

Joseph Cornell: A Closer Look

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Engage with *Untitled (Hôtel de la Duchesse-Anne)* by artist Joseph Cornell. Engage in slow looking, learn about Cornell and his work, and get new ideas for your own art making. Students can view the work in the museum, [online](#), or as a classroom poster.

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Joseph Cornell (American, 1903-1972)
Untitled (Hôtel de la Duchesse-Anne), 1957
Box construction
Lindy and Edwin Bergman Joseph Cornell Collection
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QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

- Take a moment to look at the artwork. List five things you notice. Compare your list with a partner's. Cross off anything that you and your partner both have on your lists. Find more things to complete your list of five.
- Is anything you see surprising or strange to you?
- How do you think this artwork was made?
- If this object tells a story, what is it about? What details do you see that help tell the story?
- If you could create your own title for this artwork, what would you call it? Why?
- If you could add something to this artwork, what would you add?
- Read the information about the artist and his work on the back of this resource. Look at the artwork again. How have your observations and thoughts about the work changed?

CREATIVE RESPONSES

Create your own assemblage box that is a mini museum of you. What do you like? What are some of your favorite things to do or places to go? Who are the people who are important to you? What's an important memory or event you've experienced? What would you like people to know about you? Think about how you can represent your answers visually. Find small objects and cut out images from magazines. Using an old shoe box, assemble your objects in dynamic ways using glue. Or let some objects move about, similar to how Joseph Cornell placed a loose ball in this box. Display your box and invite classmates, friends, and family to tour your mini museum of you.

Just like the artist Joseph Cornell, many people collect and display found and treasured items. Is there someone you know that collects things? Identify a person in your life—a sibling, a friend, a parent or grandparent—who has a collection and interview them. Write a list of questions to ask that person, such as: What do you collect? How did you start collecting? Why do you collect these objects? Write an article summarizing their interview. Take photographs or make drawings of the collection you are featuring.

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Joseph Cornell's studio



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in Nyack, New York, in 1903, Joseph Cornell's family moved to Queens when he was a teen. As a young man, Cornell began working as a textile salesman, and his work often took him into New York City where he found inspiration to create art. In New York's art galleries, he saw works by the Surrealists, a group of artists including Salvador Dalí and Max Ernst, who drew inspiration from chance, dreams, and the subconscious. Surrealists often experimented using collage—the arrangement of paper and other flat materials on a flat surface—and assemblage—the arrangement of found objects or other materials in a three-dimensional work. Around the age of 30, Cornell began creating his own collages and developing his own unique style.

In the city, Cornell gathered his materials. He wandered flea markets, bookstores, and souvenir shops, and brought home knickknacks, souvenirs, and various printed materials which he sorted into files on particular themes. He then began making three-dimensional assemblages by selecting objects to combine into shadow boxes. Over time, Cornell got to know influential artists of the 20th century, including some of the Surrealists he admired. He was, however, a private man and for many years worked alone at his home on Utopia Parkway with little attention from the art world.

In *Untitled (Hôtel de la Duchesse-Anne)* of 1957, Cornell evokes the playfulness of childhood and elements of movement by creating an imaginary habitat for a parrot. The cutout of a parrot floats above a wooden perch and is surrounded by objects designed for a pet's entertainment and exercise, such as a metal clock spring and marbled rubber ball. He often included moveable objects, such as marbles or balls, to add an element of chance to his boxes. The parrot and the butterfly and bugs shown on the stamps bring to mind instinctive movement, such as flight or migration—or the moment before the bird grasps its prey. Other details reference travel, such as the stamps that we see from Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. The names of two French hotels are also included in this box, though Cornell rarely left New York and never traveled to these places. Instead, his shadow boxes became poetic theaters or settings where the artist could travel using his imagination.

Cornell's boxes are three-dimensional still lifes that transport the viewer to a distant place—a bird's habitat, another galaxy, or a child's mind. The artist's careful placement of everyday objects recalls these places of wonder. The boxes also function like miniature museums inviting viewers to form connections between the objects based on their own imagination and personal lives.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Learn more about the work of Joseph Cornell and thousands of other artists by searching the museum's [collection](#) by name, title, or keyword. Below are suggestions of artists and artistic movements that relate to Cornell's work. What connections and differences do you find among their works?

Take a look at several other box constructions made by Joseph Cornell that are held in the museum's collection. Read more about these works [here](#). Read more about [Surrealism](#) and view works by Surrealist artists, including [Max Ernst](#), [Salvador Dalí](#), [Leonora Carrington](#), [Alice Rahon](#), [Hughie Lee Smith](#), [Wifredo Lam](#), [Marcel Duchamp](#), and [Matta](#). Explore collages such as [Drawing—Collage](#), [Broken and Restored Multiplication](#), [Double Blind](#), [The Return of Odysseus \(Homage to Pinturicchio and Benin\)](#), [Camera Obscura](#), [Untitled \(Soprano\)](#), and [Untitled \(To Joseph Cornell\)](#).