



Smithsonian
***Donald W. Reynolds Center for
American Art and Portraiture***
Smithsonian American Art Museum

Nov. 9, 2006

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First Joseph Cornell Retrospective in More Than 25 Years Presents New Insights Into This Modern American Master

“Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Imagination” is on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum from Nov. 17 through Feb. 19, 2007. This major retrospective, the first in more than 25 years, presents new insights into Cornell’s career, illuminating the richness of the themes he explored across all media. The exhibition, which will travel to the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass., and to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, expands the critical and public appreciation of the artist as an American master.

Co-organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Peabody Essex Museum, the exhibition features 177 of Cornell’s finest box constructions, collages, dossiers, films and graphic designs from public and private collections, and an array of source materials from the museum’s Joseph Cornell Study Center. Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, chief curator at the Peabody Essex Museum and nationally recognized Cornell scholar, is the curator of the exhibition.

“Navigating the Imagination” presents a number of new ideas and new opportunities for understanding Joseph Cornell’s work. This retrospective is organized thematically to suggest for the first time Cornell’s interpretation of the imagination as a metaphorical “echo chamber” or “mirror of the mind.” Unlike previous chronological presentations, the exhibition mingles Cornell’s series and media across four decades of his career to convey the conceptual and formal cohesiveness of his body of work. This approach emphasizes Cornell’s perception of art as a means of creating and communicating connections and possibilities through repetition and variation. The exhibition also is the first time that his films, a greater range of his collages and

the open-ended projects that he called “explorations” are being shown in the company of the box constructions for which he is best known.

More than 30 Cornell objects will be on public display for the first time in the exhibition, including the box construction “Bel Echo Gruyère” and the collages “Untitled [Tamara Toumanova],” “Untitled [Flying Machines],” “Untitled [Mary Taylor by Lee Miller]” and “Goop Joe’s Poultry Pages” from the museum’s collection, and “Quiet Autumnal—for Jeanne Eagels,” a collage from the Peabody Essex Museum’s collection.

“We are thrilled to open this exhibition which is an ambitious and imaginative consideration of Joseph Cornell, one of America’s most inventive modern artists,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. “‘Navigating the Imagination’ continues the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s tradition of presenting groundbreaking exhibitions that contribute to new interpretations of American art and artists.”

Joseph Cornell (1903–1972) looked at art as a way to discover connections and bring together disparate visual elements and ideas from the arts, humanities and sciences. Cornell owed much of his experimentation to his origins as a self-taught artist. His work often is associated with surrealism’s emphasis on dreams and poetic dislocation, yet Cornell drew imagery and inspiration from sources as wide-ranging as Victorian educational pastimes, cabinets of curiosities, optical devices, literature and the performing arts.

“We are delighted that the Peabody Essex Museum and the Smithsonian American Art Museum have partnered in organizing this landmark exhibition,” said Hartigan. “Cornell’s transformation of far-flung ideas and transitory materials goes hand in hand with his elegant integration of woodworking, painting, drawing and piecing. The result is a remarkable synthesis of the sophisticated and the vernacular that positions him as a modern American artist with a singular way of seeing.”

The first major presentation of Cornell’s work since The Museum of Modern Art’s retrospective in 1980, the exhibition is organized in 10 sections. “Navigating a Career,” an introductory section, features a selection of collages, box constructions, dossiers and graphic designs from 1931 to 1972 that provides an overview of Cornell’s evolution as an artist. The following sections—“Cabinets of Curiosity,” “Dream Machines,” “Nature’s Theater,” “Geographies of the Heavens,” “Bouquets of Homage,” “Crystal Cages” and “Chambers of Time”—each represent a particular recurring idea or theme explored by the artist.

“Wonderland” offers a selection of Cornell’s source materials from the museum’s major research archive, the Joseph Cornell Study Center. More than 150 objects are presented for the first time as a survey of his encyclopedic interests and to provide a rare public glimpse into his working methods. This repository, along with more than 700 artworks by Cornell in the museum’s permanent collection, establishes the museum as an essential destination for any scholar interested in understanding the whole of Cornell’s career.

“Movie Palace” features a selection of Cornell’s films: “Rose Hobart” (about 1936); “Untitled (Bookstalls)” (late 1930s; restored 1978); “The Aviary” (1954); “Angel” (1957); “Nymphlight” (1957); “A Legend for Fountains” (1957; completed 1965, with Larry Jordan); and “GniR RednoW” (1955), based on outtakes from Stan Brakhage’s “Wonder Ring” (1955). For the first time the artist’s films are presented within the context of an exhibition as part of his body of work. The presentation is based on digital images of the original 16mm films, which are intended to be projected on a larger scale.

About Joseph Cornell

Joseph Cornell was born in 1903 in Nyack, N.Y. He attended Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., from 1917 to 1921. Beginning in 1929, Cornell lived in Flushing, N.Y., with his mother and his brother Robert. Cornell often visited New York City’s galleries, theaters, museums, libraries and secondhand shops, collecting ideas and materials for his artworks.

Self-taught but amazingly sophisticated, he created his first collages, box constructions and experimental films in the early 1930s. His first solo exhibitions in 1932 and 1939 were held at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York. During this period, Cornell became familiar with the work of Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst and Salvador Dali. By 1940, Cornell’s boxes contained found materials artfully arranged, then collaged and painted to suggest poetic associations that drew on the arts, humanities and sciences. In the 1940s and 1950s, Cornell created some of his most memorable and compelling boxes, including the “Medici,” “Aviary,” “Hotel” and “Observatory” series, as well as boxes devoted to stage and screen personalities. His art has been described as romantic, poetic, lyrical and surrealistic. He believed aesthetic theories were foreign to the origin of his art and said his works were based on everyday experiences, “the beauty of the commonplace.” Cornell died in his home in Flushing in 1972.

About the Joseph Cornell Study Center

The Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Joseph Cornell Study Center was established in 1978, when Mr. and Mrs. John Benton, Cornell’s sister and brother-in-law, donated a

collection of the artist's works and related documentary material to the museum. The center contains Cornell's source and working materials, as well as his library. An insatiable collector, he acquired thousands of printed and 3-D ephemera—searching the libraries, museums, theaters, book shops and antique fairs in New York and relying on his contacts across the United States and in Europe. With these objects, he created magical relationships by seamlessly combining disparate images. The center has actively contributed to Cornell scholarship and advanced appreciation of the artist through public access, research fellowships and contributions to exhibitions and publications.

Tour

The exhibition debuts at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and then travels to the Peabody Essex Museum (April 28, 2007–Aug. 19, 2007) and to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (Oct. 6, 2007–Jan. 6, 2008).

Public Programs

A variety of free public programs are planned in conjunction with the exhibition. Hartigan will discuss Cornell Saturday, Nov. 18 at 3 p.m. in the museum's new Nan Tucker McEvoy Auditorium. Additional related programs include a concert Saturday, Dec. 2 at 5 p.m. by the 21st Century Consort, featuring music that recalls Cornell's art; a reading by poet Charles Simic Sunday, Dec. 10 at 3 p.m.; a Family Day Saturday, Dec. 16, from 1 to 3 p.m.; and a talk by noted Cornell collector Robert Lehrman Sunday, Jan. 28, 2007 at 3 p.m. A screening Saturday, Jan. 27, 2007 at 2 p.m. presents a rare opportunity to view several of Cornell's films in their original format. A film series in February, "Cornell's Muses," presents movies that star actresses who inspired the artist. Visit the online calendar at reynoldscenter.org for more information on these programs and other offerings.

Publication

Hartigan, a widely published Cornell scholar, wrote the catalog that is forthcoming from Yale University Press in spring 2007.

Credit

"Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Imagination" is co-organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., and the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass., with support from the Henry Luce Foundation; the National Endowment for the Arts, as part of "American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Artistic Genius;" The Mnuchin Foundation; the

Ridgestone Foundation; and James Corcoran, Los Angeles, and with the cooperation of The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation.

Richard and Joanne Brodie, the James F. Dicke Family, Tania G. and Thomas M. Evans Jr., and Shelby and Frederick Gans support the presentation at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

The Papers of Joseph Cornell at the Archives of American Art

To complement “Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Imagination,” the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art will display selections from the papers of Joseph Cornell in its Lawrence A. Fleischman Gallery at the Reynolds Center. The exhibition “Exquisite Surprise: The Papers of Joseph Cornell,” on view Nov. 17 through Feb. 28, 2007, includes his handwritten diaries, photographs, source material for his boxes and letters from Mark Rothko, Matta, Dorothea Tanning, Mina Loy, Ray Johnson, Fay Wray and others who provide an intimate view of Cornell’s life and work. For more information, visit the Web site aaa.si.edu.

About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,000 artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building, a dazzling showcase for American art and portraiture, is located at Eighth and F streets N.W. in the heart of a revitalized downtown arts district. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. Admission is free. Gallery Place–Chinatown Metrorail station (Red, Yellow and Green lines). Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 357-1729 (TTY). Recorded information: (202) 275-1500. Web sites: americanart.si.edu and reynoldscenter.org.

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Note to editors: Selected high-resolution images for publicity only may be downloaded from <ftp://saam-press@ftp.si.edu>. Call (202) 275-1594 for the password. Additional information about the exhibition is available in the museum’s online press room, <http://americanart.si.edu/press>.