

Marcel Duchamp

The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even or Large Glass, 1915-1923

Duchamp condensed almost his entire painting career into *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (or Large Glass, 1915-1923)*. It represented his greatest artistic effort and underwent a **long conceptual and compositional design phase** before he declared it «*definitively incomplete*» in 1923.

Widely recognized as one of the most meaningful pieces of art created in the twentieth century, the work has been subject to many interpretations such as the one here by Octavio Paz.

Formally the piece is made up of two horizontally contiguous plates of glass which the artist has used as a support for oil painting.

His **title**, in French, literally means *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* and points, on the one hand, to deliberate absurdity while, on the other, it highlights the theme of **erotic desire**.

Long disquisitions have pointed to the French “*Mariée*” (*Bride*) and “*même*” (*Even*) as alluding to the Great Mother and to Christian Marian doctrine.

The **images on the lower glass** are depicted in perspective while the ones on the **upper plate** appear flattened. This organization picks up a feature found in **altarpieces** where the higher section tends to host the most important holy image while the lower areas are devoted to spaces more in keeping with our earthly existence.

Duchamp allows no relationship between these **two divided realms**. The upper one is static like a stopped motor while the lower one – picking up on the principle derived from Aristotle’s *Physics* as well as from the *Divine Comedy* – is moved by desire. In fact the two-part division here refers not so much to the separation between the divine and the human as to the male/female dichotomy.

Duchamp left the glass leaning horizontally against the wall for months, a deliberate wish for it to accumulate dust which he then invited Man Ray to photograph. The result was titled *Dust Breeding*. The same dust was glued to the glass as a symbol of what befalls by chance. In many aspects of the art work, happenstance is indeed a fundamental force:

- **the Milky Way** emanated by the Bride takes the form of a cloud perforated by three quadrangles. These voids were obtained when the artist dropped a cloth on the ground and traced the irregular shapes formed. Distorting so-called objective measurements, such a process casts doubt on any certain measure and exalts the role of chance as a regulating principle of life.
- **the refusal to use canvas** as the support for painting. Through its transparency glass includes daily reality, therefore **the painting’s overall image is never definitive**. The depicted scene, blocked at the moment of its execution, blends necessarily with what hap-

pens in its environment. (Duchamp referred to painting as «*lateness*» and deemed it a way to stop the flow of time.)

- **the history of the art work itself**. In 1926, on its way back from an exhibition loan, the glass was broken and the artist decided to accept the shattered aspect, limiting himself to sealing the fragments into place.

No matter what interpretation the viewer decides to accept, one thing is certain notwithstanding those who believe that Duchamp was just laughing at art historical tradition: the *Large Glass* is a complex work tied to Western art and philosophy. What emerges is a world view opposed to the one held by religious paintings: life **is nothing more than the result of chance associated with the motions** driven by physical desires such as eroticism.



Elements for the Large Glass's Interpretation

The **bride** can be identified in the left-hand side of the upper window as the insect-like form with a half-moon-shaped head and the waist and belly of a wasp.

She emanates a **grey Milky Way** from her flesh coloured boundaries, a sign of the secretions of her erotic desire.

The **rod** that sticks out of the bride's body should be her genital organ that seeks, but never achieves, union with the **nine males** in the lower window.

Having been "stripped bare" by the bachelors, her clothes were meant to be painted along the lower dividing line but this part was never executed.

The men are represented by nine empty suits arranged like a carousel in the glass below. Not really men but more like moulds, machines without personality that have been reduced to uniforms (soldier, gendarme, manservant, delivery boy, barman, priest, gravedigger, station master, policeman) thus representing categories rather than real individuals.

All together the males make a double mechanical movement: below them there is a mill whose blades push them to rotate on themselves while moving back and forth as if in an act of coitus. Above them the two overhanging sticks open and close like scissors, forcing a piston movement on the carousel's undercarriage.

This whole **movement** is generated by the object sitting at the centre of the lower window: **the chocolate grinder**, a symbol of physical desire, of gluttony but also licentiousness. Above it there are a series of cones or filters, for purification.

The sliding block that turns the male moulds can also be viewed as a contour shape in perspective and, seen like this, it appears to be a sar-cophagus.

This image hints at one of the main sources of the painting: the theme of the Assumption of the Virgin who, with her body intact, rises from the grave towards heaven, surrounded by the apostles. Duchamp treats the religious subject matter in a philological and desecratory way.

Previous page and right **Figg. 1, 2** Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even or Large Glass*, 1915-1923. Oil paint, lead, dust on glass, 271x174 cm. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art. View and compositional diagram.

Key for Duchamp's Large Glass

The key, drawn up during Duchamp's lifetime (based on the diagram published in M. Duchamp, *Notes and Projects for the Large Glass*, edited by Arturo Schwarz, New York, 1969) is a transcription of the *Large Glass* which, thanks to the numbering, allows us to identify the various components of the representation according to Duchamp's own terminology.

The *Large Glass* is divided into two parts. **The upper area** is the **Realm of the Bride** and contains ten elements.

1. Bride, or Hanged Female, Virgin, Skeleton
2. Bride's Clothing
3. Area of the Cooling Device, insulated plates
4. Horizon
5. Top Inscription or Milky Way
6. Draught Pistons or Nets
7. Nine Bullet Holes
8. Area of the Picture of Cast Shadows
9. Area of the Mirror Image of the Sculpture of Drops
10. Juggler of Gravity (also known as the Trainer, Handler, or Supervisor of Gravity)

The lower part is the **Celibate Device** and contains fifteen elements.

11. Nine male moulds (or Matrix of Eros) which make up the Cemetery of Uniforms or Liveries:
 - 11a. Soldier
 - 11b. Gendarme
 - 11c. Manservant in livery
 - 11d. Delivery Boy from a Department Store
 - 11e. Barman
 - 11f. Priest
 - 11g. Gravedigger
 - 11h. Station Master
 - 11i. Policeman
12. Capillary vessels
13. Area of the waterfall

14. Water Mill
 - 14a. Water Wheel
 - 14b. Carriage or Sledge or Slide
 - 14c. Sledge's Runners Sliding in a Groove
15. Chocolate Grinder
 - 15a. Louis XV Body
 - 15b. Rollers
 - 15c. Tie
 - 15d. Bayonet
 - 15e. Scissors
16. Sieves or Screens or Umbrellas Tipped for Drainage
17. Area of the Butterfly Pump
18. Toboggan or Corkscrew or Drainage Slope
19. Area of the Three Crashings or Splashes
20. Mobile Weight with Nine Holes
21. Eye Witnesses
 - 21a.b.c. Oculist Panels
 - 21d. Mandala (it should have been a lens that made the splashes converge)
22. Glass Marble
23. Boxing Match
 - 23a. First Lever
 - 23b. Second Lever
24. Area of the Sculpture of Drops
25. Area of the Wilson-Lincoln Effect

The dotted spiral (nn. 17-20) and the whole boxing match (n. 23) are not seen in the *Large Glass* but were conceived for its ideal completion.

