

# THE MAMA OF DADA: Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven The True Mastermind Behind Fountain

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## ABSTRACT

The most disruptive sculpture that broke the art world and the notion of art itself; the notorious *Fountain*, by Marcel Duchamp changed art history forever. Since the anonymous submission to the salon of independent artists in New York 1917, art lovers have never been able to come to a consensus about the piece. Debates and disputes polarized the opinion of the public. As a result, the name Duchamp had become synonymous with the term *Readymade*, *Dada* and *the avant-garde*. Absurdly, sufficient evidence suggests that the French artist Duchamp was not the artist behind *Fountain*. The female Dada poet and German American contemporary artist, Baroness Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven, was the mastermind behind it.

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Any student of Western Art History would have undoubtedly heard of *Fountain* (Fig 1). This piece changed the course of Art History forever. Shattering all pre-existing artistic conventions, *Fountain* sparked controversy and debates. Is it art? If it is, then what counts as art? Does technical artistic skill hold any value? These are normally the questions that circulate when the name *Fountain*, or when the terms *Readymade*, *Dada* and *the avant-garde* are discussed.



**Fig 1:** Howarth, S., & Mundy, J. (2015, August). *Fountain*. Tate. Retrieved November 12, 2019, from <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573>

According to common lore, in 1917, a French artist named Marcel Duchamp took an ordinary urinal, an article of everyday life. He placed it on its side and signed it ‘R.Mutt 1917’. Duchamp submitted his new ‘creation’ anonymously to the salon of independent artists in April in New York, 1917 (The Art Story, 2009). The salon, an organization that praised itself for being avant-garde and modern, claimed that they would accept any work of art that was submitted, as long as the artist paid the submission fee (The Art Story, 2009). Duchamp paid the \$6 and entered Fountain. As one would predict, it got rejected. Why? Because it was an object of sanitary waste. How could a mass-produced common object, let alone one that was associated with bodily fluids, be displayed in one of the most prestigious sculpture exhibitions in New York? In fact, could it even be exhibited as an artwork in itself? Many members of the public decided that it should not, it was simply ‘indecent’ and ‘vulgar’. However, an anonymous editorial, believed to be written by the artist Beatrice Wood, states:

*“Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain (or not) has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object.”* (Duchamp & Ray, 1917).

In other words, what Ms Wood had indicated, is that artwork is considered artwork, depending on the context. Neither technical skill nor draftsmanship is required; all that matters is the concept and the context. Fountain was not Duchamp’s first readymade; he had created his first one in 1914 (The Art Story, 2011), but this particular piece took the art world by storm. (Today, a symbol of the Dada movement and the avant-garde.) Though the original version is now lost, sixteen copies had been made in the 1960s, and are currently residing in major art museums across the world (Howarth & Mundy, 2015).

This is the story that historians have accepted to be true, as is reinforced on official websites, such as the Tate modern and Art History textbooks. But there is sufficient evidence to support a very probable alternative theory; the theory that may reveal the true artist behind one of the most influential sculptures of the 20th century. Speculations have been raised concerning the intellectual property of Fountain; scholars proposed alternative theories before. Could this iconic artwork have been misattributed to Marcel Duchamp? If so, who was the true mastermind behind this artistic milestone?

To recognize the artwork fully, it is necessary to understand the personal history of Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven and her role within the art world.

Baroness Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven (né Else Hildegard Plöetz) was born in 1874 in Prussia, in what is known today as Germany (The Art Story, 2017). She was known for her Dada erotic poetry, feminist performance art, and sculptures. Fully immersing herself in the spirit of Dada, Freytag-Loringhoven often practiced gender-bending; and incorporated her sexuality into her performances. Even from her earliest days, she was a renegade. At 18 years of age, Loringhoven left home and moved to Berlin, where she met her first husband, Felix Paul Greve. Loringhoven was born into a family of meagre means, and she continued to struggle financially for most of her life. In 1909, she and her husband, Greve, reached absolute bankruptcy, partly because of Greve’s gambling addiction. To escape their financial situation, Loringhoven helped fake Greve’s death to make it look as if it were suicide. Subsequently, the two ran away together and left for the United States, settling in Pittsburgh, where they set up a small farm together (The Art Story, 2017). However, this period of blissfulness did not last long; their relationship came to an end when Greve left for Canada. Loringhoven was alone, with little knowledge of English. Not knowing what to do, she wandered around Ohio and Virginia, modelling for artists and photographers (Linda Lappin, 2004) (The Art Story, 2017).

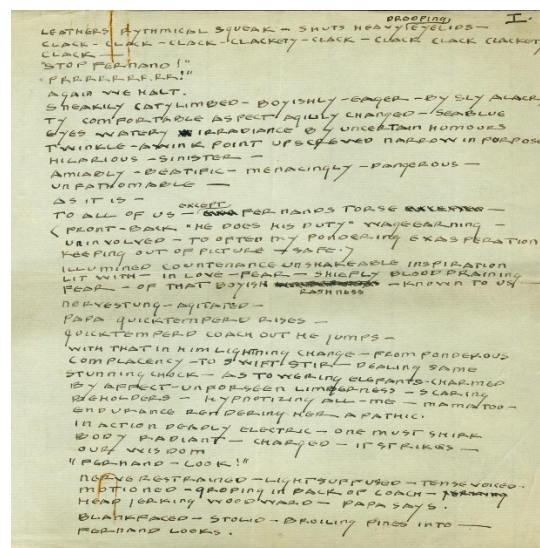
Finally, in 1913, Loringhoven settled in New York City. In that same year, she met and married her second husband, Baron Leopold von Freytag Loringhoven. On her wedding morning, as Loringhoven was walking down the street, she came across a small, discarded piece of metal (The Art Story, 2017). According to her unfinished memoir, written in the later years of her life; she approached it and picked it up. At that moment, she was struck by inspiration and anointed the small metal ring as a piece of art, entitling it ‘*Enduring Ornament*’. This was the first-ever readymade; one entire year before Duchamp created his first readymade in 1914- the concept he was applauded for inventing (The

Art Story, 2017). From then on, she started collecting discarded objects of everyday life and giving them new titles under the name of art. In other words, she recontextualized them. Loringhoven often gave them names with religious connotations, such as ‘God’ or ‘Cathedral’. At the time, Loringhoven and Duchamp were very close friends. In fact, Duchamp looked up to her, admiring her innovativeness and fresh ideas. He once said; “*She is not futuristic. She is the future,*” (The Art Story, 2017). It comes as no surprise that Duchamp made this remark- she was generations ahead of her time. Wearing spoons as earrings, postcard stamps as makeup, cakes as hats, and she was even arrested multiple times for both public nudity and wearing ‘men’s attire’ (Linda Lappin, 2004). Disregarded as a madwoman for years, Loringhoven is now acknowledged as America’s first Dada artist (in the estimation of Jane Heap), the predecessor of feminist performance art, body art, and creator of the readymade (Linda Lappin, 2004).

The primary piece of evidence that supports this alternative theory is a letter sent by Duchamp to his sister, Suzanne, who was in Paris at the time. Shortly after the submission of *Fountain*, Duchamp sent this letter, reading:

“*One of my female friends, who has adopted the masculine pseudonym Richard Mutt, (or R.Mutt) sent in a porcelain urinal as a sculpture...*” (Higgs, 2015).

Here, Duchamp has *admitted* that the sculpture was not his. In addition to this honest confession, the handwriting on the signature of *Fountain* perfectly matches the handwriting on Loringhoven’s poetry drafts (Fig 2) (Fig 1) (Loringhoven, ND.). The name ‘R.Mutt’ was traced back to an artist living in rural Philadelphia, in a town exactly where Loringhoven was staying at one point in time (Higgs, 2015). In 1950, by the time that both Loringhoven and Stieglitz (the photographer of *Fountain*), had died, Duchamp had let his name become associated with *Fountain*- as up until that point, the artist behind the genius sculpture had remained anonymous (Howarth & Mundy, 2015). Duchamp claimed that ‘R.Mutt’ was a play on words and that he intended to sign it after the ironworks company that he bought the urinal from (J.L.Mott Ironworks on Fifth avenue). He claimed that Mott seemed ‘too similar’, so he changed it to *Mutt*, after the *Mutt and Jeff* comics which were popular at the time. ‘R.Mutt’ also could have related to the German word ‘armut’, meaning ‘poverty’. However, the company that had supposedly sold Duchamp the urinal did not sell that model, therefore proving Duchamp’s claims impossible (Higgs, 2015).



**Fig 2:** Loringhoven, Elsa von Freytag (ND.) Coach Rider [draft of poem] *Digital Collections, University of Maryland*. Retrieved from <https://digital.lib.umd.edu/resultsnew/id/umd:4928>

By 1923, Loringhoven had begun to despise the United States- it had brought her little luck, little success as an artist, and her husband, Leopold had committed suicide after being taken a prisoner of war in 1914. American men feared her, dismissing her as a lunatic (Linda Lappin, 2004). Her head shaved and dyed vermillion, she was often spotted strutting the streets of Greenwich Village, New York in nothing but an Indian blanket (often resulting in her arrest). In contrast, as revealed by her detailed memoir, the Baroness was quite the opposite. Uncovered was an articulate, humorous intellectual (Reilly, 1997).

Hoping that she would find more luck back in Europe, she returned to her homeland only to find it impoverished and devastated by the war. After her father's death, she had no choice but to sell newspapers on the Berlin streets for a living. Loringhoven heavily relied on her companions and lovers, including photographer Bernice Abbott and writer Djuna Barnes for support. In 1924, Loringhoven painted 'Like This Parapluie, Am I By You- Faithless Bernice!', gouache on foil (Fig 3) (Loringhoven, 1924.). Her work during this phase was sober and melancholic. For Loringhoven, the painting intended to represent the individuals who had outdone her throughout her life. Looking back, this could have been numerous figures; her father, who was the sole reason why she ran away from home in the first place; her first husband, Greve; her second husband, Loringhoven, and possibly Duchamp as well. Not to mention, the societal and artistic conventions that devalued her art. The painting clearly illustrates a white porcelain urinal.



**Fig 3:** Loringhoven, Elsa von Freytag (undated) "Forgotten like this parapluie am I by you faithless Bernice!" *Special Collections and University Archives* Retrieved from [https://archives.lib.umd.edu/repositories/2/archival\\_objects/11452](https://archives.lib.umd.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/11452)

It should be noted that during the same year that Loringhoven had rejected the United States, Duchamp had rejected art itself. From that point onward, Duchamp claimed to no longer identify as a practicing artist and instead played chess (Time Magazine, 1952). He claimed that chess was much purer than art in its social position; and that art had become too commercialized (Time Magazine, 1952). As mentioned before, Loringhoven adopted a masculine pseudonym named Richard Mutt (The Art Story, 2017). She embraced this freedom of gender identity, often dressing up in men's clothes. She freely '*unhinged the presentational expectations of femininity by appearing androgynous*', practiced gender-bending and fused her sexuality into her art (The Art Story, 2017). This attitude was adopted by

Loringhoven around the early 1910s. Strangely enough, Duchamp started to take on his own female alter ego in 1920; a character named Rose Sélavy (The Art Story, 2011). Perhaps he took inspiration from the baroness to welcome liberated gender expression, something that Loringhoven was known for.

Out of desperation, the Baroness moved to Paris, aspiring to open a modelling school of her own in the late summer of 1927- considering it '*her last dream*' (The Art Story, 2017). On 14th December 1927, Freytag- Loringhoven died tragically at home, due to a gas leak. It is still not known whether her death was an accident, a suicide, or possibly murder (The Art Story, 2017). As previously mentioned, by 1950, Duchamp had let his name become associated with *Fountain*. By the 1960s, Duchamp had consented for the reproduction of the work. In 1964, the Galleria Schwarz reproduced *Fountain* 16 times. These are the versions that one can see on display today in major art museums across the world (Howarth & Mundy, 2015).

The sad truth is, *Fountain* wasn't Loringhoven's only work that was appropriated by another male artist. Her sculpture, '*God*', was believed by art historians for a very long time to be by the artist Morton Schamberg, however, it was Loringhoven's. Yet, official sources such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art, still say that it was a 'joint collaboration' (The Art Story, 2017).

To conclude, the art world must give Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven the recognition and credit she deserves. As the inventor of the readymade, the mastermind behind *Fountain*, the poet behind countless erotic Dada poems, and the artist behind some of the most groundbreaking and avant-garde performances, Loringhoven was generations ahead of her time. We must reassess the previously established 'facts' in history books and look deeper into the stories; unravel the overlooked tales that dictated history. Unfortunately, the story of Loringhoven and *Fountain* is not unique. For centuries, female artists have done everything they could to prove their work to future generations. Gentileschi was dedicated to integrating her signature into her paintings, in a way that they could not be mistaken for others' work (Mann, 2009); Clara Peeters painted mini self-portraits in the silverware in her still lives (Peacock, 2015). Perhaps granting Freytag- Loringhoven justice may start a chain reaction, leading to other artwork being thoroughly researched, reassessed and reattributed to its original artist. We must credit those forgotten, overlooked, often female, artists and give them the recognition they deserve.

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