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# Joseph Cornell Wanderlust

# An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

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Learning Department  
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**Joseph Cornell: Wanderlust**  
*The Sackler Wing of Galleries*  
4 July – 27 September 2015

FRONT COVER Cat. 52 *Untitled (Medici Princess)* (detail)

BACK COVER Cat. 62 *Toward the Blue Peninsula: for Emily Dickinson* (detail)

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Academy  
of Arts

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'What kind of man is this, who, from old brown cardboard photographs collected in second-hand bookstores, has reconstructed the nineteenth century "grand tour" of Europe for his mind's eye more vividly than those who took it, who was not born then and has never been abroad, who knows Vesuvius's look on a certain morning of AD 79, and of the cast-iron balconies of that hotel in Lucerne?'

Robert Motherwell on Joseph Cornell, *Joseph Cornell's Theatre of the Mind*, 1993

## Introduction

Joseph Cornell (1903–1972), born on Christmas Eve in Nyack, New York, remains one of the most enigmatic yet influential American artists of the twentieth century. Almost entirely self-taught as an artist, Cornell lived quietly for most of his life with his mother and younger brother, crafting in the confines of his basement or on the kitchen table the 'shadow boxes' for which he is best known (fig. 1).



**Fig. 1**  
Joseph Cornell, 1969

Photograph by Hans Namuth  
Courtesy Center for Creative  
Photography, University of Arizona  
© 1991 Hans Namuth Estate

He rarely travelled, and almost never left New York, yet his work, based on collage and assemblage, resonates with references to foreign places and distant times. In the course of his life he befriended ballerinas, film stars, poets and generations of world-famous artists. He showed in a succession of New York galleries, participated in landmark group shows at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and was honoured before he died with major surveys at the Pasadena Museum of Californian Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

A popular romanticised image of Cornell pervades as an ascetic outsider – a shy, eccentric man yearning for intimacy, unable to converse with the women who enthralled him but with a vibrant interior life of daydreams and an imagination capable of crossing oceans, centuries and the celestial realm. Yet this mythologised version of the man belies his active interest in the art movements of his time, and the innovative nature of his creations which have paved the way for today's appropriation and installation artists, contemporary collage and archive-based practices.

This exhibition at the Royal Academy brings together 80 of Cornell's most remarkable shadow boxes, assemblages, collages and films, including many works held in private collections and a number never seen before outside of the USA. The first major UK exhibition solely devoted to Cornell in almost 35 years, it presents a rare chance to experience a concentrated survey of his *œuvre*, and to journey inside the mind of an artist who described himself as 'an armchair voyager'. The 'wanderlust' referenced in the exhibition title – the desire to explore and travel the world – is central to Cornell's art, as was his penchant for collecting and his astonishingly wide-ranging interests. His creations transport the viewer into private universes, populated with objects and ephemera imbued with personal associations.

## Early Life

Joseph Cornell was the eldest of four children – he had two sisters, Elizabeth and Helen, and a brother, Robert, who suffered from cerebral palsy and was confined to a wheelchair for most of his life. When Cornell was thirteen, his father died of leukaemia and Robert became Joseph's responsibility (partly to assuage their overbearing mother). Robert however was a cheerful child and took pleasure in drawing and collecting model trains. Cornell considered Robert to be a pure soul, and willingly took on his brother's care. A salesman and textile designer, Cornell's father had left considerable debts for his family to manage and for several years Cornell's mother was forced to take odd jobs to support the family, and move them into a succession of smaller rented houses. In 1917, with the help of his father's former employer, Joseph was able to enrol at the Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts: a highly

**'He uses selected, sought-for, desired objects. He must have been clipping all the time, poring through magazines, collecting things and haunting junk shops and flea markets, looking for the images that corresponded to his imagination.'**

Susan Sontag, *Joseph Cornell: Worlds in a Box*, directed by Mark Stokes, 1991

**'I want to thank you for the dollar. It was very kind of you to send it. Please don't send it if you need it. I have plenty. Didn't I tell you I have a job in the library?'**

Joseph Cornell, letter to his mother, from Andover, undated

**'White is just what I mean. Not monstrously, but in wonderful variations. All I want to perform is white magic.'**

Joseph Cornell quoted in *Tracking the Marvellous: A Life in the New York Art World*, John Bernard Myers, 1984

regarded private school. There he discovered an interest in American and European literature, poetry, history and French. Yet, away from his close-knit family and after the relatively recent death of his father, Cornell struggled and was a mediocre student. He developed the first in a lifelong series of nervous crises and stomach problems, and left the Academy in 1921 without graduating.

Upon his return home, Cornell assumed the role of 'man of the house' and became a sample salesman in his father's trade for a wholesale textile business, the William Whitman Company on lower Madison Avenue. Cornell found the job mundane and himself unsuited to its demands. In his twenties, a time when the stress of supporting his family was exacerbating his stomach ailments, he converted to Christian Science. This religion teaches that reality is purely spiritual and the material world an illusion, so disease and other afflictions associated with the physical body are thought to be manifestations of a troubled mind that ought to be treated with prayer, not medicine. Joseph remained an active member until his death and recruited his brother Robert and sister Elizabeth into the fold.

In 1929, Mrs Cornell moved the family to an unassuming house at 3708 Utopia Parkway in Flushing, Queens, New York. Here, Cornell would live with his mother and brother until he died. His main escape from the tedium of domestic life and the awkward social interactions thrust upon him at work was to walk the city streets in his lunch hour, browsing the second-hand bookshops on Fourth Avenue, the flea markets and dime stores, collecting keepsakes and scavenging for relics and once-precious fragments of other people's lives. Cornell loved to explore Manhattan and the 'teeming life of the metropolis', which seemed to him the epitome of glamour. These wanderings led to Cornell amassing a vast personal archive of treasured finds – books, prints, postcards and three-dimensional ephemera such as clay pipes and watch springs – often tinged with the romance of foreign places and the nostalgia of times past, which would in due course form the material elements of the very personal poetry that is his art.

## Play and Experiment

Although he did not complete his formal education, Cornell was extremely well read and kept abreast of Manhattan's literary, musical and artistic events. Not only did he regularly attend the theatre and the ballet, but he also became an avid cinema-goer, thriving on the excitement of the city. Indeed, Cornell often waited at the stage door of theatres and opera houses for a glimpse of the female performers he idolised. He also spent time in art galleries, and in 1931 at the Julien Levy Gallery he came across collages by Max Ernst (1891–1976), a pioneer of Surrealism, who combined high art and popular imagery in his work

(fig. 2). Although Cornell was never officially part of the Surrealist movement and came to dismiss Surrealist associations with his own practice, it had a major influence on him, most notably inspiring his embrace of unexpected juxtapositions in his assemblages and his experimental films, like *Rose Hobart* (1936). Rejecting Surrealism's more violent and erotic aspects – the shock effect of jarring images – Cornell preferred instead what he described as the 'white magic' side of Surrealism, and the poetic connections between everyday objects.

By 1931 Cornell had shifted from simply collecting objects to creating them. He began to make collages and assemblages first in a style resembling Max Ernst's, then in his own manner. The basis of collage – piecing together and assembling – would be central to Cornell's works throughout his life, be they two- or three-dimensional. At this early stage he took images from the dense dossiers of engravings and clippings that he had accumulated by this time, fashioning compositions from seemingly unrelated cut-out images to create whimsical pairings, which often revealed his dual interests in science and the world of children. Both these themes would recur and overlap throughout his career.

**Cat. 2** As with Ernst's 1929 collage novel of Victorian steel engravings, *La femme 100 têtes*, this collage is an example of how found material could be combined to produce a mesmerising image. By pasting together disparate images of a sewing machine, a woman's face and two rosebuds, Cornell created an image that evokes a well-known line by the French Romantic poet Isidore Ducasse (1846–1870), 'the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table', often cited by the Surrealists as the truest representation of their doctrine.

After viewing a number of Cornell's small surreal collages, such as *Untitled* (*Schooner*), 1931, Julien Levy invited him to show in his exhibition, 'Surréalisme',



**Fig. 2**  
Max Ernst  
*And the Butterflies begin to sing (Und die Schmetterlinge beginnen zu singen)*, 1929  
Collage from *La femme 100 têtes*, plate 120  
25 x 18.5 cm

Bonn, Städtisches Kunstmuseum  
Photo © Reni Hansen - ARTOTHEK  
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2014  
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2015

**'The marvellous faculty of attaining two widely separate realities without departing from the realm of our experience, of bringing them together, and drawing a spark from their contact'**

André Breton (on Surrealism), Preface, *Exposition of Max Ernst*, 1921

**Cat. 2**  
*Untitled*, 1930s  
Collage on paper,  
12.9 x 20.5 cm

Osaka City Museum of Modern Art  
Photo Osaka City Museum of Modern Art  
© The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation/VAGA, NY/  
DACS, London 2015

which opened in January 1932. Later, Levy offered Cornell a solo show, the first of several that were held at his gallery. Entitled 'Objects by Joseph Cornell: Minutiae, Glass Bells, Shadow Boxes, Coups d'Oeil, Jouets Surréalistes', it included a series of collages and small three-dimensional objects such as bell jars and pillboxes. All the works were made at his kitchen table at night as his mother and brother slept.

**Compare the collages by Ernst and Cornell. How have the two artists used fantastical elements in their collages to great effect?**

Uneasy about his work being associated with Surrealism, Cornell later wrote to Alfred H. Barr, founding director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and organiser of the 1936 exhibition, 'Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism', in which Cornell's work was to feature: 'In the event that you are saying a word or two about my work in the catalogue, I would appreciate your saying that I do not share in the subconscious and dream theories of the Surrealists. While fervently admiring much of their work I have never been an official Surrealist, and I believe that Surrealism has healthier possibilities than have been developed.' Regardless of Cornell's own attempt to distance himself from the movement, Surrealism provided him, at least, with a context in which he could make his collages and *objets*, and understand them as deserving of a mature and discerning audience.





**Cat. 39** Around this time, Cornell encountered the collages and box constructions of Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948), composed of urban detritus, and the ‘readymades’ of Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), which are ordinary, unaltered manufactured objects designated by the artist to be works of art. In Duchamp, Cornell discovered an unlikely friend; the two regularly corresponded throughout their lifetime. When Duchamp visited New York in the 1940s, he enlisted Cornell to help him with a new project, a miniature ‘museum’ of his work, known as the *Boîte-en-valise* or ‘box in a suitcase’. Cornell already had his own ‘valise’ experiment, *Untitled (The Crystal Cage: Portrait of Berenice)*. Taking the name from ancient Egyptian royalty, and the constellation ‘Coma Berenices’, *The Crystal Cage* is a dossier work that tells the story of Berenice, an imaginary girl who is a scientific explorer and astronomer. She lives alone in a tower of sorts – the Pagode de Chanteloup, an actual French tower in the Loire supposedly transported to New England by Berenice’s parents. From the pagoda she makes studies of the stars and skies, hot-air balloons and distant vistas. However, while Berenice can see the entire world from her crystal cage, she is removed and incapable of experiencing it.

Cornell worked on this dossier from 1934 to 1967. In January 1943, a heavily culled selection was published in the ‘Americana Fantastica’ issue of

**Cat. 39**  
*Untitled (The Crystal Cage: Portrait of Berenice)*, c.1934–67  
 Valise construction, 39.7 x 50.3 x 11 cm (closed)

Richard L. Feigen  
 Photo Richard L. Feigen  
 © The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation/VAGA, NY/  
 DACS, London 2015

*View*. The magazine included a tower-shaped word poem cataloguing Cornell’s encyclopedic interests, a photo-montage of balloons, ballerinas, angels and children arranged as if dreamed by the project’s young heroine, and a series of clippings and notes.

**What parallels can we draw between the character of Berenice and Cornell’s own life?**

## Collecting and Classification

In the 1930s, Cornell began to make the ‘shadow boxes’ for which he is best known – glass-fronted box constructions containing intimately-scaled arrangements of found objects and paper ephemera, assembled in a sort of three-dimensional collage. The 1936 exhibition ‘Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism’ at MoMA, New York, showed one of his first shadow boxes, *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)*. This was the first in a long series of the same name and recalls the children’s pastime of blowing bubbles, as well as the eighteenth-century European painting association of bubbles as *memento mori*, a reminder of the transience of life.

Precisely what led Cornell to the idea of the box remains unclear. In a *Life* magazine article from 1967 he said that it came to him during one of his walks through Manhattan, as he passed a collection of compasses in the window of an antique shop:

**‘I thought, everything can be used in a lifetime, can’t it, and went on walking. I’d scarcely gone two blocks when I came on another shop window full of boxes, all different kinds [...] Halfway home on the train that night, I thought of the compasses and boxes, it occurred to me to put the two together.’**

Before Cornell developed his own carpentry skills, his early shadow boxes were housed in prefabricated, semi-antique wooden boxes, popular during the Victorian era for displaying small paintings, ship models, ladies’ handiwork and mementoes. In the nineteenth century, a similar tradition existed in China, where hardwood boxes with sliding glass covers and papered or silk-lined interiors were used to display fine ceramics, especially figurines made for export. Cornell’s approach also recalls European traditions that began to appear in his research dossiers during the 1930s: small seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch and Flemish *kunstschránke* or *kunstskammer* – cabinets that housed separate elements assembled to represent the world in miniature. In the mid 1930s, Cornell’s neighbour Carl Backman taught him some basic carpentry skills, which allowed him to construct his own boxes. The boxes are often hard to date accurately, as Cornell would tinker with and refine his constructions over several years, returning to them gradually. However, except for his early boxes which tend to be singular, we can see patterns emerging in his practice as he worked on

larger ‘families’ of works that share discernible visual motifs, often unfolding over a decade or more. These series include: ‘Hotels’, ‘Pharmacies’, ‘Aviaries’, ‘Dovecotes’, ‘Observatories’ and ‘Night Skies’.

**Cat. 40** The ‘Pharmacy’ assemblages, with their compartmentalised structures and associations with collection and classification – a nod to the ordered world of museum display – are a good illustration of one of Cornell’s ‘families’. Here, in this early example of a series that stretched over a decade with at least six similar works, we see a small specimen case containing four ordered rows of five glass jars. Its title appears to refer to medicine and healing, yet as a practising Christian Scientist, Cornell was forbidden to take medicine. Instead, in this miniature apothecary, he has created tonics for the soul and the imagination, with each fragile jar containing an object or substance that has poetic connotations – shells and sand for travel, feathers, delicate butterfly wings, tiny snippets of parchment. The interior is lined with mirrors, creating echoing reflections of the jars that line the shelves. Though its contents may seem trivial, each jar is imbued with significance, its humble items elevated and made precious through the language of their display. Looking into this box, we see a world of associations, nostalgia and elusive meaning.

**How does Cornell inspire the viewer to perceive the idea of a pharmacy in a new light?**

**As individuals, we all form connections between objects and memories. How does Cornell make his connections feel universal?**

By the time Cornell created *Pharmacy*, he had stopped working, and was pursuing his art full time. From this point on, Cornell regularly exhibited and sold his artwork. He also did freelance design work and picture research for magazines such as *Vogue* and *House & Garden*. He set up a workshop and storage area in the basement of the house on Utopia Parkway. Working in his new studio, which he sometimes referred to as his ‘laboratory’, Cornell was able to conceive works with more complex craftsmanship than he had been able to do when working at the kitchen table. While most days were spent at home, he would still escape into New York in search of inspiration and to visit friends. A keen diarist, he would sit in Manhattan coffee shops, indulging his notorious sweet tooth with sugary snacks while furiously scribbling notes on scraps of paper that would later be typed up into more formal diary entries.

As well as being an avid people-watcher, Cornell enjoyed ornithology and expressed his love of birds in the ‘Aviary’ and ‘Habitat’ series, which speak of their exoticism and beauty. Birds often symbolise freedom, their flight paths linking the heavens and the earth. In myths and religion, small birds in particular have been used to represent the souls of children freed from their earthly bonds.

**Cat. 40**  
**Pharmacy, 1943**  
Box construction,  
38.7 x 30.5 x 7.9 cm

Collection Paul Schärer  
Photo Dominique Uldry, Bern  
© The Joseph and Robert Cornell  
Memorial Foundation/VAGA, NY/  
DACS, London 2015

**‘Creative filing  
Creative arranging  
As poetics  
As technique  
As joyous creation’**

Joseph Cornell, diary entry,  
9 March 1959

**‘On the way to ART OF  
THIS CENTURY from  
Julien’s, carrying De  
Medici girl Slot Machine  
and bird with cracked  
glass saw Marlene  
Dietrich in polo coat and  
black beanie cap on  
back of hair waiting at  
curb of Jay Thorpe’s for a  
taxi. First time I’d seen  
her off screen and  
brought an unexpectedly  
elated feeling. Working  
in cellar that night on  
Soap Bubble Set the  
green glass locket  
portrait of her on the  
floor evoked very special  
feelings.’**

Joseph Cornell, diary entry,  
spring 1944





**Cat. 41**  
**Habitat Group for a**  
**Shooting Gallery, 1943**  
 Box construction,  
 39.4 x 28.3 x 10.8 cm

Des Moines Art Center, Iowa.  
 Purchased with funds from the Coffin  
 Fine Arts Trust; Nathan Emory Coffin  
 Collection of the Des Moines Art  
 Center, 1975.27  
 Photo Des Moines Art Center.  
 Photography: Rich Sanders  
 © The Joseph and Robert Cornell  
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 DACS, London 2015

**‘Original inspiration of  
 the bird store, windows,  
 simplicity of magic, pet  
 shop.’**

Joseph Cornell, c. 1943,  
 Joseph Cornell Papers,  
 Archives of American Art,  
 Smithsonian Institution,  
 Washington, DC

**‘Cornell was a voyager,  
 travelling through space  
 and time to dimensions  
 of the imagination and  
 the spirit. He infused this  
 sense of adventure and  
 an infinite beyond into  
 modestly scaled works  
 whose fragments of  
 reality give way to  
 worlds to be explored.’**

Robert Lehrman, *Joseph  
 Cornell: Shadowplay  
 Eterniday*, 2003

**Cat. 41** While visually distinct from the ‘Pharmacy’ series, *Habitat Group for a Shooting Gallery* continues the theme of arrangement and classification in Cornell’s work, with the cut-out illustrations of macaws, a parrot and a cockatoo mounted like museum specimens or dioramas against a bright white background. However, this dynamic construction has an uncharacteristic aura of violence, and contrasts with other pieces where the box is seen as a safe environment in which objects could be placed, secure and cherished. In this case, the glass that protects the sanctuary of the box has been cracked, its contents exposed to external elements. The central ‘bullet hole’ directly in front of the cockatoo’s crown acts as a focal point for the assemblage, guiding our eye in and then out to the four corners of the box. Bold splashes of colour convey a sense of theatricality and drama (Cornell referred to some of his boxes as ‘poetic theatres’), and the game counters placed over each bird evoke the targets of shooting galleries in penny arcades. Scattered feathers at the bottom of the construction, the shot glass and splashes of paint all suggest a violent event. In a rare moment of political commentary in Cornell’s work, this habitat serves as a metaphor for the horrors of the Second World War, with the birds embodying the innocence of victims caught up in the destruction of war.

**How does Cornell use colour to link parts of the composition?**

**What is the overall mood of this assemblage? How is that mood created?**

## Observation and Exploration

One of the great paradoxes in Cornell’s life was the gulf between the multitudinous references in his work to distant times and foreign places, and the fact that he himself never physically left the USA. He was a devotee of nineteenth-century European culture and a collector of *Baedeker Guides* (to travel, published in the 1830s), timetables and travel literature, yet he never went abroad – not because he didn’t have the means to do so but because, as one commentator noted, he ‘preferred the ticket to the trip’, which makes his evocation of a traveller’s sense of wanderlust even more remarkable. Cornell let dreams of voyages, particularly to Europe, remain imagined and thus unrealised, preserving his reveries in the same fashion as his glass-fronted boxes. Recurring often in his work are poignant emblems of transience and travel – birds, celestial maps, exotic-sounding hotels and luggage tags – but they remain frozen in their boxed confinement. Thus, fittingly, the central paradox in Cornell’s life found expression in the very medium for which he is now best known.

**Cat. 51** Cornell also dreamed of celestial navigation and was fascinated by the night sky and planets. In *Soap Bubble Set*, Cornell arranged fragments collected during his Manhattan wanderings against the backdrop of an antique lunar map, the roundness of the moon alluding to the titular spherical soap bubble. In his



**Cat. 51**  
**Soap Bubble Set, 1948**  
 Box construction, 36.8 x  
 52.1 x 9.8 cm

Mr. and Mrs. John Stravinsky  
 Photo © 2014 Christie's Images Limited  
 © The Joseph and Robert Cornell  
 Memorial Foundation/VAGA, NY/DACS,  
 London 2015

**'For some, who are  
 travellers, the stars  
 are guides.'**  
 Antoine de Saint-Exupéry,  
*The Little Prince*, 1943

shadow boxes, soap bubbles came to symbolise the relationship between science and childhood imagination, knowledge and wonder, as well as serving as an allegory of *vanitas* and the ephemerality of life. White Dutch clay pipes, the signature motif of the 'Soap Bubble' series, are positioned symmetrically in side compartments, laid out like scientific instruments in a lab, gleaming against the dark velvet interior of the case. These pipes, used as toys for blowing bubbles, suggest the element air, while at a lower level a fragment of driftwood (probably scavenged by Cornell while beachcombing on Long Island) grounds us in the natural world and hints at the weathering effects of wind and water over time. A cordial glass stands alone, delicate and vulnerable, empty in this construction but in others from this series cradling a marble, perhaps as a metaphor for forces securing the planets in place. At the top of the construction, the artist has hung a row of seven cylinders, the number possibly invoking the Copernican model of the solar system (in which seven planets orbit the Sun). The overall impression is of a poetic understanding of science, the infinity of space made bearable by the inclusion of objects whose culturally recognisable associations position us, along with Cornell, on Earth.

**Can you imagine what is it about the medium of the box construction that fascinated Cornell? Do you feel the same, and if so why?**

**Why might the idea of travel or a journey have seemed more attractive to Cornell than the actual experience?**

Ironically, Cornell's first recorded response to the cosmos was fear. According to his sister Elizabeth, after having returned from school for the Christmas holidays, he woke her one night, 'shaking like a leaf', and stood at the window while confessing his anxiety about the concept of infinity. His concern translated to intrigue later in life and his shadow boxes abound

with references to astronomy and space exploration. Cornell kept up to date with the latest scientific discoveries and was a keen stargazer, regularly observing the night sky from his backyard, or his kitchen window, sometimes referred to as his 'observatory'.

In 1949, Cornell joined the Egan Gallery in New York, run by Charles Egan. Around this time we can see a fresh approach emerging in his work, as he branched away from the more theatrical Victorian constructs of his early career, which can appear comparatively dense. This may have been a reaction to Abstract Expressionism, a new movement developed by American painters such as Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and Robert Motherwell (1915–1991) who used abstraction and gesture to convey expressive content. The Egan Gallery's roster of artists included notable Abstract Expressionists such as Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) and Franz Kline (1910–1962).

**Cat. 63** Cornell continued to explore themes of astronomy and celestial navigation in the 'Observatory', 'Night Skies', and 'Hotel' series (the latter also playing with the notion of a hotel as a microcosm of the wider world and, for Cornell, the universe). This work, *Andromeda: Grand Hôtel de l'Observatoire*, combines many of the motifs prevalent in these series, yet is noticeably pared back. The deep, contemplative blue of the composition suggests a starry night sky, and the cracked, aged, white frame evokes the faded grandeur of forgotten European hotels, built for wealthy travellers between the 1880s and 1920s but now fallen into disrepair. Cornell scrapbooked the names of the hotels in this series from adverts in turn-of-the-century guidebooks to European cities.

Despite the smallness of the box, Cornell has created a sense of space within by foregrounding a delicate silver chain and white dowel against the rich starry expanse beyond. The female figure we see in the background is Andromeda, a character in Greek mythology who was chained to a rock as a sacrificial offering to a sea monster because her mother, Cassiopeia, had angered the sea god Poseidon and the Nereids by boasting of her and her daughter's beauty. Andromeda was rescued from her plight by the hero Perseus, who then married her. Upon her death, she was placed in the skies as a constellation alongside her husband and her mother.

Like her rescuer, Cornell has liberated Andromeda from the chains that bound her to the Earth. She is not attached to the silver chain, which both recalls the myth and suggests a ladder to the heavens. With the lightest touch, Cornell has skilfully created both the physical presence of a beautiful woman, and her heavenly equivalent as a constellation in the night sky.

**How has Cornell successfully conjured the sense of another time and place in this construction?**

**The act of viewing Cornell's boxes has been described as 'looking through a window to another world'. Can you identify with this experience? Why or why not?**

**Cat. 63**  
*Andromeda: Grand Hôtel de l'Observatoire*, 1954

Box construction,  
46.5 x 33 x 9.8 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Partial gift, C. and B. Foundation, by exchange, 1980  
Photo © SRGF, New York.  
Photography: David Heald  
© The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation/VAGA, NY/DACS, London 2015

**'His hotel rooms [...] are inhabited less by guests than by the empty spaces of romantic yearning.'**

Deborah Solomon, *Utopia Parkway: The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell*, 1997



As well as seeking inspiration across galaxies and the limitless expanses of space, Cornell would also delve into myth and history, both factual and personal, to seek out the characters who reside in his shadow boxes. In one of his most famous series, the 'Medici Slot Machines', Cornell superimposed memories of his own happy childhood (before his father's death) onto reproductions of portraits of Medici princes and princesses by the Renaissance artists Sofonisba Anguissola (1532–1625), Bronzino (1503–1572) and Pinturicchio (1454–1513). By mixing his personal history (Cornell recalled with fondness the outings to penny arcades and shooting galleries of his youth) with these Florentine children, and further juxtaposing Old Master paintings with symbols of popular amusement, he created a mysterious world that contrasts high and low culture with haunting beauty.

**Cat. 52** This elegiac composition centres around Bronzino's posthumous portrait of Bia de' Medici. Bia, the illegitimate but beloved daughter of Cosimo I de' Medici, died from a fever aged 6, and Bronzino used her death mask as a model. Around her neck, she wears a medallion with her father's profile on it. Cornell has effectively enshrined Bia in this box, simultaneously surrounded by the trappings of childhood (marbles, jacks, toy blocks), and, notably, the metal spirals of watch springs in the upper corners, which act as a metaphor for time cycles and life repeating itself. A bright red ball in front of the young girl attracts the viewer, as do the sightlines, mimicking the cross-hair targets of amusement park shooting galleries, which converge over one eye. Bia is flanked by columns, decorated with Baedeker maps of Italy, and further side compartments stacked with repeated images, like the spliced frames of a film, recalling Eadweard Muybridge's (1830–1904) early sequences of animal and human movement, as well as foreshadowing Pop artist Andy Warhol's (1928–1987) multiple silkscreen homages to celebrities like Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe. There is a concealed drawer at the base of the box, containing a bundle of letters tied with thread, and a paper fan, perhaps a nod to the attributes of the courtly life of a princess.

Cornell's creations often included kinetic elements like marbles or toy balls, although they are seldom activated now, as the assemblages are too delicate. In this box, the unfixed objects placed around Bia accentuate her stillness and steady gaze. Perhaps because of the blue staining of the glass, we become more aware of the wall that separates us from this young girl, frozen in a world that we can look in upon, but not enter. She looks out at us directly, but is she imprisoned or merely on display?

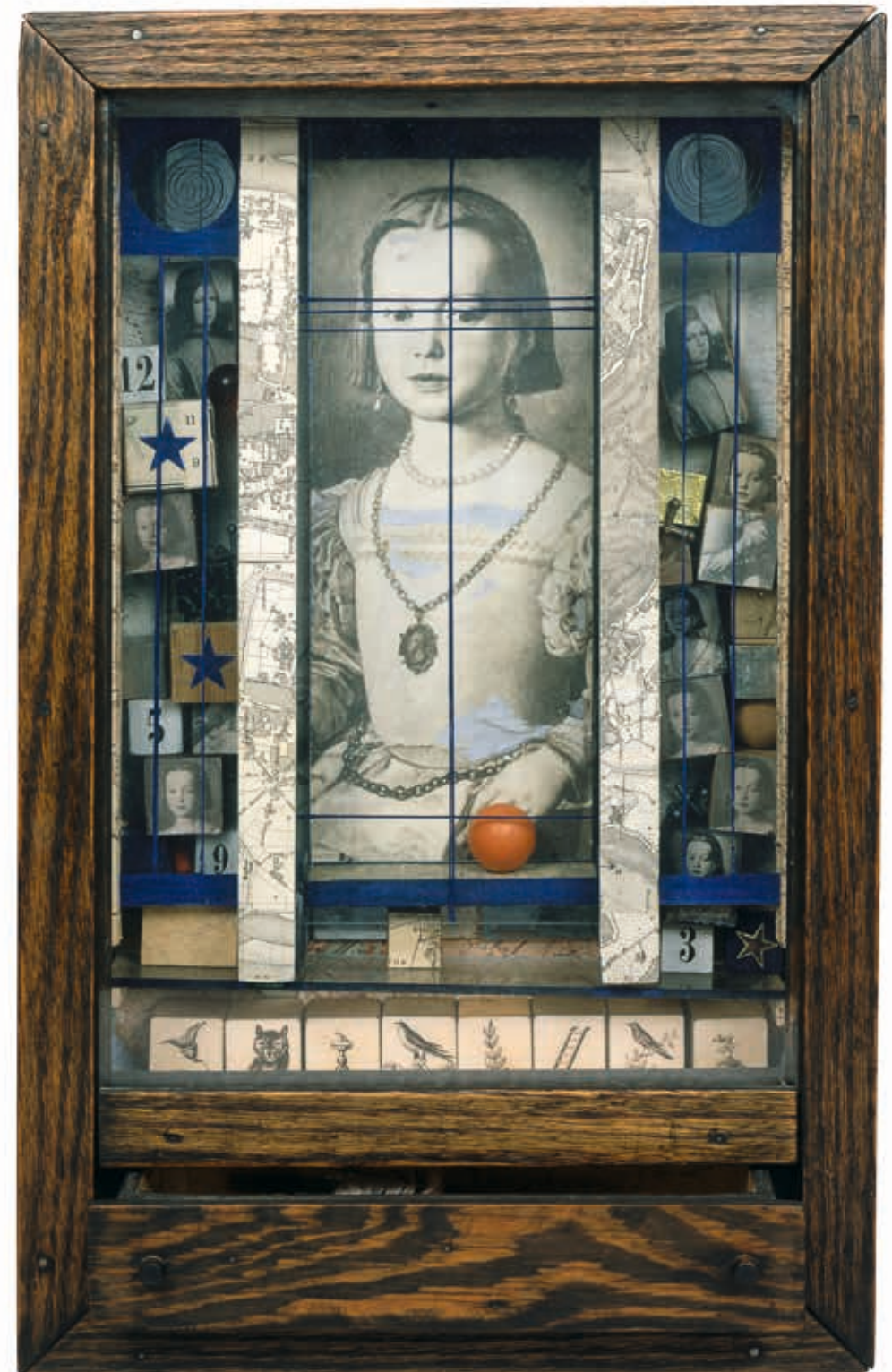
**Why do you think Cornell chose the portrait of Bia de' Medici as the subject for this shadow box? Consider that the Medici Family name is synonymous with the cultural enlightenment of the Italian Renaissance.**

**Where has Cornell introduced lines into the box, and what effect do they have on the way your eye is led around the composition?**

**Cat. 52**  
**Untitled (Medici Princess), c. 1948**  
Box construction,  
44.8 x 28.3 x 11.1 cm

Private collection, New York  
Photo courtesy private collection,  
New York  
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**'Peering into glass-  
panelled boxes to  
inspect their contents  
is not unlike looking  
through a telescope in  
order to bring the distant  
closer. Windows, doors,  
compartments, drawers,  
cross-hair targets – all of  
these elements grant  
access or focus as we  
navigate the world  
Cornell has framed.'**  
Lynda Roscoe Hartigan,  
*Joseph Cornell:*  
*Shadowplay Eterniday*,  
2003





**'Couldn't resist a blue and green coiled shell, also a shiny white and pink one, for an ONDINE box for Fanny Cerrito'**

Joseph Cornell, diary entry, 15 July 1941

### Cat. 36

**Naples, c. 1942**

Box construction, 28.6 x 17.2 x 12.1 cm

The Robert Lehman Art Trust, courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehman  
Photo The Robert Lehman Art Trust, courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehman. Photography: Quicksilver Photographers, LLC  
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### Fig. 3

**Fanny Cerrito in the Grand Ballet of Ondine, June 22 1843**

Lithograph coloured by hand by C.Graf after a drawing by Numa Blanc, 1843

Given by Dame Marie Rambert  
© V&A Images / Victoria and Albert Museum, London

**'His work is filled with the white light of early morning ...'**

Robert Motherwell on Joseph Cornell, *Joseph Cornell's Theatre of the Mind*, 1993

## Longing and Reverie

For Cornell, a relationship with a woman (other than his mother) seemed unattainable. He never married, and for him the female figure took on an elevated accumulation of hope and desire of almost mythic proportions. Throughout his life he developed obsessions with opera singers, waitresses, film stars, shop girls and most vividly, ballerinas (alive or dead). In the 1930s he discovered the international revival of the Romantic ballet, and spent the next 30 years exploring his fascination with the 'queens of the dance'. His favourites included Romantic-era prima ballerinas Marie Taglioni (1804–1884) and Fanny Cerrito (1817–1909), and their modern counterparts Tamara Toumanova (1919–1996) and Allegra Kent (b. 1937). He also became good friends with Pavel Tchelitchew (1898–1957), the Russian Surrealist painter and set and costume designer who, as a well-known figure on the international dance scene, introduced Cornell to dancers and other balletomanes.

**Cat. 36** This box is a tender homage to

Fanny Cerrito, a nineteenth-century ballerina who captivated Cornell (he first came across her likeness in a bookstore on Fourth Avenue, on a souvenir lithograph from 1842).

Cerrito was best known for her 1843

performance in 'Ondine', a ballet based on a fairy tale about a knight who falls in love with an ethereal water sprite. For her first entrance on stage, Cerrito posed in a giant

cockleshell, rising up on a platform

through the stage (fig. 3). In this

assemblage, Cornell celebrates her

birthplace of Naples, illustrating its

famously narrow streets festooned with

lines of laundry. The luggage label and the

handle of the box, which recall a suitcase, give a sense of travel and distance, but

the seashells propped up in the corners of the box and the faded sea-green paint

that borders the scene speak to Cerrito's most famous role.

**What does Cornell want us to know or feel about Fanny Cerrito from this work?**

**Throughout his career, Cornell was reluctant to sell his boxes.**

**Why do you think this was?**



**Cat. 62** Another example of Cornell's devotional works is this stunningly austere piece entitled *Toward the Blue Peninsula: for Emily Dickinson*. The purity of this box and the inclusion of a grid-like structure recall the signature style of Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), a Minimalist artist who radically simplified the elements of painting to reflect the underlying spiritual order of the visible world that he believed in. Cornell admired Mondrian's work and mentioned him in his 1946 diary: 'Mondrian feeling strong. Feeling of progress and satisfaction.'

As the title suggests, this shadow box was created for the nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), with whom Cornell felt a deep affinity. Like Cornell, Dickinson lived with her family, never travelled far from home or married, and translated her intense longing into her art. A withdrawn and enigmatic woman, she rarely left the upstairs bedroom in her home in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she wrote her poems. Dickinson's bedroom inspired the setting for this simple, white-washed box that resembles an abandoned aviary.

At first, almost everything about this box suggests containment – the white mesh cage, the dowel perch and bird feeder – but we find no resident here. In fact, the mesh has been cut open and to the left we see a rectangle of clear, refreshing blue suggesting a window open to the sky – the infinite beyond into which our bird has flown. Emily Dickinson sometimes referred to herself as a 'little wren' and often, like Cornell, included birds in her work. Here, Cornell ensures that she has been set free, present only in spirit, with two small scraps of printed paper at the bottom of the case the only physical reminder of her presence. The empty box is silent, a vacuum left after the action has occurred.

The title of this work comes from a poem by Dickinson that begins: 'It might be lonelier / Without the Loneliness / I'm so accustomed to my Fate.' It ends:

It might be easier  
To fail – with Land in Sight –  
Than gain – My Blue Peninsula –  
To perish – of Delight –

Here, Dickinson is asking whether longing is better than having, a question that clearly spoke to Cornell and his own deep-seated yearning. Better that dream remain imagined but unrealised, the poet advises, lest it disappoint. It seems these are words that Cornell heeded his entire life.

**How has Cornell simultaneously evoked the presence and absence of the resident of this box?**

**Why did Cornell and Dickinson seek release from the confines of their respective situations?**

**Cat. 62**  
***Toward the Blue Peninsula: for Emily Dickinson, c. 1953***  
Box construction,  
36.8 x 26 x 14 cm

The Collection of Robert Lehrman,  
courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehrman  
Photo The Collection of Robert Lehrman,  
courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehrman.  
Photography: Quicksilver Photographers,  
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**'Voyagers and explorers  
of their own solitudes,  
they make them vast,  
make them cosmic'**  
Charles Simic on Cornell  
and Emily Dickinson, *Dime-  
Store Alchemy: The Art of  
Joseph Cornell*, 1993





**Cat. 77**  
***Mica Magritte II: Time Transfixed*, c. 1965**  
 Collage on board,  
 30.5 x 22.9 cm

The Robert Lehman Art Trust, courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehman  
 Photo The Robert Lehman Art Trust, courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehman.  
 Photography: Quicksilver Photographers, LLC  
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**'Friday the 26th at 1:30 in the afternoon my blessed brother looked at his wall of celestial toy trains, out on the saffron feeding grounds of the ring-neck pheasants, glanced back and without a sigh was released from his frail frame which had withstood such cruel pressures and tensions.'**  
 Joseph Cornell, diary entry, 1965

In the early 1960s, Cornell did finally break with tradition and became attached to a young woman, a New York waitress named Joyce Hunter. This was Cornell's first real-life romance and he was dazzled by her, making her several gifts of his boxes and collages. Joyce eventually stole artworks from his home (though he refused to prosecute her), and was later murdered by an acquaintance in an unrelated incident in December 1964. Her death devastated Cornell, and marks the beginning of his decline into isolation; his brother Robert died in 1965, his mother a year later. In the winter of 1965 he began a series of collages dedicated to Robert's memory.

**Cat. 77** In this composition *Mica Magritte II: Time Transfixed*, Cornell appropriates the iconic painting *La Durée poignardée*, 1938, a classic Surrealist work by René Magritte (1898–1967) that depicts a steam train exiting a fireplace into an unoccupied living room. Robert had always loved playing with model trains and this work – part of a series entitled 'Time Transfixed', which takes its name from Magritte's painting – speaks to Cornell's desire to stop time in its tracks to preserve his recently-departed loved ones.

Now alone in his family home, Cornell still received visitors (an invitation to Utopia Parkway had become something of an art-world trophy) but conditions in the house declined as his involvement in Christian Science and the metaphysical world increased. He would write letters to the ghosts of his former life – Robert, his mother, Joyce Hunter. Cornell became more and more interested in sharing his work with a younger audience and one of his last exhibitions in 1972 was expressly for children: 'A Joseph Cornell Exhibition for Children' at the Cooper Union School of Art and Architecture, where cake and soda pops were served instead of the traditional champagne and canapés. He often said children were his most enthusiastic and receptive audience, and lent boxes to children in his neighbourhood for their enjoyment.

Cornell continued to work until the end of his life, although he stopped making new boxes sometime in the 1960s, after which he focused on 'refurbishing' earlier boxes by breaking them down and reconstituting them. His main focus was a renewed interest in creating collages, which he saw as freer and more spontaneous than box construction. He also concentrated on making films and re-editing earlier cinematic work. Following prostate surgery in June 1972, he spent several months recuperating with family in Westhampton before returning to Utopia Parkway in November. Cornell died of heart failure alone at home, just a few days after his sixty-ninth birthday.

## Conclusion

What can we make of the life of Joseph Cornell? From his shadow boxes we get the impression of a man who preferred fantasy to reality, finding inspiration and affinity with long-dead characters from history, from Renaissance princesses to Romantic ballerinas. But Cornell was also conscious of and responded to the changing landscape of twentieth-century art – Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and Minimalism – and had a tremendous influence on other artists during his lifetime. He had an appetite for subjects that were as far ranging as his imagination, and was able to express, with the deftest of touches, huge concepts within intimate, self-contained spaces. Cornell's cloistered worlds seem to encompass the entire universe in microcosm – its infinity, wonder, mystery and power all contained within a small box. Their appeal can only be accentuated by the fact that their creator conjured these worlds purely from imagination rather than experience. His last reported words to his sister Elizabeth on the day he died were, 'You know, I was thinking, I wish I hadn't been so reserved.' While this restraint may have caused him regret in his daily life, we see little trace of it in his art, which seems instead to be a magical, generous invitation to the viewer as a gateway to reverie, and to dream.

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**'You don't know how terrible it is to be locked in boxes all your life. You have no idea what a terrible thing it is!'**

Joseph Cornell to dealer David Mann, reported in an interview with Lindsay Blair, 26 January 1982

**Cat. 63**  
**Andromeda: Grand Hôtel de l'Observatoire**, 1954 (detail)

