

# Is it art because it belonged to Duchamp?

*Experts celebrate the discovery of a fireplace designed by the artist in Cadaques*

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Duchamp in the apartment.  
Photo: Archive Pere Vehi

“In answer to whether the fireplace is a work of art or not I will respond with one of Duchamp’s own questions: ‘Is it actually possible to create a work that is not artistic?’”, says Juan Antonio Ramirez, Art History lecturer at Madrid’s Autonoma University and author of *Duchamp. Love and Even Death* (Siruela, 2000). “It draws attention because Duchamp designed it, but also because it could be his last ever piece and the only original in Spain. If they built a little altar around it all the Duchampians roaming the earth would come in droves to see it. It would become the relic of the great secular saint. And you can be sure I would be among the first to venerate it”.

The object in question is a discreet corner fireplace designed by key 21st Century artist Marcel Duchamp (France, 1887-1968). It was discovered in a Cadaques apartment after the art world lost track of its whereabouts following the artist’s death. Gloria Moure, curator of the first Duchamp retrospective in Spain in 1984, expressed a relative surprise: “When I was organizing the show, Tenny Duchamp (the artist’s wife) even showed me a Polaroid of the finished fireplace, I’m sure I still have it somewhere. But at the time we didn’t consider it interesting enough to include it in the show”, she recalls. “Duchamp didn’t set out to create an art piece; he built the fireplace just as he would’ve an awning or any other object. But, of course, it is still something he designed, a vestige of his years in Cadaques. Personally, I don’t think of it as an art piece, but that is for his daughter Jackie Mounier Matisse to decide. She is the one who handles the rights”.

For Ramirez it is not the legatee “but the art world who should decide whether it is work of art.” There seem to be documents confirming the fireplace was built after Duchamp’s death, an “irrelevant” fact, in the historian’s opinion. “Even if it was built afterwards it followed his design; therefore it is just as important.” The myth has been set in motion. “This is a typical 21st Century romantic tale, not unlike the Incorrupt Finger”, comments Bartomeu Mari, head of Barcelona’s Contemporary Art Museum. “Duchamp turned myth into matter, and in many cases created a piece from a simple anecdote. From this point of view we might say this is one of Duchamp’s objets. Even if it isn’t looked upon as a piece until now, we will surely end up turning it into a work of art.”

Art critic and historian Victoria Colombalia had also heard of the fireplace, though she had not seen it. “If Duchamp had it built it is doubtlessly a Duchamp”, she says. “However, there are a several similar plain, austere fireplaces in Cadaques.” Art critic Estrella de Diego states somewhat more cautiously that “even if some doubt the authenticity of the piece, you’ve got to admit it’s a great a great story.” “We’re talking about the author of *Fountain*, so it’s absurd to discuss whether it’s an original or not. That only matters to the art market and the museums.” And adds, “The beauty of it is that it’s such a Duchampian joke, finding something he made without any artistic pretensions, and watching it become a cult object.”

Jose Guirao, historian and director of Madrid’s Casa Encendida, states that if that turned out to be the case, which is unlikely, the piece could be moved elsewhere, “or remain in its current emplacement after coming up with some kind of system to allow visits.” Guirao believes “it is the typical Duchampian piece and its value stems from his authorship. If it were anyone else’s it could be considered anecdotal. In his case, however, it is an art work. No doubt about it.”

Of those consulted only Vicenç Altaio, writer and current head of the Santa Monica Art Centre in Barcelona, has seen the piece and is fully involved in researching it. "Duchamp taught us that it is process and research that matter, that the piece itself is secondary", he explains. "His work is contrary to idolatry and fetishism. We all wanted to see the fireplace and the apartment it was built in, and I see two possible interpretations: the first is cultural and symbolic: its importance as a place of memory; the second, the piece's market value, if it has any. Duchamp said a work of art is not such until the artist says so."

However, everybody agrees that if the piece is really Duchamp's it should be conserved. They also agree on the fact that all this fuss has Duchamp chuckling in his grave.