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1

The Gift

For the gods who give and repay are there to give something great in exchange for something small.

—MARCEL MAUSS¹

IN THE SPRING OF 1944, two men met for a private chess game in New York City. Recently arrived refugees from World War II, from different countries, cultures, and backgrounds, they had known each other for twenty-one years through the overlapping circles of the international chess world—crossing paths in tournaments in Brussels, Paris, and elsewhere in Europe, for each was ambitious and devoted to the game of chess. One was the ironic Frenchman, the Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), who escaped to New York through Marseilles in 1942. The other was the witty, resilient Belgian chess champion George Koltanowski (1903–2000), who had avoided the German invasion of Belgium in May 1940 while on a chess tour in South America.

Caïssa, the mythic goddess of chess, had captured each man as an adolescent. From the age of eleven, Duchamp had played chess with his elder brothers in their cultured family home in Normandy. Koltanowski had learned chess from his father in his teens.² When he was twelve, he and his Belgian family had sought refuge in England during the First World War. On the boat to London he sustained an infection, causing a severe injury to his foot that led to an extended stay in a London

hospital—during which time he cultivated his memory studying mathematics and languages.

On that spring day of March 10, 1944, Koltanowski won the match against Duchamp.³ Duchamp then presented him with an extraordinary gift—a geometric smoking pipe he had inscribed M DUCHAMP 1944.⁴ It carried strange incisions that—according to observations from the Association Marcel Duchamp—were “probably nothing more than the residual marks of the teeth of the vise in which the wood was placed during the hand manufacture process.”⁵ The pipe was made of durable briarwood most likely sourced in eastern France close to the French-Swiss border, where most burlwood pipe forms were made. Duchamp had incised his name with an engraving burin, having learned engraving from both his maternal grandfather, Émile-Frédéric Nicolle (1830–1894), a shipbroker and artist; and his eldest brother, the printmaker and painter Jacques Villon (1875–1963). The pipe was in many ways the perfect gift. Devoted pipe smokers, Duchamp and Koltanowski had often reflected and smoked while playing chess.⁶ And although I describe this gift here, it's the series of personal exchanges between Duchamp and Koltanowski leading up to and following the gift of the pipe that is the subject of this book.

Koltanowski kept the pipe hidden in an envelope for forty-four years before offering it as a farewell gift to Nikki Lastreto, who edited his daily syndicated Chess column at the *San Francisco Chronicle* from 1981 to 1988. A chess player herself, she had patiently recorded and checked the complex chess moves that Koltanowski submitted to her, freeing him to do what he loved best: playing chess, and thinking and writing about it. In his gratitude for their collaboration, his offering to her was the pipe itself.

According to Nikki Lastreto, “Both men were serious pipe smokers.... Duchamp probably used the pipe; its bowl is marked with smoke and soot. George did say that he had never smoked it, but just tucked it away in that old envelope all those years. I remember being shocked when he gave it to me, as I was well aware of Marcel Duchamp's importance.”⁷

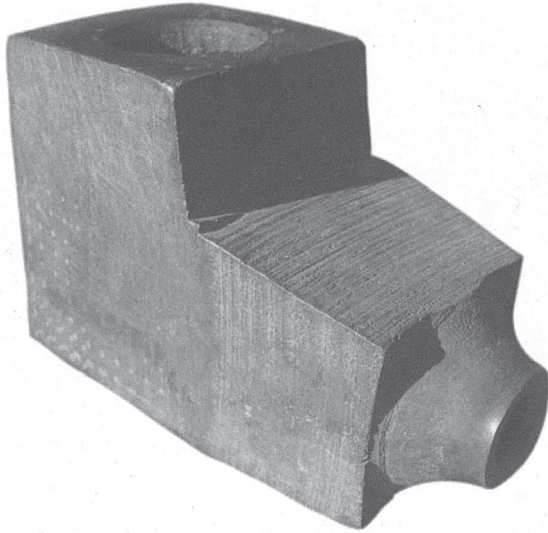


Figure 1. Marcel Duchamp's pipe for George Koltanowski, 1944 (view 1). Briar pipe ebauchon with Duchamp signature.

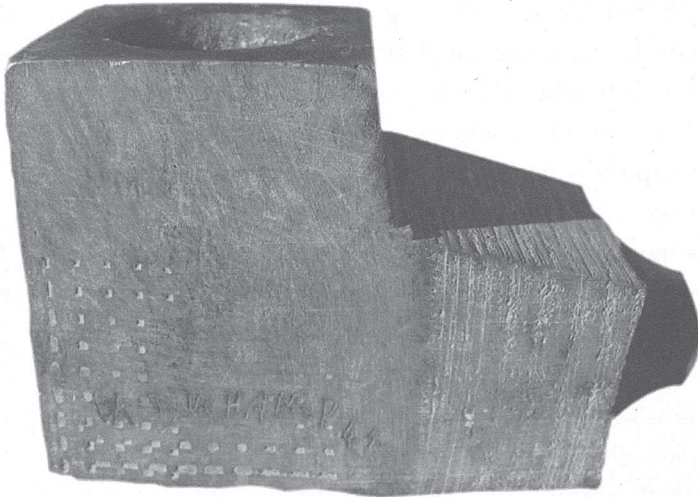


Figure 2. Marcel Duchamp's pipe for George Koltanowski, 1944 (view 2).



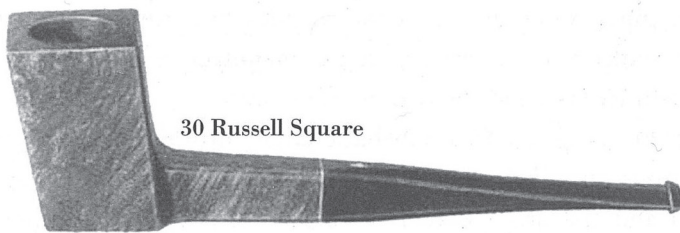
Figure 3. Marcel Duchamp's pipe for George Koltanowski, 1944 (view 3).

Lastreto surmises that “Duchamp likely removed the stem and mouthpiece for another pipe. Pipe components can be expensive.” And Duchamp had been poor at the time of their game. In order to survive, he had taught French and advised wealthy friends such as Walter Arensberg (1878–1954), Katherine Dreier (1877–1952), or Peggy Guggenheim (1898–1979) on collecting art. To Duchamp, playing chess with Koltanowski was a cerebral pleasure, and their friendship led to several creative collaborations. In the same year as that momentous game in New York City, Duchamp created an exhibition, *The Imagery of Chess*. Koltanowski was one of the main attractions, playing blindfold chess against seven Surrealist artists and intellectuals.

Duchamp selected a pipe of briar or *bruyère*, a mineralized wood root frequently found in the mountainous Jura region of eastern France. For pipe-making, the briar burl is cut in two forms: the geometric *ebauchon* from the interior of the burl or growth, for more standard symmetrical pipes; and the exterior plateaux forms for more eccentric pipes. Duchamp's pipe follows the geometric form of the original block or *ebauchon* carved from the interior root burl of the briar tree. *Ebauchons* are still used by artisan pipe makers today. Part of their

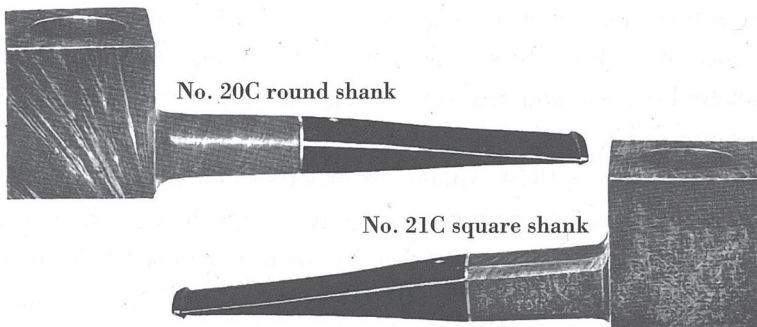
beauty derives from the fact that briar contains markings that darken with time and handling.

Though briarwood became rare as World War II drew on, the pipe manufacturer KBB—Kaufman Brothers & Bondy—managed to import briar ebauchon blocks into the United States. For their popular Kaywoodie line they imported a million blocks of briar from North Africa after the Nazi failures in the spring of 1943.⁸ Kaywoodie made a square pipe that followed the ebauchon form as shown in its catalogs from 1936 and 1947.⁹ Duchamp's pipe follows the square form, but it is blockier and less refined. Marcel's pipe suggests something raw and industrial, with an unapologetic, rough-hewn body.



30 Russell Square

Figure 4. Kaywoodie pipe shapes, 1936, S. M. Frank & Co., Inc.



No. 20C round shank

No. 21C square shank

Figure 5. Kaywoodie pipe shapes, 1947, S. M. Frank & Co., Inc.

When Marcel and George played their game in 1944, Manhattan housed many small custom and retail pipe shops that sold briar ebauchon forms.¹⁰ Within blocks of Duchamp's studio at 210 West Fourteenth Street stood several local pipe shops. These included the Charlie Smoke Shop at 200 West Fourteenth Street and the lively Barclay Rex, which until 1949 was located on Barclay and Church Streets, about a two-mile walk from Duchamp's studio. According to its owner, Vincent Nastri III, the Barclay Rex sold briar ebauchon blanks during World War II from both dead and new stock. Although it has been surmised that Duchamp might have acquired his briar in Normandy before the war, it's also true that he brought very little with him when he escaped from Europe in 1942. In all likelihood, it was in a Manhattan pipe store that the pipe's rough briar ebauchons appealed to him, echoing as they did the marks of their early industrial manufacture, the grip of a nineteenth-century vise, and the region of his youth.

In 1912, Duchamp shared a rain-battered, nighttime car trip along the mountainous Jura-Paris road with the poet Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) and the artist Francis Picabia (1879-1953) to retrieve Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia (1881-1985)—all of whom we shall meet again. It was a perilous journey that affected them all deeply, including Duchamp, who kept notes as poetic aphorisms reflecting on the arduous trip. He employed the notes years later in the unsequenced pieces of his archive, *The Green Box (La Boite verte)*, 1934.¹¹ For Marcel, the experience of the Jura-Paris road—which cuts through the rough territory where briar was sourced—embodied both his youth and the grim forebodings of his military avoidance.

Two years later, in 1914, Apollinaire experienced a second harrowing car trip in which he had premonitions of war—which began soon after. That brutal journey—and the earlier treacherous trip with Duchamp and Picabia—inspired his 1916 poem “The Little Car” (*La petit auto*), with its dark reckonings of World War I. Apollinaire wrote that poem after returning from that war, having sustained a severe head injury that two years later, contributed to his death from the Spanish flu. The poem juxtaposes the liveliness of colors to the railway arteries that snake

through the mountains toward death, expanding into an inspired vision of monsters (like Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) stirring in the deep in "carcasses of wrecks." Apollinaire thereby contrasts the soaring vision of imagination against the pull of dark forces through which man falls, a shooting star. To follow, just a few of its lines:

*A region through which invasions are always taking place
And the railway arteries along which those who were going away to die
Saluted one more time a life full of colours
The deep oceans where monsters were stirring
In old carcasses of wrecks
The unimaginable heights where men fight
Higher than the eagle soars
Man fights there against man
And falls suddenly like a shooting star¹²*