

# Modern(ist) objects? The *objet trouvé* in the 18th and 19th centuries

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Marcel Duchamp's series of 'readymades', particularly the infamous *Fountain* of 1917, are often viewed as heralding a watershed moment in the history of art. Produced between 1913 and 1921, Duchamp utilised found and appropriated objects, often drawn from everyday life, to redefine and question the very nature of art. Yet the art historical emphasis on the revolutionary nature of Duchamp's practice overlooks the productive possibilities offered by a longer and more fluid notion of the found object, or *objet trouvé*. Indeed, found objects have a long and venerable history stretching back well before the advent of Modernism, being used in the production of an array of cultural practices throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Transformed by aesthetic and material processes such as display, translation, and adaptation, both everyday and extraordinary found objects proliferate in collections, collages, still lives, manuscripts, and assemblages made throughout this period. This session accordingly seeks to examine the expanded field of the found object and the readymade by exploring these earlier manifestations.

## Speakers and Abstracts

### Excavating the 'Other': (Post) colonial archaeology and dextrous encounter in the Duchess of Portland's box

Madeleine Pelling (University of York)

Sometime in the 1780s, Margaret Cavendish Bentinck, Duchess of Portland, wrote out a label for an object in her famous Portland Museum. The object in question was a figurine carved from shell over a hundred years earlier. She recorded how 'this was found on a small isl[and] near Exuma it is supposed to have been left there by th[e] Indians and made of the shell of a conch.' She then placed the figurine inside a wooden box, arranging it alongside a green hardstone axe head, an ancient Egyptian figurine, an eagle stone in a sewn wash-leather bag, and a folded paper containing a preserved butterfly. For the duchess, the moment of 'discovery' was a central conceit useful in constructing a largely fictive and European fantasy of an unknown people, embodied and fetishised in the objects themselves which, through excavation of the box, could be 'found' again and again by the duchess and her visitors.

This paper is simultaneously concerned with the box as a framework designed to prompt tactile enquiry, and the hand as a colonial apparatus used to discover fictions attached to the material objects within. It builds on Constance Classen's claim for the tactility of the 18th-century museum, as well as Kate Smith's work on the 18th-century hand as an extension of the burgeoning world of material commodity. I suggest the box as a liminal space that offered any visitor who might put their hand into its depths the chance to enter a carefully designated in-between space in which tactile excavation brought with it bodily encounters with a different world, textures and materials. Although lifting the lid of the box triggered an invitation to excavate its contents, the truth is that none of the objects inside had ever been subterranean. The kind of archaeology practised in this context, and practised theoretically throughout this paper, relies on the plumbing of the container itself and a bringing of its contents to the surface as a way to expose the cultural assumptions and stories attached to them.

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### Superfluous Springs: *Fontaines à parfum* and the *marchands-merciers* in 18th-century Paris as 'perturbed objects'

Patricia Ferguson (British Museum, Britain, Europe and Pre-History, Project Curator, 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Ceramics)

In *Surrealist Objects and Poems*, 1937, Herbert Read recorded the term 'perturbed objects'. It was represented by a work of art by Julian and Ursula Trevelyan, *Large Bomblette* (Tate, London, T07465), which brought together an unusual assemblage of materials in a bizarre form of display with comic connotations. The incongruity of the arrangement (and wit) is not dissimilar from 18th-century *fontaines à parfum* created in 18th-century Paris by *marchands-merciers* ('Makers of nothing, sellers of everything') from 'found objects' mounted in gilt metal (ormolu) or other precious materials. For the most part, these are unique objects that juxtapose exotic, but familiar, playful, readymade elements, primarily of porcelain,

which have independent historiographies outside these assemblages. However, rather than being non-functional works of art, these unexpected historic combinations were an ultimate indulgence enjoyed by the aristocracy, forming part of the performance of ablutions in the private apartments, dispensing the most ephemeral of luxury goods, perfume. As inventive taste-makers, these retailers purchased rare secondhand goods, or commissioned bespoke porcelain from Asia or Europe, for which they ordered mounts to their own specifications. Their unsettling aesthetic is not always pleasing, as the mounts domesticating the foreign may disguise ravages of use or confusing scales, which are frequently combined with artificial flowers, referencing the contents to be dispensed. In the most inventive examples, *fontaines à parfum* change our perception of the original objects assembled, embodying very antithesis of Duchamp's *Fountain* of 1917.

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### **Specimen to Souvenir: Shell Mosaic Plaques from the British West Indies**

*Molly Duggin (National Art School, Sydney)*

Once considered a form of shipboard craft akin to scrimshaw, nineteenth-century shell mosaic plaques from the British West Indies, colloquially known as sailors' valentines, were produced as a native cottage industry in Bridgeport, Barbados, a center of supply and distribution to European, East Indian and Chinese trade as well as the last port of call for American whaling ships returning from the Pacific. Featuring an assortment of shells indigenous to the West Indies, partitioned into geometric and floral patterns and framed in octagonal cases crafted from mahogany and Spanish cedar, they were purchased by officers, sailors and travelers as souvenirs and gifts. The history of these shell mosaic plaques embodies in microcosm the commodification of the ocean world in the nineteenth century: a rich, multifaceted material discourse that intersected with scientific exploration, colonial expansion, industrial development, developing networks of trade, and the rise of middle-class leisure.

From an object of romantic consumption in Georgian salon science, which fused empiricism with aestheticism while responding to the legacy of marine-inspired *rocaille* decoration, to a manufactured souvenir encoded with Victorian sentiment, such shellwork was intimately connected with the commercial practices of nineteenth-century natural history and a modernising global handicraft marketplace. Focusing on two examples in the collection of the Strong Museum, Rochester, NY, this paper examines how the display conventions of colonial shell mosaic plaques evolved from the symmetrical arrangement of shells in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century collector's cabinets and illustrated catalogues of conchology, while concomitantly drawing from the floral design motifs of contemporary women's fancywork.

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### **The Found Object in 18th and 19th Century Home 'Art' Craft**

*Marilyn Casto (Virginia Tech)*

This presentation examines the role of found objects, particularly those obtained from nature, in women's craft work of the 18th and 19th centuries and the purposes and goals for their use in work intended to create an artistic ambiance. This era saw the development of many applications of what was basically collage with found objects resulting in the creation of 'paintings' made from assorted materials, particularly bark, pinecones and other natural materials. Women also used surfaces such as fungi as a background for drawing, making the found object the integral and intentional basis for the art.

There were four main goals in the use of such materials. 1. Memory. Plants, shells, and other natural materials served to evoke the memory of family or friends who may have been present when they were gathered or who provided the substances. 2. Connection to web of others. Materials such as shells or feathers were often exchanged among friends and acquaintances creating a web of contacts who broadened a maker's world. 3. Ties to nature. Use of substances sourced from the natural world demonstrated interest in a topic that for many reasons became an obsession for the era. 4. Demonstration of resourcefulness. Use of unconventional materials such as fish scales or drawings on fungi provided a physical demonstration of an individual's creativity and ability to envision new concepts in use of materials.