**Cornell, Joseph (1903 – 1972)**

Stratis (Steve) Pantazis

Joseph Cornell was an American artist known for his poetic use of collage and assemblage. His art, including his films, contains images that derive from art history, music, literature, ballet, theatre, film, and natural science.

He was born in 1903 in Nyack, New York into a well-off family, as his father was a textiles designer, but his death in 1917 placed the family in strained circumstances and forced them to move into an ordinary house on Utopia Parkway in Flushing, Long Island, where Joseph lived most of his adult years. He had a strong interest in culture and later on in his life he had strong links with people from the world of literature, art, and ballet in New York. Sources regarding his life mention that he spent considerable time at home working isolated, living together with his mother and disabled brother until their deaths. He was a travelling salesman for eight years, and between 1934 and 1940 he worked as a textiles designer, later becoming a freelance designer for various magazines, including *Vogue* and *House and Garden.* He also worked on an assembly line and at a garden centre for short periods.

Cornell had no formal training in art and in the beginning he produced toylike objects for the entertainment of his brother. His interest in creating art was born of his love for collecting. He used to wander the streets of Manhattan, browsing the different antique book, dime, and souvenir shops where he discovered materials, such as shells, maps, cork balls, metal springs, and marbles, for his collages and assemblages. While visiting the theatre district near Times Square with its Automats, cafeterias, soda fountains, and sweet shops, where he could observe waitresses and starlets ambitious to gain theatrical glory, he collected old advertising cards and movie magazines from the newspaper and magazine stores. His sensibility as a collector is an important element of his art, as he treated all the objects he collected (even ephemeral and low-cost) as if they were rare and precious.

His knowledge of art history came from different books illustrating the masterpieces. Their images have been introduced in his assemblages and collages, as in the case of Dosso Dossi’s *Circe and Her Lovers in a Landscape* (c. 1525) from the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., which appeared in several of his collages produced in the 1960s.

He started making art after his visits to galleries, where he discovered the medium of collage. In particular, around 1931 he made his first artwork after observing Julien Levy unpacking some Surrealists’ works in his Manhattan gallery. Here, Cornell came to know several Surrealists, and began his flirtation with the movement. In 1932, he had his first one-man show in the same gallery.

The influence of European Surrealism on Cornell’s work is apparent in his free attitude toward objects, his approach to fragmentation as the condition of modernity, his technique of irrational juxtaposition of unlike materials, and his passion for nineteenth-century Symbolist writers such as Arthur Rimbaud and Gérard de Nerval. Even though Cornell adopted these aspects of Surrealism, he kept his distance, as did other American artists who were associated at one time or another with the Surrealist group and did not want to be linked or involved with the contradictions that took place within the European group: while some Surrealists advocated freedom of thought and democracy and ridiculed religion, others were strict supporters of Marxist dogma, practiced a nationalistic elitism, and turned to occultism and numerology. Overall Cornell, did not see himself as part of any movement. In relation to Surrealism, he had stated in a letter to Alfred Barr regarding his participation in the exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (1936) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York that he did not share the Surrealists’ concern with the subconscious and the dream theories and would prefer to be called an ‘American Constructivist.’ Museums and galleries had a problem categorising and classifying his art, meaning his work was often left out of shows.

However, Cornell’s encounter with the collages of the Surrealist Max Ernst most certainly had its effect on the formation of his art. In the beginning of his career, he worked on collages and then around 1935 concentrated on his famous ‘boxes,’ which are simple, glass-fronted containers in which found objects and images are arranged, extracting inexplicable poetry. Rearranging and reworking was part of his working method, meaning that even in cases where his boxes had been sold or given to friends and family, he would not hesitate to get them back and make revisions and changes. On the one hand, these boxes and generally his collages and assemblages have strong associations to Surrealism; on the other, they, and in particular those that include images of cordial glasses, marbles, and soap bubbles, become an allegory to Vanitas, the illusion of space, and the interiors captured in Vermeer’s paintings.

Even though Cornell hardly ever left New York, the idea of imaginary travel was his artistic principle as he explored the world and his time through collecting and making. His boxes include birds from exotic places, capturing past times and places while at the same time they capturing timelessness. For instance, to achieve timelessness, he would glue pages from old books on the back of his boxes or he would place the boxes in the oven so that the paint of their surface would crack.

Cornell’s attitude toward time is also apparent in his manner of dating his works. He argued that the process of refinement and concentration required to produce his work could not be dated. In many cases, he did not supply a date, used the term ‘circa,’ or signed in mirror writing, referring to Leonardo da Vinci’s practice, adding to the suggestion of times past.

Many of his images derive from his readings of poetry as he was a voracious reader and collected poetry books from both Europe and America. He perceived poetry as a concise framework in which a world existed, similar to his box constructions. He enjoyed reading the French Symbolists and was fascinated by the imaginative worlds of Guillaume Apollinaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Gérard de Nerval, whose influence appears in Cornell’s shadow boxes. He also admired Federico García Lorca, Dante Alighieri, Friedrich Hölderlin, and Emily Dickinson, whose words and images also appear in his assemblages and collages.

Beginning in the 1920s and continuing throughout his career, Cornell created a number of films, which were shown only rarely during his lifetime. Around the late 1930s he had completed his collage films, made by recombining found materials from his own film collection. In the 1950s, he worked together with other cinematographers on the production of the directed films, which are poetic documentations of different areas of New York. Reaching the end of his life, he worked to complete works that he had begun and abandoned decades earlier.

Towards the end of the 1950s, Cornell’s production of boxes slowed down and he returned to collage, as he found the collecting of material and the construction of his boxes very strenuous. The late collages lack the intensity of his more significant boxes but they are simple and beautiful images. He died from a heart failure on 29 December 1972.

During the peak of Abstract Expressionism, critics underestimated his assemblages and considered his boxes as ‘toys for adults.’ In the 1960’s, when Pop artists came to fore and turned towards real life, Cornell’s work was truly appreciated and in 1967, the Guggenheim Museum in New York organised a retrospective of his work. Today, where the creation of installations and works directly associated to real life is more attractive to artists, Cornell’s work has never been more significant.

**References and further reading**

Blair, L. (1999), *Joseph Cornell’s Vision of Spiritual Order.* London: Reaktion Books.

McShine, K., ed. (1980), *Joseph Cornell.* New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

Pigott, Michael (2014), *Joseph Cornell Versus Cinema,* New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

**Artworks**



Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Dosso dossi),* ca. 1962

Medium: paper collage laid on panel

Dimensions: 36.2 x 43.8 cm (14.3 x 17.2 in.)



Joseph Cornell, *Hôtel de la mer,* ca. 1957,

Medium: gouache, watch springs, cork ball, wood, glass, printed paper strips, postage stamp, metal and printed paper collage

Size: 41.9 x 27.9 x 11.7 cm. (16.5 x 11 x 4.6 in.)

**Films**

Joseph Cornell, *Rose Hobart* (1936), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnbbqiD7C7A>

# Joseph Cornell (completed by Lawrence Jordan), *Jack’s Dream,* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLxwJ24-tr4>

# Joseph Cornell, *Nymphlight* (1957), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Dgw_Lqa_zk>

# Other videos and films regarding Cornell’s work

# <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T65K0ipTQHo>

# <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5n9r7JbKR2A>

# There are a number of videos on the Royal Academy’s website <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/joseph-cornell>