‘Paris Air’ or ‘Holy Ampule’?

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left: Duchamp as the Black
King in Hans Richter’s 8×8, 1957
right: Duchamp in 1957, wearing
a crown made for his 70th
birthday (photographyby Denise Hare)

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left:**Figure 1.**
Salvador Dalí, Apotheosis
of the Dollar, 1965
right: **Figure 2.**
First known image
of Clovis I and the miracle of
the ‘Holy Ampule,’ ca. 9th Century

In January 1968, Salvador Dalí wrote the preface for the English translation of Pierre Cabanne's Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, stating that "Marcel Duchamp could have been a king if, instead of making the Chocolate Grinder, he made the Holy Ampulla, the unique, divine readymade, to anoint himself as king. Duchamp then could have been crowned at Rheims." [1] Duchamp and Dalí, "treat[ing] each other with great respect," [2]had spent several summers together since the late 1950s, in the small fishing village and surrealist haven of Cadaqués, on the northern tip of Spain's Mediterranean coast.

Dalí had likened Duchamp to a king once before, in a painting of 1965 with the rather gargantuan title Salvador Dalí in the Act of Painting Gala in the Apotheosis of the Dollar, in which One may also Perceive to the Left Marcel Duchamp Disguised as Louis XIV, behind a Curtain in the Style of Vermeer, which is but the Invisible Monument Face of the Hermes of Praxiteles. [3](Figure 1).

While the painting establishes Duchamp as France's sun king and grand monarch, Dalí, with his introductory remarks for the publication of Dialogues, had yet another ruler in mind: Clovis I, pagan founder of the Frankish kingdom in the early Middle Ages who converted to Christianity only after the combined efforts of his wife and the bishop inspired him to do so. He was finally baptized at Rheims around 500 A.D. with 'le Sainte Ampoule' or 'Holy Ampule' [4] (Figure 2).

Ever since Clovis, a 'holy ampulla' has been used to consecrate the kings of France. Usually in the shape of a small vial with a large paunch and an elongated neck, its form became diversified in the 16th century. [5] The *Museum of Antiquities* in Rouen, Duchamp's birthplace, holds two such ampules designated for holy water, possibly from the middle of the 18th century (Figure 3). [6] It should not come as a surprise that these bulging flasks more closely resemble

Duchamp's *Air de Paris* of 1919 (Figure 4) than any pharmaceutical instruments of the early 20th century (Figure 5). In fact, experts testify that the shape presented by Duchamp as a readymade ampule looks nothing like a standard medical ampule of his time. (Listen to a message left on *ASRL*'s answering machine by Professor Gregory Higby, School of Pharmacy, University of Wisconsin, Summer 1998.) The apparent oddity of a medical ampule containing a hook within its design adds to the argument that Duchamp's ampule stems from an earlier period. [7]

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- Figure 3.
  Two Holy Ampules, ca. 1750s,
  height: 35 mm (photograph by Yohann
  Deslandes, Musees Departementaux
  de la Seine-Maritime
- Figure 4.
  Marcel Duchamp, *Air de Paris*,
  1919 (Philadelphia Museum of Art)

- Figure 5.
  Late 19th and 20th century
  pharmaceutical glass ampules
  (Collection Rhonda Roland Shearer,
  New York)

click to enlarge



Figure 6.
Marcel Duchamp, *Comb*,
1916 (Philadelphia Museum of Art)



Figure 7.
Set of Surrealist
Postcards, Paris, 1937
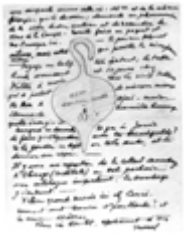


Figure 8.
Marcel Duchamp, Letter to Henri
Pierre Roché, 9 May 1949
(Carlton Lake Collection,
The University of Texas at Austin)

The ampule is not his only readymade linked to coronation ceremonies. In Duchamp’s inscribed *Comb* of 1916 (Figure 6), we note another object commonly used for this grand occasion. Those combs were often made of “precious metals, carved and

adorned with Scriptural and other subjects.” [8]

Paris Air was brought to New York by Duchamp as a present from Paris for Louise and Walter Arensberg. [9] Duchamp claimed that he bought the ampule from a Parisian pharmacist. Presumably containing “Sérum Physiologique,” the pharmacist was asked to empty the glass bottle, let it fill up with air and then reseal it. *Paris Air*, first published as a postcard in 1937, was titled *ampoule contenant 50 cc d’air de Paris* (*Ampule Containing 50 cc air of Paris*) (Figure 7). [10] While visiting the Arensbergs in Hollywood during the spring of 1949, he discovered that his present to them had beeen broken. (It was later restored).

He immediately wrote to his close friend Henri Pierre Roché, asking him to find a similar one in Paris. In a letter dated 9 May 1949, Duchamp explained: May I ask you for the following service: / Walter Arensberg broke his ampule / ‘Air de Paris’ – I’ve promised him to / replace it – / Could you go to that pharmacy on the corner of rue Blomet and rue / de Vaugirard (if it’s still there) and buy / [this is where I have bought the first ampule /] an ampule like this: 125 cc and of the same / dimensions as the drawing; ask the pharmacist / to empty it and reseal the / glass with a lamp – wrap it and / send it to me here – if not on rue Blomet / than elsewhere / but as much as possible the same form thank you (Figure 8). [11]

click to enlarge



Figure 9.

Marcel Duchamp, *50 cc Air de Paris*, 1949 (Philadelphia Museum of Art)

About three weeks later, in a letter written 29 May 1949, Duchamp tells his friend (Roché seems to have suggested to present the Arensbergs with a miniature version of the ampule from the Boîte instead) “that the ampule must be the size I gave you, because that’s the size of the (broken) original.Those in the valises are scaled down, like all reproductions (generally speaking). [12]This second version for the ‘life-size’ ampule (titled and signed on a label: 50cc air de Paris réplique type / 1949 R.S.), now in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, is generally assumed to be a selected readymade by Henri-Pierre Roché. It seems odd that after an apparently unsuccessful search for the “real thing,” Duchamp’s friend “found” – almost twenty years after Duchamp’s initial Paris Air – an object closely resembling but strangely different from the version of 1919. (Figure 9)

Most likely, Roché was aware that the small-scale replicas of the ampule which had been made in the 1940’s (for Duchamp’s Boîte) had been created by the firm of Obled, laboratory glass blowers, located close to Duchamp’s studio in Paris at that time. [13] Furthermore, glass experts tell us that pharmacists would have easily had the ability to alter or make glass objects. [14] We suggest that the probable scenario was that Roché eventually asked a pharmacist to duplicate the odd shape of Paris Air – just as Duchamp had done when he conceived of the work in 1919.

click to enlarge



Figure 10.
Marcel Duchamp, *50 cc Air de Paris* (small-scale version for the *Boíte-en-Valise*), 1940



Measuring the Schwarz-version of *Air de Paris*, 1964, at the Art Science Research Laboratory, Inc., New York

In an interview of 1959, Duchamp confirms George Heard Hamilton's suggestion that the 1919 version of Paris Air was the last of his actual readymades. [(15)] Let us consider four versions of Duchamp's ampule, including the 1964 Schwarz edition. All of these versions are obviously four different sizes. Puzzled by Duchamp's consistent '50 cc' title, we measured the volumes of the 1964 Schwarz edition and the Boîte miniature version. The Schwarz version measures approximately 123 cc; the original and the Roché versions appear to be slightly larger in volume and would therefore measure more. Even the 300 miniatures of the Boîte failed to match their shared name of 50 cc of Paris Air, for their volume measures approx. 35 cc

But why then do we trust the original ampule to be a readymade when it holds more than double the amount stated by Duchamp, when its second full-size version is signed on a label with the initials of Duchamp's pseudonym Rrose Sélavy (resembling

the lettering of the Rouen ampules)? Moreover, the 'Sérum Physiologique' on the label of the first version of Air de Paris is preceded by a small star (*), an asterisk, commonly used to distinguish words of obscure character or wrong usage. [16] Where is the *50 cc of Paris Air*?

Notes

Footnote Return 1. "L'Échecs, C'est Moi," in Pierre Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, (New York: Da Capo, 1967)13-14. Dalí had published two articles on Duchamp before – "The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes," *Art News* 58 (April 1959): 22-25 and "Why They Attack the 'Mona Lisa,'" *Art News* 62 (March 1963): 36, 63-64.

Footnote Return 2. Calvin Tomkins, Duchamp. A Biography (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 402.

Footnote Return 3. For further information on Duchamp's and Dalí's years in Cadaqués and a brief discussion of the painting, see *Tout-Fait*'s interview with Timothy Phillips.

Footnote Return 4. The first recorded mention of an ampule with holy attributes was in connection to Clovis I. In 869, the archbishop of Reims held up a small bottle of holy water at the coronation of Charles le Chauve and declared that "Glorious Clovis, King of France, was consecrated with a holy water which came down from the sky and which we still possess." According to legend, *le Saint Ampoule* or "Holy Ampule" which was filled with this holy water had been brought to the sanctuary of Saint Remi by a dove and then used in the sacred ceremony which crowned Clovis as King. The story follows the story of Christ: the spirit of God descended from the sky in the form of a dove. As a result, beginning with

Clovis, the kings of France were crowned in a fashion which implied that they had been "chosen" and that God's will would be done. (The Holy Ampule can still be found in Saint Remi, at Reims.) See Patrick Demouy, "Du Baptême du Sacre," *Connaissance des Arts* 92 (1996): 7-9.

Footnote Return 5. See Jacqueline Bellanger, Verre. D'Usage et de Prestige. France 1500-1800, (Paris: Éditions de l'Amateur, 1988); Etienne Michon, "La Collection d'Ampoules à Eulogies du Musée du Louvre," *Mélang. Archeol.* Hist. 12 (Rome, 1892): 183-201. We are grateful to Virginia Wright and Rosalind S. Young of the Corning Museum of Glass, New York, for drawing these sources to our attention.

Footnote Return 6. Laurence Flavigny, conservator of the Musée des Antiquités, Rouen, could not confirm how long the ampules have been in the museum's collection.

Footnote Return 7. For the first discussion and questioning of the status of Duchamp's glass ampule (with a hook) as a readymade, see Rhonda Roland Shearer's "Marcel Duchamp's Impossible Bed and Other 'Not' Readymade Objects: A Possible Route of Influence From Art to Science", Part 1, *Art & Academe* 10, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 26-62. Shearer argues that historical evidence and analysis of their forms reveal the readymades were not unaltered, mass-produced objects as Duchamp claimed. Monika Wagner, professor of Art History at the University of Hamburg, Germany, also discusses the impossibility of Duchamp's ampule in her forthcoming book "Das Material der Kunst" (Munich: Beck, 2000).

Footnote Return 8. Henry John Frasey, "The Use of the Comb in Church Ceremonies," *The Antiquary* XXXII (January/December 1896): 312-316.

Footnote Return 9. “I thought of it as a present for Arensberg, who had everything money could buy. So I brought him an ampule of Paris Air.” –Marcel Duchamp in Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, vol. II, (New York: Delano, 1997), 676. The quote in Schwarz’ book is taken from Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965), 99.

Footnote Return 10. See Ecke Bonk, The Box in a Valise (New York: Rizzoli, 1989) 201-202.

Footnote Return 11. Translation by Julia Koteliansky; letter reproduced in *William Camfield, Marcel Duchamp: Fountain*(Houston: Houston Fine Arts Press, 1989) 76.

Footnote Return

12. Bonk, The Box in a Valise, 202.

Footnote Return 13. Ibid., 202.

Footnote Return 14. In a fax of 27 April 1998, Virginia Wright of the Corning Museum of Glass, New York, writes:

> *“Pharmacists in the early 20th century had training in chemistry, and one of the first things taught in chemistry classes is lamp working (a.k.a. glass-blowing)”; also see: W.A. Shenstone, The Methods of Glass Blowing and of Working Silica in the Oxy-Gas Flame, London: Longman’s, 1916; p. 7 describes a burner useful in small laboratories (similar books were widely available in France at the time).*

Footnote Return 15. The interview was conducted by Richard Hamilton and George Heard Hamilton for BBC around October 1959. It was published as an audiocassette by *Audio Arts Magazine* 2, no. 4 (1976). According to Dieter Daniels this "last, actual readymade" was actually the first one to be commented upon in print. See Daniels, Duchamp und die Anderen, (Köln: DuMont, 1992), 188-189, 330. See also Henry McBride, "The Walter Arensbergs," *The Dial* (July 1920).

Footnote Return 16. In his postumously published notes (Paul Matisse, ed., Marcel Duchamp Notes, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1980), Duchamp twice refers to 'asstricks' (notes 217 and 235), a possible play on the word "asterisk." [In this context it is worth mentioning that the verso of note 32 – an important note on the *infrathin* – reads *50 cent. cubes d'air de Paris* (not reproduced).] In an e-mail of 6 December 1999, André Gervais wrote:

> *Yes, of course, "asstricks" and "asterisks" is a play on words, almost*
> *a pun (because they do not sound exactly alike). You will find in my book*
> *(La Raie Alitée d'Effects. Apropos of Marcel Duchamp, Québec: Hurtubise, 1984, p. 242) the following: "asstricks: tours du cul, arse et attrapes, trucs cul(s) lent(s), etc."*
>
> *I translate to help you:*
> ** "tours du cul" = asstricks, and "tours" is the anagram of "trous" = holes (so "trou du cul" = asshole);*
> ** "arse et attrapes", almost a pun (with French and English words): arse = cul, and "farces et attrapes" = tricks and jokes;*
> ** "trucs" = tricks or contraptions, "cul(s) lent(s)" = slow ass(es), a pun on "truculent" = realistic, tough.*
>
> *For the asterisks, also see his manuscript page The of 1915*

[Schwarz, 1997, cat. no. 334, p. 638]. And do not forget that "asstricks" is a word (probably invented by MD) with a "tr" in it: as you probably know, Duchamp said to Cabanne that in the title Jeune homme triste dans un train [Sad Young Man on a Train, (1911), see: Schwarz, 1997, cat. no. 238, p. 559], the young man is "triste" (a word with a "tr") because – ! – he is in a train (another word with a "tr"): the "tr", here, he said too, is very ("tr"ès, in French) impo"rt"ant.

Fig. 4, 6, 9, 10 © 1999 Succession Marcel Duchamp, ARS, NY/ADAGP, Paris.