

# “Desperately Seeking Elsie” Authenticating the Authenticity of *L.H.O.O.Q.*’s Back

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Figure 1



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Figure 2

Duchamp’s most fervent biographers, Jacques Caumont and Jennifer Gough-Cooper, tell us that Duchamp was in New York City on 22 December 1944 and that, on this day, he met up with Frederick Kiesler in the afternoon for a discussion about a forthcoming issue of *View* magazine. This issue was going to be dedicated exclusively to Duchamp. After meeting with Kiesler,

Duchamp cabled Walter Arensberg in Hollywood to inquire about the address of a photographer who had taken some pictures of Duchamp's work before World War II. Duchamp wanted to contact him again in connection with *View*.<sup>(1)</sup> The cable said, "PLEASE WIRE ADDRESS OF MR LITTLE WHO PHOTOGRAPHED MY PICTURES SOME YEARS AGO STOP VIEW MAGAZINE PREPARING [sic] DUCHAMP NUMBER WRITING= MARCEL DUCHAMP."

Not noted by his biographers but also on that same day, Duchamp ran a very important errand.<sup>(2)</sup> He asked Ms. Elsie Jenriche to confirm the authenticity of his rectified readymade *L.H.O.O.Q.* (Figure 1), made twenty-five years earlier in 1919. We know this from an inscription on the reverse side of the readymade. It reads, in ink: *This is to certify / that this is the original / "ready made" LH00Q / (Figure 2) Paris 1919 / Marcel Duchamp.* Beneath this, also in ink, is a testimony: *Witnesseth: / This 22nd day of / December, 1944 / Elsie Jenriche.*

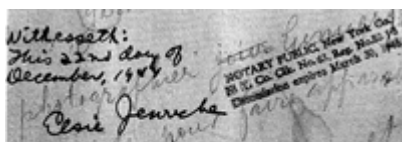
A rubber stamp to the right of Ms. Jenriche's name declares that she was a notary public (Figure 3): *NOTARY PUBLIC, New York Co. / N. Y. Co. Clk. No. 63, Reg. No. 82J-3 / Commission expires March 30, 1945.* But can we be sure of this?

The 1943 A to L volume of *Notaries Public N.Y. County Term Expires 1943* (archive #0394442), begins to eliminate doubt. Ms. Jenriche is listed, along with her profession (public stenographer) and signature. Then, in the 1945 A to K volume of the *Notaries Public N.Y. County Term Expires 1945* (archive #0394442), Elsie Jenriche is listed again, this time as a public stenographer at the Hotel St. Regis (Figure 4,5). The entry is dated 17 March 1943 with an expiration of 30 March 1945 (Figure 6). This is precisely in accordance with the stamp on the back of *L.H.O.O.Q.*

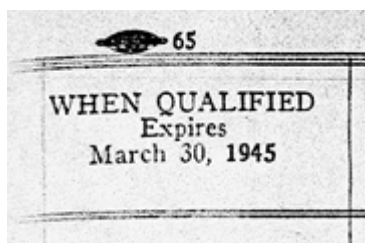
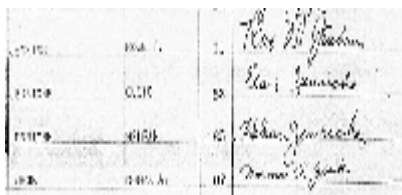
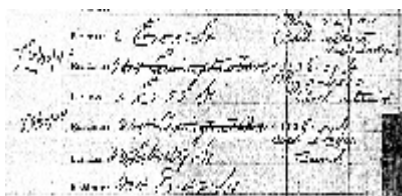
Fast forward some fifty years. On Thursday, 29 April 1999, Mr.

Jonathan van Nostren, archivist of the Division of Old Records at New York County's Surrogate Court Hall of Records, declared that Elsie Jenriche's signature on verso *L.H.O.O.Q.* is "authentic," adding that "there's no doubt that the work was properly notarized."

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- Figure 3
- Figure 4,5
- Figure 6

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## Notes:

[Footnote Return](#)

1. *Marcel Duchamp*, Pontus Hulten, ed., 1993. Why is Marcel Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel Shaking on Its Stool?

2. I am grateful to Francis M. Naumann for pointing out that four years prior to this 'errand,' Duchamp intended to sell L.H.O.O.Q. to Louise and Walter Arensberg. In a letter dated 16 July 1940, Duchamp writes from Arcachon, France: Une autre chose dans la même genre est l'original de la Joconde aux moustaches (1919) / Pensez-vous que \$100 soit trop pour la dite Joconde (Something else in the same category is the original of the Mona Lisa with a mustache (1919) / Do you think that \$100 would be too much for the so-called Mona Lisa ). The Arensbergs are not known to have acquired the work. Arturo Schwarz in his *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, vol. 2 (New York: Delano, 1997) lists the Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery in New York and the collector Mary Sisler as previous owners of L.H.O.O.Q. As for its current status, it is now in a private collection in Paris. As yet unaccounted for is the Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York, which on a label on the work's verso is credited (as Matisse Gal.) for loaning the work to the Museum of Modern Art's traveling exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* which was on display in New York from 10 October – 12 November 1961.