

# homage to r. mutt

by garth clark

On the occasion of this art fair in New York on 20th century art at the very end of the epoch, I looked back in time to select that ceramic object that was the single most influential in this Modernist era. One did not have to leave Manhattan to find this piece. To bring it even closer to home it was submitted to another art fair, the Independents Salon of 1917. Even though this porcelain object was rejected from the fair, was never exhibited and no longer exists, it has become one of the best known and most controversial modern artworks of the century. It changed the way we looked at both art and design and introduced a healthy dose of irony to neutralize the numbing influence of the academies.

It forced us to visit the banal and place context and concept over craft and authorship, developments that have had a major consequence in the arts. Of course this object did not produce all of these changes on its own but it is the artwork that perhaps best summarizes the early avant-garde spirit. The ceramic in question is not an elegant nude in unglazed porcelain, nor a cubist abstraction. It is not even a vase with a luscious exotic glaze. It was the most banal of objects, an ordinary mass-produced industrially made urinal signed by the artist, *R. Mutt*.

For an artist who never existed, R. Mutt has exerted a great deal of influence. His one artwork, *Fountain* (1917), is now the most famous and most recognizable ceramic object in 20th century art. As we well know, R.Mutt (Mutt being the term for a mongrel dog in America) was really the pseudonymous work of Marcel Duchamp. *Fountain* was an early readymade, an ephemeral work made from an everyday object. Duchamp, in the company of the painter Joseph Stella and the pioneering collector Walter Arensberg, went to a plumbing store, J.L. Mott Iron Works, and randomly chose the "Bedfordshire"

model porcelain urinoir, signed and dated it *R. Mutt, 1917* and then submitted it to the First Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York City. *Fountain* had taken the first step on its journey of acceptance into the highest canon of avant-garde art.

The concept of the Society was to ensure that artists were independent of the powerful academies and juries that hitherto controlled the exhibitions of art and mandated aesthetic taste. Any artists who paid an exhibition fee of six dollars could show two works of their own choosing. The arrival of the urinal at the Grand Central Palace, two days before the event, caused consternation. The committee met and, unaware that the piece was by Duchamp, a fellow committee member, decided to reject the work in contravention of the spirit of the event. The reasoning behind their hotly argued decision (and approved by a slender margin) was that while they would accept any work of art, this vulgar object was not art, merely plumbing. Arensberg and Duchamp promptly resigned from the Society.

The rejection of the piece turned into a cause célèbre, picked up by the daily press that was hoping the Independents Salon would be as rollicking a publicity event as the Armory Show of 1913 which had introduced a shocked American audience to Modern Art. Duchamp had been the centre of that storm as well, his painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase*, was the most controversial entry, lampooned and vilified by the press. Today we view the *Fountain* differently. Its image has been reproduced in almost every survey of 20th century avant garde art since the 1960's and it has become as ubiquitous and familiar an image as Da Vinci's enigmatic *Mona Lisa* or Warhol's *Marilyn*.

However, in 1917, the gesture of submitting this



Figure 1:  
*Fountain* as photographed in 1917 by Alfred Stieglitz

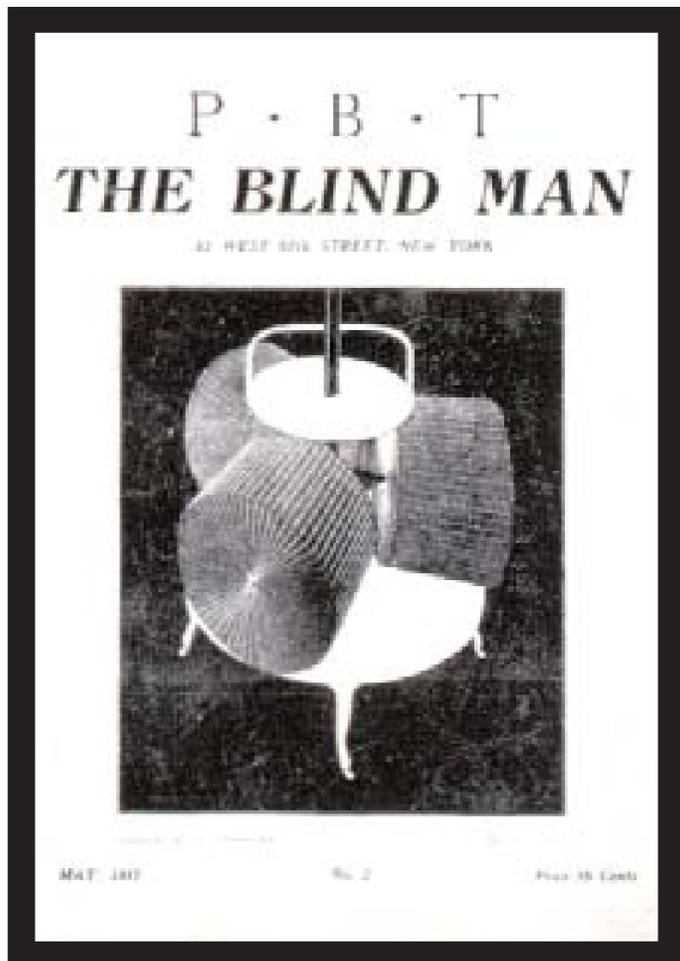


Figure 2:  
The front cover of *Blind Man* magazine, 1917

bathroom fixture was shocking. When the *New York Herald* reporter described the controversy, he could not even use the term “urinal” which was considered an obscenity and instead had to refer vaguely to a “bathroom fixture.” In response Beatrice Wood entered the fray and wrote in the short-lived publication, *Blind Man*, in support of her friend Duchamp noting that the reason for rejection, that it was not art, was absurd because, “The only works of art America has given us are her plumbing and her bridges.”

The object ended up two weeks later in the studio of another great avant-garde force, the photographer and dealer, Alfred Stieglitz. Duchamp persuaded him to photograph the ready-made and Wood recalls that Stieglitz took great pains with the lighting, “and did it with such skill that a shadow fell across the urinal suggesting a veil.” Shortly thereafter it disappeared. It is assumed that Stieglitz discarded the object with the rest of his trash when he closed the “291” gallery and moved his studio. Only a couple of dozen people ever saw *Fountain* in its plump white three-dimensional reality.

The controversy over *Fountain* has continued ever since. Part of this concerns the aesthetics of the form itself. In theory the “beauty” of a ready-made was immaterial. The work was selected for its conceptual relevance with what Duchamp declared to be “visual indifference.” Yet in defending the piece, even in its day, Arensberg, in common with other supporters, was drawn to its visual strength referring to its “lovely form and chaste simplicity”. Some saw in this white shimmering object a seated Buddha while Duchamp’s biographer, Calvin Tomkins, remarks that it takes little imagination to see the curving lines of a classic Madonna or even one of Brancusi’s polished erotic forms.

In the photograph Stieglitz was also taken by the purity of form, deliberately heightening both the objects sexual and aesthetic qualities through emphasizing the urinal’s fecund volume and the lyrical silhouette. In 1964, Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art, confronted Duchamp and demanded why, if he had selected his readymades with such aesthetic indifference, “do they all look so beautiful today?” “Nobody’s perfect”. Duchamp replied in vintage style.

Even the recreation of the *Fountain* in limited edition (with the artist’s consent) by the Galleria Schwartz in 1964 fuelled outrage. It provokes an outburst of anger from Dada purists over what many saw as Duchamp’s betrayal of the entire concept of the ready-made. Max Ernst argued that by remaking the ready-made Duchamp had compromised the validity of the original gesture. That Duchamp should participate in the degrading of his own artistic concepts was not inconsistent. It was exactly the kind

of deflationary volte face that was his form, particularly now that *Fountain* was on its way to be canonized as a modern masterpiece.

Two years ago, when on the occasion of the *Fountain*’s 90th birthday, I organized an exhibition, “Homage to R.Mutt”, to explore its impact on our culture. It seemed the perfect excuse to enter the debate and pay homage to the fictitious R. Mutt and all that he has contributed to the discourse on the meaning of art, men’s bathrooms and ceramics. As Tomkins comments, *Fountain* is one of the artist’s most insidiously subversive artifacts, “The urinal, an object with female attributes that serves as a receptacle for male fluid, thus becomes a symbol of the sexual comedy that underlies all of Duchamp’s mature work.”

I have always felt particularly close to this object, firstly as a ceramics historian but also because I was privy to many fascinating discussions about this object with a close friend and “witness”, Beatrice Wood. Until her death in 1997 at the age of 105, Wood was for decades the only person alive who had actually seen *Fountain* in the flesh (so to speak). When she was with Duchamp in 1917, Wood was an actress playing ingenue roles with the French Repertory Theater in New York. Her artwork consisted mainly of drawings and a few paintings produced at Duchamp’s prodding and with his active input as editor.

Wood is today renowned as the queen of lustre pottery. However, to avoid confusion it should be pointed out that her entry into the ceramics world in the 1930’s was not provoked by the *Fountain* but by a chance discovery of some lustre plates in an antiques shop in Haarlem, The Netherlands. She went to the Hollywood High School’s adult education class in 1932 to make a matching teapot which she expected to produce in a matter of days. In fact it took Wood another twenty years to develop the



Figure 3:  
Beatrice Wood, Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp  
Coney Island, 1917



**Figure 4:**  
Meret Oppenheim (1913-1985)  
*Objet (Le Déjeuner en Fourrure)*  
1936  
fur covered cup and spoon  
2 1/4 in. (7.3 cm) high  
Museum of Modern Art, NY

magical iridescent lustre glazes upon which her reputation as a potter was built.

Through our frequent discussions about the Dada milieu of which she was part, and in particular her first hand knowledge of the *Fountain*, I became fascinated by the power that this object continues to exert on art and taste to provoke "amusement, rage and offense". Also, it has been an endless source of inspiration. It was the precursor to generations of art derived from the everyday object from Arman's "Accumulations" of junk in the later Fifties and early Sixties, to Jasper Johns famous bronze beer can and Robert Gober's kitchen sinks. It did not affect modern design directly but certainly changed forever the way artists viewed industrial products and the way that they were to be incorporated into the making of art.

The exhibition *Homage to R. Mutt* included a diverse group of artists, all of whom have dealt profoundly with bathroom fixtures in their work although not always in ceramics. Not all of the artists were directly inspired by the *Fountain* but it remains a standard of comparison for all art that enters the taboo territory of the porcelain palace. Mike Bidlo's appropriationist work of the past few years has been dedicated to Duchamp's readymades, culminating

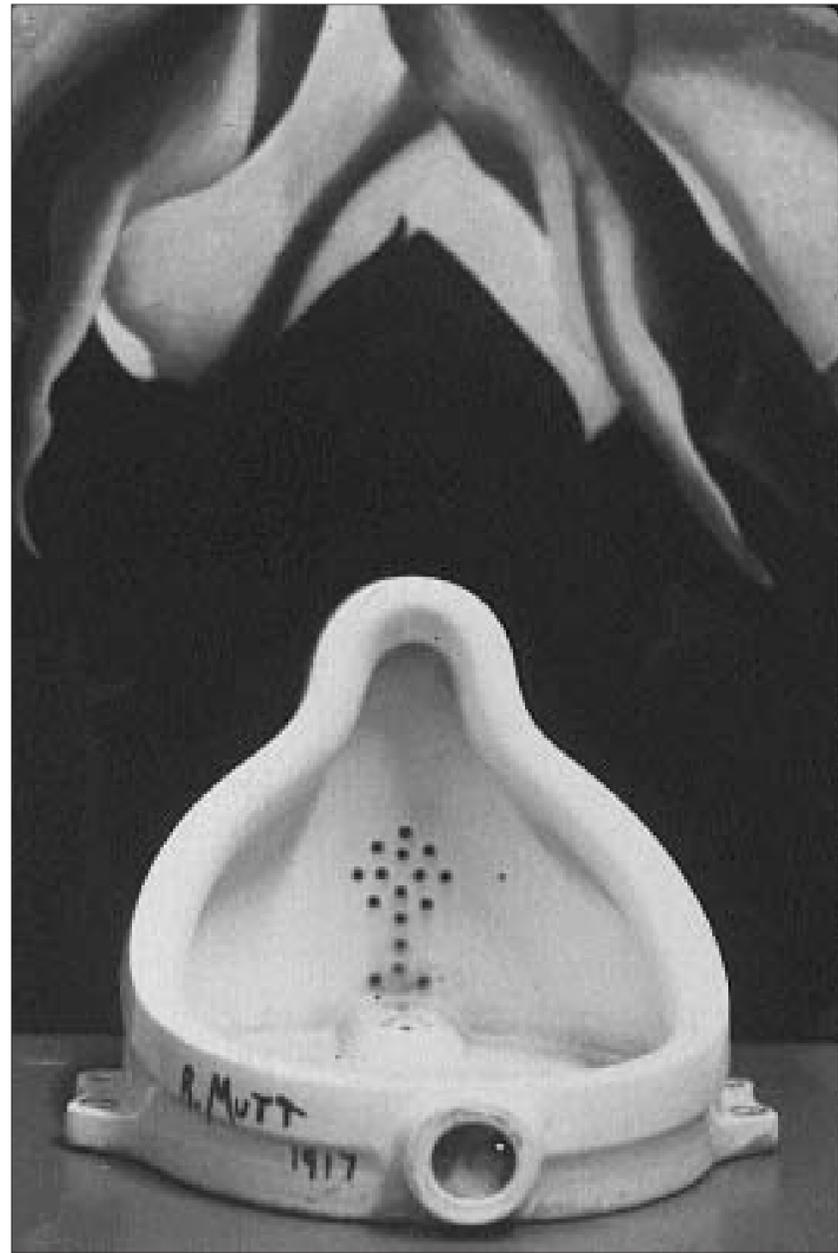


**Figure 5:**  
Marek Cecula  
*Scatology Series: Set 1, 1993*  
porcelain and stainless steel  
10 in. (25.4 cm) high  
14 1/2 in. (36.8 cm) deep

in his semi-permanent installation, *Saint Duchamp*. In addition to works such as *Origins of the World* (1995), he worked for years on a series of hundreds of drawings of *Fountain*, a remarkable process of research that was shown with dramatic effect at the Shifrazi Gallery, New York, last year. *Origins* posits Duchamp and a Georgia O'Keeffe painting (with Stieglitz's photograph as a conceptual intermediary) as the yin-yang of early Modern Art sensibilities. In addition, it plays with the vaginal forms of both urinal and O'Keeffe's lush, fecund flowers.

Ron Baron's *American Standard* is also a direct inspiration although his style is more bathroom baroque with an upside down urinal surmounted by a column of industrially produced plates. The piece is a punful play that Duchamp would have enjoyed. *American Standard* is the name of the largest maker of urinals in the United States. An American "standard" was also conceptually what Duchamp was looking for when he conceived the piece, an object that was ordinary, served a lowly function yet had a latent potency to provoke. The pun is continued in the column of found ceramics, including souvenir plates from Mount Rushmore to Cape Cod, nostalgic American "standards" of a different kind.

Robert Arneson and Claes Oldenburg both



**Figure 7:**  
Mike Bidlo  
*Origins of the World*  
1995  
porcelain, oil on canvas

broaden the issue and deal with the parent of the urinal, the toilet. The two artists represent the dirty and the clean of the 1960's art sensibility in the United States. Arneson's "Funk" art is a style that is the visceral, offensive inversion of the same issues of everyday material that Oldenburg used at the same

**Figure 6 (left):**  
Robert Arneson  
*Funk John*  
1964  
pastel on paper, 24 x 18 in. (61 x 45.7 cm)

time with such detached, cool Pop elegance. In 1964 Arneson created his life-size *Funk John* in earthenware with obvious references to the form's functional life. This seminal piece of ceramic Funk art was later destroyed and is represented here by a 1964 drawing. Oldenburg presents the "clean" side of this exploration with a soft, stitched, canvas toilet that both moves this image out of the ceramic realm and sanitizes the scatological associations that so rudely abound in the work of Arneson.

The work of Marek Cecula approaches this theme from a different point of view. Cecula's art is, at first,



**Figure 8:**  
Marek Cecula  
*Hygiene: Untitled IV (detail)*  
1995  
vitreous china, wood and steel  
46 x 31 x 17 in. (117 x 78.7 x 43 cm)

clinical in its appearance but the title of the 1995 series, *Scatology*, suggests otherwise. The shimmering, white, porcelain objects are made with the finesse of laboratory ceramics—refined, elegantly and seemingly functional. However, that function is never made clear except for the fact it would seem to involve body fluids. The objects could be high-tech bedpans for hospitals, portable urinals or simply, abstract sculpture. They are placed on stainless steel pedestals into which drainage holes have been cut, making the purpose of the objects all the more curious and disturbing.

The exhibition was hugely popular. But the response amongst our ceramics-world audience was surprisingly ambivalent. For as much as the Fountain symbolizes conceptual freedom, this icon raises fears and insecurity in the ceramic world because it has neither the individuality of craft, nor the magic of the potter's hand. Neither does it have the exotic glazes to give it traditional worth. Equally disturbing is the fact that the most famous ceramic of the 20th century is not made by a ceramist.

Indeed, as we examine the fine arts avant garde canon in the first fifty years of the century, we find few ceramic works of any description and none made by ceramists. The only other heavyweight pre-1950's contender is Meret Oppenheim's surrealist *Object: Fur Lined, Cup, Saucer and Spoon*, (1934). This work also does not rely on the virtues of "ceramic art". It does not even show its ceramic body, covering it with animal fur. However, both urinal and cup have something in common. They draw from an element that is employed every day in the ceramics world, a rootedness in utility. What made the *Fountain* objectionable was not that it was industrially made, or that it lacked any hand-made artistry but a combination of what it was used for and where it was intended to be shown, in a public art exhibition rather than a public men's room. Its power to disturb came from all the issues of gender, empowerment, sexuality, morality, mortality and privacy that flowed from its actual use. Had Duchamp submitted a teapot, an equally banal ceramic form, it would not have conjured the same outrage. Similarly, Oppenheim's cup is distressing precisely because of its functional association and by extension, imagining the upsetting, perversely intimate confluence of tea, cup, fur and lips. It is an act of tactile violation.



So even though *Fountain* was made by a non-ceramist, it is nonetheless an object of optimism for the ceramic field at large—as the *Homage to R.Mutt* exhibition confirmed. The respect that the *Fountain* has garnered in the history of modern culture, confirms that a relatively simple concept that springs from the innate traditions and forms of the ceramic field, can touch the universal nerve and even change the direction of art. In the case of this revered nonagenarian urinal we are also reminded how enduring, touching and profoundly human the role of everyday ceramic forms can be if they are intelligently and wittily contextualized.

Garth Clark is a widely published historian, an internationally known dealer in ceramic art and founding director of the non-profit Ceramic Arts Foundation. He is the author of eighteen books on ceramics and over 100 essays, monographs and catalogues. He received numerous awards for his work including the Art Critics Fellowship of the National Endowment of the Arts, the "Art Book of the Year" award from the Art Libraries Society of North America for *The Mad Potter of Biloxi: The Life and Art of George E. Ohr*. In addition he was made a Fellow of the Royal College of Art in London and this year received the "Visionaries: Lifetime Achievement Award" from the American Craft Museum.

**Figure 9:**  
Marek Cecula  
*Hygiene: Untitled IV*  
1995  
vitreous china, wood and steel  
46 x 31 x 17 in. (117 x 78.7 x 43 cm)