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# Doing Dada Differently: The Women Behind the Movement

— February 24, 2016 —

**As Duchamp's authorship of the famous readymade 'fountain' comes under scrutiny, a new exhibition examines the trio of women who really led the Dadaists of the early 20th century**





Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, 1915 *International News Photography Photography* © Bettman/Corbis

**Text** Isabella Smith

Marcel Duchamp's 'readymade' sculpture of a urinal, entitled *Fountain*, has been voted the single most influential artwork of the 20th century. In recent years, however, doubts have arisen as to whether or not Duchamp did indeed buy a urinal and call it art – many art historians now believe that this epoch-making piece was, in fact, the work of fellow Dadaist and lifetime eccentric Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Name sound familiar? For many of us, probably not. Elsa has, despite the absurd genius of her work and life, never gained the fame and notoriety enjoyed by the male Dadaists.

**Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Hannah Höch, and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven** are three women who were all leading artists of the avant-garde Dada movement: a movement which has, historically, been far more associated with its outré male protagonists. Despite their obscurity relative to household names like Duchamp and Man Ray, these three women all significantly contributed to Dada through artworks made in a dizzyingly diverse array of various media including collage, stage design, textiles, and found object sculpture. Their practices even include early examples of performance art that still appear remarkably fresh, despite being almost a century old. This sometimes overlooked trio are spotlighted as the subjects of *DADA Differently*, a group exhibition at the Museum Haus Konstruktiv, Zürich.

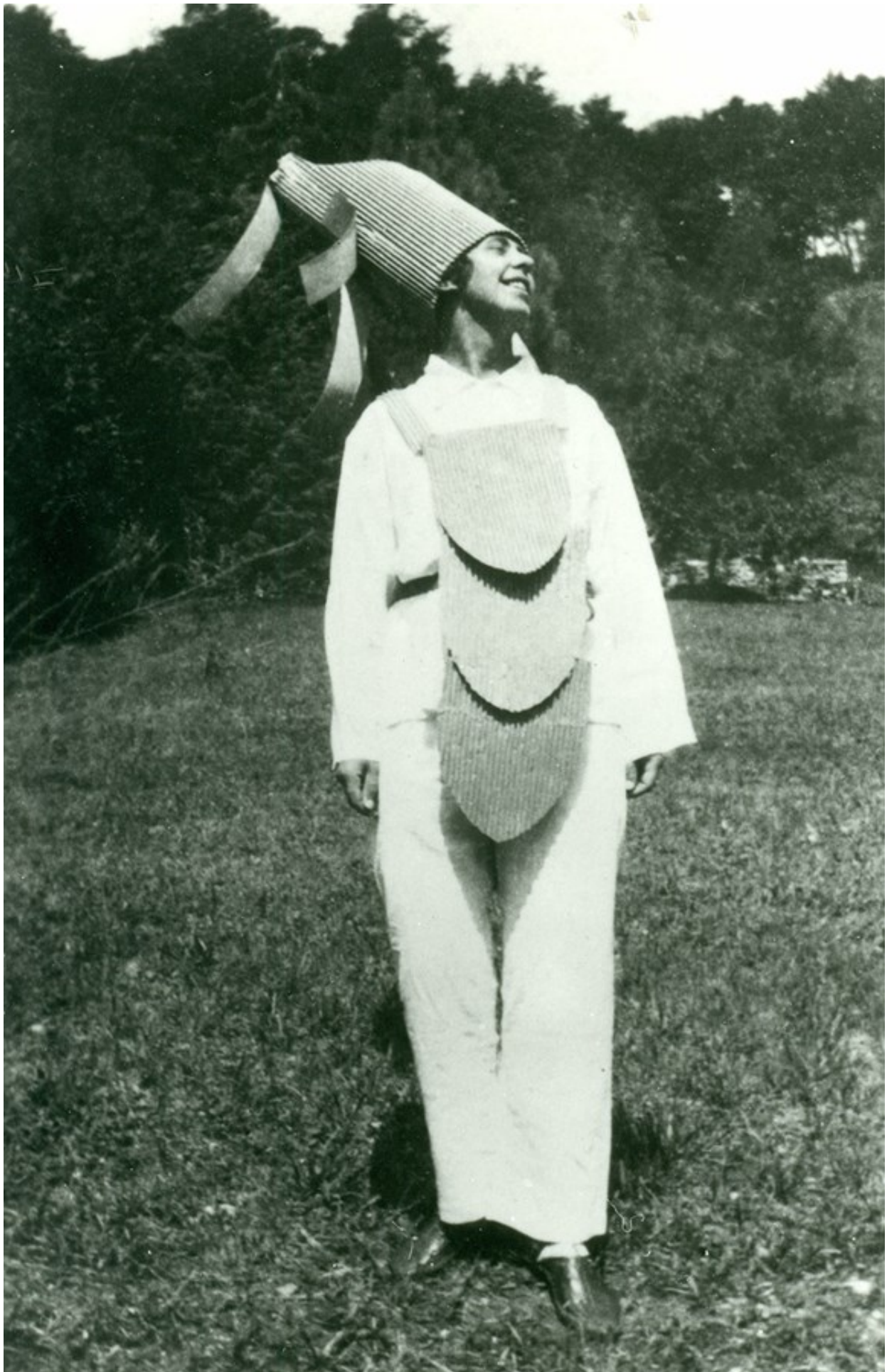


Composition en taches quadrangulaires, polychromes, denses, 1920  
*Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth*

Dada represented a radical break with conventional understandings not only of art, but of reason and logic itself. Formed in politically neutral Switzerland as a reaction to the senseless horror of the First World War, Dada imagined an art that was as nonsensical as the world it saw around it. However, for all its groundbreaking satire and cultural iconoclasm, Dada remained a movement harbouring the normalised misogyny of the early twentieth century in its otherwise avant-garde ranks. The marginalisation of the work of Taeuber-Arp, Höch, and von Freytag-Loringhoven reflects this fact.

The androgynous von Freytag-Loringhoven was a performance art pioneer whose art – and, crucially, whose life – fiercely challenged bourgeois artistic and moral convention. She gained notoriety for her proto-punk aesthetic; photographs show the artist in a bra made of soup cans, wearing a canary in a cage as a necklace, or with her shaved head dyed a vermilion red. In 1913, on her way to a registry

office to marry a penniless baron, von Freytag-Loringhoven picked up an iron ring on the street and declared it to be *Enduring Ornament*: one of the world's very first readymades. In doing so, she undermined the longstanding Western conception of an artwork as something necessarily unique and pleasing – two whole years before Duchamp and Francis Picabia made the same gesture.



Sophie Taeuber-Arp in Ascona, 1925 *Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth*

Höch's photomontages cut and spliced images of contemporary life to create new meanings while undermining existing understandings of the old. While these groundbreaking collages have received deserved acclaim in recent years, other aspects of her practice – such as the uncanny *Dada Dolls* – are less widely known. With their wide, staring eyes and exaggerated secondary sexual attributes, the rag dolls bear Höch's hallmark of sensitively incisive critique.

Painter, dancer, and stage designer Taeuber-Arp also subverted the traditionally feminine medium of textiles to radical ends, creating jointed marionettes for use in a play that integrated Dada dance with the nascent psychoanalytic movement. Puppets such as *König Hirsch: Clarissa* (1918) were designed to express interior states, via expressive movement liberated from the constraints of human anatomy.

Zürich is the city in which Dada gained its name and its definition in 1916, at the now-famous Cabaret Voltaire. It is appropriate, then, that the 100th anniversary of the movement offers us *DADA Differently*, an opportunity to revisit Dada in the light of the contributions of all



# AnOther





König Hirsch: Clarissa (Replik/Replica), 1918/1989  
*Sophie Taeuber-Arp Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, Kunstgewerbe- sammlung © ZHdK*





König Hirsch: Entwurf für ein Bühnenbild, 1918  
*Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth*



Affectionate (Wheels are growing on Rosebushes), 1921-22  
*Artwork by Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Courtesy Francis M. Naumann Fine Art, New York*

*DADA Differently: Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Hannah Höch, Elsa von*

*Freytag-Loringhoven runs from 25 February until 8 May 2016 at the Museum Haus Konstruktiv, Zürich*

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