Marcel Duchamp
Nude Descending a Staircase No -2
Master Manual Information Sheet

Artist: Marcel Duchamp

Lifespan: 1887 - 1968

Nationality: French, became a US citizen in 1955

Title: Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2

Date: 1912

Size: 57" x 35"

Location: Philadelphia Museum of Art

Media: Oil Painting

Style: Cubist-Futurist

Influences: Grandville, Cezanne, Picabia, Redon, WWI, Photography, Man Ray

Painting Highlights: Duchamp's Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2 was painted in a cubist style, and added an impression of motion by using repetitive imagery. He was after a visual expression of the idea of movement. Duchamp explains; "Organization of kinetic elements. Is an expression of time and space through an abstract presentation of movement." The painting's abstract qualities were undermined by in the controversy that surrounded it from the moment the painting appeared. There is no painting in history that has ever been so over shadowed by its title.

The painting was to first been shown at the 1912 Salon des Independents in Paris. Prior to the opening the committee (2 of whom were his brothers) asked Duchamp to change the title (take out the word "Nude") which so enraged Duchamp he decided to remove the painting. This reaction strengthened his determination to go his own way, without rules and theories, and to find a way to escape from traditional "pictorial" painting altogether.

Duchamp's painting was finally exhibited in the 1913 Armory Show in New York City, which caused a sensation. It was not well received by the art critics but was the one piece in the exhibit that attracted the most attention. New York received him as the great inventor who created art that was something new and revolutionary in its own way.

The figure in the painting appears to be an empty shell, a sort of hooded robot whose twenty or more successive positions in a descending sequence making her look more mechanical then human. Painted in subdued brown, gray, and greenish tones, one can see Duchamp must have been influenced by French and American Photographers that were experimenting with "Chrono-photography", which breaks down movement frame by frame, similar to a motion picture.
Artist

Marcel Duchamp had a strong influence on 20th century art. He was instrumental in introducing such European art movements as Cubism, Futurism, and Dadaism to American artists. Duchamp's originality, philosophy and influence in art led the way for Surrealism in the early part of the 20th century and, later, the Pop Art and Conceptual Art movements of the 1960's and 1970's. Duchamp was provocative and witty, as well as an eloquent philosopher.

The story of Marcel Duchamp began in 1887 in the French town of Blanville, Normandy region. Duchamp was born into a family of artistic talent including his grandfather, father, his two brothers (one a painter, the other a sculpture) and his sister (painter) went on to become famous artists in their own right.

Duchamp briefly painted in Impressionistic, Fauvist, and Cubist techniques but it was his unique form of Cubistic Futurism that brought him notice and fame. These years just before and after the First World War Duchamp was known in Paris and NY as an outstanding innovator and was world famous before he was thirty.

Duchamp's work after "Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2, was just as revolutionary. Together with other avant garde writers and painters, Duchamp led the Dada movement (Dada means "hobbyhorse" in French) which mocked the traditional conception of art and preached anti-art sentiments. Dada suggested that all established artistic values and morals were made meaningless by the catastrophe of the Great World War I. The attitudes towards the times led to destructive artistic expression in general, making works of "non-art", non-sense art, and anti-art. Dada works may be considered destructive criticism of artistic expression of the present and recent past. But Dada was not completely a negative movement. The only laws respected by Dadaists was that of chance, and the only reality, that of their own imagination.

The Dada group met almost nightly in Greenwich Village. Together with Man Ray, Duchamp contributed his ideas and humor to the New York art scene, many of which ran concurrent with the development of his "Readymades". "Readymades" were ordinary objects which Duchamp chose and presented as art. This "found art" became aesthetic instead of functional by changing their context. The most shocking of these ready-mades was "The Fountain" which was an unaltered white porcelain urinal displayed in a 1917 art exhibition. Duchamp's movement into ready-made sculpture expressed playfulness, spontaneity and chance which was his intuitive expression of the whimsical, fantastic, humorous and absurd.

In 1918 Duchamp ceased making his own art, after only 20 works. Marcel Duchamp was truly an original artist whose works still inspire the contemporary art world today. Without his ingenuity and disregard for the status quo art would have never been able to evolve from the acceptable, traditional, old-fashioned norm, to the thought-provoking, mind-challenging, cleverly humorous avant garde.

Presentation Ideas:

1. Ask the children how many people they see in the painting?
2. Do you see movement? What makes you see movement?
3. Ask them how many staircases they see?
4. Is this an abstract or realistic painting?
5. How does the coloring make you feel? Is color important to this painting?
6. Compare this painting to Terra Cotta Warriors of Zian and or to Sinbad the Sailor's use of cubism. Which shows motion the best?
7. Pretend to move in slow motion with a camera clicking sound at each movement.
8. Talk about how people in 1912 would have reacted to a painting that was not a traditional and realistic image.