



Marcel Duchamp
Please Touch:
Marcel Duchamp and the Fetish

London
13 October—13 November 2021

Thaddaeus Ropac
London Paris Salzburg Seoul

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Curated by Paul B. Franklin

Everything can be based on an erotic climate without too much trouble. I believe in eroticism a lot, because it's truly a rather widespread thing throughout the world, a thing that everyone understands. It replaces, if you wish, what other literary schools called Symbolism, Romanticism [...] It's the basis of everything, and no one talks about it. Eroticism was a theme, even an 'ism', which was the basis of everything I was doing. – Marcel Duchamp, 1967

The exhibition *Please Touch: Marcel Duchamp and the Fetish*, curated by Paul B. Franklin at Thaddaeus Ropac, London, is the first to explore the centrality of fetishism and the fetish in the artist's practice. Although Duchamp himself acknowledged that eroticism was 'Visible or conspicuous, or, at any rate, underlying [...] the basis of everything I was doing', the role of fetishism in his work has been largely overlooked by scholars and curators. In fact, fetishism served Duchamp as a potent guiding principle as he traced his singular path in twentieth-century art. This sensual, erotic dimension is indivisible from his radical questioning of the very nature of the artwork and the role of the artist, which prompted painter Willem de Kooning to call him a 'one-man movement' in 1951.

Please Touch highlights the extent to which Duchamp playfully and provocatively exploited the slippages between the work of art and the fetish, thwarting our habitual compulsion to circumscribe the limits of either. The varied objects featured in Please Touch incite and even cajole us to fathom art as a wellspring of pleasures and possibilities, where the visual is forever enmeshed with the sensual, the tactile, the libidinal. – Paul B. Franklin

As Duchamp adopted eroticism as his creative credo, he also drew upon certain premises associated with fetishism. The idea of the fetish – whether devotional items imbued with mystical powers or objects, materials and body parts invested with erotic potential – informed psychoanalytical theory in the early twentieth century. Rather than the psychosexual 'perversion' identified by Sigmund Freud and Alfred Binet, however, fetishism became a fundamental aspect of Duchamp's efforts to reorient the relationship between artist, artwork and viewer.

The exhibition's title is borrowed from one of Duchamp's most fetishistic works, *Prière de toucher* (*Please Touch*) (1947), a foam-rubber breast enveloped in black velvet that the artist created for the cover of the exhibition catalogue *Le Surréalisme en 1947*. This title mischievously invites visitors to contravene conventional museum etiquette and to participate in an intimate dialogue with the works on view.

The exhibition is organised around five interrelated themes: the readymade as fetish object; the fetishization of miniature replicas and mechanical reproductions as originals; fetishism and gender play; fetish materials such as leather, vinyl, foam rubber and metallic paper; and, finally, Duchamp's fetishistic multiplication of his artistic identity, most notably in his drag persona Rose (later Rose) Sélavy.

Readymade as Fetish Object

Beginning in the 1910s, Duchamp began appropriating mundane, factory-made objects that he elevated to the position of artworks simply by selecting and displaying them as such. These 'readymades' represented an attempt to eliminate from the creative process both the artist's hand and the predominance of aesthetics. As he stated in 1963, 'A Ready-made is a work of art without an artist to make it'. Duchamp's first pure, unmodified readymade was a galvanised-iron bottle rack that he purchased from a Paris department store in 1914. A functional item invested with the 'aura' of an artwork, *Porte-bouteilles (Bottle Rack)* has the tenor of a fetish object: its spiked form and quasi-mystical dynamic recall African 'nail fetishes', while its undeniably sexual connotations embody the eroticism central to Duchamp's practice.

Reproduction as Fetish, Fetishizing Reproduction

For Duchamp, the ideas embodied in a work of art were of greater importance than the physical work itself, much as the personal significance of a fetish object is disproportionate to its use value. As he declared, 'A duplicate or a mechanical repetition has the same value as the original'. Beginning in the 1930s, it was not uncommon for the artist to create or authorise replicas of lost readymades for exhibitions, such as the *Bottle Rack* on view, which is a 1964 replica of the lost 1914 original.

He also devised a self-curated retrospective titled *De ou par Marcel Duchamp ou Rose Sélavy (Boîte-en-Valise) (From or by Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy [Box in a Valise])*, which he conceived between 1935 and 1941 and subsequently issued in various editions. After fetishistically producing miniature replicas and reproductions of his works, he assembled them in transportable cardboard containers. Rather than using contemporary reproduction methods, Duchamp painstakingly created antiquated collotype prints that were coloured by hand and sometimes varnished or framed in faux wood-grain cardboard. As Franklin writes, 'Obfuscating the boundaries between original and copy, he undercut the autonomy and sanctity of the art object [...] demonstrating that its display and duplication were works of art in their own right.'

Fetish Materials

Among his contemporaries, Duchamp was one of the most adventurous when it came to incorporating unorthodox materials into his works, many of which have fetishistic associations. This is apparent in the varying tactile qualities of the foam-rubber breast and velvet used to create *Please Touch*, the titillating tulle in his drawing *Tutu* (1909), the black vinyl of *...pliant, ...de voyage (Traveler's Folding Item)*, a 1964 replica of a lost 1916 readymade, or the synthetic fur that imitates pubic hair in *Couple de tabliers de blanchisseuse (Couple of Laundress's Aprons)* (1959). These fetish materials, which are often sexually suggestive in themselves, entice the viewer to 'please touch'.

Gendering the Fetish

As he had done in *Please Touch*, Duchamp isolated other fragments of the body to create fetish objects laden with erotic significance, such as the trio of objects that he made in the 1950s and issued in bronze editions the following decade: *Feuille de vigne femelle* (*Female Fig Leaf*) (1950), *Objet-dard* (*Dart-Object*) (1951), and *Coin de chasteté* (*Wedge of Chastity*) (1954). Originating as plaster castoffs from the nude female mannequin he was creating for his final masterwork, *Étant donnés* (1946–66), each of these objects is playfully suggestive: *Dart-Object* is blatantly (if limply) phallic, *Female Fig Leaf* fails to conceal the erogenous zones and *Wedge of Chastity* enacts a sexual duality through its interlocking bronze and dental-plastic pieces.

‘A salvo against hegemonic masculinity, the Frenchman’s work [...] brims with gender play, often inflected through verbal and visual puns,’ writes Franklin. This non-binary conception of gender is evident in Duchamp’s *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), an altered reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* (c. 1503–19) that also invokes the fetishist implications of body hair. In this iconic artwork, as well as in his 1964 reedition of it, Duchamp appended a moustache and goatee to her face, simultaneously laying claim to the masterpiece and masculinising its subject. Although he restored her original hairlessness in a later work, *L.H.O.O.Q. rasée* (*L.H.O.O.Q. Shaved*) (1965), the title implies that the *Mona Lisa* is, in fact, a clean-shaven man in drag.

Fetishizing the Self

A similarly playful approach to gender motivated Duchamp’s adoption of the drag persona Rose (later Rrose) Sélavy, whose name is a phonetic pun on the French phrase *éros, c’est la vie* (eros, that’s life) and reaffirms the artist’s belief in the primacy of eroticism. She first physically revealed herself in two series of photographic portraits taken by Man Ray in late 1920 or early 1921 and later forged a career of her own, co-creating artworks with Duchamp as well as independently. Through his varied personas and self-portraits in different guises, the artist fetishized the self as a new and radical domain of artistic expression, while decrying the limitations of a singular, consistent sense of personhood.

A historic survey consisting of more than thirty artworks, *Please Touch: Marcel Duchamp and the Fetish* will feature several exceptional loans from major private and public collections, including the Staatliche Schlösser, Gärten und Kunstsammlungen Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in Schwerin, Germany, and the Duchamp estate.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with an extensive thematic essay by curator Paul B. Franklin.

About the Artist

Marcel Duchamp was born in Normandy in 1887 into a family of artists, which included his two older brothers – the painter Jacques Villon and the Cubist sculptor Raymond Duchamp-Villon – and his younger sister Suzanne Duchamp-Crotti, who was active in the Dada movement. He received academic training at the Académie Julian in 1904–05, and his early paintings reveal the influence of Cubism, as in his *Nude Descending a Staircase* (no. 2; 1912), which caused a sensation when shown at the New York Armory Show in 1913. However, by the late 1910s he had renounced painting in favour of a more singular and radical approach to art-making. As artist Jasper Johns eulogised, ‘He declared that he wanted to kill art (“for myself”) but his persistent attempts to destroy frames of reference altered our thinking, established new units of thought. [...] He has changed the condition of being here.’

‘After renouncing easel painting in the late 1910s, he pursued numerous other endeavors in the course of the ensuing decades, almost none of which would have qualified as high art at the time,’ writes Paul B. Franklin. ‘These included, among others, selecting commonplace, mass-produced objects and presenting them as his own; contriving and constructing an abstract, phantasmagoric love machine in glass titled *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*; 1915–23) and generally referred to as the *Grand Verre* (*Large Glass*); playing chess and devising chess sets; designing posters, catalogues, book covers, and bookbindings; taking notes and later publishing them in elaborate facsimile editions; composing puns and spoonerisms; curating collections and exhibitions; fashioning miniature reproductions and replicas of his work; and simply being a “breather,” as he characterised himself in 1954 when pressed to identify his vocation.’

For most of his life, Duchamp divided his time between France and the USA, living primarily in New York from 1915–23 and then in Paris from 1923–42, before returning to New York. He became a naturalised American citizen in 1955. His first solo exhibition was held at the Arts Club of Chicago in 1937, followed by his first American retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963, and his first European survey at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1966. Since his death in 1968, Duchamp’s work has been the subject of countless exhibitions and can be found in the permanent collections of the most important museums worldwide. The Philadelphia Museum of Art houses the most extensive holdings of his work, due to a generous donation by Louise and Walter Arensberg, who were his lifelong friends and patrons.

About the Curator

Paul B. Franklin earned his doctorate in art history from Harvard University. Based in Paris and Céret, he is an independent scholar and a leading expert on Marcel Duchamp. From 2000 to 2016, he was the editor in chief of the scholarly journal *Étant donné Marcel Duchamp*, one of the most highly regarded publications devoted to the artist and his work. He also worked with Duchamp’s heirs for many years, managing the artist’s estate. Franklin has lectured and published widely on Duchamp. Some of his recent publications include: ‘“Assez peint, trouve-toi un boulot”’: Marcel Duchamp, Léonard de Vinci et la bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève’ in *Les Cahiers du Musée national d’art moderne* (no. 148, 2019); *The Artist and His Critic Stripped Bare: The Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp and Robert Lebel* (Getty Research Institute, 2016); ‘“Can one make works that are not works ‘of art’?”: Marcel Duchamp’s *Bottle Rack*’ in *Marcel Duchamp: ‘Porte-bouteilles’* (Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, 2016); and ‘Marcel Duchamp, ses maîtres et ses pirouettes autour de la peinture’ in *Marcel Duchamp: la peinture, même* (Centre Pompidou, 2014). In 2018, Franklin curated the exhibition *Brancusi & Duchamp: The Art of Dialogue* at Kasmin in New York, for which he also wrote the catalogue. In 2020, he curated the exhibition *Matisse in Black and White*, also at Kasmin.

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