

# Re-reading Duchamp's Nude Descending a Staircase: A Missing Signifier and the Role of *Morée*

November — 2025

Independent Research Briefing

## **Summary**

*This briefing introduces new evidence suggesting that Marcel Duchamp's Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2 (1912) contains a small but crucial visual element that went unrecognized in its original reception: the circular forms situated across the figure's torso.*

*Critics in 1912–13 focused almost exclusively on the fractured body and the suggestion of movement, leaving these circular motifs—clearly visible but rarely discussed—without any meaningful interpretation.*

*Only later did writers retroactively describe these circular forms as “motion rings” or mechanical indicators. Yet these readings did not consider whether they might carry a feminine or ornamental function.*

*A little-known painting from 1915–16, *Morée*, brings this possibility into sharp focus. Its composition appears to clarify the meaning of the circular forms left ambiguous in 1913, creating a previously unrecognized connection between Nude No. 2 and Nude No. 3 and reframing Duchamp's transition away from painting.*

Full study is available at:

<https://doi.org/10.17613/z1c8e-rvk19>

**1912**

**Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2**



## **The Overlooked Motifs in *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2***

When *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* debuted in 1912–13, critics concentrated almost entirely on the painting's fractured, mechanized anatomy, its implied motion, and the controversy surrounding its exhibition. In the midst of this intense debate, the small circular forms situated across the figure's torso received virtually no attention.

Although these circular motifs are plainly visible, early reviewers treated them as incidental surface marks, not as potential signifiers. Their silence left a gap in the painting's initial interpretation: an ambiguity that neither Duchamp nor the audience addressed at the time.

It was only decades later that interpreters began describing these circular forms as “motion rings” or mechanical indicators—an explanatory overlay imposed long after the original reception. Yet this mechanized reading, while influential, never fully accounts for the aesthetic or symbolic role of these forms within the composition.

What remains unconsidered in both early and later accounts is the possibility that these circular units serve a feminine or ornamental function—an interpretive opening that becomes crucial once *Morée* enters the picture.

1915-16  
.. Morée ...



..Morée...

## **A Painting That Makes Visible What Was Left Unsaid in 1913**

The small circular forms situated across the figure's torso in *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* remained unaddressed in 1912–13, and were later rationalized as “motion rings.” But in the little-known painting *Morée* (1915–16), these circular units reappear in unmistakable form: as a descending string of pearls, rendered directly and without ambiguity.

In *Morée*, the ornamental reading that lay dormant in the *Nude* becomes explicit. The pearls occupy the center of the composition, suspended above a curling wave, as if enacting the very loss or misinterpretation that the earlier painting had suffered. The motif is no longer embedded within a fractured figure; it is isolated, magnified, and made legible.

This shift suggests that *Morée* functions as a corrective image—an intentional clarification of a signifier that failed to register in 1912. Where the earlier work left meaning open or overlooked, *Morée* asserts it plainly.

The painting also introduces a darker tone: the pearls appear on the brink of dissolution, their descent marked by vertical streaks that interrupt and cancel the underlying scene. This atmospheric strike-through evokes erosion, erasure, or the unmaking of illusion—gestures consistent with Duchamp's growing skepticism toward painting itself.

Together, these features position *Morée* as the missing link in a sequence: the work that restores the lost meaning of the circular forms and prepares the ground for their reappearance—more coherently integrated—in *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 3* (1916).

# Evolution of Pearls

1913 Nude —> Morée —> 1916 Replica

*Nude No. 2*



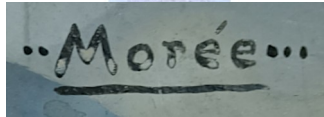
*2 Dots*



*Nude No. 3*



*3 Dots*



*mor, from Latin mors, mortis: death.*

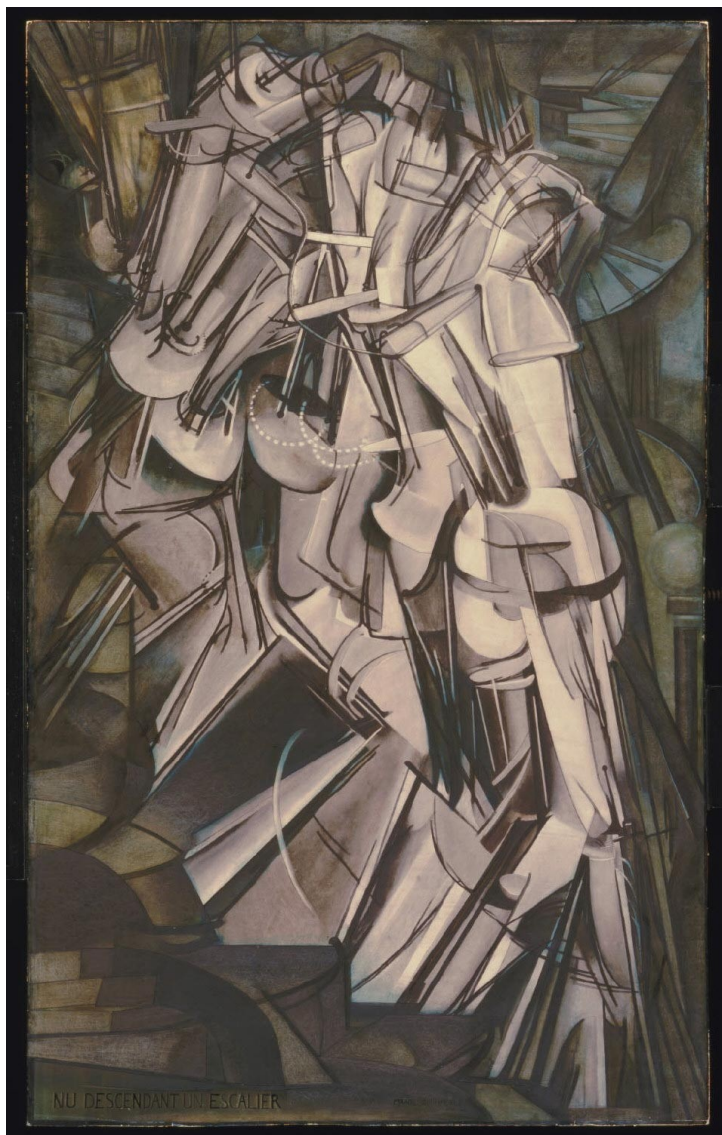
*-ée, a feminizing suffix in French: "she who"*

*Together: "she who has died."*

What early audiences overlooked — and later interpreters retrofitted as mechanical “motion rings” — becomes unmistakable in *Morée*, where the circular forms appear as a descending string of pearls. This clarification becomes especially telling in the 1916 Replica of *Nude Descending a Staircase*, where the adjusted treatment of the motif reads as a deliberate correction, completing a visual sequence that spans three years.



**1916**  
**Nude Descending a Staircase No. 3**



The black mourning border — first seen in *Morée* — may be asserting that the “Nude has already died”.

**1946-1966**  
**Étant donnés**



**Bringing the Entire Sequence Full Circle.**

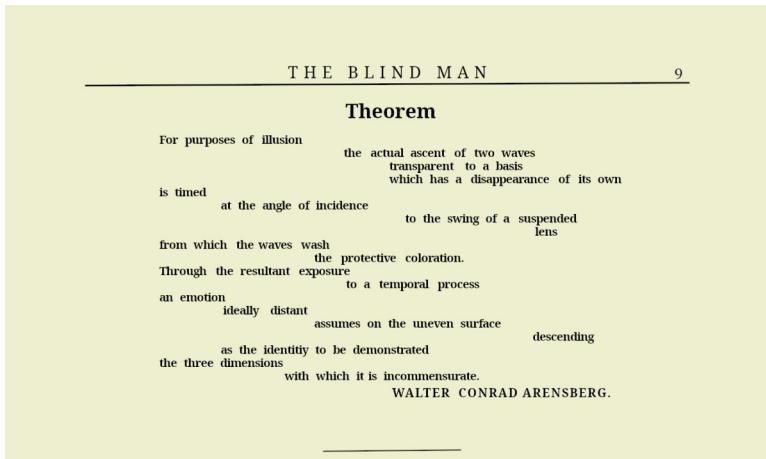
The feminine body first abstracted and misunderstood in *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* returns here as a literal corpse, resolving the ambiguity critics missed in 1913. In *Morée*, the pearl-like circular forms—later misread as mechanical “motion rings”—are isolated, magnified, and mourned, their descent framed by a black border that anticipates the funereal logic of Duchamp’s final work. *Nude No. 3* then absorbs this correction, adjusting the motif once its meaning is clarified.

Across five decades, these works form a closed system: the Nude’s obscured signifier is clarified in *Morée*, corrected in *Nude No. 3*, and embodied—tragically and conclusively—in *Étant donnés*. What began as an overlooked ornamental gesture becomes the key to Duchamp’s meditation on the limits of painting and the transformation of a symbol from motion, to ornament, to death.



# Two 1917 Morée Echoes From Arensberg Circle Members

## Walter Arensberg “Theorem”



## Francis Picabia “Mistinguett”

