

Duchamp, Dada, and World War I

Compiled by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, for the exhibition
“Inventing Marcel Duchamp: The Dynamics of Portraiture”

Target Grade Level: 9–12 in world history and United States history classes

Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be better able to:

- Define “Dada” and its relation to World War I; define “art” and “anti-art”
- Identify and analyze key components of a portrait and relate visual elements to relevant historical context and significance
- Develop debate and public speaking skills

Portraits can be found in the online exhibition “Inventing Marcel Duchamp: The Dynamics of Portraiture” at <http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/duchamp/>

Background Information for Teachers

Dada can best be described as a loud and subversive movement in art and literature that was created to reflect the violence and trauma of World War I. As more European countries became involved in the Great War, a group of dissenters formed in Zurich in 1916, vowing to break with the artistic traditions of the past and produce art that was a medium for social, political, and artistic protest. Dada is a nonsense word that means different things in different languages (“hobbyhorse” in French, “yes, yes” in Slavic languages, and baby-talk in English¹), but it was far from a nonsensical and unorganized anarchy. In fact, the loud poetry, made-up words, performance, and mixed-media artwork served as a public critique of then-modern conventions of power as they were seen in both politics and art. The Dadaists believed that art should serve to comment and reflect on contemporary events rather than provide an escape. In this way, Dada artists used the stuff of everyday life to create their art; they believed that real life had little to do with the oil, paint, and canvas of more traditional art. Sometimes silly, sometimes chaotic, but always subversive, Dada has no one visual style, but rather embraces the ideology of art as a critique for social change.

Portrait Activity

Students choose portraits that best represent their definition of “art” and “anti-art,” then defend their choices.

Teacher Prep: Familiarize yourself with Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) and Dada.

¹ <http://fusionanomaly.net/dada.html>

Portrait Reading Formula for Students:

1. Analyze the portrait using the *Reading Portraiture Guide for Educators*.
2. Gather biographical facts from the portrait's symbols, and construct the context of the sitter's life.
3. Use web resources and available books to research the sitter's life and historical contributions.
4. Share and compare the facts gathered from the portrait with the researched facts.

**Each of these steps can be done as a class, in small groups, or individually.*

As a class, have the students discuss a portrait of Marcel Duchamp.

- Questions to consider:
 - What is Duchamp doing in the portrait? What insight do you gain about Duchamp from viewing this portrait?
 - What was the artist trying to convey about Duchamp by rendering him this way?
- Have students come up with a definition for the words “art” and “anti-art.” Write the definitions on the board.
- Give students background information on the artistic and literary movement known as Dada.

Activity: Dada Debate

- As the students now know, sometimes Dada is referred to as “anti-art.” From the online exhibition “Inventing Marcel Duchamp: The Dynamics of Portraiture,” have students choose three portraits of Duchamp that best embody the notion of “anti-art,” and three examples of what they would consider “art.”
- Discuss students’ choices. Why is one piece more “art” than the other? Have their definitions of art changed from what is written on the board?
- Duchamp was so influential to later artists because he changed the answer to the question, “What is art?” Duchamp believed that anything, even (and especially) objects from everyday life such as a hat rack, is art if the artist deems it so.
- Divide students into two groups. Give each group an image of Marcel Duchamp from the exhibition. Have students prepare a five-minute debate addressing the question “what is art and what is not.” The teacher determines who has most successfully argued the point.

Extension Activity: Dada and World War I

Students learn about the historical and sociopolitical context of Duchamp’s works.

- Review Dada as a direct response to the seemingly senseless violence of World War I. Discuss:
 - Why was World War I different from wars that had come before?
 - How does art relate to what is happening in the world at any particular time?
 - How can you use art as a protest or a way to reflect emotions, as Dada did?

- In 1916 writer-philosopher Hugo Ball founded and led the Dada movement in Zürich, Switzerland. He famously performed his poem of made-up words entitled *Karawane* dressed in a cardboard tube and cone hat, in order to embrace the childlike spirit of Dada.
 - For further information, have students use the Web Resources section and available books to research Hugo Ball’s poem *Karawane*.
 - Have students stand up and recite *Karawane*. This is a silly and loud poem meant to reflect the nonsense of war.
 - Ask students: Do you think Dada was an effective means of protest? What is an issue that is important to you today? How would you let people know your point of view?

National Standards of Learning

Social Studies/World History Standards

Grades 5-12: A Half-Century of Crisis and Achievement, 1900-45

The student understands the interplay of new artistic and literary movements with changes in social and cultural life in various parts of the world in postwar decades. Students are able to evaluate the impact of World War I and its aftermath on literature, art, and intellectual life in Europe and the United States.

Key Terms

Anti-art/anti-aesthetic: An art ideology that encourages artists to break from the artistic traditions and conventions of the past; to use art to express dissatisfaction with conventional society

Dada: A nonsense word that means different things in different languages (“hobbyhorse” in French, “yes, yes” in Slavic languages, and baby-talk in English); an art and literary movement that consists of loud poetry, nonsensical words, and chaotic artwork; a movement meant to reflect the violence and trauma of World War I and a critique of then-modern conventions of power as they were seen in both politics and art

Portrait: A likeness of a person, especially one showing the face, which is created by an artist

Symbol: Something representing something else by association; objects, characters, or another concrete representation of an abstract idea, concept, or event

Web Resources

Image of Hugo Ball’s *Karawane*:

http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/brainiac/BFda_HugoBallLG%20.jpg

Words to *Karawane*:

<http://members.peak.org/~dadaist/Deutsch/NurText/karawane.html>

For more information about Dada:

<http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/d/dada.html>

<http://members.peak.org/~dadaist/English/Graphics/>