

Joseph Cornell:

Navigating the Imagination

The following checklist lists those works contained on this microsite and is not a complete list of the 180 works in the exhibition, Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Imagination at the Peabody Essex Museum.

Navigating a Career, 1931-1972

Cornell attended the Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, from 1917 to 1921 and then worked as a textile salesman in New York until 1930. To offset his job's tedium, he frequented the city's theaters, secondhand shops, and galleries, and began collecting books, music, photographs, and ephemera. This "exploring that became creative" laid the foundation for the wealth of topics and themes that appear in his work.

By 1931, Cornell had moved from collecting things to making flat and sculptural art from his materials. He created collages—cut, pasted, and recombined images—and three-dimensional compositions in salvaged domestic and commercial containers. Around 1936 he acquired the basic carpentry and woodworking skills to build his signature glass-paned constructions.

Cornell described his boxes from the late 1930s into the mid-1940s as "poetic theaters" and "shadow boxes." Between the late 1940s and 1972 his constructions became "clean and abstract" in their architectural space and celestial references. Around 1953, he resumed making collages to expand upon his themes and subjects.

The principle of collage runs throughout Cornell's entire body of work. Its cohesiveness also owes a great deal to his practice of working in series and "families" that share visual features and associations.



Cabinet of Natural History: Object, 1934, 1936 – 40

Box construction with photographs on paperboard
Closed 3 1/4 x 9 3/4 x 7 3/8 inches (8.3 x 24.8 x 18.7 cm)
Private Collection

Photograph by George R. Staley, Washington, D. C

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La Croisée, The Casement Window: Vermeer's Secret, 1969

Collage with pencil on paperboard
Board 9 x 7 inches (22.9 x 17.8 cm)

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation,
1991.155.55

Photograph by Lea Christiano

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For Emily Dickinson, 1953

Collage with ink on Masonite
Image 12 x 9 1/16 inches (30.5 x 23 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum, Gift of The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation

Photograph by Jeffrey Dykes

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Post No Bills: Object (Défense d'Afficher), 1939

Box construction with painted glass
8 15/16 x 13 15/16 x 2 1/8 inches (22.7 x 35.4 x 5.4 cm)

The Robert Lehrman Art Trust, Courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehrman, Washington, D. C.

Photograph by Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver, Washington, D. C.

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Untitled (Dovecote), c. 1953

Box construction

14 7/8 x 10 7/8 x 2 3/8 inches (37.8 x 27.6 x 7.3 cm)

Private Collection, courtesy Allan Stone Gallery, New York

Photograph by Ulysses Beato

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Untitled [Object], c. 1933

Paperboard construction with blue glass

7/8 x 4 1/8 x 5 3/16 inches (2.2 x 10.5 x 13.2 cm)

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Leo Castelli, Richard L. Feigen, and James Corcoran 82.347

Photograph by Ben Blackwell

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Untitled (Pink Palace), c. 1948

Box construction

10 1/8 x 16 1/8 x 5 1/8 inches (25.7 x 41 x 13 cm)

Betsy and Andy Rosenfield

Photograph by Michael Tropea, Chicago

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Untitled [Rooster], c. 1971

Collage with pencil and ink on Masonite

Image 11 15/16 x 9 1/16 inches (30.3 x 23 cm)

Peabody Essex Museum, Gift of The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation

Photograph by Jeffrey Dykes

(Peabody Essex Museum only)

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Untitled (Schooner), 1931

Collage on paperboard

Image 4 1/2 x 5 3/4 inches (11.4 x 14.6 cm)

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.; Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest Fund and partial gift from the daughter of June W. Schuster in honor of her mother, 2003

Photograph by Lee Stalworth

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Untitled [Tamara Toumanova], c. 1940

Collage with tempera on paperboard

Board 14 1/2 x 9 1/4 inches (36.8 x 23.5 cm)

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 1991.155.110

Photograph by Lea Christiano

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Untitled (Tilly Losch), c. 1935 - 38

Box construction

10 x 9 1/4 x 2 1/8 inches (25.4 x 23.5 x 5.4 cm)

The Robert Lehrman Art Trust, Courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehrman, Washington, D. C.

Photograph by Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver, Washington, D. C.

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Cabinets of Curiosity

From the 1500s to the 1700s, European royalty and affluent individuals often gathered an international array of art, illustrated texts and maps, coins, scientific devices, and natural specimens to create “cabinets of curiosities.” Dense arrangements in drawers, chests, and glass-fronted cases in private chambers suggested a collector’s highly personal view of the cosmos in miniature. Similarly, Cornell assembled elements in a matrix of metaphors designed to incite wonder, curiosity, and contemplation about the physical and spiritual relationships between man and nature.

Cornell also absorbed his family’s Victorian sensibility of gathering and recycling things as talismans of “what else were scattered and lost.” Well-furnished Victorian homes featured “art corners” with assorted natural and cultural souvenirs displayed on shelves or in curio cabinets. For the first time in Western culture, children were encouraged to collect as an educational activity, and their containers of personal treasures were dubbed “schoolboys’ museums.” In combining these traditions, Cornell expressed his appreciation of curiosity as an intimate pursuit of knowledge and experience.



Untitled (Journal d'Agriculture Pratique et Journal de l'Agriculture), c. 1933-mid-1940s

Antique book with collage, paper inserts, cutouts, ink, and pencil; folder of seventeen collages with type and ink on paper

Closed 1 3/4 x 10 5/8 x 7 3/8 inches (4.5 x 27 x 18.7 cm)

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 2002

Photographs by Gene Young and Graydon Wood

(Smithsonian American Art Museum and Peabody Essex Museum only)

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Untitled (Paul and Virginia), c. 1946 – 48

Box construction with blue glass

Closed 12 1/2 x 9 15/16 x 4 3/8 inches (31.8 x 25.2 x 11.1 cm)

The Robert Lehrman Art Trust, Courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehrman, Washington, D. C.

Photograph by Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver, Washington, D. C.

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Video courtesy of the interactive DVD-ROM *The Magical Worlds of Joseph Cornell*, produced by The Voyager Foundation and Cognitive Applications, in collaboration with the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2003.

Dream Machines

Toys and machines share an ingenuity that inspires new ways of operating in the world. When Cornell became an artist in the economically challenged 1930s, interest ran high in toys, games, and movies as entertainment and in practical or futuristic machines as symbols of progress. Like many Americans then, Cornell was also nostalgic for earlier, better times. His works into the 1940s often evoke his late Victorian childhood as he reinterpreted parlor games and miniature theaters designed as educational toys to develop hand-eye coordination or to teach elementary scientific principles.

Cornell also drew on his childhood memories of New York City's penny arcades. Their early moving picture machines were descended from "philosophical toys" that had manipulated perceptions of time, space, and motion since the 1600s. In his interpretations of the art and science of seeing, Cornell often alluded to these amusing yet historically significant optical devices. Penny arcades featured shooting galleries and elaborate slotted cabinets, which were called "dream machines" because they dispensed everything from prizes to fortune-telling cards. The penny arcade's "endless ingenuity of effects" greatly influenced Cornell's appreciation of chance, play, and spontaneity as avenues to creativity.



Object: Soap Bubble Set, 1941

Box construction with painted glass

12 3/4 x 9 x 3 inches (32.4 x 22.9 x 7.6 cm)

The Robert Lehrman Art Trust, Courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehrman, Washington, D. C.

Photograph by Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver, Washington, D. C.

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Trade Winds #2, c. 1958

Box construction

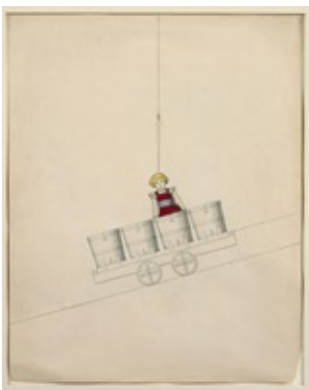
11 x 16 7/8 x 4 1/16 inches (28 x 42.9 x 10.3 cm)

The Robert Lehrman Art Trust, Courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehrman, Washington, D. C.

Photograph by Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver, Washington, D. C.

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Video courtesy of the interactive DVD-ROM *The Magical Worlds of Joseph Cornell*, produced by The Voyager Foundation and Cognitive Applications, in collaboration with the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2003.



Untitled [Doll in Mining Car], c. 1938

Collage with ink on paper

Sheet 11 x 9 inches (27.9 x 22.9 cm)

Smithsonian American Art Museum; Gift of The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 1985.64.3

Photograph by Gene Young

© Smithsonian American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution



Untitled [Flying Machines], c. 1938

Collage with ink on paper

Sheet 10 3/4 x 9 inches (27.3 x 22.9 cm)

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation,
1985.64.1

Photograph by Gene Young

© Smithsonian American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution

Nature's Theater

New York City had such an impact on Cornell that it is easy to underestimate his love of nature. The Hudson River valley, Adirondack Mountains, New England's and Long Island's rural and coastal landscapes, Manhattan's parks, and his suburban backyard—all provided glimpses of "this ethereal magic of simplicity in the commonest aspects of Nature."

Cornell was an amateur naturalist who used close observation, natural specimens, and illustrations to create environments that range from rustic intimacy to grand vistas. As he enjoyed "the song of nature, the breezes, the fragrances of the grasses—like a great breathing, deep, harmonious, elemental, cosmic," he described nature as a theater that offers scenarios of repose and inspiration.

The realms of sensuality and sexuality were among nature's "most intimate mysteries" for this bachelor artist. The tradition of the female nude as a symbol of fertility and creativity as well as his own sublimation of desire inspired his artful use of images from photography and "gentlemen's" magazines after the mid-1950s. Whether rustic or sensual, Cornell's interpretation of nature creates a space in which beauty, mystery, and imagination unfold.



Edward Batcheller

Photograph by Abigail Vakay



Joseph Cornell on the beach at Westhampton, 1931

Private Collection



Cardboard box of "Flotsam"

Joseph Cornell Study Center, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John A. Benton

Photograph by Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver, Washington, D. C.



Untitled [Great Horned Owl with Harvest Moon], c. 1942

Box construction

22 3/4 x 13 1/8 x 6 inches (57.8 x 33.3 x 15.2 cm)

The Robert Lehrman Art Trust, Courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehrman, Washington, D. C.

Photograph by Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver, Washington, D. C.

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Where Does the Sun Go at Night?, c. 1964

Collage with ink on Masonite

Image 11 1/4 x 8 1/4 inches (28.6 x 21 cm); Frame 16 1/16 x 13 1/16 inches (40.8 x 33.2 cm)

The Robert Lehrman Art Trust, Courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehrman, Washington, D. C.

Photograph by Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver, Washington, D. C.

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Geographies of the Heavens

In an effort to understand man's relationship to the land, sea, and air, Cornell projected nature's theater into the heavens. Numerous references to the sun, moon, planets, and stars reveal his interest in the history and technology of astronomy and space exploration. He was particularly intrigued by the concept of celestial navigation, a long-standing method used by sailors, including his Dutch and American ancestors. Although not a sailor, he was an avid stargazer, and celestial navigation became his primary metaphor for extended travel across time and space and between the natural and spiritual realms.

Cornell called upon "geographies of the heavens" for his interpretation of "observatories," "night songs," and "night voyages." This tradition of star maps first appeared in Europe during the 1400s to illustrate information discovered in astronomical observatories. The maps incorporate hand-colored line drawings and engravings, representations of constellations as mythological figures and animals, and diagrams of the heavens. Cornell also embraced other subjects that have inspired charts and diagrams—trade winds, solar and lunar eclipses, and latitudinal and longitudinal views of Earth. From his earliest collages to his last boxes and films, Cornell's goal was to create a touchstone for exploring the cosmos.



How the Big Dipper Changes: 50,000 Years Ago, c. 1962

Collage with ink on Masonite

Image 11 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches (29.2 x 21.6 cm); Frame 16 5/8 x 13 3/4 inches (42.2 x 34.9 cm)

The Robert Lehrman Art Trust, Courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehrman, Washington, D. C.

Photograph by Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver, Washington, D. C.

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Panorama, 1934

Collage with ink on pleated and seamed paper

Open 5 1/16 x 59 5/8 inches (12.9 x 151.4 cm); Closed 5 1/16 x 3 5/16 inches (12.9 x 8.4 cm)

Private Collection, Japan



Penny Arcade: Lanner Waltzes, 1964 – 66

Collage on paperboard

Image 4 1/2 x 5 3/4 inches (11.4 x 14.6 cm)

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.;

Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest Fund and partial gift from the daughter of June W. Schuster in honor of her mother, 2003

Photograph by Lee Stalworth



Soap Bubble Set, 1947 – 48

Box construction

12 3/4 x 18 3/8 x 3 inches (32.4 x 46.7 x 7.6 cm)

The Robert Lehrman Art Trust, Courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehrman, Washington, D. C.

Photograph by Mark Gulezian/QuickSilver, Washington, D. C.

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Tycho's Star, c. 1932

Collage on paperboard

Image 7 3/4 x 5 1/2 inches (19.7 x 14 cm); Board 10 x 7 3/8 inches (25.4 x 18.7cm)

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 1985.64.15

Photograph by Gene Young

© Smithsonian American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution



Untitled [Sagittarius, Scorpio, and Lupus Constellations], c. 1934

Collage with watercolor on paper

Image 5 1/2 x 7 5/16 inches (14 x 18.6 cm); Sheet 6 1/2 x 8 7/16 inches (16.5 x 21.4 cm)

Collection Steven and Sara Newman, Chicago, Courtesy L & M Arts, New York

Photograph by Joshua Nefsky

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Bouquets of Homage

Cornell's interests in science, history, and the arts were often driven by his fascination with historical and contemporary people, whether famous or obscure. His own desire for privacy did not prevent him from researching their lives and accomplishments as sources of inspiration and comparison. Men recur in his pantheon of creative kindred spirits, while women dominate his efforts to pay homage to the fleeting nature of fame, beauty, and the act of performing.

The aura that now surrounds images and celebrities originated in the 1800s, when new printing technologies and increasingly sophisticated marketing techniques elevated performers and artists to stardom. Cornell took his cue from these earlier phenomena as he accumulated information and images "through endless encounters with old engravings, photographs, books, Baedekers, varia, etc." From this "ecstatic voyaging," he created works that he described as "bouquets," "unauthorized biographies," and "imaginary portraits."

Because Cornell did not use representational methods such as drawing and photography, he appropriated likenesses created by other artists. Literal illustration, however, was never his intent. Instead he created portraits that suggest the essence of a person's character and accomplishments, an approach he described as "image making akin to poetry."



Pantry Ballet (For Jacques Offenbach), 1943

Box construction

10 1/2 x 18 x 6 inches (26.7 x 45.7 x 15.2 cm)

Carol and Douglas Cohen

Photograph by Michael Tropea, Chicago

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Untitled [Scrapbook of collages for Tamara Toumanova], c. 1953

Paperboard scrapbook of 9 collages with photographs, decals, cloth, feathers, and rhinestones on paper

Sheet 10 3/4 x 9 inches (27.3 x 22.9 cm); Scrapbook 1 3/8 x 11 x 9 1/8 inches (3.5 x 27.9 x 23.2 cm)

The Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection

Photograph by Michael Tropea, Chicago

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Video interview of Lynda Roscoe Hartigan

Video interview of Lynda Roscoe Hartigan courtesy of the interactive DVD-ROM *The Magical Worlds of Joseph Cornell*, produced by The Voyager Foundation and Cognitive Applications, in collaboration with the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2003.

Crystal Cages

Opening and closing a box alternately reveals and protects its contents. In Cornell's constructions, glass panes achieve both goals to create a dynamic, transparent relationship between interior and exterior. Peering through glass to inspect his boxes and collages suggests using a telescope to bring the distant or mysterious closer. The presence of mirrors complicates the experience. They expand the sense of space, confuse the real and the reflected, and include the viewer in their imagery. In the process, mirrors evoke a range of meanings, especially Cornell's interest in the mind as a mirror of the soul and dreams.

His love of New York's commercial and residential facades, New England's whitewashed buildings, and Europe's hotels and palaces infuses his references to rooms, walls, windows, apertures, and columns. These architectural motifs shape spatial arrangements that reinforce the distinction between interior and exterior as well as absence and presence. After the mid-1940s they dominated his increasingly streamlined constructions, a trend that coincided with his focus on birdhouses. These structures for restricting flight and providing temporary way stations embody Cornell's desire to build a metaphorical world around the concepts of containing and releasing the spirit of creativity.



The Crystal Cage (Portrait of Berenice), 1943

The Crystal Cage (Portrait of Berenice), 1943

Layout with photomontage and text for View, series 2, no. 4, January 1943

Open 10 5/16 x 14 1/2 inches (26.2 x 36.8 cm)

Private Collection

Photograph by Jeffrey Dykes

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(Peabody Essex Museum only)

Chambers of Time

Cornell's romance with time was complicated. He did not date most of his works because he had little use for chronology while pursuing "cross currents, ramifications, allusions, etc." Yet he constantly clocked in his diaries what he was doing day and night, suggesting time's tyranny and his awareness of life as a continuum. Time's measures, phases, and patterns loom in his work, whether in the direct use of clock parts and imagery or the suggestive presence of sand.

Nineteenth-century travelers' memoirs, guidebooks, and photographs informed his impressions of "the light of other days." The results were convincing evocations of the character of a place or period. Even as he struck timeless notes of charm and nostalgia, however, weathered or old-fashioned materials and peeling interiors convey hints of aging.

A strong sense of the present emanates from Cornell's efforts to capture "fleeting impressions" and the "spontaneous unfoldment" of images, while his emphasis on childhood and memory represents his belief in extending the past into the present and the future. Ultimately, his descriptions of time as "eterniday" and the "métaphysique d'éphémère"—the lasting and the passing—reflect time's multiple dimensions in Cornell's projection of beauty and insight.



Untitled [Blue Sand fountain], c. 1953

Box construction with paint and ink wash on glass

12 x 8 1/4 x 4 inches (30.5 x 21 x 10.1 cm)

Private collection

Photograph by Dennis Helmar

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Untitled (Cockatoo with Watch Faces), c. 1949

Box construction with inoperative music box

16 1/4 x 17 x 4 7/16 inches (41.3 x 43.2 x 11.3 cm)

The Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection

Photograph by Michael Tropea, Chicago

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