

Untitled (Hôtel de la Duchesse-Anne)

1957 by Joseph Cornell



THE
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Poster Packet

Department of Museum Education
Division of Student and Teacher Programs
The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center

Joseph Cornell (American 1903–1972)

Untitled (Hôtel de la Duchess-Anne), 1957

Mixed media, 44.8 x 31.1 x 11.3 cm (17 5/8 x 12 1/4 x 4 7/16 in.)

The Lindy and Edwin Bergman Joseph Cornell Collection, 1982.1868

“My boxes are life’s experiences aesthetically expressed.”

—Joseph Cornell

Joseph Cornell, an artist working in New York City in the middle of the twentieth century, frequently assembled diverse objects and printed material in boxes that encourage viewers to free-associate. In *Untitled (Hôtel de la Duchess-Anne)* of 1957, Cornell combines a wooden cut-out in the shape of a bird, postage stamps, a metal spring, bingo chips, a bouncy ball, and newspaper clippings evoking the whimsy of childhood and elements of movement or travel.

Born in Nyack, New York in 1903, Cornell spent his adult life in New York City and was a self-taught artist. He began making boxes, sitting at his kitchen table, around 1932, purportedly to entertain his disabled brother Robert. He supported both his brother and his mother through his work as a textile salesmen, which often took him into downtown New York City. Discontented with his job, Cornell scoured flea markets, bookstores, and souvenir shops on his business excursions, bringing home knick-knacks, souvenirs, and various printed materials which he then sorted into files, or “dossiers,” on particular themes, including the ballet, birds, maps, France, and astronomy. Cornell would then select objects to combine into shadow boxes, which he called **montages**. At first, Cornell utilized round or rectangular boxes that he found, preferring their rough and aged look. Later, a neighbor taught him how to make boxes and afterwards he preferred to make his own. Cornell never worked as an artist full-time, but instead completed his montages in his basement studio at night or on weekends.

On his trips into the city from his home in the borough of Queens, Cornell would also visit art galleries. New York City had long been the center of the art world in the United States but in the 1940s it emerged as the center of the international art world, as artists fled Europe and the spread of Nazism. On a visit to the Julien Levy Gallery in 1931, Cornell first saw works by the Surrealists, a group

of European artists such as Max Ernst (1891–1976) and Salvador Dalí (1904–1989) who drew inspiration from chance, dreams, and the subconscious. Surrealists often experimented in **collage**, or the arrangement of paper and other flat materials on a flat surface, and **assemblage**, the arrangement of **found objects** or other materials in a three-dimensional work. The collages and assemblages of the Surrealists strongly influenced Cornell’s work and, indeed, Cornell exhibited his montages in Surrealist shows. However, while Cornell utilized techniques similar to the Surrealists, he never considered himself a Surrealist, preferring to explore his own themes.

Birds, particularly parrots, cockatoos, and owls, were a recurring subject in Cornell’s art. The artist was interested in creating imaginary habitats for the birds, using both natural and manmade materials. In *Untitled (Hôtel de la Duchess-Anne)*, the shape of the box and the sparse arrangement of objects recall a birdcage. The cutout of a parrot, hovering above a wooden perch, is accompanied by objects designed for a pet’s amusement and exercise, such as the metal spring, rubber ball, and white lattice. The newspaper clippings recall the material that people use to line the bottom of birdcages. The vertical lines of the newspaper, white lattice, and metal rod echo the frame of the wooden box and reinforce the boundaries of the bird’s environment. Cornell connected the round objects in the box through the use of repeated circles, positioning the metal spring as a target that focuses the viewer’s attention on the parrot’s head. The repetition of round forms also evokes a sense of movement. The metal bracelet and rubber ball have the potential to spin or roll if the box is jostled. Cornell often purposefully included moveable objects, such as marbles or balls, to add an element of chance or whimsy to his boxes. The parrot and the butterfly and bugs shown on the stamps bring to mind instinctive movement, such as flight or migration. Indeed, the bird appears poised to swoop down on the beetles, its prey.

Cornell's box can also be seen as a surrogate for travel. This is especially evident in the contrast between the white interior and the stamps from Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, which are colorful and exotic in both a metaphoric and literal sense. The disparity between their small scale and the expanse of whiteness also suggests geographical distance. The bingo chips hidden between openings in the white lattice at the right conjure luxurious ocean voyages where deck games and gambling played a large part in the on-board entertainment. Other lattice openings contain wooden blocks with constellations on a blue background, recalling navigation. The parrot contributes to this exotic atmosphere and introduces an element of tension, suggesting both the freedom of movement and a bird caged or trapped.

The names of two French hotels are also included in this box: the Hotel des Voyageurs in Brest, a port in Brittany, and the Hôtel de la Duchesse-Anne in Nantes. The latter may have appealed to Cornell because of its association with the Surrealists, some of whom spent time in Nantes during World War I. Cornell rarely left his native New York and never journeyed to these places. Rather, his shadow boxes became poetic theaters or settings where the artist could travel vicariously in his mind.

Cornell's boxes are three-dimensional **still lifes** that transport the viewer to a distant place—bird's habitat, another galaxy, or a child's mind. Proud of his own Dutch heritage, Cornell was familiar with Dutch still lifes, which reproduce crisp details of the natural world. The artist's careful juxtaposition of random everyday objects recalls these visual feasts, while encouraging viewers of his boxes to form connections between the objects based on their own imagination and personal lives. In this way, Cornell's boxes are miniature museums, uniting objects with different pasts and functions for people to observe and experience in their own unique way. Cornell enjoyed visiting museums around New York City, especially the then Hayden Planetarium at the American Museum of Natural History. The information and objects he encountered during those museum visits are often reflected in the themes he chose for his art. Indeed, Joseph Cornell shared the museum's timeless ambition: to collect, display, and inspire awe in the eyes of the beholder.

Glossary

Assemblage (n)

the use of three-dimensional found material to create art objects; a technique deriving from collage and popular in the second half of the 20th century

collage (n)

technique used extensively in the early 20th century by Braque and Picasso that combines fragments of newspaper and pre-printed material on a flat surface to create a composition

found object (n)

object found by an artist and presented by him or her as a work of art itself or as part of a work of art, with or without any alteration

montage (n)

assembly of materials, usually one on top of the other, to create a work of art

still life (n)

picture consisting predominantly of inanimate objects, including fruits, flowers, or household objects such as candles, plates, and books

Surrealists (n)

members of a movement founded by André Breton (1896–1966) in 1924, who were inspired by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) to explore dreams and the subconscious through their writings and art; members include Max Ernst (1891–1976), Yves Tanguy (1900–1955), and Salvador Dalí (1904–1989)

Questions and activities

•Memory Box

Encourage students to select a past event that was important to them, such as a birthday party or a Thanksgiving dinner. Have them list objects that remind them of the event and explain their significance. Ask students to bring these objects to class, along with an empty shoe box or tissue box. Have students arrange the objects in the box to make a collage that recalls the event. They can decorate the outside of the box so that it connects to the event they have in mind. Have students present their boxes (and special events) to the class. Display the boxes around the room and invite other classes to visit the classroom to see the art works.

•Travel the Globe

Untitled (Hôtel de la Duchesse-Anne) includes references to other countries, such as the stamps from Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau and French advertisements for the Hotel des Voyageurs in Brest and the Hôtel de la Duchesse-Anne in Nantes. Have students locate these places on a map. Tell them to locate the capital cities of these countries and then calculate their distance from Chicago. Encourage students to learn about the culture of these countries and their histories using the Internet and library resources.

•Birds, Butterflies, and Insects. Oh, my!

This box includes images of a bird, butterfly, and insects. Have students do independent or group research to identify these species, locate their native environments, and determine their basic needs. Have students or groups share the findings with the class.

•What do you collect?

Discuss the meaning of collecting. Ask: *Who has a collection? Where do you keep it? Where did you acquire parts of the collection? Do you show it to anyone?* Have students pretend to be journalists. Ask them to interview someone who collects something (a family member, neighbor, friend.) Encourage students to write a list of questions to ask that person, such as: *What does he or she collect? How did this person start collecting? Why does he or she collect these objects?* Have students write an article summarizing their interview. Suggest they take photographs or make drawings of the collection they are featuring.

•The Stars Beyond

Some of Cornell's boxes show his love of astronomy. Many of these boxes include round objects, such as marbles and balls, that represent planets as well as maps of the constellations. Have students research other boxes by Cornell that depict this theme, such as *Soap Bubble Set* of 1948 at the Art Institute. Ask students to choose a planet or constellation to research. Have students create a box or a 2-dimensional collage that demonstrates their research.

•Aged Materials

The newspaper clippings in this Cornell box are yellowing and the paint is crackled. Cornell often purposely aged objects to give them more visual interest. Have students study the effect of elements on an object. Select several objects made of different materials, such as paper, wood, metal, plastic, and rock. Have students hypothesize about the effect rain, heat, sun, and cold will have on each material over a period of few days. Expose the materials to those conditions. Keep a sampling of similar objects indoors, not exposed to light. Compare and discuss the condition of the exposed objects to that of the unexposed objects. As an extension, have students research the field of art conservation.

•Object as a Symbol

Have students look silently at the poster for 2 to 3 minutes, then ask them to brainstorm about why Cornell put these particular objects together. Ask students to name the objects in the box that may symbolize or stand for something else. Have them discuss and/or record the possible meanings those objects might have. Have students create and draw a symbol for themselves.

•Rearrange it!

Encourage students to brainstorm about why Cornell arranged the objects in this particular way. Collect objects that are similar to those in Cornell's box, such as newspaper clippings, a rubber ball, bracelet, piece of wood, and small toy bird. Break students into small groups. Have each group rearrange the objects inside a cereal- or shoebox. When the arrangement is complete, have students draw their box or photograph it. When all the groups have completed the activity, compare the arrangements. Discuss how rearranging the objects can change the meaning of the artwork.

•Touch and Tell

Fill a bag with objects similar to those in the Cornell box, such as paper, a ball, bracelet, bingo chip, piece of wood. Have one student reach into the bag and touch one of the objects. Have her describe that object to the class without saying what the object is. Challenge the class to choose an object from the poster that is similar to the one being described.

•Last night I had the strangest dream...

Like the works of his Surrealist contemporaries, Cornell's art is often connected to the world of dreams. Based on what they can see in the Cornell box, have students write a short story that begins:

Last night I had the strangest dream....

Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Hôtel de la Duchess-Anne)*, 1957
Produced by the Department of Museum Education

The majority of this text is excerpted from: Ades, Dawn. *Surrealist Art: The Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection at The Art Institute of Chicago*. Chicago, IL: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1997.

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What's the Story?

Create a story using the objects in the Cornell box.

Look closely at the objects and fill in the story map below.

What's the Story?

Choose one object from the box. _____

Tell three things about the object you have chosen. Use adjectives to describe your object.

Problem in the story:

The solution or conclusion:

Write a paragraph below that tells a story about your object.

Use your ideas from above.

