

Joseph Cornell | American Surrealist

Professional Development for Educators at the New Orleans Museum of Art

Tuesday, October 13, 2015



Radar Astronomy, 1952 – 56, Joseph Cornell (American, 1903 – 1972)

List of Works

Radar Astronomy, 1952 – 56, Joseph Cornell (American 1903 – 1972), mixed media, The Murial Bultman Francis Collection, 86.174

Untitled (Stone House and Trees), n.d. Joseph Cornell (American 1903 – 1972), collage on cardboard, ink, gouache, frame colored by artist, Gift of the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 2002.316

The Existentialiste, n.d. Joseph Cornell (American 1903 – 1972), collage on cardboard, graphite, ink, watercolor, Gift of the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 2002.309

Untitled (Bird Habitat), c. 1954, Joseph Cornell (American 1903 – 1972), mixed media, Gift of the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 93.253

Untitled (Romantic Hotel “Chiarina”), c. 1954, Joseph Cornell (American 1903 – 1972), mixed media, Gift of the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 93.250

Untitled (Rosalba with Marble), c. 1946, Joseph Cornell (American 1903 – 1972), wood, book pages, marble, Gift of the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 2002.307

History of Turkey, c. 1952, Joseph Cornell (American 1903 – 1972), red box with tied packets of paper, The Murial Bultman Francis Collection, 86.173

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What is Surrealism?

Founded by André Breton in 1924, the surrealist movement relied upon the non-rational, subconscious aspects of the human mind. The term is French for transcending the real and absorbed the precursory Dada movement. Dada and Surrealism explore dream imagery and chance happenings for artistic fodder.

Dada artists met originally in Zurich, Switzerland beginning in 1916 to lament the chaos of World War I. These artists and writers decried the madness of war and sought to eliminate intellectualism in art. They proposed instead the irrational and the unconscious as a basis for art-making. Dada spread to other cultural hubs including Paris, Berlin, Cologne and New York. Dada artists Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, and Kurt Schwitters challenged accepted assumptions of the role of art by placing objects in strange settings or incorporating non-traditional materials. Duchamp, for example, submitted *Fountain*, signed “R. Mutt, 1917” to an art exhibition. The presentation of a purchased porcelain urinal challenged the concept of art and is today considered an icon of the 20th century.

Centered in Paris in the 1930s and 40s, the Surrealists further explored ways to tap into the unconscious through art. The movement officially launched in Paris in 1924 with the publication of André Breton’s *Surrealist Manifesto* proclaiming the omnipotence of the dream. Several members of the Dada group merged with other like-minded artists under the leadership of Breton.

Two distinct styles emerged within Surrealism. Artists such as Joan Miró, Jean Arp, and Max Ernst practiced a type of Surrealism described as biomorphic, while Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, and others represented the irrational by depicting dream imagery and combining incongruent forms in a realistic style.

As one of the preeminent art movements of the 20th century, Surrealism influenced many artists and art movements since its prominence in the 1930s. Pop artists’ elevation of pop culture to high art and conceptual artists’ emphatic attention to the idea are indebted to Dada and Surrealism for their insistence on the irrational and the poetry of images.



Fountain, 1917, Marcel Duchamp (French, 1887 – 1968), porcelain, from 1917 photograph by Alfred Stieglitz



Persons in the Presence of a Metamorphosis, 1917, Joan Miró (Spanish, 1887 – 1968), 1936, egg tempera on masonite, Bequest of Victor K. Kiam, 77.295



L'Art de la Conversation, 1950, René Magritte (Belgian, 1898 – 1967), Gift of William H. Alexander, 56.61

Who was Joseph Cornell?

Known for his whimsical constructions, Joseph Cornell (1903-1972) spent the majority of his life in his mother's home on Utopia Parkway in Flushing, New York. Associated with the Surrealist movement of the 1930s and 40s, Cornell was a well-regarded artist by the 1950s. Despite his renown, he maintained a quiet, hermit-like existence.

Cornell was the eldest of four children born to a prominent family of Dutch heritage in Nyack, NY. His father was in the textile business, but died of Leukemia when Joseph was thirteen, leaving behind a large debt. His mother moved the family to Douglaston, Long Island and eventually to Queens where they lived in a succession of several houses. In 1917 Joseph enrolled in Phillip's Academy in Andover, MA, but he left school in 1921 without a diploma. To help support his mother and care for his brother, Robert Cornell (1910-1965), who lived with cerebral palsy, Joseph went to work as a textile salesman. In 1929 Joseph moved with his mother and brother to 3708 Utopia Parkway in Flushing where they lived the rest of their lives.

On excursions into New York City for work and to attend cultural events, Cornell collected images and objects that he found in secondhand stores, bookshops and on the street. In his basement workshop he catalogued the postage stamps, advertising cards, driftwood, marbles, and other items. Inspired by the Surrealist concept of poetry through the juxtaposition of objects and the "ready-mades" of Marcel Duchamp, Cornell applied free association to his assortment of objects creating collages, assemblages, and shadow boxes on themes that included birds, ballet, travel and space. In addition to these, Cornell also made experimental films which, like his objects, were created from appropriated materials.

In 1931 Cornell first visited the just-opened Julien Levy Gallery where he saw, perhaps for the first time, works by European surrealists. He adapted the surrealist concept of selecting images as symbols and combining them in unexpected ways. Cornell was included in Levy's 1932 group show *Surréalisme* with Salvadore Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) and work by Pablo Picasso, May Ray, and Max Ernst. Later that same year, Levy mounted Cornell's first solo show. Through Levy's gallery, Cornell befriended many of the painters, writers and photographers associated with the Surrealist movement. In 1936 he was included in the landmark exhibition, *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Although he would later disparage the term "American Surrealist," Cornell's association with surrealist techniques and artists was an integral influence.



Joseph Cornell (1903 – 1972)



Cornell home, 3708 Utopia Parkway, Flushing, NY

Cornell maintained work in the textile industry throughout the 30s first as a salesman and then as a designer. In the 1940s, although his work was selling, he supplemented his income by freelancing for magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping* designing layout and covers. He worked in his studio in the evenings creating larger shadow boxes and often working in series in which he produced variations on themes that differed slightly such as the *Medici Slot Machine*, *Sandboxes*, *Night Skies*, *Hotels*, *Aviaries* and dedications to stars of ballet and film.

During the 1950s Cornell returned to making collages and film. Cornell first made films in the 1930s when he made *Rose Hobart* (1936) from re-edited footage from the B-movie, *East of Borneo* (1931) starring the actress, Rose Hobart. In his later film work, Cornell collaborated with others to shoot new footage including *Centuries of June* with Stan Brakhage. Cornell also kept an extensive diary (available online through the Smithsonian Institution's American Art Archives), which has enabled scholars to roughly date his undated works.

Toward the end of his career, collage became his principle means of art-making. After his brother's death in 1965, Joseph created a series of collages that incorporated Robert's drawings. Cornell's mother died the following year, and Joseph withdrew further from the outside world. He continued to work until his own death in 1972 refurbishing earlier boxes and creating memorial collages. Though he suffered from depression during this period, he was especially interested in working with younger artists and creating work for children.

Joseph Cornell received significant recognition for his work during his lifetime including retrospective exhibitions at the Guggenheim Museum and Pasadena Art Museum as well as profiles in *Art News* and *Life* magazines. He has been influential to many younger artists and continues to inspire and intrigue.



Prince Pince (né nez), n.d., Joseph Cornell (American, 1903 – 1972), collage (Robert Cornell modification), Gift of the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 2002.312

Joseph Cornell at NOMA

Before his death, Cornell laid the groundwork for the Joseph and Robert Cornell Foundation, dedicated to honoring the memory of his brother and aiding charitable organizations. From 1993 to 2002, the Foundation donated twenty-one Cornell artworks to NOMA, on the advice of curator Walter Hopps and the encouragement of Fritz Bultman, a famed New Orleans painter, and his sister, the art patron Muriel Bultman Francis. NOMA was one of six museums in the United States to receive works from the Foundation, whose gift marked a significant addition to the museum's holdings in modern art.

Cornell's work at NOMA is representative of the variety of subjects and materials favored by the artist.

Collages

The technique comes from the French word meaning "to stick" and was first applied to works of art by Cubists Picasso and Braque. Collage is the art of pasting fragments of non-traditional materials like newspaper, postcards, and found objects into a composition. Dada and Surrealist artists used the technique to place irrational and incongruous objects together.

Joseph Cornell's earliest known artworks were collaged black and white cut-outs from Victorian engravings. He returned to collage in his later career. Cornell collected a variety of printed materials and catalogued them in his studio, creating and saving files of imagery for later use. The artist often employed the same imagery in different works.

In *The Existentialiste* a Victorian doll lounges in a landscape. The addition of incongruent elements such as the geometric forms at the doll's feet and a celestial drawing in the upper right corner confound the viewer. Here Cornell employs the Surrealist trope of strange juxtapositions.

Untitled (Stone Houses and Trees), probably of a later date, includes all over image of a landscape, but careful inspection reveals that the rooftops do not align. Additionally, Siamese cats on the roof and in the foreground add an element of unexpected scale.



The Existentialiste, n.d. Joseph Cornell (American 1903 – 1972), collage on cardboard, graphite, ink, watercolor, Gift of the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 2002.309



Untitled (Stone House and Trees), n.d. Joseph Cornell (American 1903 – 1972), collage on cardboard, ink, gouache, frame colored by artist

Shadow Boxes

Boxes were popular in Victorian homes as an intimate place to keep treasures. Dada and Surrealist artists also adapted the form. Cornell's earliest boxes were small and fragile, but by 1936 he began to build sturdy wooden boxes in his basement studio and focused on these objects through the mid-1940s.

Radar Astronomy (page 1) is an example of one of his later themed boxes. Astronomy and the night sky were themes that intrigued Cornell and he explored them often in shadow boxes. Here the cordial glass magnifies the sun, indicating its power and importance. The metal rings can slide along the bar and may indicate the orbit of the planets as well as the passage of time. The clay pipe is a personal symbol that Cornell often included in his works.

Untitled (Bird Habitat) explores another theme that Cornell often revisited: birds. In this build environment that is lit from within, Cornell has included a stuffed parakeet in a natural environment as if sealed in amber.

Untitled (Romantic Hotel "Chiarina") is one of a series of works that explore travel and hotels. The wooden box is enclosed with glass and includes an advertisement for a hotel and a stamp from afar.



Untitled (Bird Habitat), c. 1954, Joseph Cornell (American 1903 – 1972), mixed media, Gift of the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 93.253



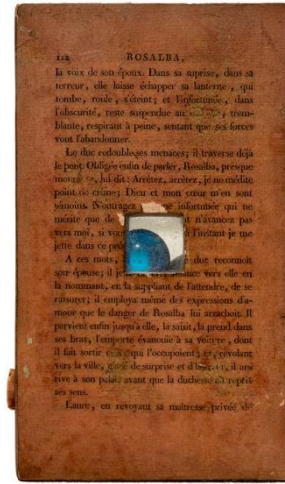
Untitled (Romantic Hotel "Chiarina"), c. 1954, Joseph Cornell (American 1903 – 1972), mixed media, Gift of the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 93.250

Books

Books provided thematic as well as material inspiration in Cornell's hands. He often visited used book stores on his missions to collect materials. In these examples from NOMA's collection, Cornell recreated books from found materials.

In *Untitled (Rosalba with Marble)* the text from a French novel is collaged over the exterior of a box in the shape of a book. A glass window cut in the center reveals a blue marble. Rosalba may be a reference to the Italian Rococo painter Rosalba Carriera, and would be in line with Cornell's celebration of female artists.

History of Turkey is an assemblage that includes a round, red box with bundles of small papers tied together by the artist. The miniature, tied books fit snugly inside the box.



Untitled (Rosalba with Marble), c. 1946, Joseph Cornell (American 1903 – 1972), wood, book pages, marble, Gift of the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 2002.307



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References

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www.theartstory.org/artist-cornell-joseph.htm --

www.nytimes.com/2007/07/13/arts/design/13corn.html?page=wanted=all&r=0 – NY Times review of retrospective exhibiton of Cornell's work.

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