Boîte-en-Valise*. The expense of commissioning the carefully prepared stencils and skilled hand-colouring led Duchamp to reconsider publishing an edition of 250 reproductions of each of the five chosen works. In the event, only *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* and *The Bride* were printed, and in such small editions that the exact number of prints are unknown. The question of authenticity and originality had long played a part in his conceptual works, and Duchamp brought these ideas to bear on the pochoir reproductions. It was standard practice in France when authenticating legal documents for the lawyer to apply a small-denomination postage stamp to the document and sign his name across it – a procedure of which

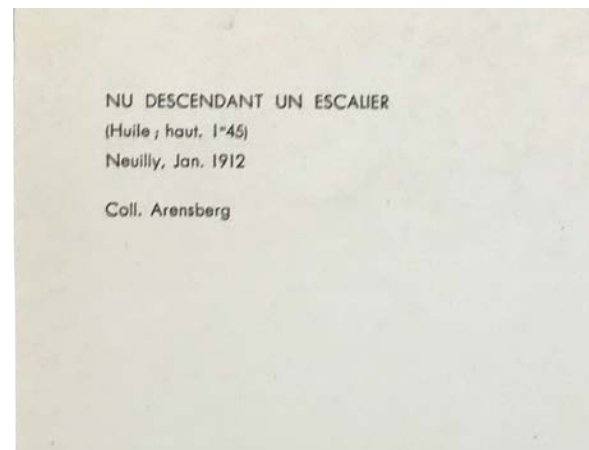


Duchamp was well aware due to his father's position as the notary of Blainville-Crevon. This resourceful method of preventing falsified documentation was carried out by Duchamp on each of the pochoir and distinguishes them as original and authentic works by the artist.

This example comes from the estate of famed Manhattan gallerist and collector Julien Levy (1906-1981), who met Duchamp in 1927 aboard Paris, a transatlantic steamer bound for Le Havre, and the two immediately became friends. Through Duchamp, Levy was introduced to many artists in the Parisian avant-garde, in particular those associated with the Surrealist movement. Levy would go on to become one of the chief proponents of Surrealist art in America, showcasing the work of such heavyweight artists as Joseph Cornell, Max Ernst, Arshile Gorky, Frida Kahlo, Man Ray, René Magritte, Salvador Dalí, and Alberto Giacometti.

In more ways than one *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* is the perfect embodiment of the revolutionary ideas that made Duchamp the bona fide father of modern art. In it we find distilled Duchamp's pioneering inquiry into the nature of authenticity, originality, and taste, as well as his captivation with alternate dimensions, the debate over what may or may not be considered a work of art, and the respects in which movement can be represented by way of a work that by all other counts is itself static.

Another example of *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* was owned by David Bowie, and was sold as part of his estate at Sotheby's in London in the famous Bowie/Collector auction of 2016 for £161,000 (\$201,577). A further example sold at Sotheby's in Paris in 2013 for \$208,830.



Marcel Duchamp

Marcel Duchamp, with Picasso and Matisse, is credited with significant revolutionary influence in the development of contemporary art in the early twentieth century. Associated with Cubism, Dada, and with an unparalleled influence on conceptual art, he is regarded as a towering figure in art history.

A student of the Académie Julian from 1904 to 1905, his early works were unremarkable and traditional although he soon developed a talent for drawing cartoons, which he also sold. These cartoons would often use verbal and visual puns, and can be recognised as the beginning of his individual contribution to art. In 1905, he began military service and was seconded to learn typography and printing processes at a printer in Rouen, skills which would prove particularly useful later in his career.

His first exhibited works, at the 1908 and 1909 Salons, were not well received. Guillaume Apollinaire in particular singled the paintings out for criticism in his reviews, which referred to "Duchamp's very ugly nudes."

By 1911, Duchamp had become friends with several of the most important young painters of the day, including Picabia, Léger, Gris and Archipenko. Duchamp gave mixed messages about what inspired him, projecting indifference and disinterest regarding Cubism when asked to debate by his fellow artists, yet creating a painting in the Cubist style, with a development indicating motion, which was highly inventive and which he referred to as "elementary parallelism".

Duchamp's first great controversy surrounded his submission for exhibition, at the 1912 Cubist Salon des Indépendants, of *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (Nu descendant un escalier n° 2), which used his elementary parallelism stylistic development, having both the fragmentation of the Cubists, and the movement of the Futurists. He was asked to remove the painting from the exhibition, the Cubists suspecting him of making fun of them. The painting was, however, included in the 1913 "Armory Show" in New York, but did not fare much better critically. This was the first major exhibition of new trends from Paris, including all the experimental styles of the European avant-garde; Fauvism, Cubism, and Futurism. The American public, still largely accustomed to realistic art, were scandalized. Despite this, Duchamp achieved a sale of each of the four paintings he had submitted, a turn of events which would prompt his decision to emigrate to America two years later.

Although often associated with the Dada movement, which rejected reason and prized nonsense and irrationality, Duchamp was never a member. Throughout the duration of the early years of WWI, his art had tended towards the surreal and had even become proto-conceptual. Arriving in New York to live, he found himself something of a celebrity, and when a soft form of Dada arrived from Europe in 1916, Duchamp was already one step ahead. He submitted *Fountain*, a urinal, to the Society of Independent Artists exhibit in 1917. Artworks in the Independent Artists shows were not selected

by jury, and all pieces were therefore displayed as submitted. In one of the most famous turns of events in modern art, the committee subsequently insisted that Fountain was not art, and rejected it from the show. Duchamp thus contributed the notion of the "readymade" to art history, found objects which he chose and presented as art. The Fountain was one, and other famous examples included the Bottle Rack.

He was a founder member of the Société Anonyme in 1920. The group collected modern art works, and arranged modern art exhibitions and lectures throughout the 1930s. Great collectors and museum directors sought Duchamp's counsel, and he began to advise Peggy Guggenheim, as well as Museum of Modern Art directors Alfred Barr and James Johnson Sweeney.

The production of his own art declined after 1920, and instead he played competitive chess at the highest level. He eschewed invitations and associations from the avant-garde and declared his life as an artist to be over. He continued, however, to make art in some secrecy until his death, only occasionally admitting to projects such as Boite-en-Valise (1935-1941) following the realisation that he could accommodate miniaturised versions of all of his greatest works in a box.

His importance and legacy to contemporary art is difficult to overstate.



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