BYZANTINE ART AND MARCEL DUCHAMP

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CHAPTER ONE

SECTION ONE

PLATO, ORPHISM AND CHRISTIANITY: PHILOSOPHIC ORIGINS OF BYZANTINE ART

During the first three centuries the new Church is cautious. The Apologists—the first Christian intellectuals, led by St. Justin, begin to clear the ground to construct definitions of Christianity. These intellectuals are the defenders of the faith. The truths most particularly stressed by them are:

1. The existence of God.
2. The nature of God as omnipotent, benevolent and all-seeing.
3. The immortality of the soul.
4. The possibility of salvation.
5. The Christian ideal of 'holy living', which is for them the manifestation of a superior morality.

These truths were steeped in tradition. The Christian intellectuals wove their doctrines from Plato's Theory of Forms and other aspects of Greek philosophy, certain theories related to salvation are traceable to Orphism and kindred cults of the Near East.

According to Plato (427-347 B.C.) the soul, or mind, is immaterial and exists apart from the body, the soul is immortal.

The soul can attain knowledge of the Forms, the body cannot attain this knowledge. Plato's vision was that beyond the world of changing and destructible things, there is another world of unchanging eternal Forms. These Forms are not in space or time and are not perceivable by the senses. This world we live in, Plato would say, is only very distantly related to these ultimate realities which can be grasped only through thought. His image of man—captive of the body and the senses, a prisoner chained in a cave on the wall of which he sees pass before him the shadows of the living beings who move behind him in the sunlight—is similiar to the Byzantine view of the world, where the sensible world of space and time is regarded as an illusion, and that by intellectual and moral discipline a man can learn to apprehend the eternal world which alone is real.

In the first century after Christ the question of the nature of the Son of God gave rise ot the opposite heresies of the Ebonites and Gnostics. By the end of the century these heresies were confuted by St. John; he revealed that Jesus Christ was the incarnation of Plato's Logos (or Reason).

Orphism, the second aspect of the philosophy adopted by the Christian intellectuals, exalted the life of the next world and exercised a great influence over Plato and the Neo -Platonists (whose aesthetic philosophy I shall refer to later). Orphism was dogmatic, with an authoritative priesthood and sacred writings. It was a personal religion, and it stood outside the social and political order. Orphic eschatology laid great stress on rewards and punishments after death. Its religious functions were connected especially with initiation and purification ceremonies in which the neophytes were

purged of the fear of death and admitted into the company of the blessed. The mysteries, or rites, were administered to the multitude without regard for individual merit, much in the same way as Christianity, with its doctrine of equality, of each soul being individual, had a universal appeal to rich, poor, women and slaves alike. Baptism, or the partaking of the Eucharist, became the Christian equivalent of these ceremonies. The Sacraments were open to all, and similiarly encompassed a doctrine of immortality.

Edward Gibbon, in his Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire, expresses the idea that Constantine (reigned 312-377 A.D.) embraced the Christian religion because the union and discipline of the Christian republic had gradually formed an independent and increasing state in Byzantium, which was the heart of the Roman Empire, and better to have their loyalty he joined them.[1] This is a rational view, and in contrast to it, Gibbon includes the myth surrounding Constantine's conversion. Constantine is supposed to have had a dream in which Christ visited him, carrying a cross on which was written "By this sign thou shalt conquer". From there on in the cross 'glittered on Roman helmets and shields and was woven into the soldier's banners'. Constantine's decisive victory at the battle of the Milvian bridge was attributed to the cross. In 312 A.D. he signed the Edict of Milan, ending the persecution of Christians and allowing freedom of worship to all peoples.

Plate 1.

Plate 2.

SECTION TWO

DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY BYZANTINE ART

It is best to restrict the term Byzantine to describe art works where a marraige of East and West has taken place; where Classical and Oriental styles mingle; where elements from Rome, from the Hellenic world and from the East weld together through the directing influence of Christianity.

In the development of Byzantine art a number of influences were at play. David Talbot Rice explains that of these influences the most important were the Hellenic and Semitic. The Hellene favoured a refined, balanced, premeditated and idealistic type of art, they knew the rudiments of true perspective and attached great importance to the idealised human figure. Semitic art, on the other hand, sought to express a significant idea. It was forceful and expressive, figures were represented frontally, there was no attempt at perspective or illusion. It represented Christ as an awesome bearded personage, possessed of all the mysterious majesty of one of the old Semitic gods of Assyria, whereas the Greek influence that went into Byzantine art looked on Christ as a young Apollo.[2] Hellenistic art had developed primarily along the cities of the Mediterranean coast, but in the uplands a culture existed founded upon very long antecedents dating back even before the days of the Hittites. In this upland Anatolian art, certain particular animal motifs were used, especially the lion, the eagle and the peacock. This animal symbolism was also to enter into Christian art. The Book of Kells for example, is studded with zoomorphic images. One particular symbolic rendering of St. Paul in this manuscript is almost identical to a stone relief of an eagle dating back to 915-21 A.D.

Plate 3

found in Armenia on the wall of a church in Achthamar.

In early wall paintings found in the catacombs, there is a peculiar mixture of pagan and Christian motifs. The phoenix rising from the ashes signifies the re-birth of the soul after purification. The peacock drinking from the fountain symbolises the incorruptible soul attaining immortality at the Fountain of Life. The Resurrection is portrayed in mosaic in a vault under St. Peter's (3rd century A.D.) (Plate 3). Christ is depicted as a haloed figure driving a horse-drawn chariot across a golden sky, surrounded by vines. Apollo, in Greek and Roman mythology, the Sun-god or God of Light, was also envisaged in such a manner.

It would appear that the early Christians merely borrowed and baptised the symbolism of their pagan and Jewish neighbours to express their own beliefs and hopes.

SECTION THREE

BYZANTINE ART—A METAPHYSICAL VIEW OF THE WORLD

As Byzantine art evolved, it developed a complex hierarchy of symbols; the artist's work became governed by theological law. The tesserae of the mosaicist, the palette of the panel painter, became strictly regulated, as was the subject matter of pictures and the form of their depiction. It was within these parameters that the artist had to reveal to the initiates a world beyond appearance and change, one beyond the Platonic 'shadow'. Sometimes a single symbol used in these paintings has the power to suggest several ideas simultaneously. For example, a saint is portrayed in the act of bestowing a blessing; his hand makes a

Plate 4.

gesture used in Hellenistic times to command attention. But it can also be interpreted on a different level. For the fingers of his hand are so placed as to form the sacred monogram of Christ's name 'IC XC'. This same gesture can also signify 'the Way' or 'Hodigitria'.[3]

When we enter into the world of an ikon we enter a mystical world of spiritual realities rather than the earthly world of objective physical realities. It is inhabited by angels and saints, by the Mother of God and by Jesus himself. In the ikons, space and dimensions are under laws other than the laws of perspective, in this non-physical world, such laws are suspended in favour of higher ones. The ikon painter is not bound by naturalistic details or realism, since he is dealing with an eternal world. An ikon in the National Gallery of Ireland, Virgin and Child Hodegetria, With on the Margins, the Baptist and Twelve Apostles, painted in the early fourteenth century in Constantinople, (Plate 4.) Expresses an aspect of this higher world where all is edged in gold, a world without shadow, only light. The stern, austere figure of the Virgin is in many ways archaic and suggests that the painter was following an earlier prototype. The origins of these ikonic forms are to be found in, ultimately, late Egyptian portraiture. (cf. Plate 1) The Virgin's head is surrounded by a halo, a disc like the sun, the Christ-child and the Saints also wear this crown of spiritual light. For those of the congregation who are illiterate, gestures, or the objects held in the saints' hands, will carry a meaning which they can understand. St. John is at the top, he wears a hair shirt with a brown cloak. The scroll he holds bears the inscription from Matthew: "Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. But now the axe is laid to

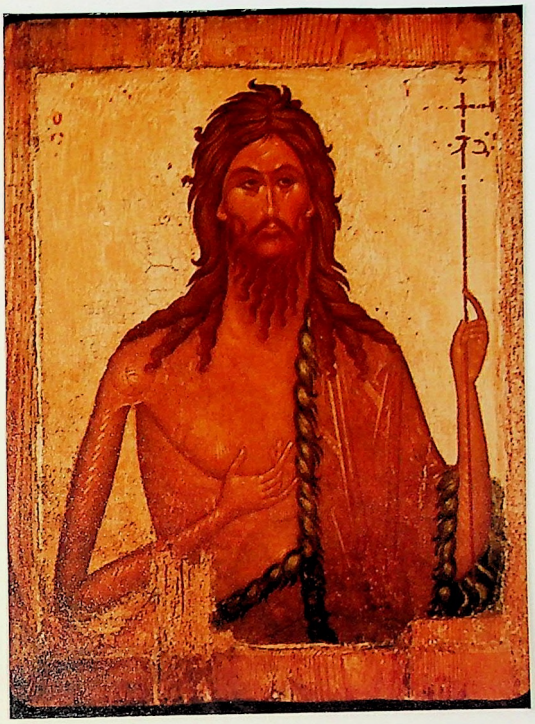

Plate 5.

its roots". Jacob, on the top left, holds a ladder. The next figure, Moses, holds a burning bush, and on his scroll is written: "I have called you a tree, in a bush have I beheld a divine mystery." The third figure, Habbakuk, holds a mountain. He shows us the words: "God will come forth from the South, and the Holy One from the mountain covered with cloud." [4] As with all ikons, here we deal with symbolism, with spiritual meaning, with stylisation of form and with abstraction of line, where all elements unite aesthetically. (Though these elements do unite aesthetically, it is interesting to note that P. Yukin, in discussing this ikon, regards the figures of the prophets as work of the fifteenth century.)[5]

In the ikon of St. John the Baptist, painted in Constantinople in the fourteenth century, (Plate 5, detail: Plate 6) the saint is shown frontally, half-length, as in the depiction of the Virgin Hodegetria. His left hand is raised and holds a slender cross. His left fore-finger points back towards himself. In contrast to Renaissance painters who promoted themselves, and searched for new styles and forms in a constant battle for originality, the Byzantine artists repeat certain well-known formulas—The merit of their work lies in the quality of repetition, not in any search for originality.

In the St. John ikon, the prototype depicted is the accepted one, but there is no doubt that the work is from an artist of foremost rank. The relationship between ikon painting and religious philosophy becomes apparent here. 'Hesychasm' is the path to spiritual life by means of continual prayer; it recieved strong impulse at the beginning of the fourteenth century under the spiritual teacher and mystic St. Gregory of Palamas. His teachings reached Rublyov, possibly the most famous of the Russian ikon painters, through Sergius of Radoneth, Rublyov's

Plate 6,(detail).

Plate 7.

master. Hesychasm taught that image and thought are interchangable, the one being the reflection of the other; that both are reflections of higher truths. In the St. John ikon this idea is made manifest. Richard Temple, discussing this ikon, says: "It is, however, . . . the mysterious transfigured materiality of the paint that seems to breathe with a life of its own . . ." [6] It is difficult not to agree with this statement when looking at the ikon. It appears to have been invested with the artist's spiritual consciousness. The goat skin cloak of St. John, his hair flowing in arabesques, his abstracted features, are all material things—yet still the paint does not refer the image to earthly time but rather it appears that the artist has glimpsed the eternal.

Andrei Rublyov's ikon Christ in Glory, painted circa 1410 (Plate 7), depicts the mediator between Heaven and Earth. The imagery, geometry and colour depicted on this rectangular fragment of wood, combine complementary pictorial elements in a musical transparency. The gold Christ is seated on a semi-circular throne in the centre of the ikon, holding an open book towards us; his right hand indicates Christ,'the Way or the Truth'. He is seated at the intersection of two opposing colour planes. The blue oval represents the celestial sphere of heaven, and the flame-coloured square is a hieroglyph for the earth. At the four corners of the square, the evangelists are symbolised. They assume their usual form as winged beast and bird, a carry-through from pagan imagery. Shape and colour interweave, the orange prisms result from a simple break-up of shape, diversity creates unity. There is no linear perspective used, the matrix of lines in Christ's robe separate him from the background. The downward fall of drapery under his left knee corresponds to the front angle of the stool on which his feet rest. This stool in

turn recedes behind the net of orange colour. Its extremities are bracketed by two studded orange circles which mirror the encompassing curve of the back part of the throne. The composition is harmonic and complex in its underlying structure. It has been built on rules, as strict as those a Chinese master would have had to follow, by abiding by them, Rublyov has surpassed them.

Mysticism, or the attempt to conceive the world as a whole by means of thought typified in Plato's description of the cave; the classical statement of belief in a knowledge and reality truer and more real than that of the senses is a concept which these examples reflect, where the three dimensional solidity of the earthly world is not portrayed. The mark of all mystical metaphysics which Bertrand Russell says is the denial of the reality of time also appears.[6] Likewise, they all contain a sense of mystery, of the unveiling of a hidden wisdom. The ikons reveal a world unlike our own, one of belief in the certainty of a higher truth which lies beyond all earthly law and limitation.

SECTION FOUR

THE MATERIAL INGREDIENTS OF IKON PAINTING

An epigram written in the tenth century by Constantine of Rhodes on an ikon of The Mother of God, says:

> If one could paint thee, O Virgin, stars rather than colours would be needed . . . the Gate of Light shouldst be depicted in luminosities. But the stars do not obey the voices of mortals. Therefore we deliniate and paint thee with what nature and the laws of painting can provide.[7]

The Iconoclasts, supported by the Roman army, argued at the Seventh Oecumenical Council in 754 A.D. that it was contrary to the First Commandment—"I am the Lord God, thou shalt not have false gods before me"—to make or worship idols. They also argued that Christ was both human and divine, and that since divinity could not be depicted, artists were breaking the unity of Christ's person. Led by Constantine V, persecution followed. Images of Christ were burnt and simplified crosses were put in their place. The Iconodules, who had for their spokesman John of Damascus, had fortunately the better argument. John based his argument on the Neo-Platonist doctrine that the appreciation of visible beauty is a neccessary, though transitory, path towards the appreciation of absolute beauty. He explained that reverence is not paid to the material object, but to the prototype, and he won the case by pointing out that to deny that Christ, in his human nature, could be depicted, was to deny the Incarnation. In 787 A.D., under Empress Irene, the iconoclastic argument was solved at the Council of Nicea. It resulted in the formulation of an official theory of art suited to the Byzantine temperament.

In relation to the epigram mentioned earlier, where Constantine of Rhodes expresses the impossible wish that stars

be used instead of colours to depict the 'Lady of Light', and Constantine V's argument that divinity cannot be portrayed materially, I feel it important to refer to the techniques and materials used by Byzantine artists in their attempt to render a metaphysical world, given the handicap of having to rely on natural materials to express the eternal world of heaven.

John Stuart, in his book on ikons, says:

> The Byzantine theory of colour almost certainly has its roots in the rich and venerable tradition of alchemy, at that time a living and highly spiritualised activity. The chemical process wherby the colour was produced by an admixture of various substances was, for the alchemist, inseparably linked with the need to understand the essential nature and spiritual properties of matter.[8]

It is interesting to note that the three streams of thought which contribute to the rise of alchemy, parallel those contributing to the rise of Byzantine art, namely: A) The philosophy and science of the Greeks. B) The philosophic tenets of the Persians. C) The philosohpy and technology of the Near East. At one time or another, the Chinese, Indians, Egyptians, Greeks and Arabs all practised this hermetic science, though it most probably grew out of the speculations of the early Greek philosophers like Heraclitus and Democritus. For, like Plotinus, who said "Fire is splendid beyond all things", Heraclitus would have us believe that fire was the most essential element, as gold is for the alchemist a shadow of the sun, which in turn is a shadow of God.

> Alchemy is not merely an art or science to teach metallic transmutation, as much as a true and solid science that teaches how to know the centre of all things, which in the divine language is called 'the Spirit of Life'.[9]

So wrote Pierre-Jean Fabre in a book published in Paris in 1636, Les Secrets Chemique.

The Fountain of Youth, the Elixir of Life and the Philosopher's Stone also have their parallels in Christianity. For example, water cleanses the body and purifies the soul at

266. Double-headed eagle with crowns of Pope and Emperor, symbolizing the kingdoms of both worlds. The eagle is covered with eyes (enlightenment).—Codex Palatinus Latinus 312 (15th cent.)

Plate 8.

Creation of Adam from the clay of the *prima materia*.—Schedel: ***Das Buch der Chroniken*** (1493)

Plate 9.

Baptism. The Elixer of Life can be seen as the Eucharist—a potion is magically created, as that of the transmutation of base metals into gold. Transubstantiation is the name given to the transmutation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. The Philosopher's Stone can be read in Christian terms as the promise of eternal life with God in heaven. (A graphic depiction of this marraige of Christian and Alchemical tradtitions can be seen in Plates 8 and 9).

However, to return to colour symbolism, the greens and browns are identifiable with the earth and its vegetation. Blue is the colour of the heavens and symbolises contemplation and the ethereal. A Byzantine poem refers to it as 'the iris-coloured light'. Orange-red suggests fervour and spiritual purification, and is obviously associated with fire. Scarlet denotes vigour and vitality. White, which is all colours unmanifest, may be used on the robes of Christ and his angels to represent their invisible presence. Gold, symbolic of the uncreated, denotes divine energy and magnificence. Rich vermilion colour was obtained from cinnabar, the principal ore of Mercury. It is a mercuric sulphide, composed of mercury and sulphur; this is interesting from the point of view of the alchemists' primary interest in both these ingredients. For them, sulphur signifies earth and fire; mercury signified water and air.(The bright-coloured cinnabar is visible in Plate 4, where it forms a double frame for the ikon. It also underlies the gold leaf, enhancing its sheen; showing the Byzantine's knowledge of optics.)

These colours, with all their symbolic attachments, had to be extracted from the earth. The recipes for obtaining pigments were often kept secret. They differ in every country, because of climate and soil conditions. Greens and browns can be extracted from leeks, when mixed with copper. Ochre was found in rich supply in the areas around the Volga, and depending on

the amount of iron oxide added to it, a precise shade could be obtained. White pigment was formed from a basic carbonate of lead, as it is today. Green came from malachite, and could also be manufactured locally by these chemist-painters. One recipe describes the process: Firstly, a tree-trunk is sawn in half, and used as a vessel to hold urine or some other acid. Then some twigs are spanned across the trunk and pieces of copper are laid on these. The other half of the trunk is used as a lid, which seals off the fumes escaping from the noxious mixture, which corrode the copper and form particles of green pigment.

SECTION FIVE

BYZANTINE AESTHETICS:

NEOPLATONISM AND THE MATHEMATICAL HARMONY

The most formidable intellectual opponents of Christianity had been the Neoplatonists, headed by Plotinus (204-270 A.D.), however, strange as it might seem, much of what he wrote with regard to the nature of Beauty in his aesthetic philosophy was adopted in later times by the Byzantines. Its influence can be seen in the Rublyov ikon, among others. To Plotinus, the value of the emotion engendered by art lies in the comprehension that Beauty is not concerned with material forms, but with eternal concepts:

> The material thing becomes beautiful by communicating in the thought that flows from the Divine.[9]

Beauty, he goes on to say, is that which irradiates symmetry, rather than symmetry itself:

> Only a compound can be beautiful, never anything devoid of parts, and only a whole; the several parts will have

> beauty, not in themselves, but only as working together to give a comely total.

He believed that the form existed in the artist's mind before executing the work, and that the arts did not exist to reproduce nature but to return to ideas from which nature itself derived:

> Every prime cause must be within itself, more beautiful than its effect can be . . . Phidias wrought the Zeus upon no mortal among things of sense but by apprehending what form Zeus might take if he choose to become manifest to sight.

Plotinus was obsessed by the nature of light and his writings pertaining to this subject also influenced the Byzantine's approach to painting:

> The beauty of colour is also the outcome of unification; it derives from shape, from the conquest of darkness inborn in matter by the pouring in of light, the unembodied. . . . Fire is splendid beyond all material things and gives the form of colour from the splendour of its light.[10]

The Byzantines agreed with this. They held that light, the first created element, was of the highest regard. It was candle-light that illuminated the already shimmering glass of the mosaics and gold-leaf of the ikons. Gold was used as symbolic of divine energy and infinity. In nature it is the colour of the sun, the very life force of the universe, on which all other colours depend for their existence. The events depicted against the gold eternal background of the ikons have a meaning which places them outside the pale of time. The web of gold lines known as 'assist', radiating out from Christ in the Publyov ikon Christ in Glory (Plate 7.) express a spiritual tension between the worlds of material and spirit. They extend and contract the composition, transversing the two colour planes, so linking the material fire and the heavenly sky, while still creating an invisible plane of their own—a veil of energy.

Plotinus's idea that 'the material thing becomes beautiful by communicating the thought which comes from the Divine' foreshadowed the Byzantine style of painting, explicit in Christ in Glory and St. John the Baptist (Plate 5.). All ikons were written as an act of prayer, and both these examples were created out of a belief and a desire to embrace a metaphysical reality. It must be remembered that belief in the existence of God was an accepted fact, an 'absolute truth' throughout these centuries; it was not thrown into question. Without this fundamental belief Byzantine art would not have come into being.

And now with regard to the underlying mathematical harmony in Byzantine art, it is relevent to quote Gervase Mathew, from his book Byzantine Aesthetics:

> An interest in the natural properties of jewels, of herbs and of the planets, was combined with lucid speculation upon ethics; ethics being conceived as the laws that govern human action and give purpose, and therefore structure, to society. Both presupposed a conception of the intelligibility of nature, a conviction of the causality of law and a world view of hierarchic grades; Byzantine civilization was essentially mathematical in its emphasis on the inevitability of due proportion, rhythm and order. This sense of the inevitable reflected the underlying serenity of the self-concentrated Byzantine culture, based on recognition of the dominance of Idea and of the rule of cool and temperate mind.[11]

The mathematical approach to beauty has of course its classic origins; Aristotle in the Poetics had stated, that beauty concists in size and order, and Plato had already noted in the Timaeus— that beauty is not without measure. For the Byzantine mathematician, the theory of numbers and pure geometry belong to the world of 'neotes'; the art of calculation, applied geometry, of optics and mechanics, to that of 'aisthetos'. Material was inevitably moulded by the laws of the mind. Neo-Pythagorian mystics, like Nicomachus of Gerasa 1st century A.D., a theorist on music and

intent on the harmonies as well as the mystic meanings of numbers, were being studied for their theories as late as the 14th century, by mathematicans. It seems that there always has been, in man, the impulse to order the natural world with laws frequently based in abstract concepts. The Optics of Euclid reached Byzantium through Pappus of Alexandria who had included it in his Little Astronomy. Gervase Mathew says that the first four definitions by Euclid are crucial for the Byzantine theory of vision:

> 'Those things are seen on which the visual rays impinge while those are not seen on which they do not'; the process of vision is due to rays from the eyes striking against objects. These rays are straight, 'The straight rays that issue from the eye traverse dimensions'. They create the field of vision by striking the object at an angle. 'The figure contained by the visual rays is a cone which has its vertex in the eye and its base at the extremities of the objects seen . . . things seen under a greater angle appear greater and those under a lesser angle less.'[12]

With regard to Plotinus' aesthetic, and the Byzantine's mathematical approach to painting, and the interest in optical experiment, it proves worthwhile to compare a much more recent painting, which derives from an almost identical approach; La Cirque, painted in 1890 by George Seurat, and an ikon in the National Gallery of Ireland; The Miracle of St. George and the Dragon (Plates 10 and 11.)

It was Humbert de Superville, the painter and engraver, who, along with the colour theorist Chevreul, provided George Seurat with his rules of expression. In his essay, Essai sur les Signes Inconditionnel dans l'Art (Leiden, 1827), Humbert demonstrated that scientific rules cannot possibly act as a check upon the spontaneity of invention and execution. According to him, harmony comes about when the 'human I' and the 'non-I' are in tune; "All of us feel the need for transmitting signs to the soul by way of the eyes . . . lines speak and signify." Seurat delved into studies about the

Plate 10.

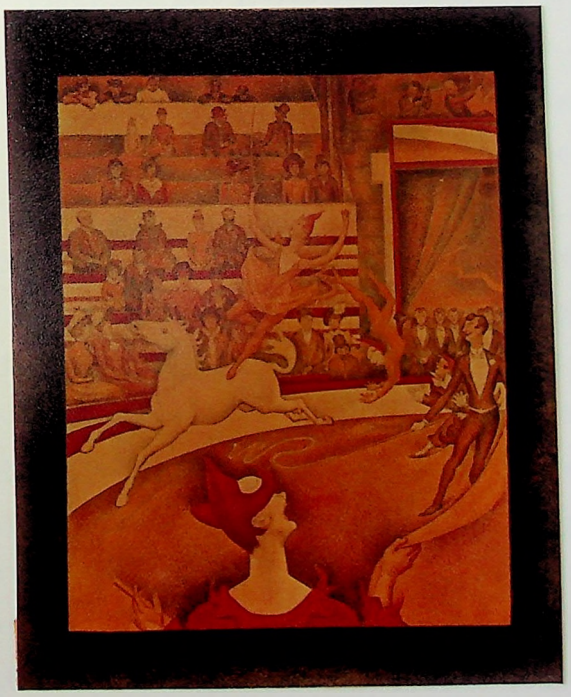

Plate 11.

electromagnetic properties of light, copied out luminosity equations and discussed dynamogenics. Steeped in theories, he summed up his credo: "Art is harmony. Harmony is the analogy of opposites."[13] The analogy of opposites meant for Seurat the analogy of similiar tones, hues and lines. By tone, the range from light to dark; by hue, the complementary colours like red and green—he believed these diverse harmonies could combine to produce serenity, gaiety or sadness. Byzantine art was essentially refined too, in its emphasis on the inevitability of due proportion. Seurat's credo appears like a direct reflection of Plotinus' aesthetic of symmetry: "Only a compound can be beautiful, never any thing devoid of parts."

Changing colour schemes in the 'St. George' ikon and Le Cirque are conceived in terms of rhythm; both use optics to redirect the effects of space. In Seurat's painting there is something like a chemical distillation of atmosphere, a 'hollowing-out of the canvas'. The points of colour atomise human, animal and architectural forms. The subject matter too dissolves in this flux—an acrobat is in mid-air and upside down; the dancer on horsback is angled so that she appears about to fall. In the ikon, by contrast, all movement is arrested by the diagonal of St. George's lance. St. George struggles for supremacy over the lower forces, he maintains the equilibrium between heaven and the lower world. Harmony, as Seurat said, is 'the analogy of opposites'. The ikon painter has unified the opposition both in terms of the subject matter depicted and also through the interplay of colour. Both Seurat and the ikon painter have used the same pure colours; yellow, green, red and white—the colours in both denote the same harmony and vigour.

Plate 12.

There is a stylisation of form in both paintings, neither illusion or naturalism are sought after. In an early drawing of Seurat's taken from a marble frieze (Plate 12) we see how capable he was of drawing a more graceful and pleasing horse. Yet he has chosen to abstract and delineate the white dancing beast in Le Cirque.

In the Renaissance system of perspective the picture is conceived as a window opening onto a space beyond. The ikon, however, opens onto the space before it, primarily because the art was considered a functional part of the church architecture. Seurat has chosen to dispense with Renaissance perspective. In The Miracle of St. George and the Dragon the carpenter has scooped out a slightly recessed flat surface area (called 'polya') to accomodate the painting, and has left a narrow raised border (called 'kovcheg') around the edge. This border has a specific function; being the exact replica of the Hellenistic niche. It gives the sense of condensed aerial space peculiar to the ikon. In a similiar way, Seurat solves the transition between the flat world of the picture and the three-dimensional space inhabited by the viewer by painting the frame surrounding the canvas in the same gradating pointillist tones. Le Cirque further opens onto real space through the directional force of the red and white elliptical contour of the circus ring. The clown in the foreground, his back turned, is like us, a spectator.

As in the ikons no one shape, colour or image in Le Cirque is allowed to dominate. The strata of horizontal lines that composes the rows of spectators, the serialised staircase between them and the door, the underlying 'Golden Section' proportions—the harmony is absolute. But the ideal

of harmony that glows under the analytic science of Pointillism —or Divisionism, as Seurat preferred to call it—and the harmony that the Russian master achieves, differ in one important area. The ikon has been painted with an assurance grounded in tradition. Seurat's painting is not assured. This two dimensional portrayal lacks the clarity of line which divides the weight of uniform complementary colours in the ikon. Le Cirque lacks solidity. Form and space blend, nothing is solid, nothing is tangible. Unlike the ikon, Seurat's painting depicts an event of this world and time yet it appears like no known representation of reality because density oscillates, because Seurat makes no differentiation between solid and void. Teodor de Wyzewa wrote this of Seurat:

> . . . . and from the first evening I met him, I discovered that his soul was one of past times. The secular disenchantment that makes the task so difficult for artists today, had not touched him. He believed in the power of theories, in the absolute value of method and in the lasting effects of revolutions. And my joy was great at having found here in the corner of Montmartre, so admirable an example of a race that I had supposed extinct, a race of painter-theorists who combine idea with practise, unconscious fantasy with deliberate effort. . . .He was one of the forces of the art of our time . . . With him has gone one of our hopes of seeing the resurgence of a new art, admidst the anarchy, the ignorance and the vulgarity of the contemporary art world.[14]

PART TWO

SECTION ONE

THE 20TH CENTURY: THE DESTRUCTION OF THE OLD ORDER

Seurat was one of the artists who helped destroy the old system of classical plastic representation—a conceptual act that required another set of concepts to replace worn-out conventions. A new non-objective art had sprung up in Russia by 1917 called Suprematism, which relied totally on logic and abstract categories. Malevich was the first to affirm non-objective plastic creation, defined by him as 'a free navigation of pictorial planes'. The principal of the dynamic liberty of these planes created the possibility of transcending earthly material reality by concentrating on the definition of a new space, one like Seurat's—in motion and perpetual change. Malevich was to activate the metaphysical aspects of space, where Seurat had activated the visual appearance of matter. Malevich can be seen in some ways as the culmination of what could be termed Byzantine iconoclastic art, as he creates a metaphysical world without use of figurative imagery. It is as if he separated the vital colours in ikons like St. George and the Miracle of the Dragon, blocked them into rigid abstract shapes and gave them 'the life and right to individual

existence of form', so creating a spiritual dimension of mechanised space. By affirming the primary importance of the 'field'(that is, the background plane given depth to by the interaction of shapes), Malevich, like Seurat with his painted frames, reintroduced Byzantine space and gave painting the possibility of going beyond Renaissance open-window easel painting. The turn of the 20th century was marked by a revolutionary upheaval—in music, Schonberg and Stravinsky who broke entirely with the old harmonic scale; in the visual arts with Cubism and Constructivism; also in literature, where form was subjugated to the demands of consciousness and imagination as it had never been before, with writers like Apollonaire, Joyce and Rimbaud.

However, the main purpose here is to analyse the effect of this new literature and thought on the work of Marcel Duchamp, the subject of this, the second half of the present work.

Duchamp admired the strange power in the writings of Laforgue and Mallarmē, a power that enabled him to break free of accustomed meanings and operate in a new, non -rational, context. He said that Roussel's play Impressions d'Afrique showed him the way, directly influencing the composition of the Large Glass. This influence of a literary model is something that links Duchamp closely with the Byzantine artists. However, Roussel's conception of beauty is a long way from that of Plotinus. Roussel's poetic method is very close to the manner in which the Large Glass was brought into being, where disparate elements, puns and sentences with double meanings are linked together

in a logical framework. It was his instinctive disregard for superficial logic that Duchamp was to rationalise in his poetic work.

An artist naturally lives in his own time, and is even formed by it, and of no-one is this perhaps truer than Duchamp. Cubist art remained in the pre-industrial world, and Futurism took from the industrial world its external features—its dynamism and its forms. But while the Futurists depicted the industrial world as Duchamp said 'impressionistically', Duchamp discovered its symbolic significance. While in Delaunay's mind Zeppelins, aeroplanes and towers in the sky all meant the poetry of modern life, Duchamp's importance lies in the fact that he discovered more than picturesqueness in this new world. He proved ready to become citizen of it, to accept it as a new kind of nature, to make it part of his own inner world, and the apotheosis of this is his creation of the Mechanical Virgin.

Baudelaire felt that "A painter, a genuine painter will be one who is capable of discovering the epic nature of contemporary life", as he wrote in his Salon of 1845; and in his last Salon (1859), he adds that the key to this new discovery of reality will be the imagination, the imagination that

> decomposes everything created and with the new materials that it gathers and treats according to the rules whose origins we must seek only in the deepest levels of the spirit, creates a new world.

Jindrich Chalupecký, in an essay entitled"Nothing but an Artist" sees in Duchamp, Baudelaire's idea of such an artist.

> I would go so far as to say that the significance of Duchamp's Large Glass and the ready-mades from the same period lies in the fact that they reveal the source of the modern world's fascination for us: it's symbolic value. It is true that Duchamp had emphasised that he

> wanted his work first of all to appeal to 'the grey matter of the brain', and even that he wanted to renew the old type of allegorical painting. A detailed analysis may in fact reveal allegory in the Large Glass: we may conceive its forms as signs, and for these signs find a lexical meaning. But the work is effective before one can explain it . . . For before the work is allegory, before it appeals to the grey matter, it speaks to archaic levels of awareness, to the area of moods, intimations, to the unstructured or the just structuring awareness of the world.[15]

The underlying structured harmony of Byzantine art, which grew out of the sacred geometry of Pythagoras, as well as Neo-Platonic aesthetics, has already been referred to. Symbolism, 'the language of transcendence', as Karl Jaspers refers to it, that imagery which clothes the mathematical harmony of Byzantine art, had its origin in the archaic pagan spirit.

The following section will examine Duchamp's very early paintings, those works which derive similiarly from an exploration into 'the deeper levels of the spirit' (Baudelaire). This is a journey which Duchamp had to undergo, like the Byzantines, to enable the construction of an equally finely-wrought symbolic language.

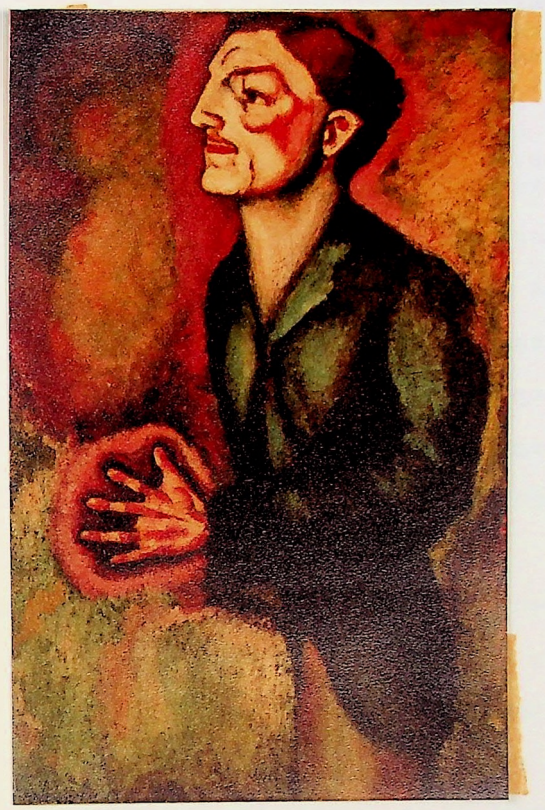

Plate 13.

SECTION TWO

SYMBOLISM IN DUCHAMP'S EARLY PAINTINGS

Duchamp painted the Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel (Plate 13) in April 1910. With regard to this painting, Duchamp wrote in a letter of the same year:"The portrait is very colourful (red and green) and has a note of humour in it which indicated my future direction, to abandon mere retinal painting." [17]

Dumouchel's body is stiff, he appears to be entranced, in a state of metamorphosis. His hand which appears out from underneath the sleeve of his jacket is neither right nor left, but rather it appears like the imprint they make on each other on contact. An aura of light surrounds the body, typifying the notion of transcendence, in the same way that in ikons, gold leaf surrounds Christos Pantocrator, or a halo surrounds the Virgin Hodigitria, so isolating the figure from this world and accentuating the timelessness in which the appearance takes place. Perhaps the 'note of humour' which Duchamp refers to, lies in the parody expressed in this painting; one relating to the notion of animal man's attempt to overcome himself through spiritual means.

In Paradise (Plate 14), painted in 1910 also, Dumouchel reappears. He is now portrayed as Adam, having been transported to the dawn of mythical time—to the Garden of Eden. He remains in profile, but he stands naked and covers himself. His chest is drawn in a manner reminiscent of the stylisation

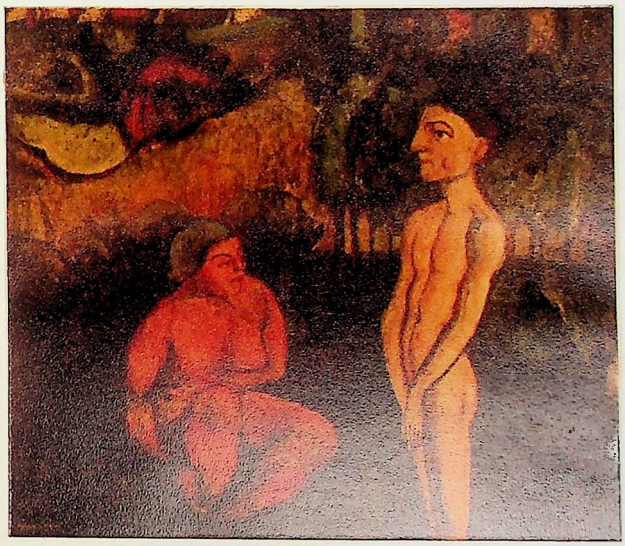

Plate 14.

used in Byzantine paintings to depict Christ's anatomy, where lines are simplified to express abdomen and rib-cage. Eve, in contrast to him, squats. She is bulbous, organic Eastern form, the like of which only Gauguin might paint. Her skin is dark, Adam's is white. The landscape too bears the influence of the Symbolists, it is ill-defined and dark, the trees are outlined, as are the figures, in thick, muted lines. There is no recognition of any sort between this couple. They seem to be neither of the same culture or time. We are drawn towards Adam's archaic expression. His eye seems to stare beyond Paradise and back into himself. Eve appears as the embodiment of nature; she is the organic impulse. Adam is not the personification of man, but rather an individual, his body is less of a part of him than his mind. The organic world and the world of the intellect seem to gaze in opposite directions.

It is impossible to refer to Duchamp's paintings from this early period without constantly introducing the idea of initiation as expressed in pagan ceremony and Christian symbolism. This is particularly so in the case of The Bush (Plate 15) painted in January 1911.

In this painting a third party, though invisible to us, is implied—as is the case in the St. John the Baptist ikon. The kneeling figure on the left is being presented in a solemn and gentle ceremony to some higher being beyond the frame, whose existence is only acknowledged through the eyes of the initiate. Both women are naked. The eyes of the standing woman are closed as if in obeisance. A reverence and stillness are created here, akin to that

Plate 15.

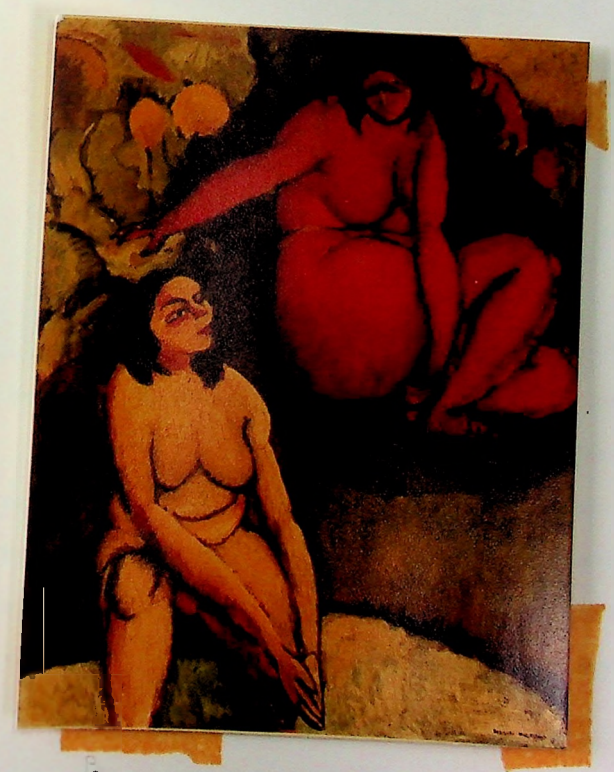

Plate 16.

present in the Virgin and Child Hodegitria. The standing woman's left hand is drawn so as to symbolise 'the Path'. Her right hand rests on the head of the kneeling girl as if both to protect and crown her.

It is interesting to compare the symbolism of initiation in Duchamp's painting with that which occurs in Botticelli's Primavera (14). Edgar Wind, in his perceptive essay on this painting, points out that Botticelli was inspired by Ovid's Fasti, and that Neo-Platonic writings also manifest themselves in the iconography of the painting. Wind describes the initiation of Castitas in the Primavera:

> As she [Castitas] acts the part of the enraptured Grace who unites the opposites in her person, the whole dance becomes imbued with her own spirit of chastity which she imparts to her companions. In this she seems to have the sanction of Venus, for however recklessly Cupid may shoot his fire, Venus tempers the dance and keeps its movements within a melodious restraint.[16]

In Plotinus' De Amore (Enneads III, V 4) which was translated by Marcilio Ficino, Venus is described as a guardian, she is peaceable and beneficient, she is identified as the 'Mother of Love', the soul.

The standing woman in Duchamp's The Bush is certainly a guardian, the gesture of her right hand acts like that of Venus in the Primavera, to offer sanction. A further development of this theme can be seen in Duchamp's Baptism (Plate 16), painted in 1911, where the kneeling girl has changed physically and sits in the company of a Buddha-like figure. All of these early paintings are difficult to date in terms of the history of thoughts or images, they have a quality about them which refers them to an early age of mankind. Young Man and Girl in Spring (Plate 17), painted in the Spring of 1911, is no exception. It also has an

Plate 17.

hermetic quality reminiscent of the mysterious drawings in alchemical manuscripts.

The artist describes the two figures in the 'Spring Garden' as 'arbour-type', and truly they have that Oriental sense of growth and strain toward life within them, like the energy within the brushmarks of a Chinese ink drawing. The man and woman strain upward and stretch their arms through the branches of the tree which stems from a circular vessel in the centre of the canvas. The man on the right-hand side bears a resemblance to Mercury as he appears in the Primavera. He too points upwards through the trees, with a stick he stirs the clouds, dispelling the mists of doubt and letting clear thought shine through (the blue sky of clear reason is used in ikons for the mantle of the Virgin). Wind regards the symbols on Mercury's cloak— inverted flames—as a reference to death, but only a death which will carry the initiate to another life. It is interesting to note that in Classical mythology, Mercury was the mediator between the mortals and the Gods, but above all else he was the ingenious god of the probing intellect, sacred to grammarians and metaphysicians—the revealer of hermetic knowledge in later tradition.

Young Man and Girl in Spring is reminiscent of the 15th century drawings of Johannes Andreae. In one of these drawings which is in the British Museum (Plate 18), the underlying script tells us that a man and woman, 'a king and queen', are removing impurities from one another, until they stand naked and conjoin to form the perfect solution, which will then dissolve into the liquid state. In Putrefactio (Plate 19) the same couple dissolve into 'the black nigredo' and pass through death to produce the perfect child.

Plate 18.

Plate 19.

In Andreae's diagram, as in Duchamp's painting, a child is contained in a vessel above which is growth. In Duchamp's painting, the child in the sphere appears to represent the seed of life issuing from the Tree of Knowledge. From the conjunction of the headless woman on the left and the Mercury figure on the right, Plotinus' 'symmetry of parts' becomes united in physical terms—the offspring of Eros defeats Thanatos.

The four examples of Duchamp's early paintings that have been described bear no reference to the objective world. They are not concerned with representing what the eye sees, nor are they concerned with perspective, light or shade, and can therefore be equated with the sensory innocence of Byzantine art, an innocence which became lost in painting since the Italian artists of the Trecento had begun to approximate a more concrete rendering of nature. Symbolism had also disappeared with the advent of the Renaissance, it was beginning to return in the early twentieth century with artists like Odilon Redon—though with subject matter that was far from Christian. The Renaissance had replaced the symbolism of the Byzantines with exaggerated gesture; an evident example of this can be seen in comparing Leonardo Da Vinci's St. John the Baptist (1509-12) with the St. John the Baptist ikon of Constantinople (Plate 5). In contrast to Renaissance painting, for example Masaccio's Adam and Eve (c. 1527), or even the psychological dramas enacted in Giotto's frescos, ikons make no appeal to sentiment, being principally concerned with the life of the mind and not the body, an idea which is typified in Dr. Dumouchel

Plate 20.

and Paradise. Paralleling the fall of Byzantine art, the religious art of the West became rational. During the Renaissance the miracles become materialised or dramatised, no distinction is made between heaven and earth, Christ is seen portrayed as a human being, and haloes, if they are not eliminated entirely, become merely exercises in perspectival construction. In Man and Woman in Spring, mystery reappears in the form of a mannerist ikon. The orthogonal perspective of the Renaissance is not used because it is not neccessary to strengthen the simulation of a human condition. The scene does not take place in a world subject to natural laws, the man and woman are insubstantial beings, they are symbolic, like St. George, and the objects held by the saints who surround the Virgin Hodigitria. Duchamp's King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes painted in 1912 (Plate 20) is a further development of this male and female theme, it glows with the same golden hue of an ikon. These gold automatons could be seen as the mechanical 'creators' of the twentieth century. They are given the title of king and queen, they are surrounded by swift nudes, a concept not unlike the aerobatic angels who so frequently surround the Christian deity.

Rendering the concept of the image is what is important for the Byzantine artist and Duchamp alike. His involvement with geometry and physics, which links him also with the Byzantines, was a reaction to the Romantic sensualism of painting. With the rapid development of technology since the second half of the eighteenth century, a style of mechanical drawing had developed that was aesthetically beautiful and scientifically clear. It was derivations of

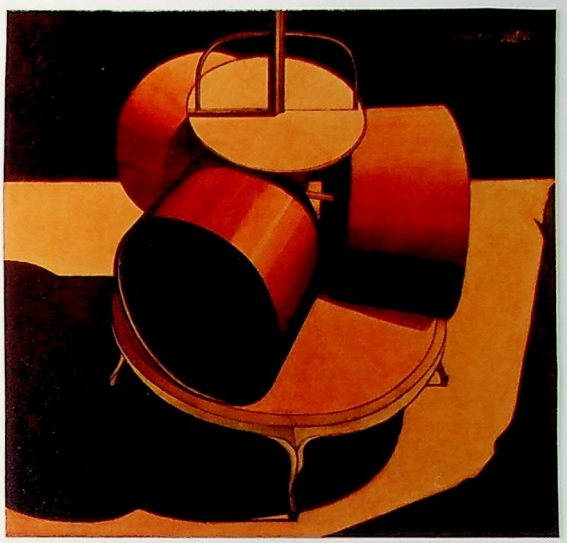

Plate 21.

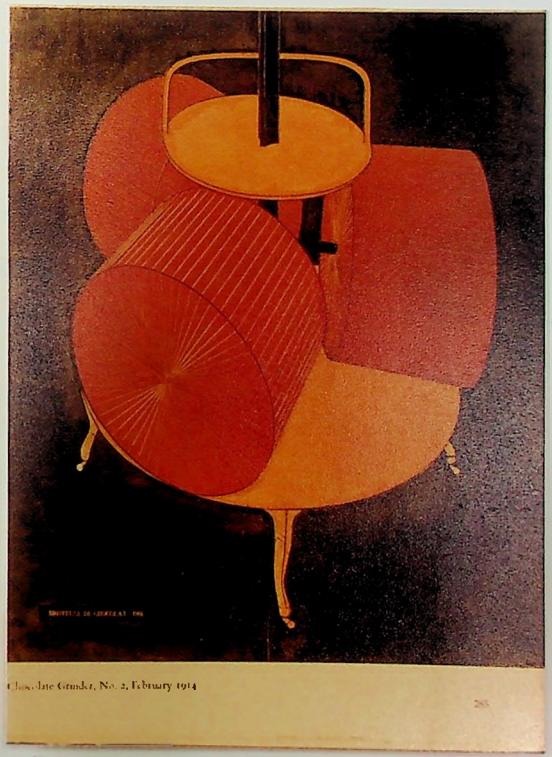

Plate 22.

these depersonalised mechanical symbols that Duchamp was to use in his Large Glass.

In his first version of the Chocolate Grinder, painted in 1913 (Plate 21) the title is printed in gold letters on black ribbon and stuck on the upper right-hand corner of the picture, like a trade mark. In the second version (Plate 22) he painted of this picture, all shadow is eliminated. The grinder stands against a uniform background where no horizontal line or colour plane divides the background space. It is a purely geometric composition—three three-sided cylinders are shown from one viewpoint, they are all at angles to one another and linked by a horizontal and vertical axis.

Byzantine artists never used shadow: for them, light was all-important. Seeing the second version of the Chocolate Grinder develop out of the first is like seeing the realistic illusionary aspect of early Roman fresco painting being consciously disregarded by the Byzantines in favour of depicting a higher reality by omitting the shadow. Granted, the highlights used in early Roman painting were carried through in Byzantine art as 'assist', but not used to draw a distinction between light and shade, or to create three-dimensional effects; only to illuminate the essence of the two-dimensional portrayals. The strings Duchamp has glued to the elliptical shapes of the grinder in Plate 22 serve a similiar purpose as 'assist'. They create a tension in the composition and an added planar surface. Duchamp did not sign these two works; the trade mark titles suffice, a signature would have defeated the fact of their anonymity. This is interesting from the point of view that Byzantine artists

did not sign their work either. The search for new styles and forms, in a constant battle for originality, was a Renaissance trait. For the Byzantines, all merit lay in the quality of repetition. Duchamp approaches the second version of the Chocolate Grinder in the same spirit, respecting the mass-produced nature of the subject itself. This is one of the symbols he uses in the Large Glass to construct an image of the mechanical world.

SECTION THREE

DUCHAMP'S METAPHYSICS AND THE ONTOLOGICAL NATURE OF THE PANEL AND THE GLASS

In 1963, William Seitz asked Duchamp what adjective he would use to describe his work."It is not political" he said; "Does it then have any aesthetic or philosophic significance?". "No, no" replied Duchamp without any hesitation, "Metaphysical, if any."[18]

Metaphysics is the philosophical study whose object is to determine the real nature of things; to determine the meaning, structure and principles of whatever, insofar as it is. It is presented by metaphysicians as the most fundamental and comprehensive of inquiries, inasmuch as it is concerned with Being as a whole. It must now be pointed out how Duchamp's metaphysical philosophy differs from that of the Byzantines. The point for Duchamp is not to be right before God, but to be right before himself, and to do so, give up looking outside himself for guarantee of his existence. Byzantine art, as was previously explained, revolves around an unquestioned belief in God. In constast, Duchamp's art revolves around himself and his constant struggle for personal freedom.

> 'God is created in Man's image' Duchamp says. 'He is the final end of man's use of causal systems—the product of the desire for the absolute. God is the natural end of man's desire for proof and an absolute. Explanation through cause and effect comes from the same desire to prove things. But how can we say what is really cause and effect?! When asked did he believe in God, Duchamp replied

replied "No, not at all. Don't say that. For me the question does not exist. It's man's invention; why speak of such a Utopia? When man invents something there is always somebody for and somebody against. To have created the idea of God is the craziest stupidity. I do not want to say that I am atheist or believer. I don't even want to discuss it.[19]

In an extract from Florensky's Ikonostas, a stimulating and original view is put forward which serves to differentiate between the choice of surface used by ikon painters—the hard wooden panel; and that chosen by Renaissance painters—the yielding canvas. Duchamp, in his Large Glass, chooses the most unyielding of surfaces; his materials reflect his philosophy, as will be explained later. P. A. Florensky (1882-1942), one of the most interesting Russian thinkers of this century, writes about the dialectics of artist's materials:

> Stretched canvas, yielding yet resilient, provides a surface which vies with the artist's hand. As he grapples with it, the painter becomes conscious of the fact that it lies within his power to impose his own attitude upon it, as upon an equal, a fellow-creature, a phenomenon of of the world of appearances. By contrast, the hard unyielding surface of wall or board is too rigid, too demanding, too ontological for the creative intelligence expressed through the fingers of Renaissance man . . . the fingers of his hand need to feel their own autonomy as a law unto itself, unperturbed by the outside intrusion of anything that does not submit to the artist's will. A hard, solid surface would have stood facing him as a reminder of those unyielding realities which he is striving to erase from memory. I do not suggest that the artists of the Renaissance and subsequent culture had thought consciously about this. But his hands and fingers, imbued with the collective mind, the mind of the culture itself, certainly take account of what passes for reality . . . Instead of speculating on the metaphysical nature of things in the abstract, man now laid stress on understanding them in a way cognisable to the senses. They were understood not ontologically, but in their limited and mutable phenomenal reality. Renaissance man, who saw himself as being possessed not of an absolute reality, but only of an unstable 'seeming', naturally felt called upon to instill order into this world of metaphysical transparencies.[20]

It was Duchamp's theory that anything of three -dimensional form was the projection in our world of a fourth-dimensional world that was to dictate his choice of materials in The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even. In the same way as the Platonic idea of Form, of infinite recession, of eternity, had indicated to the Byzantine mosaicist his use of gilded squares of glass, and the ikon painter his use of gold leaf and lapis lazuli—the most precious materials of the earth—for the portrayal of the heavenly dimension. It is interesting to note that Duchamp's theory is essentially Platonic, when understood as the shadow cast by a four dimensional figure on our space being a three dimensional shadow—Plato's image of the cave.

One recipe used by the ikon painters to obtain green pigment has already been described. Similiarly, for Duchamp, the creation of materials was to become part of the artistic process. Tubes of paint sold in shops envisaged as 'ready -mades' would certainly not suffice for the creation of the fourth-dimensional home of the mechanical bride. At first he experimented with mirror, as its surface could act as a physical paradigmfor Plato's image, however he was to settle for a flat sheet of transparent glass, the opposite of a reflective medium on which to operate. Glass is one of the hardest materials known, yet it is also one of the most fragile. By exercising this choice, he would introduce a dichotomy. Glass would defy time by its durability; it was also easily destructible."I used glass to get to get away from any possibility of placing this work in a material world."

In a further extract from Ikonostas, Florensky says:

> If the aims of the artist do not coincide with the characteristic properties of his materials he will be forced, consciously or unconsciously, to seek out a surface more appropriate to his personal expression.[23]

Like an alchemist, Duchamp tested the chemical properties of materials; he mixed graphite and linseed oil to achieve the effect of steel, he investigated the properties of mica, believing this element might also yield the glimmer of the machine age. He prepared substances from commercial products —from grated chocolate, toothpaste and shoe polish. In 1915, a note in the Green Box (a collection of documents relating to the origins of the Large Glass) tells us, Duchamp attempted to cultivate colours in a greenhouse;

> In the greenhouse [on a glass plate, colours seen transparently]. Mixture of flowers of colour i.e. each colour still in its optical state . . . Perfumes with psychological rebound can be neglected and extracted in an imprisonment for the fruit. Only, the fruit still has to avoid been eaten.[24]

This idea brings to mind the image of scientists cultivating bacteria in their glass Petrie dishes, growing cultures to investigate their properties. The thought of cultivating these immaterial colours led Duchamp in 1920 to 'breed dust' and use it as the colour material of the Sieves , another element of the Large Glass. In Leonardo's notebooks we find a similiar reference to dust on glass—

> The glass should be varnished or soaked on the inside, so that the dust that falls from the hopper may attach itself to it, and the spot where it sticks will remain marked, and by that means you will be able with certainty to discern the exact height where the dust struck, because it will remain sticky there.

Duchamp tested the possibilities of ground glass and coloured glass. In note 18 in the Green Box, he mentions

the use of ground glass in conjunction with matt-black paper in order to obtain silvered effects. As far as liquids were concerned he considered the possibility of a transparent, colourless juice to use as the 'Love Gasoline' in the Large Glass.

His first attempts to engrave the lines of his design on the Glass, by covering it with paraffin wax and then etching it with hydrochloric acid, failed. The drawing problem was finally solved through the use of lead wire— in comparison to gold, the basest of metals. It was stretched and attached to the glass with drops of varnish, some of the areas between these lines were then filled with pigment, a method comparable to cloisonné work.

Duchamp animated the Glass by working according to the dictates of the ambiguous surface. The Bride, in the upper left of the Glass, is not flesh, but skeleton. Her orgasm is purely intellectual, there is no physical contact between her and the Bachelors. On this unyielding surface Duchamp imposed his own laws. The rules of the game demand that if the Bride wants to continue breathing she must remain a virgin. When he introduced the principles of wind, skill and weight into the work, it was because he know these phenomena had not the slightest aesthetic value or artistic significance. At the Bride's base is a resevoir of gasoline, the purpose of which is to fuel the motor whose strokes control the machinery of her electrical stripping. The glass is subject to the 'Rules of Coincidence' or the 'Ministry of Gravity'. He constructs a new alphabet using lines, dots

and circles, a new grammer which is nothing to do with a pedagogical sentence construction. What are these 'Rules of Coincidence'? one might ask; how can chance be a rule, doesn't chance distort all Truth? Doesn't chance negate the possibility of absolutes?—Yes, Duchamp would say, and that is precisely why it is the only rule. It is because he recognises life's paradoxes that he can reject the absolute in all fields; that he can use and distort the so-called 'truths of science'—truths which are invalidated one day and replaced by others tomorrow, replaced by another stratum of objectivity. In the Large Glass, he weighs imagination against science. He refers to his work as metaphysical, because it contains no 'facts', only an irony which would prove valid if the laws of physics were distended.

Plate 23.

Plate 24.

SECTION FOUR

AN ICONOLOGICAL COMPARISON BETWEEN THE LARGE GLASS AND A POKROV IKON

An ikon in the National Gallery of Ireland, Our Lady's Protection or Stole (Plate 23), tells a story about a miracle. The main scene is derived from a version of St. Andrew's vision, one based on an event which carried a special message to the Russians. Byzantium was at war with the Arabs at the time the event is thought to have occurred, around 903 A.D. Andrew, the holy man, had gone to the Chruch of the Blachernae to pray for his fellow Christians. It was then the Virgin appeared, hovering in the air above him. Apparently, she was accompanied by angels and celestial beings. When she withdrew, her stole remained, glowing brightly 'till dawn broke. It is this scene which is shown in the upper half of the ikon. Accompanying the Virgin are archangels Gabriel and Michael. Michael wears a green tunic beneath a garment of red brocade. Gabriel's tunic is red, his outer garment is dark green. A little below them, but still within the celestial sphere, are the divines who form two groups.[25]

The scenes represented in the lower section of the ikon take place on earth. In the centre of the painting St. Romulus the Sweet Voice is seen standing in the circular pulpit. He holds a scroll bearing the opening words of a hymn, "The Heavenly Maid Appears in Church and For Her

Plate 24.

Give Thanks to God". Six choir boys sing with Romulous, they wear green, red and ochre. Two imperial persons, a king and queen, stand on his right.

Duchamp's Glass is similiarly divided into two zones (Plate 24). His skeletal 'Virgin' is placed directly above the nine Bachelors. She is described as a 'pendue femelle'—a hanging female body. She exists in a world where the Bachelors cannot physically reach her. The Virgin in the Pokrov ikon also stands above a group of uniformed bachelors—the altarboys, she too belongs in a world where physicality is non-existent. She carries across her arms a red garment, the miraculous stole. Duchamp's virgin Bride is separated from her Bachelors by her'Garment': three narrow strips of glass which run across the middle of the work, dividing her domain from the'Bachelor Machine'. The Glass in itself is but an inventory of the elements of the sexual life imagined by her, the ikon, in contrast, is the inventory of a supernatural event that was experienced by St. Andrew, leaving aside the question of whether or not he imagined it.

Another similiarity between the Large Glass and this ikon resides in the depiction of the cathedral in the Pokrov piece and Duchamp's 'Three Draft Pistons' in the 'Top Inscription'. For the Pistons, Duchamp photographed a square piece of gauze as it hung blowing in front of an open window, changing shape in the breeze. In The Bush and Baptism (Plates 15 and 16), ethereal choud-like formations also appear. The only inscription the 'Milky Way' bears are the 'Three Draft Pistons', symbols of the breeze that wafts into our world from 'elsewhere', dispelling, as in Neo-Platonic thought, the clouds of doubt and unreason. The Virgin in the Pokrov ikon

stands in front of a cathedral, the architectural form of which is cloud-like. The receding domes represent heaven, they are green like her dress. A narrow window opens upon each of the six arches, like the 'Stoppages'in the Glass open up the 'Top Inscription'. In both works there is a dichotomy between interior and exterior space. Duchamp's Glass is already transparent, yet he opens up through windows three another space. In the Pokrov ikon, the Virgin appears to be outside the church door, but she is understood to be within the building, as are the imperial persons and Romanus.

The bottom half of the ikon, as has been stated, is the earthly zone. The persons presented there are recognizable to the initiates. Likewise, with Duchamp's Glass, the initiates —those who read and understand the contents of the Green Box— will comprehend that the group of figures beneath the Bride are individual prototypes. There is a priest, a policeman, an undertaker, a department store delivery boy, among others identifiable in the group—characters on whom our society unquestionably depends. These characters are all dressed in similiar uniform, and are collectively called the'Nine Malic Moulds'. It would seem that their jobs, represented by their uniforms, mould them. They are stereotypes in a social machine. The Byzantine society is presented to us in the Pokrov ikon with the king and queen crowned and robed in jewelled vestments. They and the church leaders with them, who all wear robes of rank, are the lynch-pins of an imperialist, rather than a capitalist, society.

The perspective which governs the Bachelor's position on the the Glass is similiar to that used in the ikon to

position the group of figures in the earthly zone. Duchamp explains:

> It was neccessary to have them [the Nine Malic Moulds] enter in the shape of the glass, because I did not want to have the glass ten feet wide to get these beings into a group. Thus, the perspective distortion, which I had already studied in the plan of the Bachelor Apparatus, sends everyone into a general design.

Form is condensed in the ikon too; heads peer out from between shoulders to accommodate the crowd and balance the overall harmony of the poetry explicit in this painting--a poetry, it may be added, which stems from the sense of communion in the ikon; and which is noticably lacking in the much-vaunted Sacra Conversazione of the Renaissance.

SECTION FIVE

NEW YORK 1946-1966: DUCHAMP'S ETANT DONNÉS: 1. LA CHUTE D'EAU/ 2. LE GAZ D'ECLAIRAGE (GIVEN: 1. THE WATERFALL/ 2. THE ILLUMINATING GAS)

J.T. Harskarp, in his essay "Contemporaneity, Modernity, Avant Garde", points out that the arts can only continue by seeking inspiration in their own age:

> In whatever field one may explore, there are two recurring principles inherent in the very nature of things: the spirit of change and the spirit of conservation. Both principles are essential. Change for the sake of change is a passage from nothing to nothing. On the other hand, mere conservation without change cannot conserve. There is a flux of circumstance, and the freshness of being evaporates; under mere repetition, tradition would petrify. If we are to preserve culture we must continue to create.[26]

The exclusive demand for contemporaneity frequently deteriorates into the cult of the new, and so becomes as destructive to the artistic imagination as the unconditional surrender to the authority of the past. In the first chapter of her book Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition, Frances Yates writes:

> The great forward movements of the Renaissance all derive their vigour, their emotional impulse, from looking backwards. The cyclic view of time as a perpetual movement from pristine golden ages of purity and truth through successive brazen and iron ages still held sway and the search for truth was thus of neccessity a search for the early, the ancient, the original gold from which the brazen metals of the present and the immediate past were corrupt degenerations.[27]

Duchamp may have sailed to Byzantium, but for him Constantinople also fell. His Etant Donnés (Plate 25), executed in New York between 1946-66, bears as little resemblance to the Large

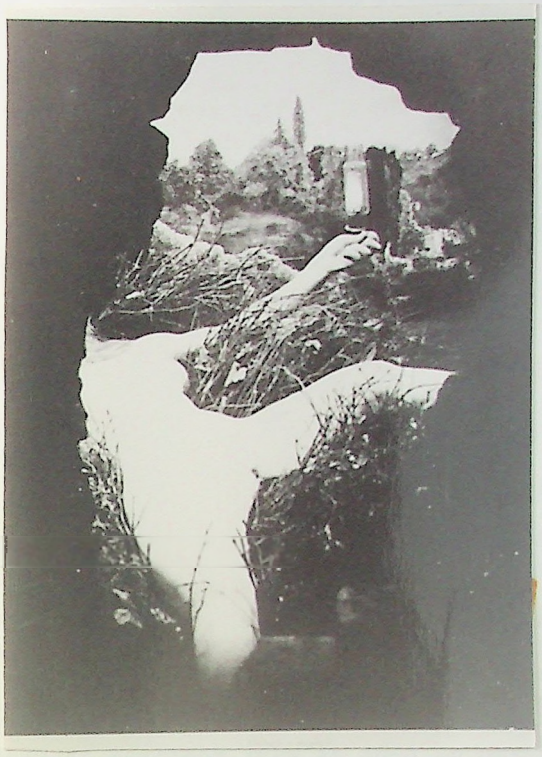

Plate 25.

Plate 26

Glass as do Renaissance paintings to Byzantine art. It is sensual and naturalistic, unlike the skeletal and abstracted nature of the Glass. Arturo Schwartz describes the breath-taking scene:

> At the end of the large gallery where the Large Glass is shown opens a small room in which the visitor is confronted with an old barn door of the type common in the European countryside. Approaching the door, he will notice tow fairly large oblique holes at average eye level. On looking through them he will probably have to hold his breath. The visitor will behold a scene of unique beauty that associates a perfect trompe -l'œil realism with an irrational unreal setting. . . the back wall of the barn suddenly disappears to give way to a hilly, wooded landscape. A thick cluster of trees, in late summer and autumn tonalities, stretches along the horizon, outlined against a light turquoise sky with a few solitary clouds. To the right, just below the line of the trees and escaping from the rocks surrounded by thick vegetation, is a waterfall slowly and endlessly precipitating in a wide pond. Surrounding the deeply incased pond and covering the whole background, is an intensely exuberant plant life on which floats, at certain points, a light mist, enhancing the feeling of depth and magnitude. In the foreground a battered brick wall—the impression is that the aperture in the wall has been made by an old-fashioned cannon shot—discovers the Bride finally stripped bare by her Bachelor.
>
> The Bride is spread on a bed of dead twigs and fallen leaves. Her legs are provocatively open, offering with exhibitionist gusto the sight of her hairless sex. Her left hand is raised and holds a glowing gas lamp, as if to better illuminate her cunt. Her head cannot be seen—the anonymity of the Bride must be preserved. A wave of blond hair partially covers her left shoulder. The whole scene is bathed in a brilliant light which has a peculiar quality that escapes definition. The work itself is totally different from anything Duchamp ever did.[28]

Plate 27

In a certain way, the wooden door is both open and closed. It bars the way to the work of art, but at the same time allows us to see through it. Through the peepholes we may watch the Bride's endless disrobing, while the viewer now becomes the frustrated Bachelor. The headless woman lying on the twigs is a life-size version of the small relief Given the Illuminating Gas (Plate 26), a work made in velvet and cowskin, enclosed in a coffin-like case, lined with sharp points like an Iron Maiden.

Etant Donnes is a peepshow, a blind box. The viewer can watch for as long as he likes at the provocative display. The show is real, it is a convincing illusion. It is as far from the transparent metaphysics of the Large Glass as is Lucas Cranach's Diana (Plate 27) painted in 1530, from the heavenly Virgin of the Pokrov ikon. As in the background of Etant Donnes, in Diana's Arcady natural growth abounds. Trees are silhouetted against the blue sky, a gentle fall of water trickles into a pond. In Cranach's painting, a naked female also reclines with her sex turned towards us. She covers herself only with a flimsy veil, akin to the strips of glass that separate the Bachelor Apparatus from the Bride in the Glass, or the door that separates the viewer from the woman in the Etant Donnes. Diana is the huntress, her bow and quiver hang from the tree, she is the Goddess of chastity too. In the myth that surrounds her, she is said to have turned Acteon into a stag, because she caught him peeping at her through the bushes while she bathed. Soon after, he was devoured by his own hounds. The inscription above her translates as: "I, am the nymph of the sacred spring, am resting here; do not disturb my sleep."

The desire of the viewer to possess, and the impossibility of possessing, is the theme of Etant Donnes. The viewer draws back from the Door, as Acteon must have done having spied Diana, with a feeling of both joy and guilt, as if having unearthed a secret. The mere act of looking is turned into the act of viewing through, the contradictory relationship between public and secret art is bridged. The question "What do we see?" confronts us with ourselves.

It was Cranach who possessed the 'gift' of Classicism least of all his generation. In his own day, he used be regarded as capriciously retrograde, such was the extraordinary modernity of his approach, and much of his subject matter. Cranach's work possesses an independant originality which is another reason he can be aligned with Duchamp. His intuitive grasp of contemporary spiritual reality, while living during the Reformation, is comparable to Duchamp's awareness of man's predicament while living in an alienating industrial society.

Duchamp created his Etant Donnes in the land of the celluloid dream, the America that had promised 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness'. The naked woman who holds the Illuminating Gas could be seen to parody the concept of freedom, as expressed in the Statue of Liberty. The woman bearing a torch aloft also appeared at this time, as Columbia Pictures' trademark, the goddess become saleswoman.

CONCLUSION

In the Book of the Council of the Hundred Chapters (1511) it is laid down that painting should not be done for gain. With great care the monks who painted the ikons worked patiently with their strictly regulated palette, each colour a symbol in itself, each line a musical note, the finished work the product of prayer and belief.

It is in a similiarly monastic light that Marcel Duchamp can be seen, pieceing toghether the broken fragments of his Large Glass, rejecting the numerous temptations of money offered him by buyers to paint just one more picture, and his decision to remain celibate (up until a few years before his death) in exchange for personal freedom. Duchamp refused to believe in values which stood in the way of this freedom he sought, values, for example, attached by society to procreation or art as veracity or truth: "People speak of art with great religious reverence, but I don't see why it is to be so revered." But his own attitude to this was paradoxical:

> I believe that art is the only form of activity in which man as man shows himself to be a true individual and is capable of going beyond the animal state, because art is an outlet toward regions not ruled by time or space.

The complex strategy with which Duchamp presented his work during his lifetime had no other purpose than to protect it from false publicity, to keep it from being transferred into the world of objectivity. Chalupecky, in an article on

Duchamp, draws attention to the fact that he hesitates to exhibit his work, and if he shows it at all, then in the most inconspicuous way possible, and usually a long time after doing it.

> His first 'ready-made' Bicycle Wheel, was not exhibited until forty-one years after he put it together. His first one-man show was held in Chicago the year he turned fifty, where only nine works were exhibited, and he did not attend. When he had his first retrospective in France at the age of eighty, he held it initially outside the main art centres, in Rouen, the town of his youth. In the end, he exhibited Etant Donnes so that it could only be looked at through peepholes by one person at a time, thus making the encounter with the work a private affair for each viewer. His installation in New York at the Surrealist exhibition in 1942, was again symbolic of his attitude: instead of offering the works to the public for observation, he created a network of strings criss-crossing the room so that it was impossible or difficult to get near exhibits. His Boite en Valise, a collection of sixty-eight reproductions of his work, he packed in an attache case, so that yet again the viewer is forced to involve himself, as with the Green Box.[29]

Like the ikon, which is made for private worship, all of Duchamp's works are offered to us privately. If we read the contents of the Green Box and watch the Bride be stripped bare by her Bachelors, while letting our imagination flow, we will hear the water fall and the mill-wheel begin to spin and activate the 'slow reciprocation of the chariot'. We will overhear its 'chanted litanies' relieving the still silence of the Cemetery of Uniforms. The basic concerns in Seurat's figure paintings—the contrast between the natural and the synthetic, and the artificiality of modern life—are Duchamp's concerns also. In his comi-tragedy, he links the divided worlds of thought, emotion, mathematics, science and impossibility.

It has been said that tragedy is life viewed close at hand, while comedy is life viewed at a distance. It has also

been said that life is comedy for the person who thinks and tragedy, for the person who feels.

One of the few modern philosophies that bear comparison to Duchamp's is perhaps that of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). For Nietzsche, there is no independent faculty of pure reason, constructing its demonstrations in isolation from the life of the passions. Duchamp,in "The Creative Act", his important statement. points to the distinction between his private life and his art, and quotes to T. S. Eliot from this work about 'the man who suffers and the mind that creates'. Christianity, socialism, egalitarianism, are, all of them, for Nietzsche and Duchamp alike, only 'methods' divorced from the individual consciousness, they are all symbols of an impoverished life. Nietzsche's conception of the philosopher as a 'physician of culture' is realized in Duchamp. Through his art, he learned to re-examine the human situation in the light of the fact that it is no longer possible to believe in God's existence. For both, the real world lies beyond the understanding, as opposed to Plato, of abstract thought. Both attack the philistine, the uniformed pawn, whose highest ideal is to submerge himself—to do 'what is done', to be 'Man', as opposed to 'a man'.

Octavio Paz explains in an essay entitled "Water Writes Always in the Plural", that since the seventeenth century, our world does not have Ideas in the sense in which Christianity had them, that what we have, especially from Kant onwards, is Criticsim. He points out that even contemporary 'ideologies', despite their pretensions to incarnate truth, present themselves,

like Marxism, only as 'methods'. He says that "Duchamp's Bride is the (involuntary) representation of the only Idea—Myth of the Western world in the modern era: Criticism. . . The Bride is an Idea continually destroyed by herself: each of her manifestations by realising her, denies her."[30]

The art and poetry of our time comes about when the artist inserts subjectiivity into the order of objectivity and meets with an awareness of human contingency. Modern 'beauty', contrary to that of the ancients is condemned to destroy itself. In order to exist it reaffirms its modernity daily, like the 'truths' of science which are replaced by newer ones tomorrow.

It was obvious to Duchamp that in this society, a product of European civilisation, art cannot continue; but rather than protest, he chose to remain at a constant distance from it. I held the opinion, during my studies for this thesis, that Duchamp's life and work walked the narrow tight-rope between metaphysics and nihilism. It was an understanding of his 'ready-mades', chosen

> on a reaction of visual indifference, with a total absence of good or bad taste . . . in fact a complete anesthesia,

that posed the greatest difficulty for me. His debasement of pre-existing artworks—L.H.O.O.Q., his rejection of all absolutes, his proclamation of his own laws—Standard Stoppages, all made me feel that by asserting his own self-determination, he scoffed at the self-determination of the living cosmos. It seemed to me that his reason had forgotten to consider the organic laws by which living creatures actually live, that his was the antithesis of the Byzantine philosophy. I now see

his 'ready-mades' as acting subversively against the fastidious privilages of bourgeois artistic taste, as well as an effort on his part to come to terms with the depersonalised objects of our society.

If one recalls Plotinus' declaration—"That only a compound can be beautiful, never anything devoid of parts, and only a whole"—and Seurat's credo,"that harmony is the analogy of opposites", perhaps one can better understand Duchamp's naturalistic Etant Donnes in the light of the transparent, metaphysical,Glass; suited to the 'barren' godless, selfless, twentieth-century machine age.

George Russell (A.E.), speaking of W.B.Yeats, wrote:

> We have always to strike a balance between our own opposites, and the wisest thinker is he who is conscious that our nature is made up of opposing elements, all neccessary, and who will not be afraid of speaking now from one pale of his being and now from another.[31]

Yeats, who had once marvelled at the abstract truths of Byzantium, and the splendid beauty of the art of that time; was to write in The Tower of 1927:

> And I declare my faith:
> I mock Plotinus' thought
> And cry in Plato's teeth,
> Death and life were not
> Till man made up the whole.

FOOTNOTES

1. Edward Gibbon, The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963), p. 285.

2. David Talbot Rice, Byzantine Art, (Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 126.

3. John Stuart, Ikons, (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 27.

4. David and Tamara Talbot Rice, Icons of the National Gallery of Ireland (Catalogue, 1968), pp. 13-15.

5. Ibid.

6. Richard Temple, Masterpieces of Russian and Byzantine Icon Painting, (Catalogue; The Temple Gallery, London, 1974), p. 24.

7. Stephen Runciman, Byzantine Style and Civilisation, (London: Pelican, 1975), p.87.

8. Stuart, p. 27.

9. Milton C. Nahm, Readings in Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1974), pp. 220-240.

10. Ibid.

11. Gervase Mathew, Byzantine Aesthetics, (London: Pelican, 1965), p. 3.

12. Seurat in Perspective, Ed. Norma Broude, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1968), p. 31.

13. Ibid, p. 18.

14. Ibid.

15. Chaloupeckny, "Nothing but an Artist", Studio International Vol. 189, No. 973 (Jan.-Feb. 1975), p. 42.

16. Edgar Wind, Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance, (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), pp. 113-125.

17. Pierre Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1967), p. 17.

18. "Conversation with Marcel Duchamp" (soundtrack from a thirty-minute film made in 1958 by the N.B.C.)

19. Cabanne, p. 27.

20. Stuart, p. 147.

21. Arturo Schwartz, The Large Glass, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969)

22. Ibid.

23. Stuart, p. 148.

24. Marcel Duchamp, The Green Box, (Thames and Hudson, 1979)

25. David and Tamara Talbot Rice, Ikons of the National Gallery of Ireland, p. 43.

26. J. Harskarp, "Contemporaneity, Modernity, Avant Garde" British Journal of Aesthetics, Vol. 20, No. 3. (Summer, 1980)

27. Frances Yates, Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition, (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1964), p.1.

28. Schwartz, The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp, (New York: Abrams, 1970), p. 557.

29. Chaloupeckny, p. 44.

30. Octavio Paz, "Water Writes in the Plural", Duchamp, Ed. Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963), p. 163.

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