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MARCEL DUCHAMP

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First Attempts - Cubism - The Nude Descending a Staircase

In his essay on Constantin Guys, the ‘Painter of Modern Life’, Charles Baudelaire referred to him only by an initial. ‘Monsieur G.’, he wrote, ‘does not like to be called an artist.’ And he added: ‘With two or three exceptions, whom I need not name, most painters must be regarded as no more than skilful brutes, craftsmen pure and simple.’

If you complete these remarks with the definition of dandyism with which Baudelaire supplemented his description of ‘Monsieur G.’, a whole aspect of Marcel Duchamp’s personality will be clarified in a few sentences, and perhaps once and for all.

Yet if today conditions scarcely favor the sort of anonymity Duchamp desires and which, furthermore, he manages for himself, his personality is many-sided and, so far as art is concerned, completely original. Any precedents we might think of for it would put us off the track.

The enigma he presents cannot easily be solved by the comparative method, the usual basis for criticism. It would be quite misleading if we tried to clear it up without first challenging the notions which are usually current about art and artists.

We must emphasize at the start the dangers we run if our diagnosis is too limited. At first sight it might seem wrong to consider Duchamp an artist at all, but we must never lose sight of the fact that although his work surpasses, so to speak, the limits of painting, it is nonetheless relatively considerable in quantity and of a quality equal to the most accomplished.

It is characteristic of the guilty conscience of our age that such curious prestige should be enjoyed by a man who gave proof of his talents and then suddenly declined to use them. He soon became a sort of living reproach; even the mention of his name was embarrassing. For a long time, as we know, this was the case with Rimbaud, and the French have seen to it that Duchamp’s reputation remained a source of uneasiness. Americans, on the other hand, greet him cordially as ‘good old Marcel’, as if he were a once famous movie star, more affable than Garbo, who managed to retire at the right time after the spectacular success of the Nude Descending a Staircase, leaving only pleasant memories behind him. Therefore it makes sense that Duchamp should prefer to live in America, where the everyday sort of misunderstanding is less intolerable.

An objection might be heard to the effect that he could have given some kind of explanation, as so many artists have, more or less successfully. To tell the truth, he has never refused to do so, and I have often been amazed by his inexhaustible patience during the lengthy interrogations to which I felt I had to subject him. In Duchamp there is no pretense of hermeticism or false modesty, no question to which he does not immediately find an apparently intelligible answer. As free from the histrionics customary with public figures as of the picayune suspicion so often shown by those who are trying to weave a legend for themselves, Duchamp poses neither as a misunderstood genius nor as an ascetic. At the most, he might be thought to be slightly annoyed when certain memories are evoked.

Since there is nothing at all odd about his appearance, his idiosyncrasy consists rather in his humorous but firm refusal to acknowledge the laws of immediate causality. By disregarding them his conversation, so unlike the schoolboy platitudes of most artists’ confessions,
Fig. 1 Suzanne, Mme Duchamp, Marcel, Yvonne (1896)

Fig. 2 Marcel Duchamp (1900)

Fig. 3 Jacques Villon, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Marcel Duchamp (Puteaux, 1912)