

**INTERWAR EUROPE  
(1919-1939): DADAISM:  
REJECTING MODERNITY  
THROUGH CHAOS**



# INTERWAR EUROPE (1919-1939): DADAISM: REJECTING MODERNITY THROUGH CHAOS

## Description

Through an examination of both primary and secondary sources on the subject, including various types of visual media in addition to electronic and written sources, Students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the basics of Dadaism as a rejection of bourgeois culture during the Great War and how Dada artists and poets intentionally used irrational nonsense, satire and irony in an attempt to bring sense to the world around them.

## Subjects

Art / Art History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Dadahaus, Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich
- Dada Monument, Romania
- Guggenheim Museum, Venice
- Guggenheim Museum, New York
- Janco Dada Museum, Israel

## Essential Questions

- What was Dadaism? Where did the word come from?
- How did it develop as a reaction to Bourgeois culture in Interwar Europe?
- Who were the founding fathers of the Dada movement?
- What was the Cabaret Voltaire?
- How did the Dadaists challenge conventional definitions of art? What were some of the aims and attributes of Dada artwork?

## Academic Summary

### Dada Manifesto

#### Hugo Ball, Zurich (1916)

Dada is a new tendency in art. One can tell this from the fact that until now nobody knew anything about it, and tomorrow everyone in Zurich will be talking about it. Dada comes from the dictionary. It is terribly simple. In French it means "hobby horse". In German it means "good-bye", "Get off my back", "Be seeing you sometime". In Romanian: "Yes, indeed, you are right, that's it. But of course, yes, definitely, right". And so forth.

An International word. Just a word, and the word a movement. Very easy to understand. Quite terribly simple. To make of it an artistic tendency must mean that one is anticipating complications. Dada psychology, dada Germany cum indigestion and fog paroxysm, dada literature, dada bourgeoisie, and yourselves, honored poets, who are always writing with words but never writing the word itself, who are always writing around the actual point. Dada world war without end, dada revolution without beginning, dada, you friends and also-poets, esteemed sirs, manufacturers, and evangelists. Dada Tzara, dada Huelsenbeck, dada m'dada, dada m'dada dada mhm, dada dera dada, dada Hue, dada Tza.

How does one achieve eternal bliss? By saying dada. How does one become famous? By saying dada. With a noble gesture and delicate propriety. Till one goes crazy. Till one loses consciousness. How can one get rid of everything that smacks of journalism, worms, everything nice and right, blinkered, moralistic, Europeanized, enervated? By saying dada. Dada is the world soul, dada is the pawnshop. Dada is the world's best lily-milk soap. Dada Mr Rubiner, dada Mr Korrodi. Dada Mr Anastasius Lilienstein. In plain language: the hospitality of the Swiss is something to be profoundly appreciated. And in questions of aesthetics the key is quality.

I shall be reading poems that are meant to dispense with conventional language, no less, and to have done with it. Dada Johann Fuchs gang Goethe. Dada Stendhal. Dada Dalai Lama, Buddha, Bible, and Nietzsche. Dada m'dada. Dada mhm dada da. It's a question of connections, and of loosening them up a bit to start with. I don't want words that other people have invented. All the words are other people's inventions. I want my own stuff, my own rhythm, and vowels and consonants too, matching the rhythm and all my own. If this pulsation is seven yards long, I want words for it that are seven yards long. Mr. Schulz's words are only two and a half centimeters long.

It will serve to show how articulated language comes into being. I let the vowels fool around. I let the vowels quite simply occur, as a cat meows . . . 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.

Each thing has its word, but the word has become a thing by itself. Why shouldn't I find it? Why can't a tree be called Pluplusch, and Pluplubasch when it has been raining? The word, the word, the word outside your domain, your stuffiness, this laughable impotence, your stupendous smugness, outside all the parrot-ry of your self-evident limitedness. The word, gentlemen, is a public concern of the first importance.

**Gadji beri bimba**

**First Recited by Hugo Ball at the Cabaret Voltaire, 1916**

gadji beri bimba glandridi laula lonni cadori  
gadjama gramma berida bimbala glandri galassassa laulitalomini  
gadji beri bin blassa glassala laula lonni cadorsu sassala bim  
gadjama tuffm i zimzalla binban gligla wowolimai bin beri ban  
o katalominai rhinozerossola hopsamen laulitalomini hoooo  
gadjama rhinozerossola hopsamen  
bluku terullala blaulala loooo

**Max Ernst, Dada / Surrealist artist**

'Art has nothing to do with taste. Art is not there to be tasted.'

Dadaism was a cultural, literary and artistic movement that developed out of the chaos of the Great War. A precursor to surrealism, Dada began in Zurich in 1916 at the Cabaret Voltaire as a condemnation of everything bourgeois. It was a movement best known for its use of the illogical and revolutionary "modern" media techniques. With the horrors of the western front destroying a generation, Dada artists and poets such as Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco strove not to understand society, but instead to completely abandon it, even to the point of nonsense. Many in the new movement were foreigners in Zurich, having come from countries then engaged in what seemed like a war of annihilation. As Marco Janco put it in an interview,

We had lost confidence in our culture. Everything had to be demolished. We would begin again after the "tabula rasa." At the Cabaret Voltaire, we began by shocking common sense, public opinion, education, institutions, museums, good taste, in short, the whole prevailing order.

Dadaists would take the stage dressed in outrageous costumes to recite poems that made no sense. Swirling around them on stage would be chaos, a complete rejection of logic and reason. Whereas traditional forms of art were concerned with pleasing the senses, Dada took the opposite approach. It looked to offend the senses. Yet, in the end, to many in the avant-garde dealing with the insane spectacle around them, Dada made perfect sense: a complete rejection of the very bourgeois society that had driven Europe into the trenches.

When the war ended in 1918, many Dadaists returned to their home countries and the movement spread and expanded across Europe, especially to Berlin and Paris, each of which became a hotbed for the movement. Interwar France, with its preoccupation with punishing the Germans, and Weimar Germany, a society that seemed to be teetering on the brink of economic and social disaster almost daily in the years after the Versailles

Peace Conference, provided plenty of fodder for Dada artists.

Just when it seemed to be enjoying its heyday in the mid-1920s, however, Dada as seemed to be as unstable as its art. The chaos of wartime society began to fade in Europe, temporarily replaced by an economic prosperity that championed wealth while at the same time tolerating poverty, prostitution and despair. That all changed, of course, when the economy collapsed during the Great Depression, but instead of turning towards leftist movements like Dada for answers, European society in the early 1930s shifted towards nationalist and fascist ideologies. Under the Nazi regime, Dadaists in Germany, many of whom had socialist and Jewish ties, suffered terribly as Hitler cracked down on anything that might be labeled anti-German and/or “degenerate.” Under Nazi definitions, Dadaism fit under both categories. Some Dadaists made it out of Europe by the time the next war broke out, but many did not. Unfortunately, too many of those who had once lived on the margins of society eventually ended up on trains headed east to Auschwitz and other camps.

Although it faded as quickly as it rose, Dada left a strong legacy on modern art and literature. Its rejection of societal norms became an inspiration for others, particularly in the wake of the even greater horrors of the Second World War. Dada techniques surrounding the elevation of everyday objects and the use of common items laid the foundation for post-modernism and pop-art in the decades that followed. In many ways, it became the inspiration for all reactionary movements in the 20th century.

Through an examination of both primary and secondary sources on the subject, including various types of visual media in addition to electronic and written sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the basics of Dadaism as a rejection of bourgeois culture during the Great War and how Dada artists and poets intentionally used irrational nonsense, satire and irony in an attempt to bring sense to the world around them.

## **Objectives**

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the basics of Dadaism and how it developed as a rejection of bourgeois culture during the darkest days of the Great War.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how Dada artists and poets intentionally used irrational nonsense, satire and irony to help bring sense to the world around them.

## Procedure

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: How is art a reflection of the society from whence it came? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT / Prezi – Dadaism (20 min)
- Video – Dada and Cabaret Voltaire (15 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on Dadaism, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources before class.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Discussion on Dadaism. (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment / DBQ – Essay: Explain in detail the basics of Dadaism as it developed as a rejection of bourgeois culture during the darkest days of the Great War, and how Dada artists and poets intentionally used irrational nonsense, satire and irony in an attempt to bring some sense to the world around them.
- Alternate Assessment – Working in groups, students should compose and subsequently present to the class a Dada style poem, piece of prose, song or other work of art that takes a look at modern 21st century society. Are Dadaist themes still relevant in the modern age?

## Extension

### On tour: Dadahaus, Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich

While on tour in Zurich, students can visit the Dadahaus at Cabaret Voltaire, where they can see for themselves the birthplace of Dadaism. The modern version of the Cabaret Voltaire still pays homage to its roots, although nothing of the original exists. The building had fallen into disrepair by the turn of the last century. In the winter of 2001/2002, it was illegally occupied by a group of artists who claimed to represent the revival of Dada thought. News of the occupation, which had been done to stop the building's planned demolition, inspired a period of protests in Zurich. On 01 April 2002, the artists were evicted by authorities, but a solution was soon worked out to save the building. Today, the Cabaret Voltaire has been reopened as a museum and Dada sanctuary, one where students and visitors can learn more about the various Dada artists of the past while at the same time seeing modern versions of the artistic genre. The exhibition and shop are open Tue to Sun from 12:30pm to 6:30pm. Performances and art shows last until midnight Tue, Wed and Thurs., and until 2:00 am on Fridays and Sat. Please see the website below for more details. Big celebrations are planned for 2016, the 100th anniversary of the first Dada manifesto and the birth of the movement.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.sas.upenn.edu/~jenglish/English104/tzara.html](http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~jenglish/English104/tzara.html)  
Dadaism by Tristan Tzara (primary source) – from James English, Continental Professor of English, University of Pennsylvania
- [www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/aug/31/hugo-ball-gadji-beri-bimba](http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/aug/31/hugo-ball-gadji-beri-bimba)  
Poem of the Week: Gadji beri bimba by Hugo Ball (web article / primary source)
- <http://pers-www.wlv.ac.uk/~fa1871/surrext.html>  
Dadaism: Texts and Extracts (primary sources) – from Gerry Carlin, Professor of English and Literature at the University of Wolverhampton (UK)
- [www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/tzara.html](http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/tzara.html)  
How to Make a Dadaist Poem by Tristan Tzara (primary source) – from Al Filreis, Faculty Director of the Kelly Writers House at the University of Pennsylvania.
- <http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/index.html>  
International Dada Archive (website) – from the University of Iowa Libraries, this site has links to primary and secondary sources on dozens of famous Dada artists and poets.
- [www.lasalle.edu/~blum/c340wks/DadaPoem.htm](http://www.lasalle.edu/~blum/c340wks/DadaPoem.htm)  
Dada Poem Generator (website) – from Thomas Blum, Department of Mathematics and Computer Science, La Salle University (PA)
- [www.cabaretvoltaire.ch/agenda.html](http://www.cabaretvoltaire.ch/agenda.html)  
Cabaret Voltaire - Zurich (official website)
- <http://jancodada.co.il/index.asp?lan=100>  
Janco-Dada Museum (website). This museum is in Israel, Marcel Janco's home. Although the famous Dada artist was originally from Romania (and it is possible that he is the originator of the word "Dada"), he moved to British Palestine after fleeing his native country in 1941. He remained in Israel until his death at age 88 in 1984. Today the museum is dedicated to continuing his life-long support of art in Israel.
- [http://prezi.com/h\\_xhheisdzch/dada-presentation/](http://prezi.com/h_xhheisdzch/dada-presentation/)  
Dada Presentation (Prezi) – online Prezi on Dada. Extremely well done and recommended for all students.
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqkJJ0odFxA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqkJJ0odFxA)  
The ABCs of Dada (video) – 30 minutes total for all 3 parts
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEBnxWQct24](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEBnxWQct24)  
WWI, Cabaret Voltaire and the beginnings of Dada (video). This 15-minute video documentary is appropriate for all classes.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkl92oV1kMc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkl92oV1kMc)  
Dada and Cabaret Voltaire (video). This 5-minute video, part of a larger film in

German (with English subtitles), was made in the late 1960s using descriptions from Hugo Ball's diaries. The scene here is of Ball's famous 1916 presentation in the Cabaret that ushered in the age of Dada. In many ways, the fact that it is in German only adds to its message for American students. Highly recommended for all students and all classes studying Dadaism. The ending contains a haunting message in French (with English subtitles) that really wraps up Dadaist thought and philosophy. Remind students that there are no videos of the original performance, as the technology did not exist to capture them with sound.

### **Background Information**

- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dada>  
Dada – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugo\\_Ball](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugo_Ball)  
Hugo Ball – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cabaret\\_Voltaire\\_\(Zurich\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cabaret_Voltaire_(Zurich))  
Cabaret Voltaire (Zurich) – Wikipedia article

### **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/interwar-europe-lost-generation-hemingway-sun-also-rises](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/interwar-europe-lost-generation-hemingway-sun-also-rises)  
Interwar Europe – Hemingway: Sun Also Rises
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/interwar-europe-remarque-all-quiet](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/interwar-europe-remarque-all-quiet)  
Interwar Europe (1919-1939) – Remarque: All Quiet on the Western Front
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/weimar-gropius-bauhaus-and-internationalism](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/weimar-gropius-bauhaus-and-internationalism)  
Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus: International Art and Architecture in the Weimar Republic
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/switzerland/interwar-europe-dadaism](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/switzerland/interwar-europe-dadaism)  
Interwar Europe (1919-1939) – Dadaism: Rejecting Modernity's Chaos

### **Key Terms**

- Avant-garde
- Bourgeois culture
- Cabaret Voltaire (Zurich)
- Dadaism
- Hugo Ball
- Interwar Europe
- Salvador Dali
- Weimar Germany



