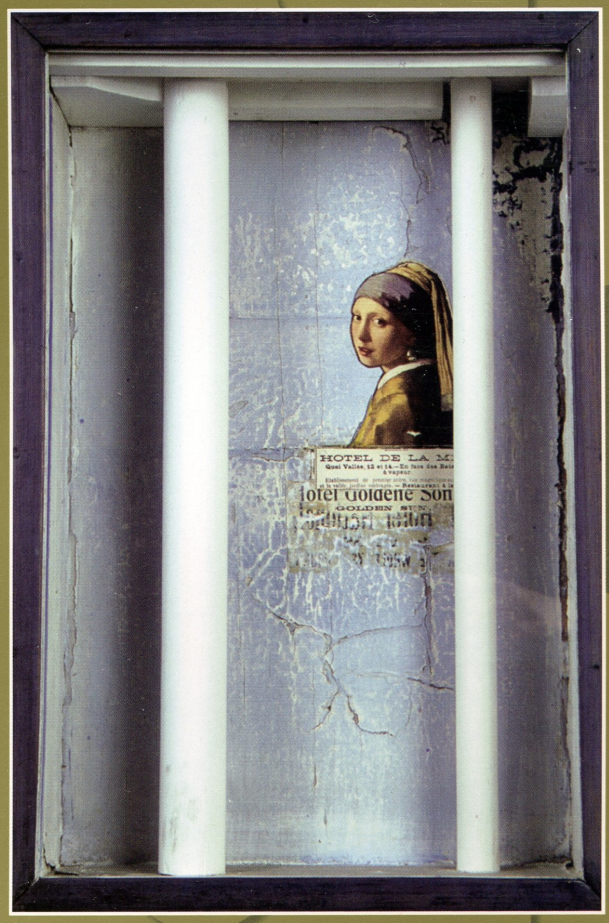
KRESGE ART MUSEUM

BULLETIN



JOSEPH CORNELL: A CURATORIAL DILEMMA

April Kingsley

Fig. 1 (Detail)
See Plate 3
Joseph Cornell (American, 1903-1972)
Hôtel de la Mer (Hotel Goldene Sonne), 1950-51
Wood, glass, pigment and paper, 17⅞ x 12 x 4⅝ inches
MSU purchase, funded by the Nellie M. Loomis Endowment in memory of Martha Jane Loomis and the Kathleen D. and Milton E. Muelder Endowment, 2000.12

Joseph Cornell wrote the following words on the glass in white paint when he made this box:

> *make replica retaining this as artist's original + color reprod*

When the Kresge Art Museum purchased this beautiful box construction, *Hôtel de La Mer (Hotel Goldene Sonne)*, 1950-1951, by Joseph Cornell in 2000, we felt that the white writing was disturbing to the proper appreciation of the imagery behind the glass, visible in this photograph of the work at the time of purchase (fig. 2). The words have no narrative connection with the imagery or the words within the box. The words are not poetic, they are merely instructions to an assistant or a reminder to the artist. Before making the purchase we discussed this dilemma with Cornell experts.[1] They felt that replacing the glass with a clear sheet of the same kind of glass would not be detrimental to the piece, which the artist surely never intended to be exhibited in that state. For one thing, artists don't tend to want the world to know they make replicas of their works, which Cornell didn't actually do in this case anyway. But, since he didn't remove the words, there is the possibility, however slight, that we would not be honoring his intentions by changing the glass.

The problem, from a curatorial perspective, is that the words are not only not poetic, there is no precedent in Cornell's work for instructions like this as part of the piece. He did, however, make a number of boxes which were collected in his lifetime that have paint on the glass fronts put there deliberately and meant to be part of the piece. Dawn Ades cites some of the ways he did so:

> His use of paint is not restricted, however, to a box's interior walls: objects within a box may be painted or have splashes of paint on them; there are often transparent, almost invisible stains and drips of paint or blue ink on the boxes' glass panels; obvious trails of white paint might be spattered across a surface, bringing to mind distant star clusters, bird droppings, and the drip of the Action Painter; and white paint may be smeared across glass as on the windows of an empty shop.[2]

One early box, well before his *Aviaries, Object 1941*, 1941, contains seven parakeets in a nest made of twigs, bark, and collaged paper behind a glass pane spattered with arcing strings of paint drops that predate Jackson Pollock's drips by six years. Pollock probably saw it in 1943 when it and his own work were in a show of collages at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery.

Although Cornell was extremely generous in giving his work as gifts to all sorts of people, he was reluctant to let dealers or collectors have the work. As with many of his boxes and collages, Cornell never sold Kresge's box or exhibited it in this state, and after his death it was found with all the other works left in his basement studio on Utopia Parkway in Queens, New York. We know of no replica[3] though there is another similar box,

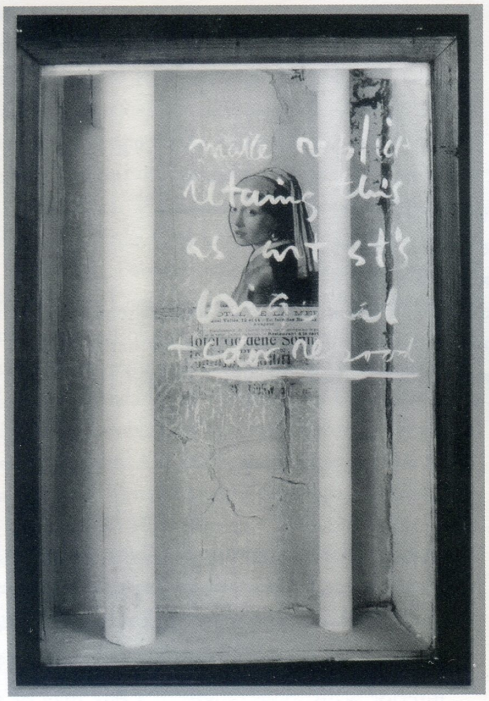


Fig. 2
Joseph Cornell (American, 1903-1972)
Hôtel de la Mer (Hotel Goldene Sonne), with original glass, 1950-51
Wood, glass, pigment and paper, 17⅞ x 12 x 4⅝ inches
MSU purchase, funded by the Nellie M. Loomis Endowment in memory of Martha Jane Loomis and the Kathleen D. and Milton E. Muelder Endowment, 2000.12

Grand Hôtel Bon Port, 1952 (fig. 3), with the identical reproduction of Jan Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* in about the same place on the back wall.[4] The rest of the construction is quite different however, though it is also white. The 1950s were white years for Cornell, a time of Minimalist and geometric thinking for him, but he usually managed to make the works look cracked and peeling as if timeworn despite the purity. Multiple coats of paint were applied and he would either "weather" the pieces outside in the elements or do so artificially by baking them in the oven to make them crack as though aged.

Cornell worked on several boxes at a time over some very long periods of time, often months, even years, returning at a later date to finish them or to declare them already finished. It was a rare but wonderful feeling when he felt a work in progress was a success: "suddenly the sense of completeness, poetry, connection with life as opposed to the confining esthetic feeling of limitation experienced too often in working with the boxes…the intense longing to get into the box, this overflowing, a richness and poetry felt when working with the boxes but which had often been completely extraneous in the final product."[5] Perhaps the rarity of this kind of success is what caused him to protect himself by working on multiple boxes at once. In the 1960s he had many young assistants, which also made more production possible. He purposely built the boxes, or had them built under his direction, with screws to attach the top, rather than the nails and glue used for the sides and back, just so that the box could be opened and the glass lifted out whenever he wanted to make changes.

The boxes are about closing precious things off from harm, protecting them. Dance is implied without any actual movement, and music without sound. He never referred to them as sculpture. They were little inhabited worlds to him: the dolls, the beautiful birds, the stars of ballet, opera, and film, the constellations, all were imprisoned behind the glass in total silence. Their images are pinned to the back and often hidden in part

behind a wall of twigs, sprayed or tinted glass, and wire mesh or perforated wood walls. They are like actors in silent films. Cornell understood "the suggestive power of the silent film to evoke an ideal world of beauty, to release unsuspected floods of music from the gaze of a human countenance in its prison of silver light."[6] Dawn Ades sees Edward Hopper and Cornell as "poets of loneliness" and the hotel rooms as "inhabited less by guests than by the empty spaces of romantic yearning." She calls Cornell an armchair traveler: "In his hotels he guarantees his beloveds a life that outlasts mere flesh."[7]

Cornell was spellbound by glamour, that of nineteenth century ballerinas, and twentieth century movie stars. Although he tried to contact them and even sent them gifts, they were never part of his real life, but rather dreamy apparitions sealed behind glass. But the actual women in his life were not glamorous, they were working girls, for the most part. He responded to plain, pretty, but not gorgeous females, preferably young and sweet or good natured. Joyce Hunter, with whom he had the most extensive relationship—a long close friendship which included much gift giving of work that she turned around and sold to New York galleries to keep her far-less-than-perfect life going. When he found out about the sales he cut off the gifts, and she retaliated by raiding his unlocked garage/storage room one night with a friend and stealing some of his work. She was caught, but he refused to press charges. He remained concerned about her and was devastated later when she was killed in her apartment by an intruder. Joyce was described as "sweet but plain looking" which defines the kind of girl he liked. At one point he became enchanted from afar by the ticket seller in the booth at the Bayside movie theater protectively ensconced behind glass in her little cage. "One can speculate that seeing her in the ticket booth was like seeing life itself step onto the movie screen; she was a living embodiment of that cinematic device known as the freeze frame, a silent image trapped for the viewer's perpetual gaze."[8] After many visits to view her without making contact, he decided to bring her a

Fig. 3
Joseph Cornell (American, 1903-1972)
Grand Hôtel–Bon Port, 1952
Box construction, 19 x 13 x 3¾ inches
Photo courtesy ACA Galleries, New York

bouquet of flowers which he tried to thrust through the small opening at the front of her glass cage frightening her. The manager came running at her screams and either wrestled Cornell to the ground (one version of the story) or summoned the police.

Cornell adored Vermeer's paintings and often made a point of visiting those on view in New York at the Frick Mansion and the Metropolitan Museum of Art on his trips into Manhattan. He kept a file on Vermeer including a review of Lawrence Gowing's 1952 book on the artist in which he wrote that the spirit and the secret of Vermeer is grounded in a woman's humble beauty. His women were not dazzling beauties, but plain, pleasantly-featured comely females of the middle to lower classes. Cornell himself searched for such beauty in his many hours walking the streets of New York. One of his diary entries concerns it: "In the freshness of the day realization that with *Member of the Wedding* showing in College Point [another neighborhood movie theater] opportunity to make something of in relation to Vermeer's *Head of a Young Girl (turban)* remembering light in the night scenes and close-ups of plain but wholesome & interesting type of beauty."[9] Whether seen on the street or on the screen, those ordinary women that embodied Vermeer's beauty and glowed with his light were given the appellation "Vermeer Girl" by Cornell who used them often in his boxes as he did here.

Besides a shared love of French literature and a commitment to scientific inquiry and a completely open, non-traditional approach to making art, Cornell shared with his friend Marcel Duchamp a passion for making notes, giving instructions, and cryptic, elliptical verbalization. The backs of many of Cornell's boxes are covered with relevant quotations or poetry, instructions for handling, and/or related materials that broaden or possibly diffuse the work's meaning or implications. Duchamp's *Green Box* was a compilation of notes about the making and the meaning of *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1911-1915, but published in a large laboriously handmade edition in 1934.

> Duchamp had always maintained that his *Glass* was not just something to be looked at but "an accumulation of ideas," in which verbal elements were at least as important as visual ones, perhaps even more so. [...] As Duchamp would say in a 1959 interview, he had "tried in that big Glass to find a completely personal and new means of expression; the final product was to be a wedding of mental and visual reactions; in other words, the ideas in the Glass were more important than the actual visual realization." Since the ideas were contained (more or less) in the notes, their long-delayed publication would become a new chapter in the continuing saga of his unfinished, shattered, but far from defunct masterpiece.[10]

Cornell created "dossiers" on and "explorations" of his favorite people, places and legends. They could be biographies that weren't authorized, portraits that were imaginary, real or faux travelogues, or collections comprised of Photostats, lithographs, engravings, clippings from books, magazines, and newspapers, postcards, and notes galore on any available scrap of paper. In addition, he hoped one day to edition and publish these primarily two-dimensional parts of his endeavor. In any case these gatherings of ideas and information around certain themes or subjects allowed for greater ease in making his boxes by combining them with his cartons full of three-dimensional materials. He had begun collecting these materials back in the 1920s on his rounds of bookstores and other sources in Manhattan, but helping Duchamp assemble the replicas of his *Bôite en Valise* during his stay in New York after WWII began must have fueled Cornell's impulse to not only create some order in his materials but to create meaningful things with them. Back in the 1930s when he discovered Surrealism through Julien Levy and his gallery, and more importantly, collage, he found a purpose for his collecting obsession: collages and assemblages.

Cornell never studied art and never thought or spoke about his work in art terms. He had been a poor student in prep school at Andover where he enrolled at 14 and focused on science. His grades hovered around D, and he only excelled in French literature. He had been born in 1903 to a well-to-do Nyack, New York, family and enjoyed a good childhood until his father sickened with pernicious anemia and died in 1917. Family fortunes took a downturn while he was away at school, and his

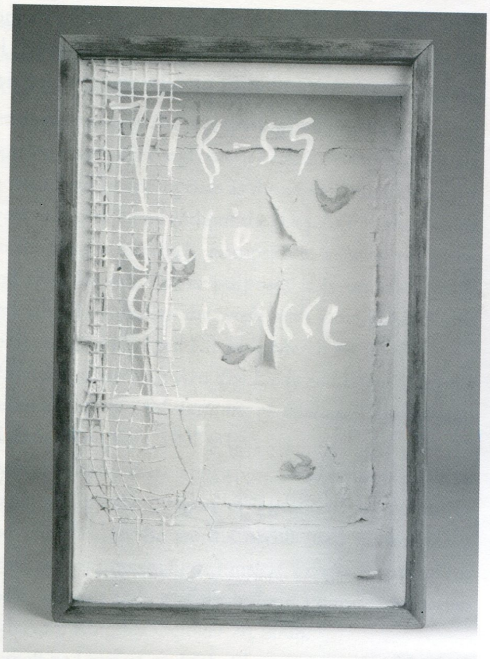


Fig. 4
Joseph Cornell, (American, 1903-1972)
Columbier (Julie de Lespinasse), 1959
Box construction, 15 x 9⅜ x 3⅜ inches
Photo courtesy Pace Wildenstein, New York

mother, two sisters, and severely handicapped brother had to move away from their Nyack mansion and its lifestyle to a homelier, more pedestrian milieu in Flushing Queens, near the Long Island Sound and Bayside. Cornell joined them after Andover and found work at 18 selling textiles in Manhattan, a job he disliked in a city he adored, and explored in every bit of spare time. He went to operas, museums, galleries, and of course, he haunted bookstores and curio shops. He essentially educated himself through reading voraciously and by exhaustively researching everything that intrigued him that he didn't know about already. The idea of collage and assemblage was inherited, but he made it completely his own, never to be confused with Cubist versions formally or with Surrealist adaptations in terms of content. He abhorred the Surrealist focus on psychological states of mind, on sex and the body. All their interests are missing from, or are there but thoroughly repressed in his work. Instead he gives us poetry, reveries, exquisitely beautiful dreams, and a sense of music and dance, of a fluttering, dreaming, magical life.

A wonderful example of this quality—magic—emanates from *Columbier (Julie De Lespinasse)*, 1959 (fig. 4), a Cornell box with writing on the glass. That writing partially obscures the imagery inside, yet seems so perfectly suited to the spirit of that imagery, one can't imagine exchanging it for a clear pane. The interior is distressed white layers of paper or tin with irregular edges. On the top layer four swallow-like bluish-white birds with red beaks dip and soar. A painted white vertical of wire-mesh about three inches wide runs up the left side, partially obscuring the word Hotel printed in blue in the upper left corner. The writing, which extends from the top to about five-eighths of the way down the glass, is gaily cursive, echoing the swooping birds. The date is topmost "7/18 – 59" with the "8" curved into a pretzel shape and the "/" moving over to extend the "7" and flow down to become the "J" in "Julie." The top crossing unit

of the "J" slides down to join with the upright in the "p" of "L'Spinasse". The lowest element is an elongated cloud-like line of finality. All the connecting and interlocking of the letters makes the writing different from, but of almost equal interest to the imagery.

Elements to consider when comparing the use of words here and in Kresge's piece: the birds are bluish and may be bluebirds, symbols of love and happiness. Cornell was a passionate romantic with no real life person to pour his feelings out to. He dreamt of nineteenth century Romanticism in all its forms—ballet, opera, visual art, literature, poetry—and read everything he could find on everyone involved in that life. Madame Julie De Lespinasse was an important fixture on the salon scene in late nineteenth century Paris with a salon of her own. Though not a great beauty, nor of nobility, her ability as a hostess made her salon the most popular in Paris. What earned her fame, however, was her love life. Two volumes of her letters published in 1909 displayed her as the victim of a passion of rare intensity which caused critics to rank her letters with those of Héloise and the fictitious *Letters of a Portuguese Nun*. Surely Cornell read them and the letters were signed, perhaps not unlike the way Cornell has signed her name on the glass.

As a compromise, the Kresge staff decided to display *Hôtel de La Mer* with clear glass replacing the painted one and a photograph nearby that shows how the piece came to us. (Of course we kept the glass so that we can exhibit it that way should that become desirable.) A second label, next to the customary one with information about the artist and his work, describes the whole curatorial dilemma. It excites numerous opinions from our visitors often expressed in the comment book. The majority feel we should have left it as the "artist intended," not knowing what his intentions might have been had it been sold or shown while he was alive. One person wrote that "the glass should be put back in its place as it was found originally. The 'hand of the artist' is present there and it adds another 'level' both literally and figuratively to the narrative of the piece." Five subsequent visitors agreed, plus one in Chinese. Not knowing Cornell's probable intentions makes comments like these out of context. Knowing his artistic output more comprehensively and understanding the ways artists are likely to handle their work and its reception by the public, including normative practices about sales, as discussed here, enables the viewer to better understand our decision.

Notes

1 Lynda Roscoe Hartigan at the National Museum of American Art in Washington D.C. is including it in the catalogue raisonné she is preparing of Cornell's work. Her opinion was that if the glass was broken, trying to duplicate it would not be appropriate as the overall intention of the work would be intact without the glass. As it is, the writing on the glass is extremely disruptive to viewing the piece, and thus for installation purposes it is understandable and ethical to display the work with clear glass. Phone conversation with April Kingsley, March 20, 2000.

2 Dawn Ades, *Surrealist Art: The Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 1997, 31.

3 Hartigan thinks there are two or three other pieces that might fall into the category of "variations" on this theme and said that is the word Cornell used normally, not "replicas." Variation is more musical, a characteristic of his boxes, as was a feeling of the balletic. Phone conversation with April Kingsley, October 20, 2008.

4 Cornell had sets of multiple Photostats made of favorite color reproductions, and bits of printed material from newspaper and magazine ads in European and American magazines and guidebooks from his own collection and those of the New York Public Library on 42nd Street, and the Flushing library so he could use them in his constructions and collages still leaving his clipping archive intact. 203. Ades, *Bergman Collection*, 105.

5 Ades, 33. Cornell Papers, Archives of American Art (AAA) reel 1059; diary entry of Oct. 14, 1950 recorded in typescript Oct. 16, 1950.

6 Joseph Cornell, *"Enchanted Wanderer:" Excerpt from a Journey Album for Hedy Lamarr.* 1941-42. Joseph Cornell Study Center, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John A. Benton. Illustrated in *Joseph Cornell/Marcel Duchamp … in Resonance*, Philadelphia Museum of Art and The Menil Collection, Houston, 1999, 182 (exh. cat.).

7 Ades, 217.

8 Deborah Solomon, *Utopia Parkway: The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell*, The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1997, 43. Different versions have been circulating in the New York art world for years.

9 Jodi Hauptman, *Joseph Cornell: Stargazing in the Cinema*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1999, 157.

10 Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp*, Henry Holt, New York, 1996, 296.