

Marcel Duchamp

L.H.O.O.Q., 1919



b. 1887 in Blainville
d. 1968 in Neuilly-sur-Seine

Following the hostile reactions to *Nude Descending a Staircase no. 2*, exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris and the Armory Show in New York in 1912, Marcel Duchamp finally abandoned painting with the comment that it was obsolete. From then on, he directed his search towards everyday life and found a bicycle wheel (1913), a bottle dryer (1914) and a urinal (1917). The artist did not change these objects; he simply chose them, signed them and presented them as artworks. Duchamp introduced the term for such items in a letter from abroad to his sister Suzanne (1889–1963), also an artist: "Here in New York I purchased objects of the same type and called them readymades. You speak sufficient English to understand the meaning of 'already finished,' which I have given to objects of this kind."

The next object that the artist used for his new artistic strategy was a postcard of Leonardo da Vinci's (1452–1519) *Mona Lisa*, also known as the *Gioconda*, whose upper lip and chin he now adorned with a beard. *L.H.O.O.Q.* is the title. When pronounced in English, the result sounds like "look." In French, however, it sounds like the suggestive "elle a chaud au cul," which means, more or less, "her arse is hot." This was the way people often use posters was how Duchamp explained his actions: "Colouring teeth black and other such things. The *Gioconda* was so universally known and admired, it was very tempting to use it for a scandal."

The *Mona Lisa* was indeed famous. When writing Leonardo's biography, even Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), the father of recorded art history, focused his attention on the work without ever having seen the original. At one point it hung in Napoleon's bedroom, and when it arrived in the Louvre, it was initially one portrait among many. That changed in the mid-nineteenth century when the artist Aimée Brune-Pagès (1803–1866) put the spotlight on the making of the work, as it were, with her painting *Leonardo Painting the Mona Lisa*. But what made the masterpiece into a real star was its disappearance in broad daylight on 21 August 1911. In the Salon Carré of the Louvre curious crowds of people filed past to see the ugly gap with three nails which the work had left behind. And yet it was almost impossible to avoid the lady's gaze: postcards, advertisements, chocolate boxes – no one knew where the beautiful woman was, and yet her face was everywhere. And so it was not so much the artwork that Duchamp was making use of, but rather the mass phenomenon.

Since the principle of readymades is that they are freely available, there are naturally also several versions of *L.H.O.O.Q.* Francis Picabia, for example, also contributed to one of them; he initially forgot the goatee – a mistake that Duchamp corrected 22 years later, in 1942. In 1965 the lady appears beardless, as Leonardo had created her, as *L.H.O.O.Q. rasée*.

In addition to the numerous theories as to who the lady with the legendary smile might be, for many years there has been one which speculates that the portrait is, as it were, a feminised self-reflection and a self-portrait of Leonardo. Duchamp would no doubt have found pleasure in this conjecture. What Rose Sélavy (ill. p. 11) as a female alter ego was for Duchamp, *Mona Lisa* was now for the old master. DG

L.H.O.O.Q., 1919
Pencil on heliogravure,
19.7 x 12.4 cm (7 7/8 x 5 in.)
Enlarged replica of the original
From: *Box in a Valise*, Series A, 1943
Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise
and Walter Arensberg Collection



Henri Matisse

The Moorish Screen, 1921



b. 1869 in Le Cateau-Cambrésis
d. 1954 in Nice

Henri Matisse was in Nice. He had just moved into an apartment at Place Charles-Félix, which would serve him as a stage for arrangements like this one: female figures in richly furnished settings of tapestry work and decorative fabrics provided from the stock of Matisse's collection. The famous series of odalisque pictures was created here, as were various interiors and still lifes. Apart from the overwhelming decoration, what the works from these years have in common is a return to a more realistic representation of figure and scenery. It seems to mark the end of the period of radical experimentation which had culminated in Matisse's investigation of Cubism.

Public and critics alike demonstrated a mixed reaction to the pictures of the early Nice period from 1917 until 1929. Welcomed by the conservative audience because of their easy accessibility and decorative merits, they were greeted with scorn by the modernist art critics. Alfred Barr (1902–1981), the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, saw in the naturalism of these pictures nothing but a regression. Other critics saw the pictures not so much as a betrayal of Matisse's own artistic radicalism as a flight from the political situation at the end of the First World War. One topic, however, linked the paintings of the early Nice period with the previous ones and also with the artist's works which would follow them. It is perhaps the most important theme of all in his works: the topic of decoration. Matisse worked during the 1920s on the relationship between figure and decoration, whereby in this phase of his work decoration literally means the ornamental furnishing of his pictorial spaces.

And so, too, in *The Moorish Screen*: in it we can see two female figures in an extravagantly furnished interior. Sitting in the armchair is the musician and dancer Henriette Darricarrère (born in 1901, the year of her death is not known). Leaning against the wall is Marguerite (1894–1982), the artist's daughter. Both are wearing light summer outfits. Like items of scenery representing the bourgeois lifestyle, a few pieces of furniture have been placed in the room. The Moorish screen of the title rises up behind the two figures and occupies a good third of the picture area. It will crop up again in various pictures during the years to come.

But that tells us nothing about the clashes of decoration and figuration which permeate the painting. Although the foreshortening of the table and the fireplace sketchily suggest an interior space, there is no stable sense of spatiality. This lies not only in the fact that the screen blocks the transition from floor to wall. The patterns of the carpets and fabrics are so varied in scale that they blow up all the stable coordinates and assert their contrary surface rhythm.

It is a true excess of the decorative, in which the emphasis is shifted from the figures to their surroundings. And here it is, the richly ornamented Moorish screen, covered with a North African fabric which Matisse had brought back from one of his trips. "The revelation came to me from the Orient," he would say in 1947, referring to his conception of the panel painting as a decorative field. *The Moorish Screen* is a part of this painterly research which combines the contradictory arrangements of ornamentation and figure – and which would then be perfected in the late cut-outs. CM

The Moorish Screen, 1921
Oil on canvas, 91.9 x 74.3 cm
(36 1/4 x 29 1/2 in.)
Philadelphia Museum of Art,
Bequest of Lisa Norris Elkins (1950)



Man Ray *Le Violon d'Ingres*, 1924



b. 1890 in Philadelphia
d. 1976 in Paris

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) achieved fame as the artist who led the great French tradition of Classicism into the modern age. He was a champion of the line. If necessary, he would enhance the back of one of his nude models, draped more chastely than salaciously, to improve its anatomical correctness, so that the contour was sufficiently perfect. When Pablo Picasso and André Derain were experimenting with their *Return to Order*, they welcomed Ingres as a colleague.

Ingres had a hobby for which he was as notorious as he was famous. He played the fiddle, but the sounds that he produced were not as beautifully formed as his lines. He was just a hobby musician in this respect, an amateur, a dilettante. In French, "violon d'Ingres" (Ingres's violin) has come to mean a hobby that is practised clumsily. This was reason enough for a Dadaist, Surrealist and linguistic juggler like Man Ray to stage one of the most enchanting plays on words in art history. Text and image normally converse in a highly idiosyncratic, unwieldy language, but here the leap from one idiom to the other has been mastered to perfection.

And so, in this carefully-chosen memorial to Ingres there is a rear-view nude. Provided is the nude upper body of Kiki, also known by the sobriquet "de Montparnasse." She was the muse of various artists who populated the scene there, and during these years she was the companion, partner and lover of Man Ray (ill. pp. 1, 14, 15). He shows her here with complete concentration on her rear view, and he has put a turban on her head, so that the echoes of Ingres's *Woman Bathing* from 1808 will be completely obvious. The photograph of this Venus in reverse has had two marks drawn onto it in Indian ink which look like the f-holes of a violin. Kiki's body has become the sound box of a violin, and it simultaneously recalls one of Ingres's most famous paintings. The perfectly coherent staging is complete. Man Ray's montage has become nothing less than an emblem in the immediacy with which title and illustration adapt to each other.

"Kiki still hesitated; she didn't want photos of herself lying around all over the place." was how Man Ray remembered the situation in his autobiography from 1963. "But she worked as a nude model, I insisted, and the pictures were constantly on view in exhibitions, sometimes with her name in the title. Yes indeed, she countered, but an artist can modify the appearance of things, while a photograph is too true to reality. Not mine, I retorted; I photograph the way I paint. I transform models just as a painter does; I can improve and re-shape them just as an artist would do." In *Le Violon d'Ingres* the photographic artist has indeed added the occupation of painter to his repertoire. No painting could have developed the witty combination of language and thought more vividly.

The work was reproduced and thus printed as a photograph for the first time in June 1924. The Paris magazine *Littérature*, in which the illustration appeared, was the central organ of the Surrealists before they formed a group. The three gentlemen who acted as editors were Louis Aragon, André Breton and Philippe Soupault. They were poets, and they would have taken particular pleasure in disseminating a piece of fine art which plays with such virtuosity on the keyboard of language. Surrealism is primarily a literary movement. Man Ray has redeployed it not least with pictorial examples. RM

Le Violon d'Ingres, 1924
Gelatin silver paper with pencil and ink,
31 x 24.7 cm (12¼ x 9¾ in.)
Paris, Centre Pompidou – Musée
national d'art moderne – Centre
de création industrielle



Eileen Gray Table E-1027, 1927



b. 1878 in Enniscorthy
d. 1976 in Paris

A single item of furniture reflects almost the entire history of Modernism and the biography of a designer spanning close to an entire century. When Eileen Gray designed the *Adjustable Table E-1027* she was almost fifty years old and at the zenith of her creative career. It was an occasional table of simple refinement, conceived for a single, understatedly decadent everyday situation: breakfast in bed. A construction of steel tubing with a support on one side which enabled the table to be pushed under the bed with a flick of the wrist. A circular glass plate, also surrounded by steel tubing, which could be adjusted to various heights. A table which Eileen Gray basically designed just for her own use and which became a worldwide success over the following decades, while its designer was gradually forgotten.

Eileen Gray was born in Ireland and travelled to Paris for the first time in 1900. It was the city with which she would retain a lifelong association. After studying art in London, in 1907 she moved into an apartment at 21 rue Bonaparte, in which she would live for almost seventy years. Far away from the narrow restrictions of Irish Catholicism, she lived a modern, sophisticated life with all the freedoms of the big city. She had affairs with men and women alike, she drove a lorry and she travelled to North Africa. Above all, however, she made a name for herself as a craftswoman with a predilection for Japonist lacquer furniture and elaborate screens.

During the 1920s her modern spirit and the modern world finally came together. In 1922 she founded her own workshop and opened a gallery which she gave a fictitious man's name: Jean Désert. She made the acquaintance of the Romanian architect Jean Badovici (1893–1956), the publisher of the architectural magazine *L'Architecture Vivante*. She met Gerrit Rietveld (1888–1964) and Le Corbusier and began to design architecture as well as furniture. She and Badovici became lovers, and in 1927 Eileen Gray designed and built for the two of them the summerhouse E-1027 on the Côte d'Azur on the cliffs near Menton. The abstract-sounding name is a code for love: E stands for Eileen, 10 for Jean (the 10th letter of the alphabet), 2 for B(adovici) and 7 for G(ray). It is the house for which she designed the table with the same name. Like the house it is simultaneously practical, economical and elegant, a synthesis of Art Deco and Constructivism.

This brilliant duo of house and furniture could have become the start of a career as an architect, but it marked the end of her successful 1920s. The men's club of modern architecture in Paris refused to tolerate a woman in their midst. Even to the extent of artistic aggression: during a visit to E-1027 Le Corbusier painted all the walls without previously consulting Eileen Gray. She was furious, but when she asked him for an explanation he simply laughed at her.

She broke off her relationship with Badovici and returned to Paris. She lived a retiring life and was forgotten, unlike the male heroes of Modernism. Only in the 1970s did she work with the London furniture manufacturer Zeev Aram to make her furniture and lamps ready for serial production. She died in 1976 at the age of 98. The house in Menton became a ruin and was not restored and classed as a historic monument until long after her death. Her *Table E-1027*, by contrast, embarked on a triumphal march around the world and remains one of the most-plagiarised items of furniture of the twentieth century. MN

Table E-1027, 1927
Chromium-plated tubular steel,
steel plate and glass, 54–93 x 50.8 cm
(21½–36½ x 20 in.)
Photograph of Eileen Gray's *Jean Désert*
Showroom, 217, rue du Faubourg Saint-
Honoré, Paris
Dublin, National Museum of Ireland

