

Artist Resources – Joseph Cornell (American, 1903-72)

[The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation](#)

[Joseph Cornell Study Center, Smithsonian American Art Museum](#)



Cornell, ca. 1940

“Everything meant something to him, and everything was about his work, and everything was special. I mean, he was someone who used things in his work that were sometimes esoteric and sometimes ordinary, but in either case once his glance hit it, it was special,” reflected [Harry Roseman, Cornell’s studio assistant in a 1999 interview](#) about his first meeting and studio memories with Cornell. “One thing about being there and knowing him and being with him is this: in how we respond to things we have a choice as to whether to keep our self-conscious coolness and our analytical ability or to go with something. To suspend disbelief. It’s a kind of faith, in a sense.”

177 of Cornell’s creations were on view in the [Smithsonian American Art Museum’s 2007 retrospective](#).

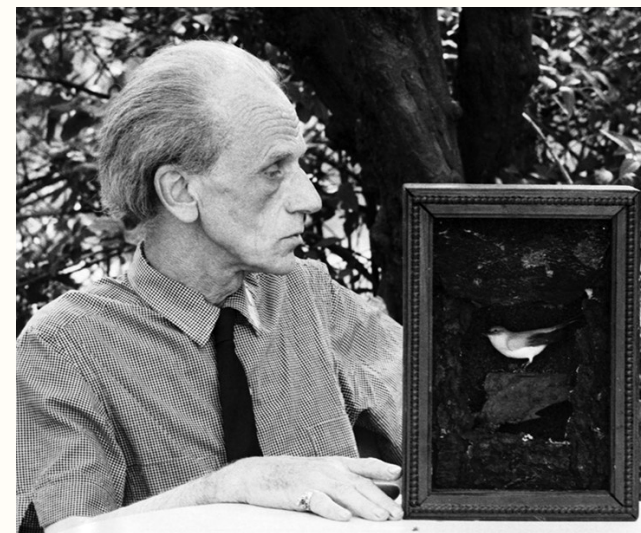
In 2014, *Christie’s* auctioned a stellar collection of Cornell box constructions owned by prominent Chicago art collectors Ed and Lindy Bergman. The auction house details the pieces in-depth in [a video interview with scholars](#).

London’s Royal Academy celebrated Cornell’s fanciful constructions in [the 2015 exhibition, *Wanderlust*](#). Over 80 boxes, assemblages, and collages were brought together with the artist’s films to explore his love of nature and dreams of travel. Digital resources include a series of podcasts in which scholars discuss [Cornell’s creative identity](#) and [his relationship to Surrealism](#); and [a photo tour of Cornell’s studio](#) with curator Sarah Lea.

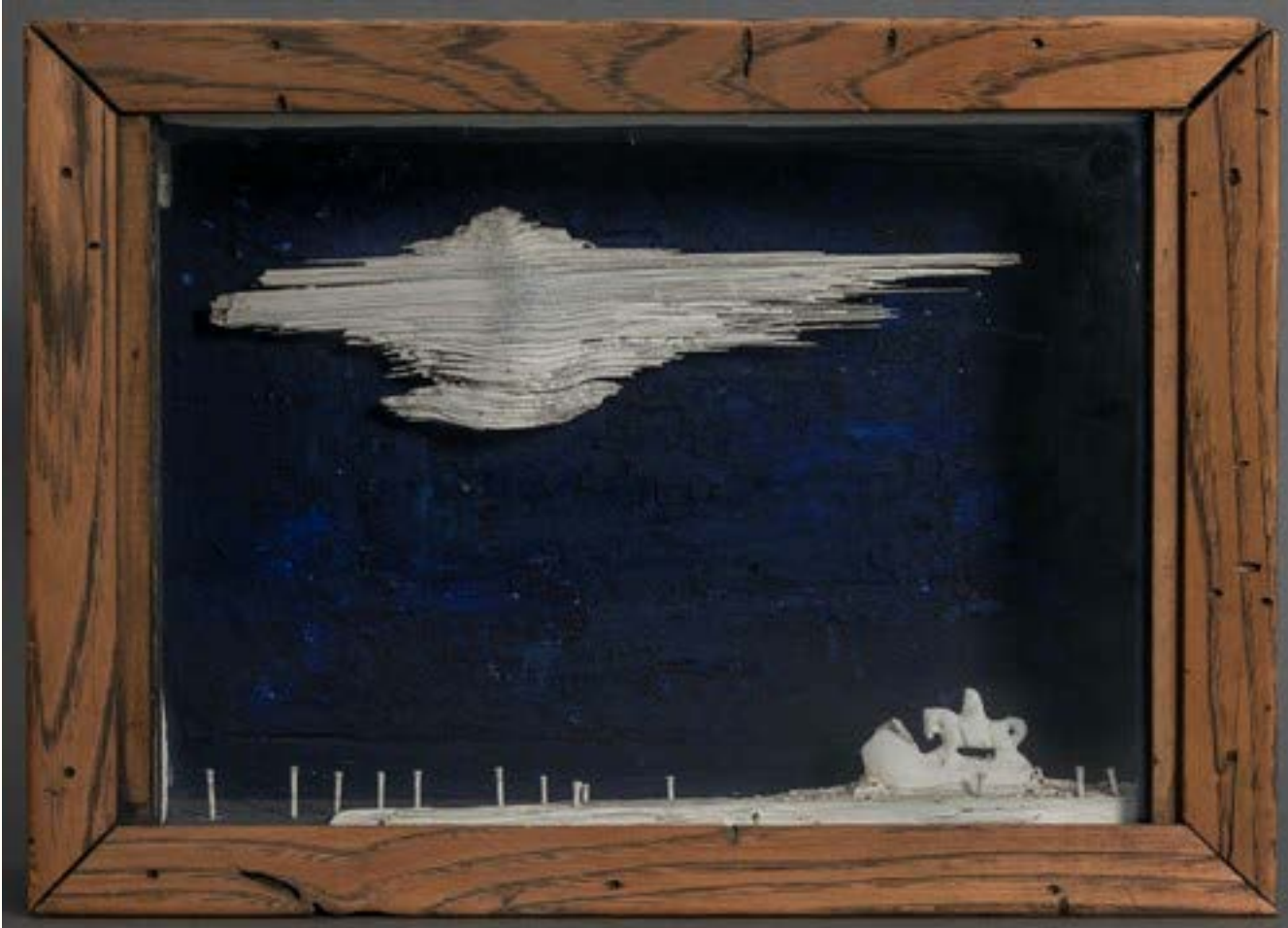
Lea also [discussed Cornell’s unusual path to becoming an artist](#) and reflected on his relevance and the exhibition [with *Christie’s*](#): “What’s most fascinating and unique about Cornell are his processes; he was constantly analyzing how he made his work,” she explained. “He called his studio a laboratory and didn’t like the term artist, preferring to call himself a maker.”

[The Guardian published an intimate profile](#) of Cornell in conjunction with the Royal Academy’s show, elaborating on his personal history, artistic relationships, and deep wells of creativity, which resulted in anthologies of research about the subjects and objects that inspired his artwork.

In [a 2020 essay](#), art historian and critic Phyllis Tuchman recounted a visit to Cornell’s studio in 1971, the remnants of a lost interview for *Artforum*: “I love thinking back to the interview that I never did, the afternoon I spent with Joseph Cornell in his backyard eating cake and ice cream while the birds chirped and the sun flickered through the leaves of a tree he planted around 1932.”



Cornell, 1967



Joseph Cornell (American, 1903-72)

Pleiades as Seen with Unaided Eye, 1952-54

Wooden box construction

Private Collection; L2020:113.1

The collages and box constructions of self-taught artist Joseph Cornell arose from a love of collecting, a fondness for ordinary everyday objects, and a fascination with a diverse assortment of meticulously researched subjects, including art and the sciences (particularly astronomy), ballet, opera, travel, cinema, and literature. Cornell lived a quiet life in New York, dedicated to his mother, disabled brother, and an evolving art practice that he honed by night in his basement. He was also a passionate filmmaker and is now recognized as one of the most innovative American artists of the mid-twentieth century. His shadow box assemblages, such as **Pleiades as Seen with Unaided Eye**, were inspired in part by the work of Surrealist artist Max Ernst and the readymades of close friend Marcel Duchamp. Cornell began making his fanciful constructions in the 1930s, first as individual pieces and eventually as complex narrative series. Bound by handmade frames, the interiors contain and were inspired by forgotten treasures Cornell picked up from thrift stores, antique shops, and dime stores—subtle celebrations of what he called “the beauty of the commonplace.”

On view December 2, 2020 – March 7, 2021