

Joseph Cornell's obsessions inspired astonishing boxes and tributes to the Romantic ballet. **Lynda Roscoe Hartigan** introduces the poet of Utopia Parkway

Cabinets of curiosity

The American artist Joseph Cornell (1903-72) was born with an extraordinary curiosity about the world around him. He had no inhibitions about what he could bring into the realm of art, and being a self-taught artist freed him up to experiment: he knew no fear. Cornell's pioneering achievement in the art of assemblage, often in the form of box constructions, are lyrical, imaginative and highly personal explorations of art and culture, including ballet. Our exhibition is the first big show in 26 years, and includes 177 boxes, collages, films and graphic designs. It's a multi-layered presentation of a multi-dimensional, multimedia artist.

Being self-taught freed him up: he knew no fear

Cornell lived in the same house, in Utopia Parkway in Queens, New York, from 1929 until his death. He wasn't a recluse, as is sometimes thought, but was committed to family life, living with his mother and brother. His brother had cerebral palsy, and Cornell arranged his routines so that he could get back home to help his mother. His father died when he was only 13, so he became the man of the house at a very early age, and he had to make sacrifices. He hated his job as a textile salesman, but when he lost it during the Depression he took a succession of part-time jobs to support the family.

As a collector, he had an extraordinary knack for finding rare objects, like throwaway souvenir lithographs from the Romantic ballet that everyone thought had been lost. He always had the makings of a

collector, so you can't formally identify his first art work – he made a natural segue from collecting material to doing something with it. The work itself is sophisticated and very well made. He had tremendous manual dexterity – the craftsmanship and obsessive finishing are astonishing, and the collages absolutely seamless. It is as if he wanted to put his arms around what he was thinking and feeling, and that involved miniaturisation. He left most of his works untitled and undated – he worked in a white heat of creativity, but would often feel that he hadn't got it quite right, which I think drove him into a serial mode of working.

He was such an innocent – he loved women, but he didn't know what to do with them

Cornell absolutely loved store display techniques, especially the contemporary trend of injecting the modern and avant-garde into window displays. He also assembled projects in folio boxes – fascinating and bewildering compilations which help visualise his exploratory process. *The Portrait of Ondine*, for example, offers an opportunity to browse through the material and get a sense of the person's life. He frequently described his homages as 'unauthorised biographies.'



Untitled (Tamara Toumanova)

c1940; Smithsonian American Art Museum

There is an element of Cornell which is very much about being a fan. He was very shy, but was clearly enamoured of Toumanova. They became friends and corresponded for years, and he admired what he called 'her floating and swimming movements.' In this collage, she looks as if she is floating underwater; there's a sense of other-worldliness. It relates to a scenario for an unrealised ballet film called *Nebula, The Powdered Sugar Princess* which Cornell wrote around 1940.

Untitled (Tilly Losch)

1935-8; Robert Lehrman Art Trust

This is a wonderful box. It was made before he met the Viennese dancer Tilly Losch, but it captured her personality – she was very sophisticated and childlike. There is a sense of the ephemeral, as the bottom of her skirt is made of folded paper, but she also floats away over the mountains. It's a great illustration of the title of our show, *Navigating the Imagination* – it invites you to free yourself, travel over different territories, open yourself up to childlike wonder.

Cornell's family took him to ballet, theatre and films – he got the bug early. He saw Anna Pavlova's farewell tour of the United States, and was very aware of the revival of Romantic ballet between the wars. He was friendly with Lincoln Kirstein, corresponded with the dance writer Cecil Beaumont and was involved with the magazine *Dance Index*.

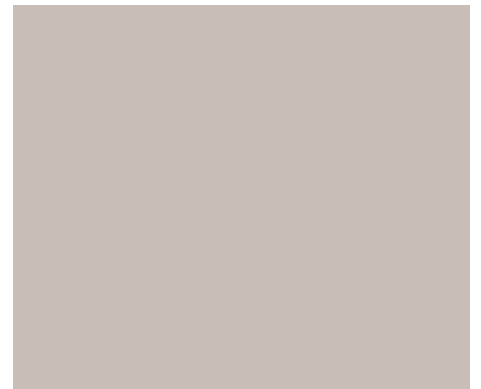
He wanted to put his arms around what he thought and felt

He was such an innocent – he loved women, but I don't think he quite knew what to do with them. He was old-fashioned in his sensibility in terms of sexuality. The female performer clearly represents the epitome of grace and beauty in action, as well as someone whom he could admire from afar.

If there is a connecting thread in Cornell's work, I think it is his belief in what he called 'the beauty of the commonplace.' Very few artists were focused on beauty during the mid-20th century, but he was open to the potential for beauty in a variety of ways. He also had such an impulse to connect with people – but because he was inherently shy, the way he could connect was through his art.



Joseph Cornell: *Navigating the Imagination* is at Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA (28 April–19 August) and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (6 October–6 January 2008). An accompanying book will be published by Yale University Press in April. Lynda Roscoe Hartigan was speaking to David Jays.



A Swan Lake for Tamara Toumanova

1946; private collection

Cornell saw Toumanova perform *Swan Lake* in New York in 1941. He would watch from the wings and annoy Toumanova's mother, because he had a little pair of scissors and as the dancer ran on or off stage, he was busy snipping at her costume. Some of the feathers in this piece came from her crown. The work is also about metamorphosis – here, the ballerina appears as a swan. The rear wall is lined with mirrors, accentuating the surreality, and the dark blue refers to the ballet's nocturnal setting – Cornell was never literal, but had a great sense of atmosphere.

Lobster Ballet: for Jacques Offenbach

1943; private collection

This box features kitsch plastic lobsters that his mother brought back from a trip to Maine. He decorates them with necklaces and tutus. Offenbach's operettas were mad musical comedies, and Cornell picked up on their spirit. He also knew *Alice in Wonderland* and its dance, the Lobster Quadrille.



Untitled (Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)

1945-6; Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection

Cornell was also drawn to actresses, and this is based on his experience of seeing the film *To Have and Have Not*, which he saw five or six times. It's a magnificent box – but Bacall never knew about it, and was genuinely flattered when she found out about it in the 1980s. He also made an amazing box for Greta Garbo in 1939, but she was merely annoyed that he didn't get permission to use her photo.



Taglioni's Jewel Casket

1940; Museum of Modern Art, New York

This extraordinary object is inspired by an anecdote about the great Romantic ballerina Marie Taglioni. Travelling in Russia, she was stopped by a highwayman who spread a panther skin on the snow and ordered her to dance for him. Ever after, she allegedly kept an artificial ice cube in her jewellery box to remind her of this transcendent moment, because it is not often that a ballerina dances for a single besotted spectator. This looks like an actual jewellery case, but is in fact a Victorian strongbox, lined in black velvet, containing glass cubes and a glass costume necklace. Like the highwayman, Cornell often seems to orchestrate private command performances for himself.

Portrait of Ondine

c1940-late 1960s; Smithsonian American Art Museum

Cornell was comfortable with history – historical figures were as real to him as the living. I look on him as an archaeologist, bringing the past into the present. He worked on this project for years: a compendium which gives a rounded sense of the 19th-century ballerina Fanny Cerrito, whose most famous role was Ondine. Cornell was taken with the ephemerality of life, embodied by the figure of the performer. A person can enjoy a moment of fame, but because of changes in public taste, they could then be

forgotten. Cornell found that very sad, and these works are like memorials. He was as much an archivist as a fan. People frequently think he's sentimental or nostalgic, but he's never maudlin or creepy.

