



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Found Objects as Art: Influence of Marcel Duchamp on Contemporary Pakistani Art**

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**ABSTRACT**

The art of Pakistan is under constant evolution. This research aims to study the changing perceptions of art in Pakistan, where the idea behind the artwork supersedes the act of creation. The article intends to investigate the definition of art with respect to the found object art, also known as ready-made art. It is a revolutionary form of artistic expression, which challenges the conventional practice of creativity by presenting everyday objects assembled within a gallery or museum. The pioneer of found object art Marcel Duchamp, a Modern Western artist, defines art as an idea, rather than the process of making. Building upon Duchamp's legacy, this article examines the paradigm shift in Pakistani art from art-making to art-assembling. The found object art by contemporary Pakistani artists, Huma Mulji, Adeela Suleman, Ehsan ul Haq, and Mohsin Shafi, depicts how the identity and connotation of these objects transform according to the spatial context, provoking diverse responses from the viewers. This qualitative research presents an analytical study of found object art by Duchamp and aforementioned Pakistani artists. The images of artworks, collected from museum visit, books, and online sources, help examine the innovative approach of these artists, which stimulates viewer's curiosity, prompting them to question the very essence of art. The research demonstrates the significance of found objects in expanding the boundaries of creative expression, art definition, and viewer's experience, besides broadening the perception of art in Pakistan.

**KEYWORDS** Art-Assembling, Art Definition, Artistic Expression, Contemporary Pakistani Art, Found Object Art, Ready-Made Art, Spatial Context

**Introduction**

Art does not have any rigid definition. It is as flexible as the artist's perception. The freedom of artist to express his concerns and to invite the public to give their response has led art towards a unique dimension. The twenty-first century globalization has introduced Western practices throughout the world, freeing the art from the constraints of making. The idea is now central to any artwork, leading to the execution of works which least involve the process of making. With the approach of presenting the idea rather than the skill, the art world has seen a new form of art composed of found or ready-made objects. In this case, a mundane object is presented or assembled in a different context, opposed to its literal meaning. The display of such assembled objects within the gallery space arouses the viewer's responses, transporting them in an unexpected experience, and completely transforming the usual significance of the objects to a different perspective. This displacement of objects provokes questions regarding the definition of art in today's world.

The diversification in the definition of art from the creation of an art object to the assemblage of the found objects was first introduced by Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), a French-American Dada artist of twentieth century, whose work is greatly influenced by the World War-I (Kleiner, 2016, p. 902).

The freedom of self-expression advocated by the Western artists provides the foundation for the evolution of art world wide. The influences of the West on Pakistani art are vast. The contemporary Pakistani art, apart from carrying the historical influences, is also affected by the twenty-first century globalization. The contemporary artists like Huma Mulji (b. 1970), Adeela Suleman (b. 1970), Ehsan ul Haq (b. 1983) and Mohsin Shafi (b. 1982) produce artworks which break the conventional practice and are the product of well-composed found objects having symbolic meanings. This research, with respect to the artworks of Duchamp and the four Pakistani artists, questions what makes found object a piece of art; is it the process of choosing and assembling or is it only the idea. Moreover, the emphasis is paid on different approaches of these artists and how their artworks contribute to reshape the perception of the viewers.

### **Literature Review**

The literature reveals the scholars' stance regarding the idea derived from imagination and how it supersedes the technical process. According to Italian physician and poet Giralomo Fracastoro (1924), for an artwork to be expressive, it needs to be freed from the technical constraints and should be inventive as is poetry (p. 66). This according to an English poet and scholar Sir Philip Sidney (1891), is the source of lifting up the poet "with the vigor of his own invention" extracting things from the nature and presenting in a way not presented by the nature itself, and impacting the reader (p. 7). This concept is applicable to the art of the found objects as well, the assemblage of which becomes a stimulus for the artist. This is how the imagination surpasses in its role against the process of making, encouraging expressive responses from the viewers.

According to the point of view of Italian philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce (1929), it is not necessarily the technique which generates the expression. For expression, the object requires to have the appeal or power of arousal or challenge. The expression associated with found object art is a two-way expression, where outward expression is characterized by revealing of the thoughts and emotions of the artist as he associates them with a certain object. Whereas, inward expression is the viewer's feeling and response to the displaced object. Milton C. Nahm (1955) quotes Croce who validates the two-way expression in art, by mentioning imagination as "...expression of impressions, an act of unconditioned creative freedom, whether we mean by 'expression' the productivity of the artist or of the aesthetic perceiver" (p. 458, 459).

The daily life objects have such a strong impact on artist's perception who finds them as a tool for viewer's arousal. The observation shows that inspiration from surroundings is not conditional, and is in fact essential for any kind of artwork, be it imitative or inventive. Moreover, inspiration has been a constant entity in "transition from imitation to imagination; it persists and is elaborated in the developed philosophy of expression as imagination" (Nahm, 1955, p. 461). The found objects, therefore, are the reflection of artist's inspirations besides their imagination.

### **Materials and Methods**

This research is a qualitative study of the found object artworks by Marcel Duchamp and four contemporary Pakistani artists, namely Huma Mulji, Adeela Suleman, Ehsan ul Haq and Mohsin Shafi. The write-up follows the format of American Psychological Association (APA). The data is collected from various primary and secondary sources, including visit to COMO Museum of Art, Lahore, books, research articles, magazines, websites, and videos available on the internet.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Found Object Art by Marcel Duchamp**

The promotion of freedom of expression by Modern Western artists is most observed after the World War-I. The war profoundly changed the form and execution of art by directly effecting the artist's thought and psyche. The psychological distress caused by the war led the artists to express the way they want. Moreover, the artists from avant-garde art movement Dadaism were working on Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) theory that the human behaviors are based on the unconscious which the beholder is mostly unaware of. During the chaos of the war, the dada artists, to unveil that unconscious and in turn to have an understanding of themselves, came up with the most absurd thoughts executed with the freedom to express (Kleiner, 2016, p. 901). The absurdity, underlying the dada art, is the element that received the viewer's response to the level not received by any preceding art movement.

Being affected by the World War-I himself, as his brother died in the destruction, Marcel Duchamp's (1887-1968) life completely transformed, also transforming his art (Harris & Zucker, 2011, video 0:34). The painter turned into an unusual sculptor who found the objects to be called art, by pouring his thoughts in those objects, thus expressing himself and letting the viewers express in response. This trait of outward and inward expression, seen in many works of the Modern art, became a chief character for the evolution of art in the West.

The twentieth century American Society for Independent Artists led by Duchamp was not in the favor of the conventional juried exhibitions in New York. Duchamp, being a Parisian, already had the rebellious tendency that had been prevalent in France since the mid-nineteenth century. He introduced in America the all-new way of presenting a sculpture. His first ready-made art piece presents two objects out of their literal context, but combined to offer a complete new visual, never seen before. In the *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), a wheel of a bicycle is installed upside down on a kitchen stool (fig. 1). Both the objects are removed out of their functionality into a non-functional gallery item, challenging the conventional notions about art and inviting viewers to have an urge to spin the wheel (Lowry, 2019, para. 1-5). Duchamp, in an interview clearly advocates the idea that art is how the artist defines it himself. About the *Bicycle Wheel* he states,

"I did not even make it myself... so it was a form of denying the possibility of defining art. In other words, the ideas are more important than actual visual realization" (Duchamp, 1959).

The viewer's perception and reaction towards the art here are also the essential components of the artwork itself. What Duchamp intended was to

"... establish ... that the choice of these ready-mades was never dictated by an aesthetic delectation. The choice was based on visual indifference — a total absence of good or bad taste — in fact, a complete anesthesia" (The Museum of Modern Art, n.d. audio).



Figure 1. Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1951 (third version, after lost original of 1913), metal wheel mounted on painted wooden stool, 129.5 x 63.5 x 41.9 cm. (Source: The Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81631>).

According to Lord Kames (Scottish philosopher, 1696-1782), imagination has the capability to fabricate images of the objects which do not have real existence (Nahm, 1955, p. 461). Though the objects from reality provide the visual vocabulary for the creation of a new imagery, yet there is innovation lying in Duchamp's individuality. His expression lies beyond mimetics, in the imagination. Here, the artist's freedom is determined by both the originality in execution and the choice of the objects.

Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) made a breakthrough in the modern art (fig. 2). Though bought from a plumbing store, the *Fountain* is a ready-made urinal placed on its back and signed after the supplier 'R. Mutt' (Harris & Zucker, 2012, video 0:01-3:11). In the *Fountain*, the artistic expression lies not in the technique, but in the way artist makes the viewer question about art. *Fountain* is not about the aesthetic presentation, nor is it about introducing a new method. It is about presenting a routine object in a different context, to stimulate the viewer to ponder upon the existence of that object within the gallery space. Duchamp intended his art to transport the viewer in an experience unexpected. He completely transformed the usual significance of the urinal to a new perspective. Here the significance is on the philosophy of art; what makes something an art object, breaking the typical perceptions of the viewers shaped by the conventional art (Harris & Zucker, 2012, video 0:01-3:11). The display of *Fountain* in the gallery declares that art needs not be crafted by the artist himself, rather it is the thought that the artist is expressing to elicit viewer's responsiveness.



Figure 2. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1950 (second version, after lost original of 1917), glazed sanitary china with black paint, 30.5 cm high. (Source: Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, 902).

The readymade objects are something that the public would never expect to be art. Nevertheless, Duchamp intended to create his own definition of art, linking it with a unique concept. The idea that he links with his found objects is stated by him as, "It is my power of choice. It is my deed of making a selection that makes a work, a work of art" (The Museum of Modern Art, 2013, video 0:01-2:28). The process of imagination, hunting for and selecting the appropriate object and then putting it in the gallery, transformed the purpose and meaning of that object from literal to symbolic. The displacement of a ready-made object

makes it stand out against its mass-produced counterparts, making people rethink in a different way and connecting it with the chaos of the war which has caused displacement of everything in Europe.

American art curator and author Sarah Urist Green (2017) states that, for the viewer, the art is not in the ready-made object, rather it happens in the space between the viewer and the object (video 7:26). Thus, the 'dialog created between the artist and the viewer on the basis of an innovative idea' is the answer to the question what art is. The viewer's response that Duchamp's ready-made art received, and is still receiving, is remarkable to a great extent. Using an already known object and presenting it in a context different from that of the original, gradually became a trend in the art worldwide. The assemblage of found objects by the contemporary Pakistani artists reflect Duchamp in their execution, affirming that the art does not necessarily need to involve the making process, rather it is the notion with which it is assembled and displayed that makes it an art object.

### Found Object Art by Contemporary Pakistani Artists

In the light of the above discussion, the article presents analytical study of the found object art by Pakistani artists. Huma Mulji's (b. 1970) installations vary from the ones which mostly involve the process of making. Rather, she creates assemblage of the found objects, all based on direct social commentary. Her installations address the current issues that she views as a Karachiite (Mulji, 2019, video 0:25). To comment on the extinction of birds due to environmental degradation, Mulji has used a pedestal fan, colored it completely pink and related it with flamingo (Ali, 2017, para. 11, 12) (figs. 3a-3c). Though the fan stands with its pole on the base, however another pole is added with angular bending, suggesting the flamingo standing on one leg, while the other leg bent upwards. One of the four wings of the fan is painted in lighter tint of pink and another in darker shade. Both these wings are kept longer in length, thus projecting out of the fan cage, so as to hinder the rotation process, which is symbolic of the birds dying. The sound made by the fan, when these two wings are repelled by the cage, is a disturbing one attracting the viewer's attention to the subject addressed. Here Mulji challenges the expectations of the viewer both by formal modifications of the pedestal fan and by using it to symbolize the bird. By restricting it within the gallery space and by placing it on the stairways besides the wall with a small part of a large window, she intends to deliver the notion of diminishing birds' population which are meant for the open skies. She highlights the issue of environmental degradation which has restricted the birds' freedom of flight.



Figure 3a.



Figure 3b.



Figure 3c.

Figures 3a-3c. Huma Mulji, *Fly (A)way / Pink Flamingo*, 2017, assembled pedestal fan. (Source: Pakistan Art News, [http://thisissatire.blogspot.com/2017/09/make-art-pretty-again\\_10.html](http://thisissatire.blogspot.com/2017/09/make-art-pretty-again_10.html)).



Mulji's *Pink Flamingo* asserts that the alteration in the literal context of an object to give it a new meaning is central to the art of found objects. Mulji herself claims that she has "always been interested in the dysfunctional" (Hashmi, 2009, p. 28).

In Karachi Biennale 2017, Mulji exhibited an assembled installation titled *An ode to a lamp post that got accidentally destroyed in the enthusiastic widening of Canal Bank Road* (figs. 4a-4c). Her idea is based on the conflicts on the widening of Canal Bank Road in Lahore which results in cutting of the trees along with uninstalation of the lamp posts. The ready-made posts, assembled within the small building of the Pioneer Book House Karachi, cross the interior at unexpected angles, suggesting how the uninstalation of the lamp posts have been creating hurdles at the Canal Bank for the locals. The lamp light at the end of the posts flickers and then fades out, depictive of the fused lights which have neither served the purpose before the uninstalation from the Canal Bank (Mulji, 2019, video 0:01-3:04). Having an innovative approach, Mulji's found objects provoke curiosity of the viewers, forcing them to ponder on social and environmental issues.



Figure 4a.



Figure 4b.

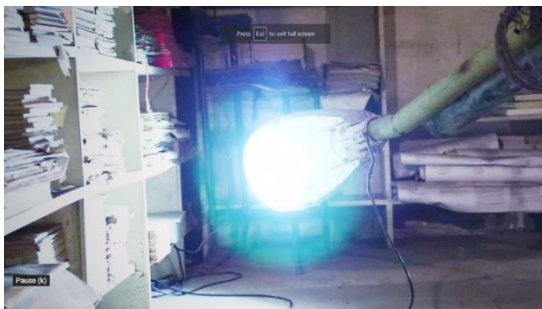


Figure 4c.

Figures 4a-4c. Huma Mulji, *An ode to a lamp post that got accidentally destroyed in the enthusiastic widening of Canal Bank Road*, 2017, assembled lamp posts.

(Source: Art TV Pakistan, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1XOi-38EL4>).

On the other hand, Adeela Suleman's (b. 1970) installations are the perceptions of the female with respect to the worldly and domestic affairs. She uses kitchen utensils to assemble in the form of head gears (figs. 5-7). She creates a comparison with the helmets worn by bike riders, which in Pakistan is being forcefully implemented. The female with the helmet made up of kitchen utensils is a commentary on her protection verses limitations put up by the society and on the gender discrimination. Quddus Mirza wittily states that these kitchen utensils also serve as weapons during the family fights (Mirza, 2015, p. 83). As a satirical depiction of female protection, these head gears present a monumental visual effect. She also relates these helmets with the transformations in the urban transport for the lower middle-class females from horse carriages to the back of bikes, where they have always been dependent to be driven from place to place (Hashmi, 2009, p. 17). She projects the idea that the limitations faced by the females of our society turns out to be their strength. As the head gears worn by the Mughal Kings were embellished with jewels to reflect their grandeur, in the similar way she has adorned her head gears with popular decorative motifs to glorify the female.



Figure 5. Adeela Suleman, *Helmet 7*, 2005, aluminum cooking utensil, aluminum toaster, aluminum tongs, small aluminum bowl, lace, embroidery, gold thread, beads, fabric and foam padding, 30.5 x 33 x 25.4 cm. (Source: Art Jewelry Forum, <https://artjewelryforum.org/articles-series/adeela-suleman-stainless-steel-helmet-with-kettle>).



Figure 6. Adeela Suleman, *White Helmet with Green Flags*, 2008, steel cooking utensil, steel spoon, cycle ornament, powder coated, enamel painted, inside padded with foam and cloth, 45.7 x 33 x 12.7 cm. (Source: Hashmi, *The Eye Still Seeks*, 92).



Figure 7. Adeela Suleman, *Feroza (Turquoise)*, 2008, aluminum funnel, steel spoons, cycle ornament, powder coated, enamel painted, with foam and cloth padding, 48.3 x 25.4 x 25.4 cm. (Source: Asia Society, <https://sites.asiasociety.org/hangingfire/adeela-suleman/>).

Though the artworks of these contemporary artists are composed by assembling the found objects, yet the overall visual has an innovative appearance because of the artistic treatment the objects have underwent. Opposed to Mulji and Suleman, young contemporary artists, Ehsan ul Haq (b. 1983) and Mohsin Shafi (b. 1982) make use of the found objects in a different way. Instead of adding modifications and formally altering these objects to relate with their ideas, they put forth the objects as they actually are, to challenge the viewer's perception who is trained to appreciate the artworks involving the process of making. It is in the way these artists choose the ready-made objects and put them in correspondence to the given space that an aura of aesthetic expression is created.

Ehsan ul Haq's installation *Noah's Ark* is a cubical assemblage of the household objects placed adjacent to and one above the other to form an exact cube (figs. 8a, 8b). His idea comes from the concept of life's transience and that in order to do something worthwhile in this short instant, one needs to be in action. The action that he himself gets involved into is that of collecting and exhibiting the chosen goods of everyday use (Jalil,

2016, para. 3-8). The presented objects refer to the living essentials of a lower-middle class family, for whom every chosen object is worthy enough to be placed in the significant cube. However, *Noah's Ark* demonstrates the irony how the human overlooks the impermanence of worldly life under the pressure of worldly affairs.



Figure 8a.



Figure 8b.

Figures 8a, 8b. Ehsan ul Haq, *Noah's Ark*, 2010, household objects, 193 x 193 x 193 cm.  
(Source: Hashmi, *The Eye Still Seeks*, 198).

A highly innovative approach linked with the exhibit of the found objects is observed in the artwork of Mohsin Shafi who displayed his collection of stolen objects in the exhibition titled "Self Portraits in the Age of the Selfie" (2019) at COMO Museum of Art, Lahore (fig. 9). Through his artwork, Shafi presents himself as a thief who shamelessly steals the belongings of his closed ones and confesses this act as his identity in front of the public. Such public confession is seen for the first time in the history of Pakistani art. Along with the exhibited objects, he displays the brochure enlisting all these objects stolen since childhood. The objects comprise of his grandmother's *saag* cutter, grandfather's shoe polish brush, friend's cigar, seashell from Arabian Gulf, bell from his father's goat's neck, leather heel, crow feather from a graveyard, mother's *surma* stick, mother's glasses, *khala's* scissors, *tasbeeh* from mother's drawer after her death, lover's photo frame with greeting card, dried flower to get his wish accomplished, *kalam* from his calligraphy class, friends letter opener, dried rose from admirer's table, friend's paint brush while she was working on her favorite painting, friend of a friend's lock, metal text from friend's perfume bottle, crush's audio cassette, tea bag from crush's favorite cinnamon tea box, tutor's floppy disk cover, chain from a metal workshop, ashtray from father's friend, safety pin from carpenter's tool box, lock holder from cousin's diary to read, shaving blade from friend's barber, sleep mask from airplane while travelling, button from aunt's cushion, friend's belt holder, candle holder from Friday market, paper holder from uncle's office, sea shell from California, friend's engagement wrist watch, crush's drawer holder, hammer from first sculpture class, neighbor's cable connector, twig from Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, and friend's battery cell. Among these objects he places a book made up of *papier-mâché* in the middle, for which he stole the papers from an old book shop (Shafi, 2019, artist's brochure). He relates all these objects with some of his associating emotions. Although an immoral act, yet the public confession he does, makes it an innovative idea and a novel aesthetic experience for the viewer.





Figure 9. Mohsin Shafi, *Confession of a Secret Lover*, 2017-2019, various mundane stolen objects selection from artist's collection and *papier-mâché* book cast. (Source: Captured by the author at COMO Museum of Art, Lahore).

With the display of the stolen objects in their actual condition, Shafi makes up a small museum on a wooden plaque – museum as a symbol or source of recognition of the personal identity (Shafi, 2019, artist's brochure). Here the art lies not in the objects themselves, but in exhibiting them all together in the museum space, and in the dialog that is generated between these objects and the viewer. The viewer's questions, like how could this be an artwork or how the property of others be presented as one's own artwork, are very responses which Shafi has been expecting.

The ready-made found objects as a medium of self-expression portray the personality of the artist directly through the choice of objects. Though the object may not be innovative in its formal aspects, however the innovation lies in the context with which it is brought forth the viewers in the gallery.

The artworks of Mulji, Suleman, Haq and Shafi present the ready-made found objects out of their literal context, offering a complete new visual in a composite form. These objects change their status and impact in accordance to the changing placement. These objects are removed out of their functionality into non-functional gallery items, challenging the conventional trends of art practice in Pakistan and encouraging viewers to probe about the idea of artwork. The twenty-first century globalization requires an art object to be instantly communicative to the public and to receive inevitable responses, which these artists have achieved successfully. Such art emphasizes not the actual meaning of the object, rather its significance within the gallery space as interpreted differently from viewer to viewer. The involuntary reaction of the viewer is actually what these artworks aim at, hence allowing diversity in the definition of art.

## **Conclusion**

Rejecting the conventional art-making and introducing ready-made or found objects as art, Marcel Duchamp excelled in his definition of art, which according to him is the thought of the artist and the way he conveys this thought to the public, rather than the making. So, the idea itself becomes a work of art. Contemporary Pakistani art is highly influenced by Duchamp's innovative approach, and is currently making a great shift from the process of making to the process of assembling the found objects, in order to deliver the idea instantly. The works of Huma Mulji, Adeela Suleman, Ehsan ul Haq, and Mohsin Shafi, presented in this research, demonstrate that art is the thought of the artist that communicates with the viewers to elicit their responsiveness. Found object as a work of art has the tendency to captivate the viewers and stimulate them to question art. Furthermore, these objects change their status with respect to the spatial context. The found object is no more an artwork when not displayed in a gallery or a museum. It becomes a regular object outside the exhibition space. It changes its expression and receives varied responses according to its placement. Moreover, the perception regarding a certain found object varies from viewer to viewer, depending on diversity of their backgrounds and experience with the objects presented. The viewers react in a curious way, with their preconceived definitions of art challenged. All types of responses and reactions of the viewers, positive or negative, that these artworks receive, are the stimulus for the artists – the very objective of the found objects. The dialog generated between the artist and the viewer as a result of innovatively composed idea provides the definition of art, where the viewer is capable to relate the visual with his own experience.

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