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The Twentieth Century Discovers the Object

by EVAN H. TURNER, DIRECTOR OF THE MONTREAL MUSEUM

THE PREFACE of the first issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* published in 1924 announced that «Toute découverte changeant la nature, la destination d'un objet ou d'un phénomène constitue un fait surréaliste... La Révolution... la Révolution... Le réalisme, c'est émonder les arbres, le surréalisme, c'est émonder la vie.» This statement, while encompassing all of the arts in its creators' minds, applies with particular aptness to works of art dependent upon found objects. *Objet-trouvé* sculpture usually falls into two categories: one in which a single object is given more complex ramifications by the addition of a fanciful title, and the other when an independently existing object having little if any aesthetic importance is given new significance by being incorporated into a larger context. The resulting conflict between the nature of the object and its context becomes necessarily a vivid part of the aesthetic experience for the viewer.

In itself, the incorporation of objects into a work of art is not a 20th century innovation; one thinks, for example, of the many fantasies by the great 16th and 17th centuries goldsmiths in which such precious objects as minerals, shells, ostrich eggs and other exotic items became the core around which the work was created. However, in this century a quite different attitude is apparent when objects that are usually mundane and ordinary — a snow shovel, a flat iron, a tin can — are presented as «works of art» in themselves or are introduced into more elaborate compositions, often ones with a witty or satirical intent.

During the winter of 1911-1912 the Cubists led by Picasso and Braque began to incorporate newspapers, oilcloth, and fabrics into their compositions, thus creating a more complicated concept. In doing this they wished to emphasize the fact that art need not depend alone upon the conventional media employed in the past. However, these materials were introduced essentially for textural variety rather than for associative reasons.

As these artists were consolidating their theories, a young Frenchman named Marcel Duchamp was painting such works as «Nude Descending a Staircase» and «Le Passage de la vierge à la mariée,» works which antagonized the Cubists because of their manifestly literary nature. In his deliberate desire, as he put it, «To avoid being influenced by one's immediate environment, or by the past; to get away from clichés — to get free,» Duchamp submitted for exhibition in 1914 a bottle-drier (fig. 1), the first of a succession of «Ready-mades,» that is, ordinary commercially-produced objects, which the artist audaciously signed with his own name. These blatantly aggressive «ready-mades,» while seeming to undermine the creative dignity of the artist, were at the same time fascinating for the ingenious and amusing originality of their ideas. Their spontaneity was also attractive. Succeeding works by Duchamp included a bicycle wheel in rotation, a snow shovel which hung from the ceiling and was entitled «In

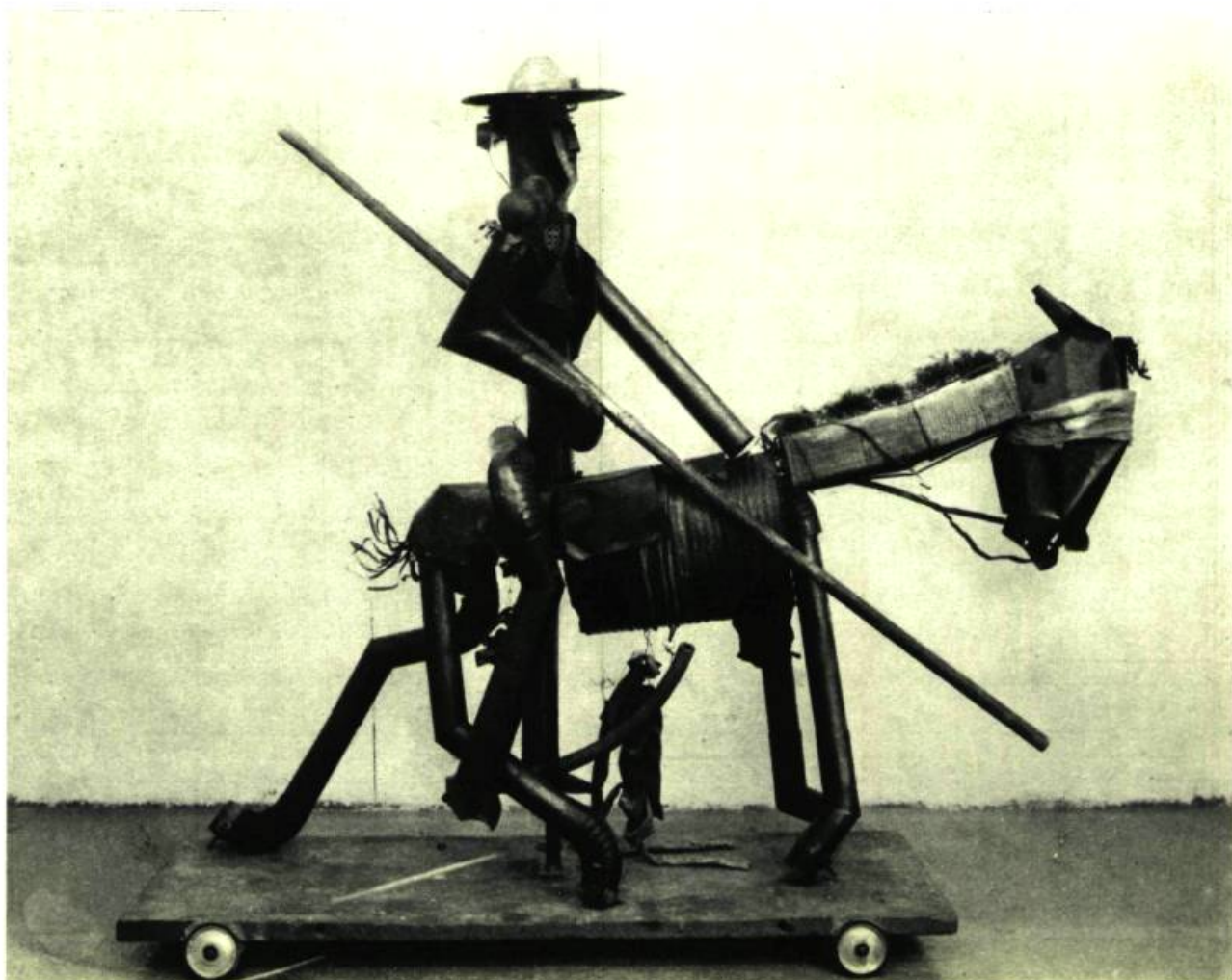


Kurt Schwitters, "Hindenberg Merz" 1920. Collection: Munson-Williams Proctor Institute. With the permission of the American Federation of Arts.

Jose de Creelt, "Picador" 1925. Collection: The Contemporaries, New York. With the permission of the American Federation of Arts.

Advance of the Broken Arm,» and, most famous of all, a composition entitled « Why not Sneeze ? » which consisted of a bird cage containing marble cubes simulating lumps of sugar out of which stuck a thermometer. That he was egging on his fellow artists as well as the public became evident when in 1917 he submitted to a jury of artists of which he was a member an inverted urinal entitled « Fountain » and signed R. Mutt. The jury refused to allow the piece to be shown in the exhibition and Duchamp therefore resigned from the jury with great ostentation. Duchamp's consistent denial of the self-consciousness inherent in artistic creation might be said to have carried him to the logical end when he virtually gave up the creative arts for chess in 1921.

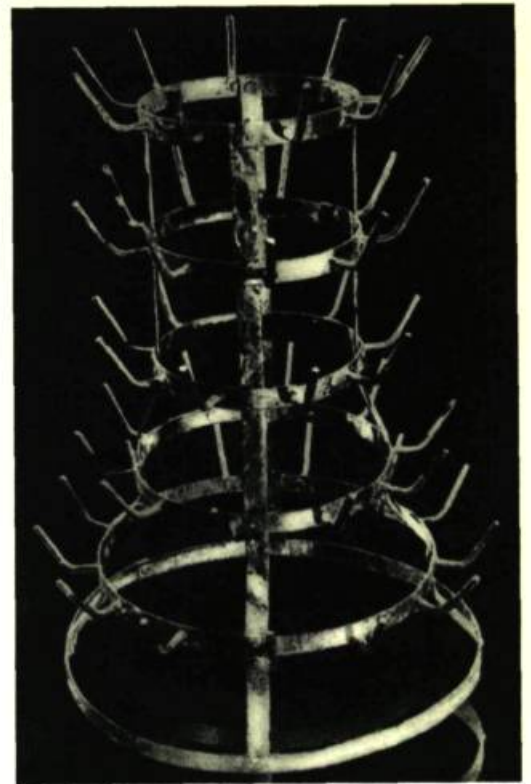
The originality of Duchamp's ideas were an essential influence upon the creation and the evolution of the Dada movement which was formally founded in the neutral city of Zurich early in 1916. This movement with its deliberately meaningless name was an understandable outgrowth of a continent torn by war. The Surrealist writer Georges Hugnet has suggested the creativity inherent in its contradictory aims: « Dada is ageless... making no distinction between what is and what is not. It approves while denying, it contradicts itself, and acquires new



force by this very contradiction.» As the whole social and economic structure of the western world was at a turning point during these years, so it may be said that traditional aesthetic concepts were being radically undermined and, at the same time, greatly extended. The nihilist attitudes of the Dada movement were essential to this change.

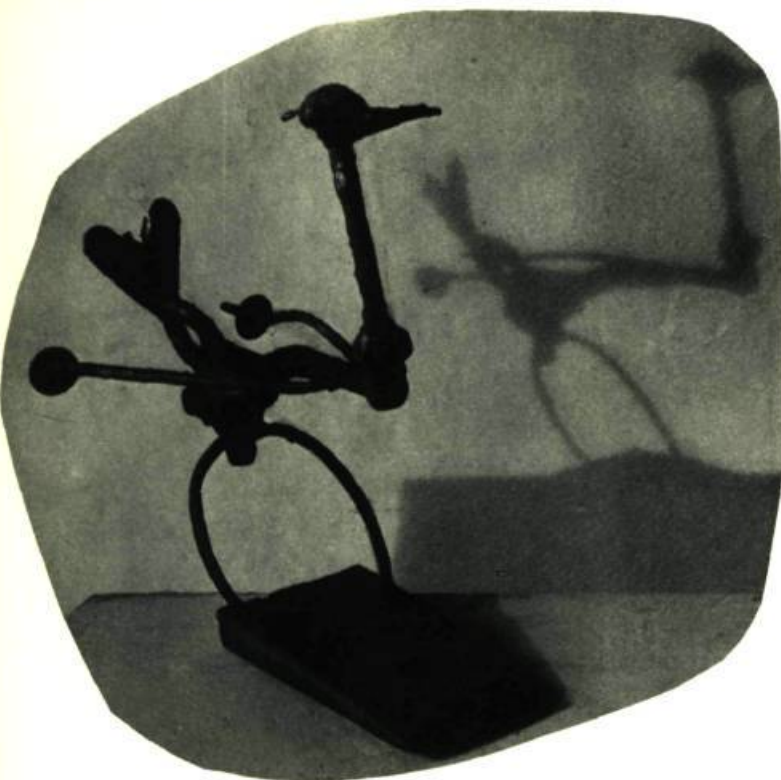
The anti-rational attitude of the «ready-made» naturally appealed to the Dada artists; following Duchamp others created ready-mades, often «assisting» or elaborating, the point of the idea or the wit by adding other objects. One of the most famous «ready-mades assisted» was Man Ray's ludicrous «Gift» (1921), which was a flat iron with a row of thirteen tacks sticking out of its flat surface. The Dada movement spread to all centers of Europe as well as to New York. Each center developed the concept in a slightly different fashion; for example, in some German cities it had a strongly political tone.

One of the most interesting artists affiliated with the movement was Kurt Schwitters who worked quite independently in Hanover. He called his poetry, his pictures and his constructions *Merz*. He expressed his concept thus: «The medium is as unimportant as I myself. Essential only is the forming. Because the medium is unimportant, I take any material whatsoever if the picture demands it. When I adjust materials of different kinds to one another, I have taken a step in advance of mere oil painting, for in addition to playing off colour against colour, line against line, form against form, etc., I play off material against material... I call the *weltanschauung* from which this mode of artistic creation arose «Merz.» *Merz* stands for freedom from all fetters, for the sake of artistic creation. Freedom is not lack of restraint, but the product of strict artistic discipline.» In the 1920 «Hindenburg Merz» Schwitters used with fine abstract sensitivity such odds and ends as trolley car tickets, stationery and obsolete money; the deliberate wit of associating these insignificant bits with the dignified name of the great German political leader is augmented by having the design balance of the elaborate composition depend upon the seemingly minor fragment which represents a woman adjusting her stocking. Schwitters' *Merz* also included great constructions and even rooms made from miscellaneous objects he had gathered together.



Marcel Duchamp, Ready-Made: Bottle Drier (replica) 1914. With the permission of the American Federation of Arts.

Richard Stankiewicz, "Middle Aged Couple" Collection: The Stable Gallery, New York. With the permission of the American Federation of Arts.



Even though important works were created by the more original members of the Dada movement and even though the group's attitude was of inestimable importance in extending the subject and the techniques of the artist, the antirational foundations of the movement as a whole ultimately proved unsatisfactory after a few years. The discord centered in Paris and finally, in 1924, some of the leading figures of the earlier movement created a new group known as the Surrealists. In the Declaration of 1925 these men stated: « *Le surréalisme n'est pas un moyen d'expression nouveau ou plus facile, ni même une métaphysique de la poésie; il est un moyen de libération totale de l'esprit et de tout ce qui lui ressemble.* » To realize their ends the group encouraged study of dreams, the absurd, and the art of the insane; the psycho-analytical theories of Freud gaining a wider recognition at that time influenced their thought. During the following fifteen years, the members of the group and the younger artists that they influenced worked in widely varied media. The ready-mades of Duchamp and the other Dada artists were elaborated with infinite diversity; an art-form which necessarily depended upon vividness of imagination and/or fantasy was a delight to the Surrealists.

Tristan Tzara, a leading thinker of the movement, wrote « A form plucked from a newspaper and introduced in a drawing or picture incorporates a morsel of everyday reality into another reality constructed by the spirit. » The dichotomy of the real becoming unreal in its new context yet still recognized for its intrinsic self was a most attractive aspect of the surrealist-experience.

During the years before the Second World War, many artists studied the possibilities of the objet-trouvé and a few devoted themselves to it exclusively. Although Jose de Creeft was not a member of the surrealist group, his 1933 exhibition, « Objects to be lost or given away » was characteristic of their attitude. The only piece remaining at the end of the show was an amusing and most expressive « Bird » which had as its primary component a stove lid handle, represents a « Picador, » almost life-size, made by the same artist in 1925 from stovepipes, cans, shredded metal, and other such materials. The worn-out nature of the pipes and the corrugated sheeting appropriately conveys the tired quality so characteristic of horses in the bull-ring, and the pride of the picador is suggested not only by the expression on the figure's face but even more significantly by the erectness of the stove-pipe body. (Man and horse are one in their tubular lankiness.) This piece superbly exemplifies the fact that truly successful objet-trouvé sculpture must have as much unity of material and texture as does sculpture of the more traditional media.

The elegance associated with one phase of the surrealist movement and evident in the work of such painters as Dali, Magritte and Tanguy is reflected in the delightful boxes created by the self-trained American, Joseph Cornell. In the composition of objects entitled « Soap Bubble Set » this refinement is evident in the choice of such materials as an egg delicately shaped with turquoise and gold, a glass, a small bust of a child, and some early engravings; these elements are in sharp contrast to the rude materials of Schwitters. The Surrealist delight in change and the new associations which result might be said to be reflected in Cornell's ingenious use of such materials as springs, coloured sand, shreds of newspaper or india-rubber balls which are left loose in the boxes and thus create always a new variation on the static composition. Cornell's method has changed little since the 1930's but his skill and good taste continue to make his boxes most diverting.

Perhaps the most sensational of surrealist objet-trouvé — and one interesting for being essentially a late manifestation of the Dada attitude — was Meret Oppenheim's 1936 « Object, » the famous fur-covered cup, plate and spoon. The viewer's textural sensations, which should be such an important aspect of the objet-trouvé aesthetic, are here blatantly teased.

David Hayes, "The Fledgling Bird", Private collection, Montreal.

Pablo Picasso, "Girl Reading a Book". Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Gidwitz, Highland Park, Illinois.

While certain of the best surrealist artists worked on in their earlier style, after 1945 the creative drive of the movement as a whole was no longer of particular importance. However, the influences of such a creative movement inevitably remain vivid and one of the most interesting is the renewed post-war interest in objet-trouvé sculpture.

In Europe the most brilliant achievements have been those of Pablo Picasso. However, he is unique in that he creates an objet-trouvé sculpture and then casts it in bronze, thus insisting upon a permanence far from the idea of the earlier workers in this genre. And his most delightful creation of this type is a reclining figure of a girl absorbidly reading which is entirely made of nuts, nails, screws, and oddments of metal. Picasso's seemingly casual but thoroughly deliberate introduction of any technique to realize the image he desires is amusingly evident in one of his outstanding post-war bronzes, the important 1951 «Baboon and Young»; the impetuous and powerful modeling of the material effectively complements the brutal force of the animal and it is only with a shock that one realizes that the mother's head is in reality a child's toy car with ears added. In few works has the element of surprise been used with such startling success.

The liveliest post-war realization of the possibilities inherent in objet-trouvé sculpture has occurred in the United States. The works of Richard Stankiewicz, who has been working almost entirely in this genre for most of the 1950's, have been particularly outstanding. In his fantastically diverse pieces one sees an imaginative eye for abandoned junk brilliantly matched by an ingenious conceptual power.

While his witty «Middle-aged Couple» has a degree of satire, it presents at the same time considerable human observation. One feels in viewing the evolution of Stankiewicz's work that although he has devoted himself entirely to this one form of sculpture he has done it with such imaginative variety that he has contributed a deserved new stature to the art.

One of the outstanding achievements of 20th century art is the seriousness with which sculptors have studied and extended their techniques to realize new concepts. As many younger sculptors have been evolving their style and the best manner for its expression some interesting work in a variety of media has been realized. A case in point is «The Fledgling Bird» by the young American sculptor, David Hayes. While this artist is devoting most of his attention to larger figures of welded sheet metal or of carved wood, the sensitive imagination characterizing his more elaborate works is brilliantly evident in the skill with which he uses some miscellaneous bicycle parts found rusted on a beach to suggest the scrawny and tentative nature of the young bird. The greatest problem of objet-trouvé sculpture — the happy balance between an astonished recognition of the nature of the parts and an appreciation of the whole concept — is solved here with particular success. The miscellaneous found objects have become the means for a brief sketch permitting a quick development of an idea which is full of life and has a spontaneity which is deliberately keyed-down in the more monumental sculptures.

The objet-trouvé sculpture of the 1950's has little similarity in subject matter to the works done in the years of the Dada movement. This is not surprising since the attitudes of each period are significantly different. The aggressive gesture, the highly sophisticated wit important only in terms of itself, and the use of a single object to which a title is affixed have been abandoned. Nevertheless, the earlier bold gesture of technical freedom has led to the realization of a new art form which, however mannered it may seem, has splendid suggestive possibilities in the hands of a capable and imaginative artist.

