

## QUICK VIEW:

### Synopsis

Dada was an artistic and literary movement that began in 1916 in Zurich, Switzerland. It arose as a reaction to World War I, and the nationalism, and rationalism, which many thought had brought war about. Influenced by ideas and innovations from several early avant-gardes - Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, and Expressionism - its output was wildly diverse, ranging from performance art to poetry, photography, sculpture, painting and collage. Dada's aesthetic, marked by its mockery of materialistic and nationalistic attitudes, proved a powerful influence on artists in many cities, including Berlin, Hanover, Paris, New York and Cologne, all of which generated their own groups. The movement is believed to have dissipated with the arrival Surrealism in France.

### Key Ideas / Information

- Dada was born out of a pool of avant-garde painters, poets and filmmakers who flocked to neutral Switzerland before and during WWI.
- The movement came into being at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in February 1916. The Cabaret was named after the eighteenth century French satirist, Voltaire, whose play *Candide* mocked the idiocies of his society. As Hugo Ball, one of the founders of Zurich Dada wrote, "This is our *Candide* against the times."
- So intent were members of Dada on opposing all the norms of bourgeois culture, that the group was barely in favour of itself: "Dada is anti-Dada," they often cried.
- Dada art varies so widely that it is hard to speak of a coherent style. It was powerfully influenced by Futurist and Expressionist concerns with technological advancement, yet artists like Hans Arp also introduced a preoccupation with chance and other painterly conventions.

## DETAILED VIEW:

### Beginnings

Disgusted by the nationalism which had sped the course to war in 1914, the Dadaists were always opposed to authoritarianism, and to any form of group leadership or guiding ideology. Their interests lay primarily in rebelling against what they saw as cultural snobbery, bourgeois convention, and political support for the war. Dada events, including spontaneous readings, performances, and exhibitions, had been taking place for three years at Hugo Ball's Cabaret Voltaire before Tristan Tzara claimed to have invented the word Dada, in his *Dada Manifesto* of 1918. Various explanations have been floated for the name of the group, but the most common is that put forward by co-founder Richard Huelsenbeck, who said that he found the name by plunging a knife at random into a dictionary. It is a colloquial French term for a hobbyhorse, yet it also echoes the first words of a child, and these suggestions of childishness and absurdity appealed to the group, who were keen to put a distance between themselves and the sobriety of conventional society. It also appealed to them because it might mean the same - and nothing - in all languages - as the group was avowedly internationalist.

### Concepts and Styles

The cross-cultural possibilities of language were at the core of the movement's belief in freedom of expression: Hugo Ball, in his early Cabaret Voltaire readings of sound-poems, underscored this by deconstructing words into a series of guttural sounds meant to be universally comprehended. Likewise, visual artists such as Hans Arp, used abstract compositions made by chance to express patterns in nature which were expressive regardless of one's cultural background.

Overall, Dada artworks present an intriguing paradox in that they seek to demystify artwork in the populist sense but nevertheless remain cryptic enough to allow the viewer to interpret works in a variety of ways. Like the Cubists, some Dadaists portrayed people and scenes representationally in order to analyze form and movement. Other artists, like Kurt Schwitters, practiced abstraction to express the metaphysical essence of their subject matter. Both modes sought to deconstruct daily experience in challenging, rebellious ways. Key to understanding Dada works lies in reconciling the seemingly silly, slapdash styles with the stringent anti-war message. Tristan Tzara especially fought the assumption that Dada was a statement; yet Tzara and his fellow artists became increasingly agitated by politics and sought to incite a similar fury in Dada audiences.

### The Spread of Dada

The end of Dada in Zurich followed the Dada 4-5 event in April 1919 that ultimately caused a riot. Soon after this, Tristan Tzara traveled to Paris, where he met André Breton, and began formulating the theories that Breton would eventually call Surrealism. Dadaists did not mean to self-consciously declare micro-regional movements, but as it happened, the spread of Dada throughout various European cities and into New York can be attributed to a few key artists, and each city in turn influenced the aesthetics of their respective Dada groups. In Berlin, Club Dada ran from 1918 to 1923, and included attendees such as artists Johannes Baader, George Grosz, Hannah Höch, and Raoul

Hausmann. Closer to a war zone, the Berlin Dadaists made politically satirical paintings and collages that featured wartime imagery, government figures, and political cartoon clippings recontextualized into biting commentaries. In Hanover, the Merz group, including Kurt Schwitters, made art that reflected inspiration from Constructivism. Schwitters' works in particular examines Modernist preoccupations with shape and color. In Cologne, Hans Arp made breakthroughs in collage during his collaborations with Max Ernst. And in Paris, under the influence of figures such as Francis Picabia and Tzara, the movement took on a more dandyish tone, before collapsing into internal infighting and ceding to Surrealism.

### **Aftermath/Results of Movement: Surrealism, Duchamp, and New York**

As Arp, Ernst, and Tzara went to Paris, they were instrumental in bringing Dada interests in free expression and the deconstruction of both forms and conventional ideas to those who would become Surrealists. Dada's tradition of irrationality led directly to the Surrealist love for fantasy and expression of the imaginary. Artists such as Max Ernst are considered members of both Dada and Surrealism since their works acted as a catalyst in ushering in a new era of art based on the unconscious.

Marcel Duchamp provided a crucial creative link between the Zurich Dadaists and Parisian proto-Surrealists, like Breton. The Swiss group considered Marcel Duchamp's readymades to be Dada artworks, and they appreciated Duchamp's humor and refusal to define art. Duchamp, along with Picabia, Man Ray, and Guillaume Apollinaire, had already been in New York as early as 1917, and Duchamp served as a critical interlocutor, bringing the notion of anti-art to New York. One of his most important pieces, *The Large Glass or Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, was begun in New York in 1915 (and completed in 1923) and is considered to be a major Dada milestone for its depiction of a strange, erotic drama using abstract, mechanical forms. Duchamp's disdain for bourgeois convention was shared by all members of Dada. Though he was not a Surrealist, he helped to curate exhibitions in New York that showcased both Dada and Surrealist works.

### **Quotes**

"Dada does not mean anything.. We read in the papers that the Negroes of the Kroom race call the tail of the sacred cow: dada. A cube, and a mother, in certain regions of Italy, are called: Dada. The word for a hobby-horse, a children's nurse, a double affirmative in Russian and Rumanian, is also: Dada." Tristan Tzara, *Dada Manifesto*

"Words emerge, shoulders of words, legs, arms, hands of words. Au, oi, uh. One shouldn't let too many words out. A line of poetry is a chance to get rid of all the filth that clings to this accursed language, as if put there by stockbrokers' hands, hands worn smooth by coins. I want the word where it ends and begins. Dada is the heart of words." Hugo Ball's manifesto, read at Zunfthaus zur Waag on July 14th, 1916

"We attempted perfection; we wanted an object to be without flaw, so we cut the papers with a razor, pasted them down meticulously, but it buckled and was ruined... that is why we decided to tear prewrinkled paper, so that in the finished work of art imperfection would be an integral part, as if at birth death were built in."

Hans Arp from The Artist in his Studio by Alexander Liberman



**Content written by:**

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**Key Artists:**



**Tristan Tzara**

Tristan Tzara was a Romanian and French poet, playwright, and avant-garde performer who played a key role in early Zurich Dada.



**Francis Picabia**

Francis Picabia was a French artist who worked in Dada, Surrealist, and abstract modes, often employing language and mechanical imagery.



**Marcel Duchamp**

The French artist Marcel Duchamp was an instrumental figure in the avant-garde art worlds of Paris and New York. Moving through Dada, Surrealism, "readymades", sculpture, and installation, his work involves conceptual play and an implicit attack on bourgeois art sensibilities.



**Man Ray**

Man Ray was an American artist in Paris whose photograms, objects, drawings, and other works played an important role in Dada, Surrealism, modern photography, and avant-garde art at large.



**André Breton**

André Breton, author of the 1924 Surrealist Manifesto, was an influential theorizer of Dada and the spiritual leader Surrealism.



**Hans Arp**

Hans Arp (also known as Jean Arp) was a German-French artist who incorporated chance, randomness, and organic forms into his sculptures, paintings, and collages. He was involved with Zurich Dada, Surrealism, and the Abstraction-Creation movement.

## Major Works:



**Title:** Untitled (Squares Arranged according to the Laws of Chance)

**Artist:** Jean (Hans) Arp

**Description:** Hans Arp made a series of collages based on chance, where he would stand above a sheet of paper, dropping squares of contrasting colored paper on the larger sheet's surface, and then gluing the squares wherever they fell onto the page. The art could then provoke a more visceral reaction, like fortune-telling from I-Ching coins, which Arp was interested in. . Apparently, this technique arose when Arp became frustrated by attempts to compose more formal geometric arrangements, (Gale, p.63). Arp's chance collages have come to represent Dada's aim to be "anti-art."

**Year:** 1917

**Materials:** Cut-and-pasted colored paper

**Collection:** MoMA, New York



**Title:** Performing at Cabaret Voltaire

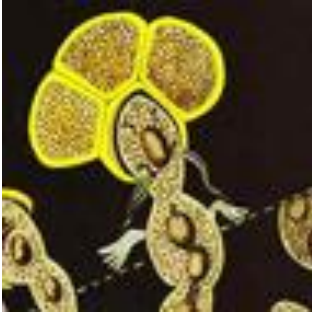
**Artist:** Hugo Ball

**Description:** Ball designed this costume for his performance of the sound-poem, "Karawane," in which nonsensical syllables uttered in patterns created rhythm and emotion that could be universally understood. Words that become increasingly stressed during vowel sequences Ball likened to elephants "plodding" along. Ball said of this costume: "My legs were in a cylinder of shiny blue cardboard, which came up to my hips so that I looked like an obelisk. Over it I wore a huge coat cut out of cardboard, scarlet inside and gold outside. It was fastened at the neck in such a way that I could give the impression of winglike movement by raising and lowering my elbows. I also wore a high, blue-and-white-striped witch doctor's hat.." (Gale, p.53).

**Year:** 1916

**Materials:** Photograph

**Collection:**



**Title:** The Gramineous Bicycle

**Artist:** Max Ernst

**Description:** Max Ernst and his early collaborator Hans Arp were responsible for bringing Dada to Paris, where Surrealism would later take hold. *The Gramineous Bicycle* is an example of an early collage, in which Ernst overpainted a botanical chart into abstracted elements. His work, which would become increasingly dream-like, often dealt with the deconstructed human body. In this painted collage, Ernst transformed plant illustrations into biomorphic forms that seem both human and foreign. Collages such as this were precursors to his Surrealist works.

**Year:** 1921

**Materials:** Gouache and ink on botanical chart with ink inscription

**Collection:** National Gallery of Art



**Title:** Cut with a Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany

**Artist:** Hannah Hoch

**Description:** Hannah Hoch is known for her collages composed from newspaper and magazine clippings, sketches and texts pulled from her journals. As part of Club Dada in Berlin, Hoch unabashedly critiqued culture by literally slicing it apart and reassembling it into vivid, disjointed, emotional depictions of modern life. In *Cut with a Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany*, Hoch pits human against machine. The title refers to the decadence of pre-war German culture, metaphorically criticizing humankind's lack of humanity.

**Year:** 1919

**Materials:** Cut paper collage

**Collection:**



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**Year:** 1919

**Materials:** Cut paper collage

**Collection:**



**Title:** Dada 6 (Bulletin Dada)

**Artist:** Tristan Tzara

**Description:** Dada in Zurich was heavily based on performance and printed matter, as can still be seen in the *Dada Bulletins* that exist in various library archives. In these magazines, for which Tristan Tzara served as editor, poetry and experimental typography was printed to document live happenings. Program bills for events, flyers, posters, and advertisements were also popular amongst Dadaists for disseminating information to the local public.

**Year:** 1920

**Materials:** Printed Matter

**Collection:** Art Institute of Chicago