

Philosophical Provocation: Art and Reality

“How can we know the dancer from the dance?”

- W.B. Yeats

This session is based around Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* and Jackson Pollock's *Lavender Mist*.

In 1917 the American Society of Independent Artists advertised its wish to hold an exhibition in New York that would showcase the latest in contemporary art. There would be no jury and no prizes, simply the work. The only requirement for an artist wanting to exhibit was the payment of a small fee.

Marcel Duchamp, a Frenchman who was a director at the Society, decided to submit a piece. He visited a plumber's merchant, bought a urinal (picture), signed it 'R Mutt 1917' and, with a made-up address, sent it pseudonymously to the society, but they refused to exhibit it.



Contradicting the claim that there would be no jury, the board of directors, some of whom were outraged by the urinal (known as *Fountain*), had met to deliberate on whether it should be rejected. Though it was highlighted that the entrance fee - the only requirement - has been paid, a slim majority ultimately voted against its inclusion on the grounds that it was indecent and it wasn't art. Duchamp, without letting on that *Fountain* was his, resigned from the Society.

Fountain
by Marcel Duchamp
[1917]

QUESTION I Is *Fountain* art?

FURTHER QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Is *Fountain* indecent?
- Can something indecent be art? (Consider Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*)
- Should art be virtuous? Should it be good for us?
- Should art be pleasurable?
- Did Duchamp create *Fountain*? Is he an artist?
- At what point did it become art? When it was first made? Signed? Submitted? Rejected?
- Are urinals art?
- Should the government use taxpayers' money to exhibit urinals (as it does at Tate Modern)?

Three decades after Duchamp's *Fountain*, *Life* magazine - a hugely popular periodical in the US - featured a piece on the artist Jackson Pollock entitled, 'Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?'

Shirking the brushstroke, Pollock made his paintings by pouring, dripping and flicking paint onto a canvas laid out on the floor, using sticks and dried-out brushes as his tools. Like Duchamp, his work was met with hostility and derision. The magazine received over 500 letters in response to the article. Only a few were positive. Most took the tone of those art critics who had described Pollock's paintings as a 'mop of tangled hair' and a sign of the 'disintegration' of modern painting.



Lavender Mist
by Jackson Pollock
[1950]

QUESTION II Is *Lavender Mist* art?

FURTHER QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Should artists be highly skilled? Is art a skill?
- Should art have a clear meaning?
- Are there any limits to what art can be?
- What does it mean to call something 'art'? Does that word change the way we look at an object? Does it change the value of an object?
- If *Lavender Mist* and *Fountain* are both art, what is it they have in common?
- Is *Lavender Mist* a good picture?

Clement Greenberg, a New York critic of the time, declared Pollock, 'the most powerful painter in contemporary America', and others eventually cottoned on; Pollock is now a standard fixture in lists of great 20th century artists. Greenberg claimed that his paintings were so vital and new because they weren't about anything, they weren't pretending to be something other than what they were.

Painters of the past, the 'Old Masters', had tried to make what looked like three-dimensional images, but this was an illusion, a trick of perspective. Pollock's paintings were different. They weren't representations of the world. They were simply and purely lines of paint on a flat canvas. They were about nothing other than themselves.

QUESTION III Does *Lavender Mist* depict reality?

FURTHER QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Does it depict objects? Must a depiction of reality include a depiction of objects?
- Do emotions and moods represent reality?
- Is art separate from reality?
- Can a painting be more real than a photograph?
- If art depicts reality, why not just look at reality? Why make art?
- Does music depict reality?
- What is reality?

Source: *Provocations* by David Birch