

# Five Small Things about *L.H.O.O.Q.*

## 1

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Figure 1

Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.*

Attempting to recall exactly when in 1919 the *L.H.O.O.Q.* had been made, Marcel Duchamp himself offered two different dates: in conversations with Sidney, Harriet and Carroll Janis in early 1953, he mentioned December;<sup>(1)</sup> in conversations with Pierre Cabanne in June 1966, October.<sup>(2)</sup> Either date—October 1919 or December 1919—may be the right one.

From early August to December 27, 1919, Duchamp resided at avenue Charles-Floquet (Paris 7e), in the home of Francis Picabia and Gabrielle Buffet (the latter pregnant with Picabia's fourth child, who was born on September 15). Picabia had been living for some time (days or weeks) in rue Émile-Augier (Paris 16e) with Germaine Everling, his mistress, who was also pregnant by him (their child was born January 5,

1920).<sup>(3)</sup> This particular situation (two places of residence, two pregnant women, etc.) would indicate that during this nearly five-month stay there were few, and perhaps no contacts between Duchamp and Picabia (except, in all likelihood, towards the end of the stay), and may explain why *L.H.O.O.Q.* was not published in issues 9 (November 1919), 10 (December 1919), or 11 (February 1920) of *391*, Picabia's journal, but rather as a Picabia version entitled *Tableau dada par Marcel Duchamp* in issue 12 (March 1920).<sup>(4)</sup> Michel Sanouillet argues that "Picabia wrote to ask him [Duchamp] for authorization to 'redo' a *Mona Lisa* for *391*, and the authorization was naturally granted. But Picabia, who had only a vague memory of Duchamp's work, contented himself with drawing the moustache."<sup>(5)</sup> In fact, Picabia simply redid "L.H.O.O.Q.," the inscription that would become the title of the readymade.<sup>(6)</sup> He also wrote these initials vertically and without periods on one of his own canvases, *Le double monde*, dated [December] 1919, which was exhibited on stage by André Breton during the First Friday of (the journal) *Littérature*, January 23, 1920, the first Dada manifestation in Paris.<sup>(7)</sup>

## 2

Owing to its title (*Tableau dada par Marcel Duchamp*), for many years the Picabia version passed for the original. Along with an enlarged replica (done in late January or early February 1930),<sup>(8)</sup> the original was not displayed until March 1930 in Paris in an exhibition titled *La peinture au défi* and with an important preface by Louis Aragon.

For a poet, novelist and critic like Aragon, a readymade was not, from that time on, merely an industrial object removed from its context and divorced from its utilitarian function.

# 3

It must be pointed out that the colour reproduction which is the basis of the work was not a postcard, despite what so many people have stated verbally or in writing.<sup>(9)</sup> A glance at the back of the reproduction, published by Arturo Schwarz in 1969 in the 1st edition of his catalogue, shows that it is not arranged in the usual way, with one space for the address and stamp (at right), and another for the “message” and the caption of the illustration (at left). The reproduction has been inscribed by Duchamp with a technical indication (in pencil) on how to photograph the picture on the front and, later, above this indication, with an official declaration in the presence of a notary (in ink) stating that it is indeed the original.<sup>(10)</sup> The only trait shared by the small palimpsest-*writing on writing* –on the back and the picture on the front is the lead [in French: *mine*] pencil markings (additions of the moustache and goatee)<sup>(11)</sup> on the Mona Lisa’s face [in French: *mine*].

But where did Duchamp obtain this colour reproduction? The most likely explanation, as he mentioned to the Janises in 1953, is that he purchased it in a boutique near the Louvre, in the rue de Rivoli, which sold inexpensive copies of reproductions of the museum’s masterpieces, a popular practice in all large cities with major museums. It should also be recalled that in April 1911 Leonardo’s highly celebrated work, painted in the early sixteenth century, had been stolen from the Louvre (and not recovered until December 1913). Since it was believed to have disappeared or been destroyed, massive quantities of colour reproductions were distributed during these years or immediately afterwards, including photographs both intact or touched up, some in postcard format.<sup>(12)</sup> As well, there was undoubtedly an awareness that 1919 was the 400th anniversary of the painter’s death. These two events (the perhaps irremediable loss and the anniversary) come into play

in Duchamp's choice.

When Duchamp sent a letter (New York, May 9, 1949) to his friend Henri-Pierre Roché asking him to purchase a vial of serum—become the vial of *Air de Paris*—to replace the one, currently broken, he had brought back from Paris in late December 1919 for his friends Louise and Walter Arensberg, he wrote:

Could you go into the pharmacy on the corner of rue Blomet and the rue de Vaugirard (if it's still there, *that's where I bought the first ampoule*) and buy an ampoule like this one: 125 c.c. and of the same measurements as the drawing [...]

—If not rue Blomet, somewhere else—but, as far as possible, the same shape and size, thanks.<sup>(13)</sup>

A glance at a map of Paris shows that there is no corner of Blomet-Vaugirard, since these streets (15e) run parallel to each other! I use this example to demonstrate that a specific indication, even on the part of the author, may quite simply be inaccurate, even erroneous. And so it was for *L.H.O.O.Q.*, postcard.

And when Duchamp, in "Apropos of Myself" (1962-1964), describes this colour reproduction as "a cheap chromo," it must be pointed out that in French as in English, *chromo* is the abbreviation of *chromolithographie*, "*image lithographique en couleur*" (*Petit Robert I*), and *chromolithograph* "a color print produced by chromolithography" (*The American Heritage of the English Language*). In French, however, *chromo*, now a masculine (and no longer feminine) form, has a pejorative sense: "*toute image en couleur de mauvais goût*" [any colour print in bad taste]. This added meaning, which highlights the notion of taste, introduces an aesthetic, even artistic, note; such is not the case in English, where *cheap*, in this example, signifies "of poor quality," but particularly "inexpensive."<sup>(14)</sup>

# 4

When, during his 1966 conversations with Cabanne, Duchamp spoke of Picabia and *L.H.O.O.Q.*, he used the opportunity, if I may say so, to add:

Another time, Picabia did a cover for *391* with the portrait of Georges Carpentier, the boxer; he and I were as much alike as two drops of water, which is why it was amusing. It was a composite portrait of Georges Carpentier and me.<sup>(15)</sup>

During the summer of 1923, Georges Carpentier went to Picabia's home in Tremblay-sur-Mauldre, the little village where the artist had been living since 1922. Picabia did a profile of the boxer, who even signed the portrait. When Picabia, over a year later, decided to put this portrait on the first page of the last issue of *391* (issue 19, October 1924), he crossed out Carpentier's signature incompletely (it can still be seen under the cross-out markings) and added "Rose Sélavy / by Picabia".<sup>(16)</sup>

Accordingly, if, by contiguity, this "composite portrait" likewise designates *L.H.O.O.Q.*, Duchamp's 1961 statement makes sense:

The curious thing about that moustache and goatee is that when you look at it the *Mona Lisa* becomes a man. It is not a woman disguised as a man; it is a real man, and that was my discovery, without realizing it at the time.

In 1919, a woman (Mona Lisa in *L.H.O.O.Q.*) is also a man, just as in 1920-1921, a man (Marcel Duchamp as Rose, then Rose, Sélavy) is also a woman.

# 5

Without actually entering into an interpretation of the famous readymade, one notes, nonetheless, that the 400th anniversary of Leonardo's death may have been not only a trigger (as an anniversary), but also a constraint (as a set of numbers), with the 4 indicating that only four letters could be used, and the 00 suggesting that one of them—which must be an 0—be reduplicated.<sup>(18)</sup> As can be seen afterwards as well, these four letters (as Duchamp states in "Apropos of Myself") are in alphabetical order—H, L, O, Q—in the name of the street (cHarLes-flOQuet) where he lived at the time. But they are also in the name of the process at the basis of this reproduction, which is *cHromoLithOgraphiQue*.

And I note that in New York the name of the notary chosen by Duchamp, whose signature on December 22, 1944 certified that the work was the original ("This is to certify that this is the original 'ready made' L H O O Q Paris 1919"),<sup>(19)</sup> was Elsie Jenriche.<sup>(20)</sup> How can we fail to see that she was there because of her name as well (which, by this fact, is a metatextual reference to one of the issues in the work), a mix of *I* in English or *Ich* in German and of *else*, and that the issue of "gender" (*jenre*, another way of spelling *genre*) comes into play, since *else* rhymes with the feminine (*elle*: La Joconde, La Gioconda), which in turn rhymes with the masculine (*L*: Leonardo, Louvre), she having become a he!

Finally, if we trace a vertical line at a right angle to the top of the work and passes it through the centre of the moustache, it becomes clear that, owing to the angle of the face, the line runs alongside the nose, at left, of the female—and now also male—figure and arrives "down below" (as Duchamp would say in 1961), exactly between "L.H." and "O.O.Q." This reduplication of the 0 is indicated once again.

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# Notes

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1. Still unedited, the conversations with the Janis family (Sidney, the father, Harriet, the mother, and Carroll, the son) occurred on the occasion of Duchamp's preparation of the catalogue and hanging of the exhibition *Dada 1916-1923* at the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, April 15 – May 9, 1953. In the integrated chronology of the catalogue *Joseph Cornell / Marcel Duchamp... in resonance*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, October 8, 1998 – January 3, 1999, and at the Menil Collection, Houston, January 22 – May 16, 1999 (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz Verlag, 1998), 277, Susan Davidson, without mentioning her information source, gives the month of December 1919.

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2. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, translated by Ron Padgett, introduction by Robert Motherwell, preface by Salvador Dali, appreciation by Jasper Johns (New York: Da Capo, 1971), 62.

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3. It was a day after the meeting of André Breton, who had been invited there, and twelve days before Tristan Tzara arrived there to live on January 17, his stay coinciding with the start of what Michel Sanouillet called "Dada à Paris"; see his general survey, *Dada à Paris* (Paris: Pauvert, 1965). The seat of the "MoUvEmEnT DADA, Berlin, Genève, Madrid, New York, Zurich," according to the letter paper with this heading, was now in Paris. Furthermore, I notice the following coincidence (which was perhaps not a coincidence in 1919, considering the state of knowledge on Leonardo's work): when Duchamp was in Paris that year, Picabia's two women (his

wife and mistress) were pregnant with sons; when, in the spring of 1503, Francesco del Giocondo commissioned Leonardo to paint a portrait of his wife, she had already given him two sons (in May 1496 and December 1502). See Daniel Arasse, *Léonard de Vinci. Le rythme du monde* (1997; Paris: Hazan, 2003), 388-89. The rhyme, here, is in between *Mona Lisa* [*Joconde*] and fertile [*féconde*].

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4. To Cabanne, Duchamp says *Tableau dada de* [*sic*] *Marcel Duchamp*.

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5. Michel Sanouillet, *Francis Picabia et «391»* (Paris: Losfeld, 1966), II: 113. Volume I is a facsimile edition of *391* [1917-1924] expanded with various unedited documents (Paris: Losfeld, 1960). Since Duchamp had been in New York since January 6 and no 12 of *391* did not appear (Sanouillet specifies) until the end of March, one might assume that Duchamp, interviewed by Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Abrams, 2nd edition, 1970), 476, only dimly recalled the circumstance: "My original did not arrive in time, and to delay the printing of *391* no further, Picabia himself drew the moustache on the *Mona Lisa* but forgot the goatee."

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6. I say "the inscription that would become the title of the readymade" since, in the poster-catalogue of the exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery, Duchamp wrote: "*La Joconde*, postcard with pencil." In *Marcel Duchamp* (London: Trianon Press, and New York: Grove Press, 1959), Robert Lebel first uses the inscription as the title. In *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Abrams, 1st edition, 1969), Arturo Schwarz first indicates the exact dimensions of the readymade: 19.7 x 12.4 cm. (7  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 4  $\frac{7}{8}$  in.).



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7. The two 0's in "L H 0 0 Q," themselves in the centre of two other 0's shaped like strings forming 8's, or propeller blades, but without an axis, soft and bent by the wind, are equally—and doubly—the 0's of "d0uble" and "w0rld" [*m0nde*]. The small gap at the top left in one of these other 0's is matched only by the small gap in the À of "À DOMICILE" [at home], another inscription, and by the small addition—the tail—of the Q in "L H 0 0 Q." One way of creating an ironic coincidence between mathematical speculations (top0LOGY) and commercial speculations (delivery "à domicile", that is, at home [*AU LOGIS*]).

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8. "I made, just before leaving Paris, a Mona Lisa, for Aragon [...] / Man Ray has the 1st Mona Lisa", letter from Duchamp to Jean Crotti, Villefranche-sur-mer, February 6, 1930, in *Affectionately, Marcel : The Selected Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp*, edition by Francis Naumann and Hector Obalk, translation by Jill Taylor (Ghent and Amsterdam : Ludion Press, 2000), 171.

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9. Three examples: Duchamp himself in 1953 (see note 6); Ecke Bonk, *Marcel Duchamp: The Box in a Valise. Inventory of an Edition* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 241; Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 221.

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10. I note that Duchamp never used a postcard in subsequent replicas.

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11. In the original French version of this article I use the plural, as did Duchamp in April 1942, when he indicated in ink at the bottom of the model of one of Picabia's two versions (that reproduced in 391): *Moustaches par Picabia / barbiche par Marcel Duchamp.*" In French, the

singular and plural are used indifferently for certain words, for example: *ciseau* and *ciseaux* (two blades), *pantalon* and *pantalons* (two legs), *moustache* and *moustaches* (two cheeks or, simply, two sides of the face). Furthermore, I note that the indication, inscribed by Picabia on two lines pencilled vertically to the right of the reproduction, begins with two liaisons—the one starting the l of “1 cliché” on the first line, and the other starting the s of “sans” on the second line—which are matched only by the tips of the moustache! For a reproduction with commentary, see Francis Naumann, *The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, catalogue of the exhibition at Achim Moeller Fine Art, New York, October 2, 1999 – January 15, 2000. If, in fact, Arp came into possession of these two versions during his trip to Paris in April 1942, his meeting with Duchamp (they had known each other since 1926) could only have taken place in the non-occupied zone of southern France (in Grasse where Arp lived or in Sanary where Duchamp was living before his departure for the United States on May 14th).

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12. See the two postcards dated 1914, reproduced in Roy McMullen, *Mona Lisa: The Picture & the Myth* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1975).

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13. *Affectionately, Marcel*, 272.

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14. This is, moreover, Michel Sanouillet’s translation of this passage: “*un chromo [...] bon marché*”, in “À propos de moi-même,” *Duchamp du signe* (Paris : Flammarion, 1975), 227. Naumann follows exactly the same train of thought: “an inexpensive chromo-lithographic color reproduction”, *The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 10.

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15. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*,

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16. See Michel Sanouillet, *Francis Picabia et "391,"* 166. One can see (391, 127) Carpentier's signature and Picabia's addition under some of the typewritten lines printed at the bottom of the page.

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17. Herbert Crehan, "Dada," *Evidence* (Toronto), no. 3 (autumn 1961).

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18. These two 0's also evoke, by means of the rhyme "0." / water [eau], the mountain lake and the plains lake in the *Mona Lisa*, respectively at the top right and a little farther down left of the landscape dominated by the loggia where Lisa, the model, is. And what about the winding road that leaves the plains lake, and which is echoed in the tail of the "Q" (calligraphied by Duchamp)?

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19. A presentative sentence in another, the referent of "This" (This, as in "This is my Body" or in "This is a work of art") being cataphoric (that is, it follows the pronoun): in the first case, it is "the original 'ready made';" in the second, it is the entire proposition that shapes the first case.

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20. In a short article titled "Desperately Seeking Elsie: Authenticating the Authenticity of *L.H.O.O.Q.*'s Back" (*Tout-Fait*, New York, vol. I, no. 1, December 1999), Thomas Girst informs us that this lady was a public stenographer at the Hotel St. Regis, New York, from 1943 to 1945.