

RA

Royal Academy of Arts

Art Detectives

A guide for
young visitors

Art Detectives are supported
by the Flow Foundation

**Joseph
Cornell**
Wanderlust

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Introduction

Joseph Cornell (1903–1972) was a curious artist. He lived alone with his mother and brother in a quiet neighbourhood near New York. He could not draw, paint or sculpt, and he wasn't trained as an artist; instead he worked a series of jobs that he didn't enjoy very much, in order to support his family, and then spent his evenings creating artworks at the kitchen table or in his basement. He never left America, but in his imagination, he journeyed across the world and to far-away distant times. Cornell is best known for his collages and glass-fronted boxes – known as 'shadow boxes' – which he filled with objects that he found when browsing second-hand stores in New York, and with images cut out from magazines and books. He transformed ordinary objects into beautiful pieces of art, carefully positioned behind glass. The subjects of these shadow boxes range from old film stars and ballerinas, to birds and the stars of the night sky. Cornell loved the idea of children playing with the shadow boxes he created. In fact, the last exhibition of his life was designed especially for children, with the boxes displayed at a low height, and orange squash and cake served at the opening party!

Section 1.

Play and Experiment

Find *Untitled (Story without a Name – for Max Ernst)*, c. 1930s

On his lunch hours while working as a salesman in New York, Cornell liked to visit bookshops, theatres and art galleries. One day he came across some collages by Max Ernst, a famous Surrealist artist. He was inspired to try making his own collages – a way of creating art by pasting various materials like bits of newspaper, photographs or pages from a book, onto a single surface.

In this collage, Cornell has pasted together images from Victorian novels and magazines. If you look closely, you'll see that there are some unexpected people and things placed side by side!

Can you find:

- A flower blooming from the side of a building?
- A bird soaring through the rings of a planet?
- A flying head?

What other weird and wonderful things can you spot?

Section 1.

(continued)

*Find Untitled
(Soap Bubble Set), 1941*

This work shows a clay pipe blowing soap bubbles. The soap bubbles take the form of overlapping glass discs, which bear images.

How has Cornell suggested the lightness of soap bubbles in this box?

What images have been printed onto the glass discs?

Bubbles vanish in seconds, but shells and fossils have been around a long time. Do you think the artist was trying to tell us something about the idea of time in this work? What could that be?

Section 2.

Collecting and Classification

Find *L'Egypte de Mlle Cléo de Mérode*, 1940

Cornell loved to collect wondrous and mysterious things, and then display them in his boxes. He imagined connections between objects and experiences, and tried to make these connections visible in his work. Sometimes he would adapt wooden chests, which would gradually unveil their treasures as they were unpacked.

This work is dedicated to a famous French dancer called Cléo de Mérode. It also links to another famous person, this time from Ancient Egypt. Can you guess her name?

There are 12 different corked-topped glass bottles in this work, filled with all kinds of things. What kinds of thing can you see within these bottles?

If you look closely, you'll see another layer in the box beneath the bottles, visible through a sheet of glass. What can you see in this layer?

Section 2.

(continued)

Find Habitat Group for a Shooting Gallery, 1943

Birds, particularly parrots, cockatoos, and owls, were a repeated subject in Cornell's art. He was interested in creating imaginary habitats for them, using both natural and man-made materials, after seeing some exotic birds in the window of a pet shop.

What has happened to the centre of this box?

This work was made during the Second World War. Do you get a sense of the artist's awareness of what was happening in the world through this work? If so, how does this come across?

Would you describe this work as:

Exciting Sad Violent Messy
Finished Broken Colourful

Section 3.

Observation and Exploration

Find *Untitled*
(*Blue Sand Tray*), c. 1952

Cornell loved to stargaze and imagine travel across the world, or even the universe! In the 1950s he began a series of shadow boxes called the ‘Celestial Navigation’ series, which use images relating to the earth and the night sky.

Can you describe this sand tray?
What objects does it contain?

This tray makes some people think of standing on a sandy beach at night-time, staring up at the stars. Describe what that might feel like (think about the sand between your toes, what the air might smell like)...

Section 3.

(continued)

Find *Untitled*
(*Medici Princess*), c. 1948

This work is from a series called the ‘Medici Slot Machines’. In it, Cornell has combined photocopies of Renaissance paintings with the ideas of old-fashioned penny arcade games, like slot machines.

Cornell has surrounded the image of a young girl (her name was Bia de’ Medici) with lots of different things. Can you spot:

- A pair of watch springs?
- Stars?
- A bright orange ball?

What is in the wooden drawer beneath the box?

Does the girl look happy or sad to you?
Describe her expression.

How does this shadow box made you feel? Tell us why.

Section 4.

Longing and Reverie

Find Toward the Blue Peninsula: for Emily Dickinson c. 1953

Cornell was often a lonely man – he never married, and lived with his mother and brother until after they died. He yearned for things beyond his reach, and often became very interested in people from history that he could never know in real life. He especially loved 19th century ballerinas, as well as poets, musicians and authors.

This box is dedicated to an American poet called Emily Dickinson, who, like Cornell, lived quietly at home, never married, and never travelled, despite a longing for distant places.

What colours has Cornell used in this box?
What sort of mood do they create?

What has happened to the wire mesh in front of the window?

Emily Dickinson sometimes referred to herself in her poems as a 'little wren' (a type of bird). Does anything in this box suggest a home or habitat for a bird?

Section 4.

(continued)

In Cornell's work, certain objects are connected to certain ideas: for example, a bird can represent travel, or freedom. Now you have seen some of Cornell's shadow boxes, can you work out the connections between these objects that often occur in his work, and the ideas on the opposite side of the page?

Object

Images of the stars

Sand

Watch springs

A marble

Maps

What does it represent?

Time unraveling

Travel

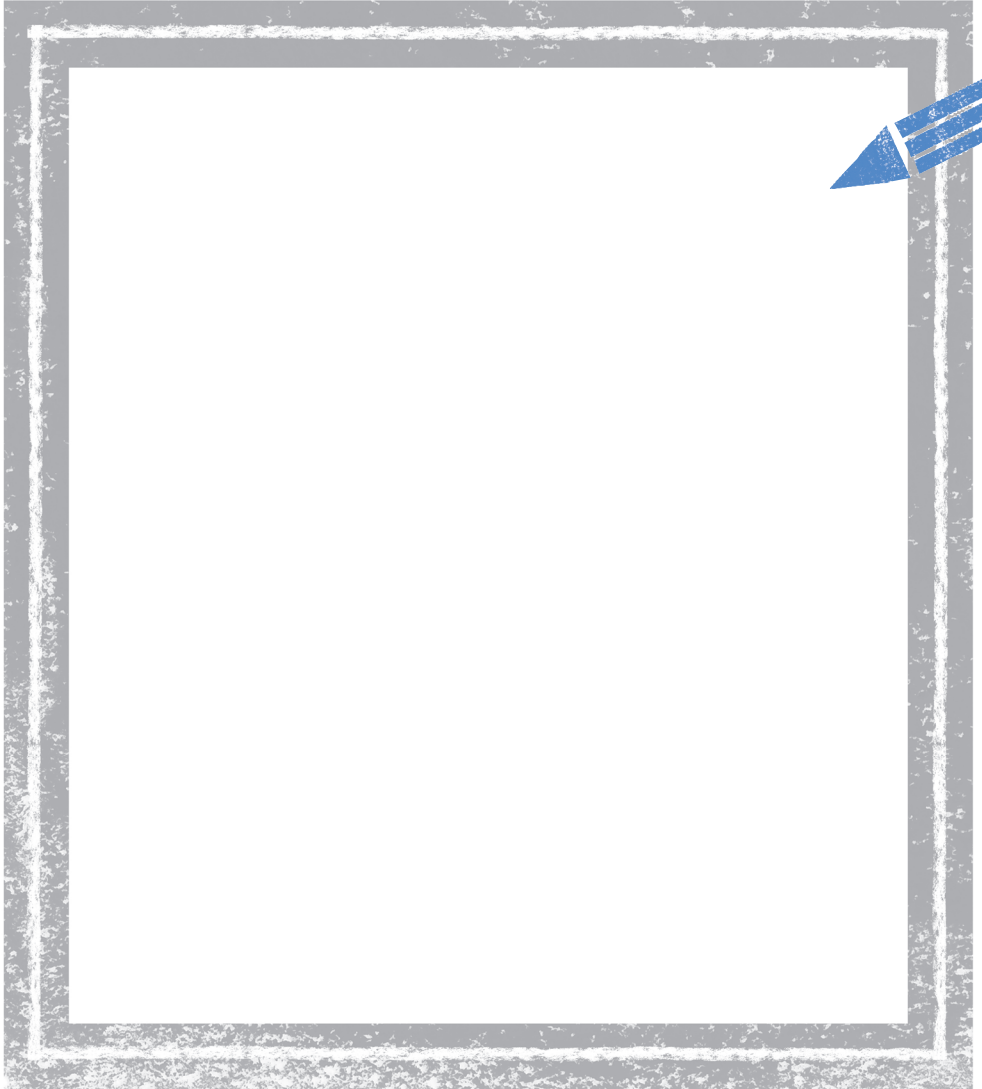
A planet

Bird flight

Time passing

There is no right answer – sometimes objects had many meanings for Cornell!

Design your own 'shadow box' in the space below.
Fill it with images you have seen in this exhibition,
or objects that are important to you!



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If you would like to see your drawings on the RA website, please hand in your completed Art Detective at the Reception Desk. Alternatively, if you would like to work on your picture at home and send it to us later, you can post it to:

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