

AR 695
CONCENTRATION

ON THE ENIGMA OF MARCEL DUCHAMP'S 'BRIDE'

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It is never easy to strive for the answers to what one ought to be or do instead of merely how to succeed in society. To try to reach for the completeness where thought and action are one, and to attempt unity among all possibilities is difficult. This is especially true when one is aware of one's own incompleteness, and the overpowering relativism of modern western culture.

Most human beings haven't developed what Hemingway called a "built-in shock-resistant shit detector."¹ However, modern artists generally have continued to search for and express a clear perception of life; though ineffable as it is. Relative to this is the fact there are significant twentieth century paintings and other artworks that make use of ordinary images or objects to privately address the ineffable. This occurs when the artist personifies the image, derives metaphorical response from it, or attaches symbolic reference to it. Ultimately, the viewer is left with a mystery - tangible clues leading to intangible solutions.

There are, of course, countless examples in art where the image has fulfilled the artist's esoteric intention. In order to explore this in more depth, I am limiting this paper to one artist whose work often exemplified the enigmatic nature of image and personal metaphor. This artist is Marcel Duchamp and the work is his Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors,

Even. I will focus on the image and notes on 'the Bride' within this work.

Kurt Schwitters wrote in 'Merz' (1920), "Every artist must be allowed to mold a picture out of nothing but blotting paper, for example, provided he is capable of molding a picture."² In Duchamp's art the image manifests itself as a central preoccupation. He would often recognize a metaphorical intrigue surrounding the choice of imagery where humor and poetry could be explored.

Artworks such as Duchamp's 'Readymades' and 'Assisted Readymades' had initiated a philosophical reconsideration of the relationship between art images or objects and ordinary ones. It is with his work on 'The Bride' that one can recognize the strength of the mystery evoked by his esoteric symbolism. The fact that Duchamp was often silent regarding the disclosure of personal intention serves to intensify the absence of a solution to his riddle.

As an example, in notes from 'The Bride' Duchamp has written:

"The Bride, basically, is a motor. But before being a motor which transmits her timid-power. This timid-power is a sort of automobiline, love gasoline, that distributed to the quite feeble cylinders, within reach of the sparks of her constant life, is used for the blossoming of this virgin who has reached the goal of her desire. (Here the desire-gears will occupy less space than in the bachelor machine. They are only the string that binds the bouquet.)

It is, in general, the halo of the bride - the sum total of her splendid vibrations: graphically, there is no question of

symbolizing by a grandiose painting this happy goal - the bride's desire; only more clearly in all this blossoming, elements of the sexual life imagined by her bride-desiring. In this blossoming, The Bride reveals herself nude in 2 appearances. The first, that of the stripping by the bachelors; the second appearance that voluntary-imaginative one of the bride. On the coupling of these 2 appearances of pure virginity - on their collision depends the whole blossoming; the upper part and crown of the picture."³

Part of Duchamp's enigma is due to the fact he consciously never accepted any pre-ordained principle or intangible explanation. In a short speech he said, "I force myself to contradict myself so as to avoid conforming to my own taste."⁴ This illustrates a constant concern to reject rigorous personal disciplines relative to his approach to art. One is able to see a form of humanism in his attitude, for in comparing man to machine, man always retains the option not to repeat himself.

Duchamp imposed significant, personal, symbolism upon words. Leading to the 'Bride' from the '1914 Box' he writes: "to have the apprentice in the sun.-

arrhe is to art as
shitte is to shit

arrhe = shitte
art shit

Grammatically: the arrhe of painting is feminine in gender."⁵

The symbolism expressed here is clearly seen as an inextricable part of the creative process. In the creative act the artist moves from intention to realization though a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward

the realization is a series of efforts, pains, satisfactions, refusals, and decisions which cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the aesthetic level. As Duchamp stated, "the personal 'art coefficient' is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed."⁶

All in all the creative act is not performed by the artist alone. The spectator brings the artwork into contact with the outside world. It is at this moment when the mystery associated with personal metaphor manifests itself.

Due to Duchamp's capacity for stereoptic vision necessary to be able to re-evaluate meanings behind the labels given to unprepossessing images there are countless opportunities for fresh interpretation by the viewer. This becomes obvious when considering how posterity gives its final verdict and rehabilitates many artists and their work.

Knowing whether or not Duchamp wished to give a certain interpretation to his intentions behind 'The Bride' is perhaps beside the point. A myth has been built around 'The Bride' and the authenticity of the factors which serve to support this myth are less important than the collective state of mind which gave birth to it. If it were demonstrated to us that 'The Large Glass,' i.e. 'The Bride,' was only a gigantic put-on the myth of an enigmatic and ineffable Duchamp would only be more alive and a different interpretation would be found for a forever meaningless work.

Duchamp believed that painting was simply a means of expression not an end. In other words, painting should not be exclusively retinal or visual. It should have to do with intriguing our urge for understanding. As he once stated, "I believe that art is the only form of activity in which man shows himself to be a true individual. Only in art is he capable of going beyond the animal state, because art is an outlet towards regions which are not ruled by time and space. To live is to believe; that's my belief."⁷

Duchamp's work with 'The Bride' has and will continue to serve as foundation material from which one can learn and appreciate. There is a unique perception that exists. Duchamp interpreted personal experience through symbolism and metaphor. Ultimately, he has left a significant impact upon art through his existing enigma.

Endnotes

¹Gardner, John. On Moral Fiction (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978), p. 41.

²Dault, Gary. Books: Dore Ashton, A Joseph Cornell Album (Artscanda, Vol. 75, No. 198-199, June 1975), p. 75.

³Duchamp, Marcel. Salt Seller (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 42.

⁴Ibid., p. 43.

⁵Ibid., p. 47.

⁶Ibid., p. 24.

⁷Ibid., p. 137.

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