

LESSONS

LESSON ONE: Transforming Everyday Objects



IMAGE TWO: Marcel Duchamp. *Bicycle Wheel*. 1951 (third version, after lost original of 1913). Metal wheel mounted on painted wooden stool, 50½ x 25½ x 16¾" (128.3 x 63.8 x 42 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection. © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp

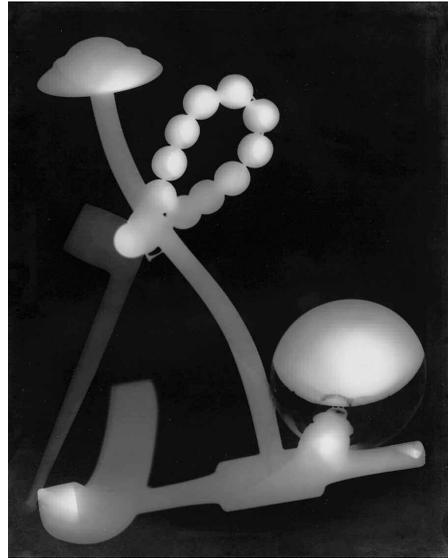


IMAGE THREE: Man Ray (born Emmanuel Radnitzky). *Rayograph*. 1923. Gelatin silver print, 11¼ x 9⅝" (29.4 x 23.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of James Thrall Soby. © 2006 Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris



IMAGE FOUR: Meret Oppenheim. *Object (Le Déjeuner en fourrure)*. 1936. Fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon, cup: 4¾" (10.9 cm) in diameter; saucer: 9¾" (23.7 cm) in diameter; spoon: 8" (20.2 cm) long; overall height: 2¾" (7.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase. © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Pro Litteris, Zurich

INTRODUCTION

Dada and Surrealist artists questioned long-held assumptions about what a work of art should be about and how it should be made. Rather than creating every element of their artworks, they boldly selected everyday, manufactured objects and either modified and combined them with other items or simply selected them and called them “art.” In this lesson students will consider their own criteria for something to be called a work of art, and then explore three works of art that may challenge their definitions.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will consider their own definitions of art.
- Students will consider how Dada and Surrealist artists challenged conventional ideas of art.
- Students will be introduced to **Readymades** and **photograms**.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to take a moment to think about what makes something a work of art. Does art have to be seen in a specific place? Where does one encounter art? What is art supposed to accomplish? Who is it for?
- Ask your students to create an individual list of their criteria. Then, divide your students into small groups to discuss and debate the results and come up with a final list. Finally, ask each group to share with the class what they think is the most important criteria and what is the most contested criteria for something to be called a work of art. Write these on the chalkboard for the class to review and discuss.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Show your students the image of *Bicycle Wheel*. Ask your students if Marcel Duchamp’s sculpture fulfills any of their criteria for something to be called a work of art. Ask them to support their observations with visual evidence.
- Inform your students that Duchamp made this work by fastening a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool. Ask your students to consider the fact that Duchamp rendered these two functional objects unusable. Make certain that your students notice that there is no tire on the bicycle wheel.

To challenge accepted notions of art, Duchamp selected mass-produced, often functional objects from everyday life for his artworks, which he called **Readymades**. He did this to shift viewers’ engagement with a work of art from what he called the “retinal” (there to please the eye) to the “intellectual” (“in the service of the mind.”)⁴ By doing so, Duchamp subverted the traditional notion that beauty is a defining characteristic of art.

Inform your students that *Bicycle Wheel* is the third version of this work. The first, now lost, was made in 1913, almost forty years earlier. Because the materials Duchamp selected to be Readymades were mass-produced, he did not consider any Readymade to be “original.”

- Ask your students to revisit their list of criteria for something to be called a work of art. Ask them to list criteria related specifically to the visual aspects of a work of art (such as “beauty” or realistic rendering).

4. H. H. Arnason and Marla F. Prather, *History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Photography* (Fourth Edition) (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), 274.

Duchamp said of *Bicycle Wheel*, “In 1913 I had the happy idea to fasten a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool and watch it *turn*.”⁵ *Bicycle Wheel* is a **kinetic sculpture** that depends on motion for effect. Although Duchamp selected items for his Readymades without regard to their so-called beauty, he said, “To see that wheel turning was very soothing, very comforting . . . I enjoyed looking at it, just as I enjoy looking at the flames dancing in a fireplace.”⁶ By encouraging viewers to spin *Bicycle Wheel*, Duchamp challenged the common expectation that works of art should not be touched.

- **Show your students *Rayograph*. Ask your students to name recognizable shapes in this work. Ask them to support their findings with visual evidence. How do they think this image was made?**

Inform your students that *Rayograph* was made by Man Ray, an American artist who was well-known for his portrait and fashion photography. Man Ray transformed everyday objects into mysterious images by placing them on photographic paper, exposing them to light, and oftentimes repeating this process with additional objects and exposures. When photographic paper is developed in chemicals, the areas blocked from light by objects placed on the paper earlier on will remain light, and the areas exposed to light will turn black. Man Ray discovered the technique of making photograms by chance, when he placed some objects in his darkroom on light-sensitive paper and accidentally exposed them to light. He liked the resulting images and experimented with the process for years to come. He likened the technique, now known as the photogram, to “painting with light,” calling the images **rayographs**, after his assumed name.

- **Now that your students have identified some recognizable objects used to make *Rayograph*, ask them to consider which of those objects might have been translucent and which might have been opaque, based on the tone of the shapes in the photogram.**
- **Now show your students Meret Oppenheim’s sculpture *Object (Déjeuner en fourrure)*. Both *Rayograph* and *Object* were made using everyday objects and materials not traditionally used for making art, which, when combined, challenge ideas of reality in unexpected ways. Ask your students what those everyday objects are and how they have been transformed by the artists.**
- **Ask your students to name some traditional uses for the individual materials (cup, spoon, saucer, fur) used to make *Object*. Ask your students what choices they think Oppenheim made to transform these materials and objects.**

In 1936, the Swiss artist Oppenheim was at a café in Paris with her friends Pablo Picasso and Dora Maar. Oppenheim was wearing a bracelet she had made from fur-lined, polished metal tubing. Picasso joked that one could cover anything with fur, to which Oppenheim replied, “Even this cup and saucer.”⁷ Her tea was getting cold, and she reportedly called out, “Waiter, a little more fur!” Soon after, when asked to participate in a Surrealist exhibition, she bought a cup, saucer, and spoon at a department store and lined them with the fur of a Chinese gazelle.⁸

- **Duchamp, Oppenheim, and Man Ray transformed everyday objects into Readymades, Surrealist objects, and photograms. Ask your students to review the images of the three artworks in this lesson and discuss the similarities and differences between these artists’ transformation of everyday objects.**

5. John Elderfield, ed., *Studies in Modern Art 2: Essays on Assemblage* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 135.

6. Francis M. Naumann, *The Mary and William Sisler Collection* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 160.

7. Bice Curiger, *Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom* (Zurich, Frankfurt, New York: PARKETT Publishers Inc., 1989), 39.

8. Josephine Withers, “The Famous Fur-Lined Teacup and the Anonymous Meret Oppenheim” (New York: *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 52, November 1977), 88–93.

ACTIVITIES

1. Art and Controversy

At the time they were made, works of art like Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* and Oppenheim's *Object* were controversial. Critics called Duchamp's Readymades immoral and vulgar—even plagiaristic. Overwhelmed by the publicity *Object* received, Oppenheim sunk into a twenty-year depression that greatly inhibited her creative production.

Ask your students to conduct research on a work of art that has recently been met with controversy. Each student should find at least two articles that critique the work of art. Have your students write a one-page summary of the issues addressed in these articles. Students should consider how and why the work challenged and upset critics. Was the controversial reception related to the representation, the **medium**, the scale, the cost, or the location of the work? After completing the assignment, ask your students to share their findings with the class. Keep a list of shared critiques among the work's various receptions.

2. Make a Photogram

If your school has a darkroom, have your students make photograms. Each student should collect several small objects from school, home, and the outside to place on photographic paper. Their collection should include a range of translucent and opaque objects to allow different levels of light to shine through. Students may want to overlap objects or use their hands to cover parts of the light-sensitive paper. Once the objects are arranged on the paper in a darkroom, have your students expose the paper to light for several seconds (probably about five to ten seconds, depending on the level of light) then develop, fix, rinse, and dry the paper. Allow for a few sheets of photographic paper per student so that they can experiment with different arrangements and exposures. After the photograms are complete, have your students discuss the different results that they achieved. Students may also make negatives of their photograms by placing them on top of a fresh sheet of photographic paper and covering the two with a sheet of glass. After exposing this to light, they can develop the paper to get the negative of the original photogram.