



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Joseph Cornell and His World

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Perhaps it is inevitable that an artist like Joseph Cornell (1903–72), who is best known for the creation of boxed assemblages, would himself be described via stereotypical roles that securely seal him in the nostalgic past. Through my scholarship I seek to reveal that, while Cornell was passionately interested in the cultural life of the past, he was also emphatically connected to the world of his present. This is a surprisingly unorthodox view of an artist whose preferred media (the shadow box, the collage) and lifestyle are often read as remnants of a lost, past world. And yet a study of Cornell's connections to the twentieth century, links that are evident in both his art and his life, could add enormously to our understanding of his legacy.

In this book, I address the false notion that this artist lived in either a dream world or a world of the past. I focus on Cornell's connections to the twentieth century, both in terms of his life and also the subjects and processes of his art work, because I believe that the best way to reappraise this artist for the twenty-first century is to begin the process of connecting him to the time of his life. My book will provide an in-depth discussion of Cornell's *modern*, as opposed to his Victorian, affiliations, and will illustrate how our understanding of his work changes when we look at him as a man with his feet firmly planted in the present, rather than as a dreamer lost in the world of the past. In my book, I discuss Cornell's production, biography and history in terms of modernity and postmodernity.

The archival collections of the Joseph Cornell Study Center at SAAM are crucial research tools that play a critical role in my project. They will provide primary documentation of Cornell's interests, beliefs and ideas, and will help me to understand his artistic, as well as his everyday, endeavors. I am keen to read the archives with an eye toward fleshing out scholarly understanding of Cornell's interests in politics, social issues, and current events, as well as his connections with twentieth-century popular culture.

The ultimate goal of my project is to open perceptions of Cornell and his art beyond the limited art historical "box" that has been placed around them. In my work I seek to be inclusive and expand the scholarship on this artist in at least two important ways. First, I will describe important materials from the SAAM archives that have been overlooked in previous publications. Second, I will consider *all* of Cornell's types of creative production, from his boxed assemblages and collages to his diary entries to his films and his collecting activities. I will build on scholarship from the past by adding

useful historical context found in the archival materials at the Joseph Cornell Study Center that will broaden accepted notions of what this artist and his art were about.