

# Response to “Boats & Deckchairs”

To the Editor:

In their essay on a note by Marcel Duchamp about the fourth dimension (*Natural History*, 12/99-1/00), Stephen Jay Gould and Rhonda Roland Shearer emphasize the fact that no other previous Duchamp scholar has ever noticed that the text of this particular note relates to the image of three boats in a landscape that appears on its verso. Although they go on to explain that there are various reasons for why this observation had not been made before – without explanation – they specifically single out my writings as an example of a Duchamp scholar who missed this very point.

This is a perfect example of biased and prejudicial scholarship. Since it was employed by a Darwinian like Gould, it is difficult to resist comparing his actions to that of natural selection, one that, in this case, functions within the ongoing evolution of his and his wife's indomitable quest to find hidden meanings in the work of Marcel Duchamp. If these writers were really going to be fair in assessing my powers of observation, after having cited my description of this note, they would have gone on to quote the very next sentence of my writings: “Although it has been assumed that these paper fragments were selected arbitrarily and that they bear no relationship to the subject of the notes themselves, at least one note referring to the ‘legs of the [Chocolate] Grinder’ appears, appropriately, on the verso of a torn fragment of candy wrapping advertising the town of ‘Hershey, PA.’” (*The Mary and William Sisler Collection*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984, p. 143). In the note discussed by Gould and Shearer, I did not notice a relationship between the subject of the fourth dimension and the image appearing on its verso for one very specific reason: I am not wholly convinced

that there is one (not when I wrote about these notes over fifteen years ago, nor even now after having read their elaborate argument).

First of all, these authors claim that “Duchamp’s object is not, in fact, a commercially produced postcard but an original painting, almost surely by Duchamp himself.” This is a perfectly reckless assertion, particularly since it is made without a single shred of supporting evidence. Stylistically, the image bears no relationship whatsoever to any other work by Duchamp from this period, unless, of course, Duchamp feigned an artistic style totally foreign to his own artistic sensitivities (even if this were the case, then we are presented with no reasonable explanation for why Duchamp would have employed such a strategy). The authors then point out that on the verso of this image, “a vertical line in the middle and four horizontal lines to the right” were “inked in by hand” to “mimic the address guides of a normal postcard.” These lines would prove critical, for according to the authors, they provide a clue that the image on the other side must be rotated in order to be understood for its fourth dimensional message. But even here, how can we be sure that Duchamp drew these lines? I – for one – doubt very much that he did.

I share the belief that Duchamp’s note was written on a “pseudo-postcard,” that is to say, a watercolor executed on a relatively thick piece of drawing paper and cut to resemble the size and format of an ordinary, commercially-produced postcard. But it is hardly necessary to prove that Duchamp himself physically rendered this image; simulated, one-of-a-kind postcards of this type can still be purchased on the streets of Montmartre to this very day, affording tourists the option of sending their correspondents relatively inexpensive original works of art. In order to make the function of their product clear, it is usually the artist who draws the address lines on the verso of the image as well as.

It is, of course, entirely possible that Duchamp might have noticed a casual resemblance between the three rather poorly-executed boats on the facing side of this card and an overhead view of deckchairs, causing him to muse on the subject of the fourth dimension (just as I had earlier noticed that an advertisement for Hershey's Chocolate inspired Duchamp to write about the leg of the *Chocolate Grinder*). But I do not – for a moment – believe that he drew this image to serve as an illustration of his ideas. The boats on this card bear a resemblance to one another *not* because their proportionate sizes were meant to illustrate a concept of the fourth dimension, but simply because after having drawn literally hundreds of similar boats, for the sake of convenience and expediency, the Montmartre artist repeated the same pattern that – by then – had been engrained in his visual memory.

Lastly, I find it preposterous that in such a highly respected publication devoted to the sciences, the authors are allowed to refer to their relatively-minor observation as a “discovery.” Indeed, the following claim is highlighted in the text: “Shearer *discovered* the key as we indulged in our favorite pastime: playing mental chess with Duchampian puzzles.” If these authors see only puzzles in Duchamp, then I am afraid they shall remain forever blinded to his most important message. In my opinion, they would be better guided by following the advice contained in one of his most memorable statements: “There is no solution because there is no problem.”

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