Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Imagination
On View at the Smithsonian American Art Museum
November 17, 2006 – February 19, 2007

"Now voyager sail thou forth to seek and find."
Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1871

Joseph Cornell (1903-1972) has been celebrated internationally for his box constructions, collages, and films since the 1930s. His lyrical, often surprising combinations of materials and concepts reflect his highly personal exploration of art, culture, and science as an uplifting voyage into the imagination. This retrospective exhibition, the artist's first in twenty-five years, mingles series, media, and time frames in thematic clusters to suggest Cornell's emphasis on discovering possibilities and connections through the subtle intricacies of repetition and variation.

His work is usually associated with surrealism's emphasis on dreams and poetic dislocation, yet Cornell owed much of his experimentation to his origins as a self-taught artist. He often described himself as a maker rather than as an artist because his principal format, the box, traditionally involves craftsmanship, a concept foreign to the definition of modern art, which emphasizes transformation rather than fashioning.

Making "something from nothing" is critical to the processes of many self-taught artists, as well as to fundamental concepts of creativity. A desire to reinterpret traditions and to suggest connections between disparate experiences frequently drive creativity and innovation as springboards for change and discovery. Cornell's belief that artists can renew and transform transitory materials, experiences, and ideas inspired his emphasis on the beauty and magic of forgotten and ordinary things.

In 1867, Henry James, one of the artist's favorite American writers, observed that Americans "can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically) claim our property wherever we find it." Cornell's mining of far-flung ideas and traditions and elegant integration of painting, drawing, piecing, papering, and woodworking all contribute to the sense of innovation and poetic synthesis associated with his work.

Navigating a Career: 1931-1972

During the 1920s, Cornell frequented New York City's theaters, secondhand shops, museums, galleries, and libraries and began collecting, especially books and photographs, to offset his job as a textile salesman. In 1931 he made his first collages and "objects," inspired by "the exploring that became creative."

By 1932, Cornell incorporated cutouts from prints, colored paper, and small items such as wood beads into small prefabricated boxes that he had salvaged. He also began shaping old books into chambered containers and surfaces for collage as well as altering antique portable chests. Around 1936 he mastered basic carpentry and woodworking skills that launched him into building glass-paned box constructions. References to the visual and performing arts, nature, science, and time in these early works suggest the breadth of topics and themes that he would develop in individual series and larger "families" of works that share visual features or associations.

Cornell called his early constructions "poetic theaters" after Victorian miniature toy theaters. Into the mid-1940s his boxes suggest stage sets in their arrangement and use of velvet, old-fashioned engravings, mirrors, and photographs. By contrast, boxes made between the late 1940s and 1972 assumed a "clean and abstract" look in their streamlined ordering of space, architectural and celestial references, and emphasis on texture.

The principle of collage—piecing together elements—runs throughout Cornell's constructions, films, graphic designs, and dossier-based projects. He even applied the concept to the backs of his works to complete his integration of design and meaning. After the mid-1950s, making collages dominated his efforts. Continuing his serial approach, these late collages explore themes and subjects found in his boxes, suggesting the overall cohesiveness of Cornell's work.

Cabinets of Curiosity

European royalty and affluent professionals from the 1500s to the 1700s gathered works of art, illustrated texts and maps, coins, scientific devices, seashells, and other natural specimens from around the world 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. Like his European counterparts, Cornell assembled elements in a matrix of metaphors designed to incite wonder, curiosity, and contemplation about the physical and spiritual interrelationship of 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 the containers for their treasures were dubbed "schoolboy's museums." In combining the traditions of two eras, Cornell expressed his appreciation of curiosity as an ongoing and intimate pursuit of knowledge and experience.

Wonderland

Studio, laboratory, workshop, museum—these are the ways in which Cornell described the modest house where he lived and worked in Flushing, New York. Since the 1920s, this inveterate collector surrounded himself with approximately four thousand books and magazines, hundreds of record albums, thousands of pages of diaries and correspondence, and countless examples of two- and three-dimensional ephemera. All reflected his encyclopedic interests, ranging from the performing arts to scientific phenomena, and the equal value he placed on the rare and the commonplace.

Believing that "everything could be used in a lifetime," Cornell gathered his materials as the conceptual and physical resources for his boxes, collages, and films. He used manila folders, envelopes, and paper bags to house his files dedicated to thematic topics or specific people and overflowing with photographs, Photostats, prints, excerpts from books, newspapers, and magazines, and his typed or handwritten notes. The basement studio was also home to his "spare parts department." Shelves filled with cookie tins, industrial packing cartons, and boxes once devoted to shoes, stationery, and candy held traditional art supplies and an array of objects, from clay soap bubble pipes to elements that he prefabricated in bulk for his box constructions.

All of the source materials, box fragments, and unfinished works displayed here are part of the Joseph Cornell Study Center, established at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 1978 through donations from John A. and Elizabeth Cornell Benton, the artist's sister, and supplemented by donations from The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation in 1983, 1985, 1991, and 2002.

Movie Palace

These seven films provide a cross section of Cornell's two dozen short films made between the mid-1930s and the late 1950s. This is the first time that his films have been incorporated into an exhibition of his work, rather than being shown separately.

Learning how to use a camera held no interest for Cornell, despite his fascination with still photography and motion pictures. He is credited with making the first "collage films" because he edited and spliced footage from silent, commercial, travel, educational, and early "trick" films that he had collected since the 1920s. Abrupt changes in scale and scenery that suggest adventures ranging from the melodramatic to the metaphorical characterize his efforts in the 1930s.

When Cornell renewed making films in the 1950s, he collaborated with avant-garde filmmakers. He directed their photography of the architecture and activities of his favorite New York neighborhoods, and then edited their footage to create his later collage films. The prevalence of images of young women, children, and the elderly reveal his lifelong fascination with the city's "stream of humanity."

Films on View

The films run for approximately seventy-four minutes and are shown continuously. This presentation is based on digital images of the original 16 mm films, which are intended to be projected on a larger scale; SAAM's public program on Cornell's films on January 27th in the McEvoy Auditorium provides that opportunity. Digital images of the films, with the exception of *GniR RednoW*, are courtesy of The Voyager Foundation, Inc. Sequentially, the films are:

Rose Hobart, about 1936
black-and-white with blue or purple filter, sound on record or tape, 19 1/2 min.
© The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Untitled (Bookstalls), late 1930s; restored 1978
tinted black-and-white, silent, 11 min.
© The Museum of Modern Art, New York

The Aviary, 1954
photography by Rudy Burckhardt
black-and-white, silent, 11 min.
© The Museum of Modern Art, New York

GniR RednoW, 1955-late 1960s
based on outtakes from Stan Brakhage's *The Wonder Ring*, 1955
unfinished; color, silent, 6 min.
Courtesy Canyon Cinema

Angel, 1957
photography by Rudy Burckhardt
color, silent, 3 min.
© The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Nymphlight, 1957
photography by Rudy Burckhardt
color, silent, 7 1/2 min.
© The Museum of Modern Art, New York

A Legend for Fountains, 1957; completed 1965 with Larry Jordan
photography by Rudy Burckhardt
black-and-white, silent, 16 1/2 min.
© The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Dream Machines

Toys and machines share a spirit of ingenuity that inspires new ways of operating in the world, whether for playful or useful purposes. When Cornell became an artist during the economically challenged 1930s, interest ran high in toys, games, and movies as sources of entertainment and in practical and futuristic machines as symbols of progress. Like many Americans during the Depression, 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 that had been designed as educational toys to develop hand-eye coordination or to teach elementary scientific principles.

Cornell also drew heavily 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 also featured shooting galleries and elaborate slotted cabinets, which were called "dream machines" because they dispensed everything from prizes to fortune-telling cards. The "endless ingenuity of effects" of the penny arcade's toys and machines greatly influenced Cornell's appreciation of chance, play, and spontaneity as avenues to creativity.

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 countryside and coastline, Manhattan's parks, and his modest backyard in Flushing, New York—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 the essence and mood of rustic environments. His romantic perception of America's distinctive natural habitats aligns him with the country's landscape painting and literary traditions since the early nineteenth century. 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 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.

Geographies of the Heavens

Nature's theater extended into the heavens as Cornell considered man's relationship to the land, sea, and air in his efforts to understand the cosmos. His references to the sun, moon, planets, and stars and to the history and technology of astronomy and space exploration all relate to celestial navigation as a long-standing method used by sailors, including his Dutch and American ancestors. Although not a sailor, Cornell was an avid stargazer at home and at the Hayden Planetarium, 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 unknown.

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, comparison, and even consolation. 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 contributed to the elevation of performers and artists as personalities or stars. Cornell took his cue from the scrapbooks and souvenirs that accompanied these earlier phenomena as he accumulated information, images, and ephemera "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."

Cornell did not practice representational methods such as drawing and photography, and literal illustration was never his intent even when he adapted likenesses created by other artists. Instead he designed portraits and homages as abstract equivalents that captured the essence of his subjects, an approach he described as "image making akin to poetry."

Crystal Cages

Typically, boxes are made to be opened and closed, to reveal and protect their 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 the contents and composition of his boxes and collages suggests using a telescope to bring the distant or mysterious closer. The presence of mirrors complicates the experience. As they expand the sense of space, confuse the real and the reflected, and include the viewer in their imagery, 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, columns, and beams. These architectural motifs shape spatial arrangements that reinforce the distinction not only between interior and exterior but also absence and presence. After the mid-1940s they dominated the increasingly streamlined design of his constructions, a trend that coincided with his focus on birdhouses. These structures for restricting flight and providing temporary way stations embody the duality that Cornell navigated in building a metaphorical world around the concepts of containing and releasing the spirit of creativity.

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 in the midst of pursuing "cross currents, ramifications, allusions, etc." Yet he constantly clocked what he was doing day and night in his diaries, suggesting not just the tyranny of time but also his awareness of life as a continuum based on the daily. 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.

Travelers' memoirs, guidebooks, and photographs of the 1800s 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 and provided hints of aging through the use of weathered or old-fashioned materials and peeling interiors.

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 "metaphysique d'ephemera"—the lasting and the passing—reflect his estimation of time's multiple dimensions and effects in his projection of beauty and insight.