

## Museums Get the Best Gifts

**Date :** December 24, 2007

*Marcus Moore, School of Visual & Material Culture, Massey Univ.*

"Practically everything that [Marcel] Duchamp made has been treasured by someone - the losses are those things he happened not to give away" - Richard Hamilton 1965.

In 1983 Mrs. Betty and Judge Julius Isaacs of New York City bequeath a substantial collection to the National Art Gallery of New Zealand, Wellington - the twin precursor with the Dominion Museum to what is now Te Papa Tongarewa, the National Museum of New Zealand. This donation consisted of over 200 artworks, publications, and articles. As characterised by Betty Isaacs (born in Tasmania, Australia and a resident of New Zealand between 1896 and 1913) the collection is predominantly an eclectic range of over 80 of her sculptures and 45 amateur paintings by her husband Julius Isaacs. The bequest also contains a small grouping of artworks by the American artist Larry Rivers; and works by two important New Zealand expatriates Frances Hodgkins (NZ/London) and Billy Apple (NZ/London/New York).

There are equally three pieces by Marcel Duchamp which are the most important items in the gifting of this bequest. Two of the works were themselves signed 'gifts' by Duchamp to the Issacs. The entire bequest was accepted on the basis that his articles were included as well as the biographical association Betty Isaacs had with New Zealand. This was a clear sign of the recognition of Duchamp's significance and the desire to acquire such works for the National collection. Given the comparative small scale of Duchamp's oeuvre and since unique works by him were rarely available or in art market circles, this would prove to be an astute and canny move (Naumann 2003). Such rarity has caused consternation for those wishing to collect works by the artist who has eclipsed the contributions of many other 20th Century figures in the history of contemporary art.

Of the various artefacts by Duchamp in the bequest, the following have been recorded as distinctly separate pieces: *BETTY waistcoat* (1961, New York) (Fig.1); *The Box in a Valise* (Edition D 1961, Paris); and *The Chess Players* (copperplate etching, artist's proof, 1965, New York). In addition, four 1st edition publications on Marcel Duchamp signed with personal dedications accompany the works.

So that the text is clear, the artist's bequest from David Lauder (who was his application) to a Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, is the "New Zealand of the South Pacific" as it is called in the original document. The artist's bequest to the National Art Gallery of New Zealand is a collection of his works, including the "Bicycle Wheel" and "Fountain". The artist's bequest to the National Art Gallery of New Zealand is a collection of his works, including the "Bicycle Wheel" and "Fountain". The artist's bequest to the National Art Gallery of New Zealand is a collection of his works, including the "Bicycle Wheel" and "Fountain".

"As a young country New Zealand cannot, apart from its superb indigenous cultural assets, boast of rich assets reflecting the art historical developments of the Western world. As such several of the works contained in the Isaacs Estate, in particular the Duchamp items, will have a significant impact with the art museum collections in New Zealand, whereas their retention in Europe and America will only marginally affect the stature of any significant collection. Given the limited financial resources of our museums the impact of the Isaacs collection will be substantial". While the bequest was somewhat serendipitous, Bieringa exhibited a presence of mind in securing a small yet significant collection of Duchampian art and articles for the National Art Gallery, especially at a time contemporaneous to a wider desire in collecting works by Duchamp. The bequest belongs to a limited transfer of his works to international museum collections after the artist's death. Museums and curators arrived at the significance of Duchamp's work much later

than that of other 1960's New York based artists, and so a period of institutional interest in Duchamp's work grew belatedly (Neumann 1999). Within a period in which very few Duchamp works might have actually been purchased or exchanged, the National Art Gallery of New Zealand succeeded in obtaining a small but unique collection.

Bieringa's enthusiasm for the transaction made in 1983 has not been sustained by the institution that had facilitated the bequest. Indeed, *The Box in a Valise*, documented on its acquisition, has been shown on two occasions: at the Auckland Art Gallery, for the exhibition 'Chance and Change' in 1985, and more recently in 2003 at the Te Papa Museum, in 'Past Presents', an exhibition of works focusing on gifts to the collection (Fig.2). The *BETTY waistcoat* and *The Chess Players* were also documented upon their acquisition, but Te Papa Museum art catalogue files have not recorded any further movement of these items for exhibition, either within the institution or beyond. In addition, the 80 sculptural works by Betty Isaacs have never had any comprehensive exhibition and remain in their brown cardboard boxes in storage. Duchamp's works have never formed a collective basis for any exhibition in New Zealand, though such an exhibition is long overdue. Therefore, akin to one of Duchamp's time based pleasures (from his delayed work on the Large Glass), these three Duchamp works have, as in that figure of speech, gathered dust.