NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN:

FACULTY - FINE ART

DEPARTMENT - SCULPTURE

Joseph Cornell

"Surrealist or Individualist"

by

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INTRODUCTION:

Introduction:

'Joseph Cornell is a Virtuoso of fragments, a maestro of absences'. (1, p. 43)

This statement uttered by art critic, Carter Ratcliff in the collection of essays on Joseph Cornell's work and art. For contrary to the widely held notion that Cornell was a Surrealist, this one simple sentence points to the fact that Cornell's work consists of fragments and is the amalgamation of influences from many quarters. Amongst these are Surrealist notions on the supremacy of the object, Obsession with the Modern Metropolis as embodied in his native New York, the mechanics of Poetry, (particularly that of the French symbolists), his fascination with cinematic technique and his personal life and of course his family.

What better way to observe these forces at work than to consider the content of his work. The large body of work Cornell completed in 1946 called the Penny Arcades, provides a starting point.

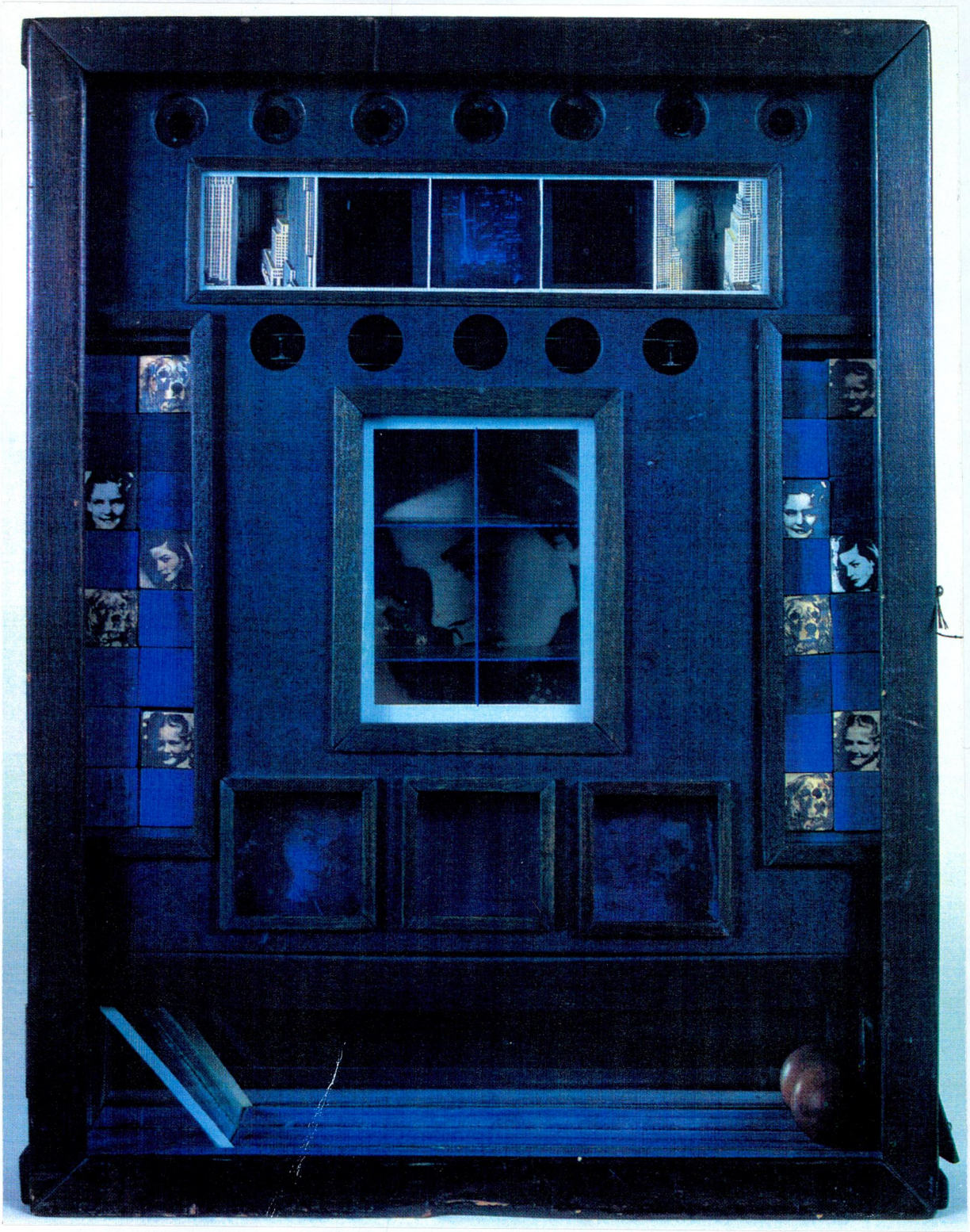


Fig. 1
Joseph Cornell
Portrait of Lauren Bacall
Penny Arcade 1946

(Portrait of Lauren Bacall) 1946. Fig. 1

'As far as the fan's are concerned the new silky, sultry, sexy siren of the silver screen.

But underneath all this cheesecake, a girl, a Botticelli, in Slenderness. Blue glass like the night blue of early silent movies.

Compartments becoming individual silver screens, strips of films as though they are stored in back of machine for operation.

Brightly coloured pin-balls traveling in Climb Mud ways, compartment after compartment with a symphony of mechanical magic of slight and sound. Borrowed from the motion picture heart in the childhood in the fantasy through the streets of New York'. (8. Video)

This extract was taken from the diaries of Cornell and used in the BBC1 Omnibus Programme (about this artist) when describing this particular piece from his body of work. Already we are made aware of numerous influences and fragments which Cornell carefully selected when creating such a piece of Art Work.

Granted of all these influences, Surrealism is probably the one that most characterized his body of artistic achievement. But Cornell's work is Surrealist and more, and it is important not to ignore and negate the other forces in his work. This Thesis will show that Cornell's work, far from being that of a pseudo-Surrealist, was that of one who created and moulded his own unique mode of artistic expression and who, to this day, still defies absolute technical definition.

CHAPTER ONE:

Outline and understanding of the art movement Surrealism and the Surrealists. Who they were? Where they came from and their theatrical idea's towards Art.

In order however to argue that Cornell's work is not entirely concerned with Surrealist ideas we must first comprehend what Surrealism is and what characterizes it and then examine his involvement with and attitude to this movement. The indications are that Cornell's work was fundamentally different from the mainstream of Surrealist concerns in certain aspects.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, Surrealism is

> 'A 20th Century movement in Art and literature that seeks to express what is in the subconscious mind by depicting objects and events as seen in dreams'. (7)

It is generally agreed that this movement grew out of Dadaism, an art movement which sought to rid the artist of all the constraints hitherto, placed upon him by bourgeois society. Up until then 'realism', that is the depiction of 'reality' as it was widely perceived to be was the order of the day in the existing art circle of that time, (other such art movements at this time also trying to rid themselves of the constraints put on them by bourgeois society were the Cubist and Futurist movements). The Realist artist was compelled to draw and duplicate objects in the world around, and the powers of the imagination were excluded from the artistic experience.

However with the collapse of traditional bourgeois society with the out break of World War One bourgeois notions of Art also began to be questioned and challenged, this movement was engendered out of a sense of 'disgust' (as Tzara it's main instigator put it). It was in its most fundamental essence a revolt against the sterility and staleness of bourgeois realist art, as Sarane Alexandrian put it in her Book Surrealist Art.

> 'It was an anti-movement which opposed not only the academicisms but also all the avant-garde schools from the limits which confined it'. (2. p. 29).

The first notion this movement (headed by the trio of Tzara, Janco and Arp) dismantled was that there was no sense in the artist trying to depict reality, for having tapped into contempary psychological Theory, (as apparent in the writing of Freud) they believed that there

was no such thing as a uniformed reality and that it was up to each individual artist and each individual viewer to perceive and to create their own reality. Dada paintings and literature also reflected on the chaos, nonsense and incoherence of the modern world as it was seen. This artistic rebellion this manifested itself in a form of revolt against artistic conventions, but was also a revolt against social conventions. However one cannot dismiss the fruits of the Dadaist movement as the mere ranting and raving of anti Bourgeois rebels. Instead one must recognize (whether intentionally or not) that a vacuum was created which allowed important issues of art and painting to be discussed, issues included attitudes to reality, the subconscious and the object. It must also be appreciated that it was out of Dadaist Vacuum that the movement of Surrealism emerged, tinged with the same sense of aggressive revolt and questioning as Dadaism. But by that time Dadaism had lost its momentum the Surrealists (amongst them Breton and Aragon) had already exorcised the Chaos of Dada and replaced it with a comprehensive and more concrete programme of idea's which they would adhere to in the creation of the art. As Sarane Alexandrian again emphasis,

> 'Without the Dada experience, Surrealism would not have existed in the form which we know it ... Surrealism was not born after Dada but during it'. (2, p.46).

However the transition from the anarchy of Dadaism to the supposed "order" of Surrealism was not an easy one. Breton and his fellow collaborators had first to define the Objectives behind their Art and to outline their common aims as a collective of artists whilst also trying to emphasize what it was that made them different from their contemporaries. But their initial efforts to amalgamate all these concern's into a coherent code in the first manifesto of 1924 was greatly overshadowed by personal debacles.

Many saw Breton's endeavour to define Surrealism as 'a certain psychic automatism that corresponds rather closely to the state of dreaming' (5, p.63).

As too vague and not concrete enough. Furthermore, the group's main artistic uniformity (something that Dadaists had failed to do) also guaranteeing each member freedom to express their individuality

others saw as contradictory. Many now see, with the benefit of hindsight, the first manifesto essentially a failure an enthusiastic yet garbled statement of artistic ambition. But what did emerge from the melée was Breton's definition of Surrealism and a declaration of at least two of the main components of Surrealist art, the notion of super-reality and concept of non-conformity.

The main component of the Surrealist primary manifesto and the one that probably best characterized their philosophy of art was that of non-conformity for example, to either social or artistic constraints. As Arp phrased it 'I exhibited with the Surrealists because of their attitudes of revolt towards art ...' 2, p.46).

It was obvious from the outset, when one views the prowferation of influences that moulded Surrealism - from Freudian psychoanalysis to that of Symbolist poetry, that the Surrealist movement was not going to limit itself to just one medium of artistic expression. Breton's dabbling with automatic writing and his interest in Freudian dream-theory convinced him that all forms of expression whether it be in film, poetry, collage, montage, sculpture, photography or painting were legitimate and that to confine themselves to merely one mode would be to continue the stranglehold on the imagination from which they had tried to break free. However this notion of non conformity was obviously in direct conflict to the idea of membership in a group of artists and this contradiction was never fully resolved. As will be later elucidated it was this dictate that caused so many problems for Cornell.

The second most important concept of Surrealism was that of super-reality. In common with the Romantic poet of an earlier epoch Breton wished that the artist could possess the unfettered imagination of the child. The problem with art and the artist as he saw it was that they were both tied down by social conventions. In Realist Art the artist had been condemned to reproduce "reality" as those around him deemed it to be. But this reality in Breton's view was only a recognition of a one sided superficial facade of life and it largely ignored the unexplainable, the irrational comprehension or as Breton put it "the marvellous". It was what was beyond explanation that Breton called on the Surrealists to try and embody in their work. This did not mean however that they were to totally negate "reality" as endorsed by society, and escape into

a world of fantasy but rather that they were to supercede reality and attempt 'to reconcile it with the illogical processes which arise in dreams with the aim of creating a super-reality'. (2, p. 48).

But how was the Surrealist Artist best to do this?

By tapping into Freudian dream theory and by using continued images and symbols in a variety of ways Breton asserted the belief that the artist could, successfully depict both sides of reality the rational and irrational ("Marvellous") and thus give form to humanity's most secret longings as found only in the subconscious.

Freudian theory stipulated that society exerted influences on every person to control their deepest desires or fears and to make them conform to a more, stylized form of behaviour. The disastrous effect of this was then that the common person lost touch with their subconscious desires and also that their imaginative capacity was severely limited. Surrealist Art thus offered not merely a new mode of expression for the artist but also a means by which the ordinary person could get in touch again with their subconscious and power of imagination. As Alexandrian in Surrealist Art explains.

> 'Surrealism cannot accurately be described as fantasy, but as a superior reality, in which all the contradictions which effect humanity are resolved as in a dream'. (2, p.49).

It wasn't however until five years later after much practical applications with the ideas laid down by the first manifesto that the Surrealists then introduced the central concept of the object or Object Art. However this was not an entirely new idea, it had already been roughly outlined in 1924 by Breton and translated as: 'the concrete realization and subsequent circulation of numbers of copies of objects perceived only in dreams". (3, p. 263).

Object Art as developed by the Surrealists did not merely entail the intricate reproduction of an inaminate object by painting it, but rather it was essentially a 3-Dimensional Collage of everyday articles usually taken out of context. By juxtaposing seemingly unrelated articles or objects the Surrealists hoped to create something which would leave the viewer puzzled, wondering and questioning, in short they hoped to create something that would provoke the viewer into thought and thus

awaken the dormant powers of the imagination. However this only describes one form of Object Art, that of the "Assemblage". Other Surrealists used the "Object" or articles in a variety of different ways to create a number of different effects, in which a banal, everyday object or article is somewhat distorted or changed, thus compelling the viewer to stop and rethink their previously held preconception of it. Also the found and the naturally found object were used in the creation of assemblage. To the Surrealists the found object, was an object which contained a certain surprise element in acquiring it. They believed it had a captivating effect; when seen among a large number of other objects it possessed an attraction. This form of Object Art was known better to the Surrealists as the Art of the jamais vu, 'The never before seen". (2, p.140).

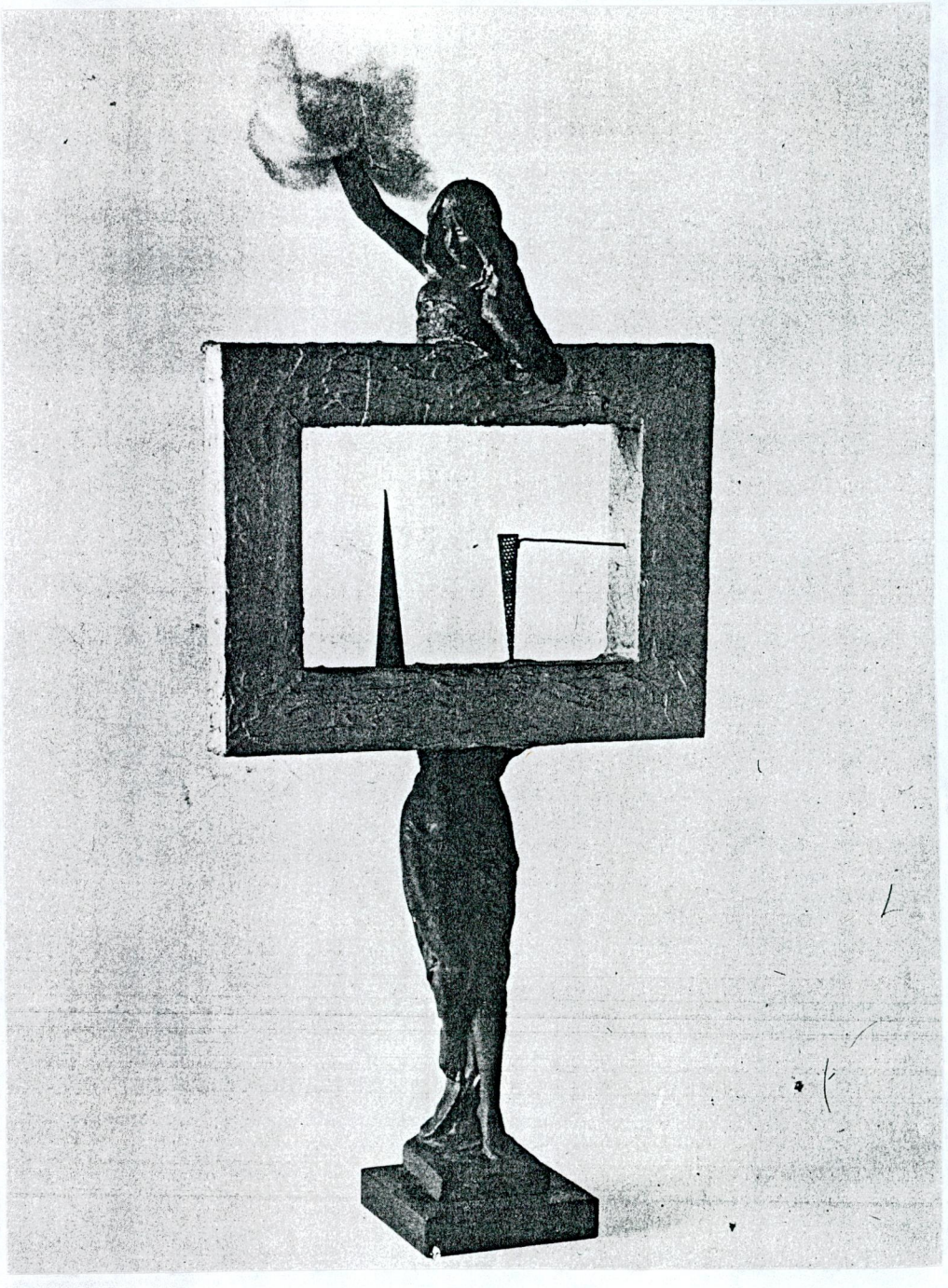


Fig. 2
Oscar Dominguez
"Arrival of the Belle Epoque 1936.

The Natural Object was found by chance, surprise, discovery and they believed that this natural object was one found, and not one desired after for any length of time. These were objects maybe found while walking on a beach, in the countryside or woodland area. Examples of such objects would be feathers, stones, shells, dried wood, leaves and bones, which the Surrealists would use in their creations either on their won or surrounded by other objects. There were the interpreted found and Natural Objects. The Interpreted found object came in many forms and shape. Very often an object such as an ornament or an ordinary utensil would be changed or interfered with in such a way that it altered the objects ordinary appearance and created a bizarre effect visually and mentally for the viewer. An example of such a bizarre creation can be seen in Oscar Daminguez "Arrival of the Belle Epoque' 1936. Fig. 2. Whereas the Interpreted found object would be similar to that of the found object, such as a root of a plant or a shell that held distinct characteristics of its own when found in its natural surroundings. If placed in a different context its appearance took on a whole new meaning without too much interference on the Surrealist artists behalf. The Surrealists considered the Readymade such an "object", for it was considered untouchable in the sense that it had been changed from the most natural thing into a thing of the mind. Duchamp himself refined such an idea and was considered by the Surrealist as the inventor of the genre. The art of the Readymade was achieved by the Surrealists through the manipulation of industrially mass produced objects. By changing their known functions or altering them, Surrealists developed them into something quite ingenious Marcel Duchamp for example put together a bird's cage containing imitation sugar lumps made of marble, a thermometer and a cuttlefish bone in one of his assemblage and called it "Why not sneeze" 1921. Fig. 3) However these were not the only ways the Surrealists used objects. Evident in all of their works of art is the ability to shock, to provoke and to make the audience think.

Fig. 3.
Marcel Duchamp
<u>Why not sneeze</u> 1921
READYMADE OBJECT

Fig. 4
Meret Oppenheims
Cup, saucer and Spoon in fur 1936
DREAMT OBJECT

During the vogue years of Object Art, Breton was the sole innovator of two unique kinds of Surrealist objects, that of the Dreamt Object and the Poetic Object. Breton described the Dreamt Object as one which was very humble and familiar in appearance, yet it had "the need inherent in the dream to magnify and to dramatize" (2, p.141). Dreamt Objects could be changed from the familiar object, by some whim of desire, which altered it to give a new and more magnificent appearance. One of the most outstanding examples of this is Meret Oppenheims "Cup, Saucer and spoon in fur" 1936. (Fig. 4). The best way to understand such a concept would be to close your eyes, first imagine a tea cup, then imagine it covered in purple fur. A purple furry tea cup. Known as a Dreamt Object. Breton's other contribution to the invention of Surrealist objects was the Poetic object, infact Breton was the only one of the Surrealists who produced a valid example of this type of work. For Breton the Poetic Object consisted of numerous objects, which would have been placed in some kind of relief in reference to words of a poem. They were often numbered, so that the viewer could identify the word with the object, represented. (Fig. 5). This plainly showed the constant relation between the arts that the Surrealist always emphasized. The Surrealists owe this invention of the symbolically functioning object to Dali, who defined it as 'An object produced by an "Objective Perversion", which expresses a repressed desire or allows a compensatory satisfaction of the libido'. (2, p. 143).

Dali made such an object consisting of a woman's shoe inside which he had placed a glass of milk. The symbolic function of this piece was when he placed two lumps of sugar into the glass of milk each lump having a red shoe painted on it. (Fig. 6).

But the one genre that was particularly important for the Surrealists and the one which used all the best characteristics of the other genres, Dreamt, Poetic Objects, etc. was the box and its close relation to the Assemblage. The Box, in effect and in creative make up are very similar, so what did they consist of? Articles and objects were placed side by side in a confined space. The Surrealist artist would usually combine unusual unrelated objects together in order to create a striking or contradictory effect,- an effect in short that would make the viewer explore the possible connections that consisted between the objects as explained by Sarane Alexandrian.

> 'The hidden meanings to be found with ordinary objects placed so close to one another in the confined space of a Box, brought forward an explosive fuse to the powers of the viewers imagination'. (2, p. 148).

These novel ideas on how to use materials and present artistic creations were spread throughout artistic circles mainly by means of the Surrealist Revolution pamphlets "La Révelition Surrealisté". and took root Europe wide. In fact it was ironic that it was a man - both geographically ant theoretically apart from the Surrealists, that would take their ideas particularly the concept of the Box and perfect them - this man was Joseph Cornell.

Fig. 5
André Breton
Portrait of Jacqueline 1937
POETIC OBJECT

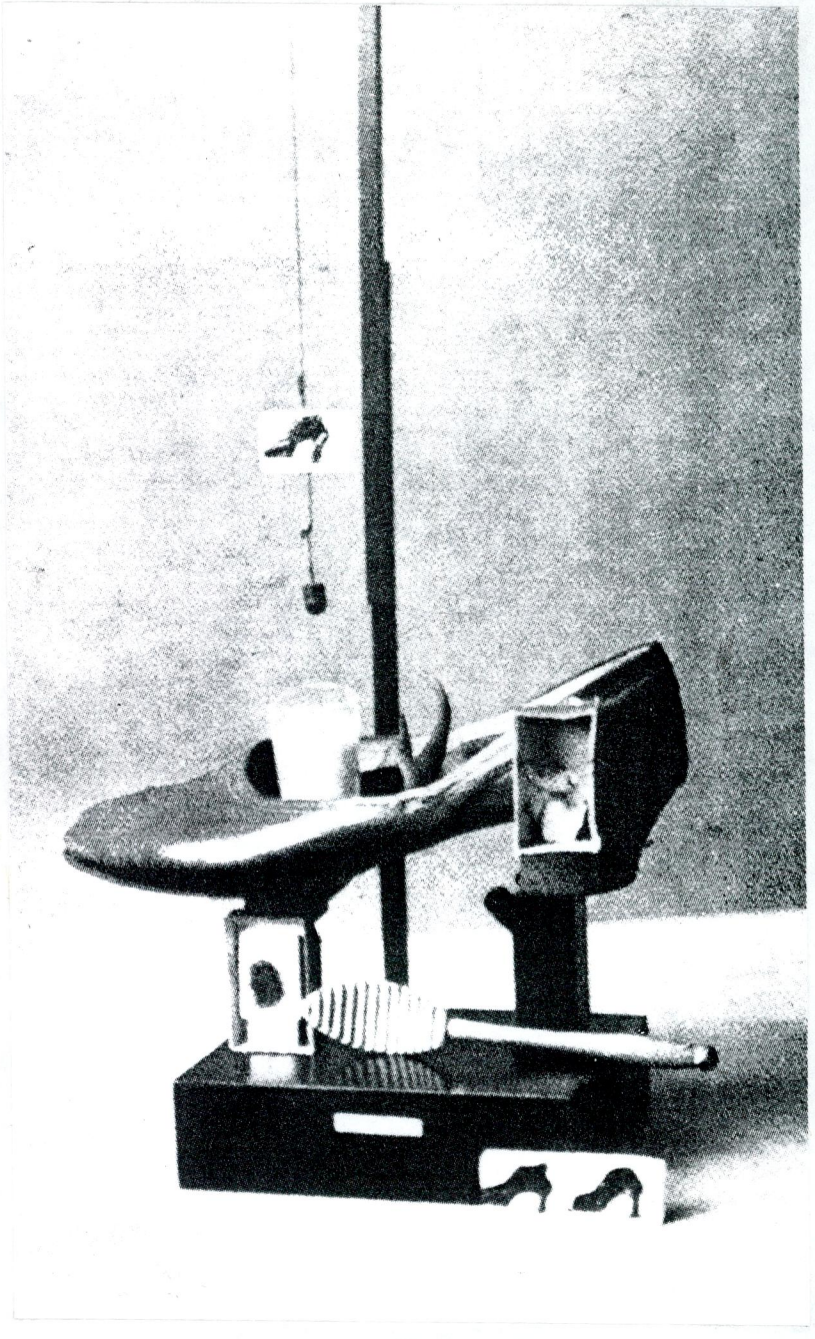


Fig. 6
Salavador Dali
Object of Symbolic Function 1931.

CHAPTER TWO:

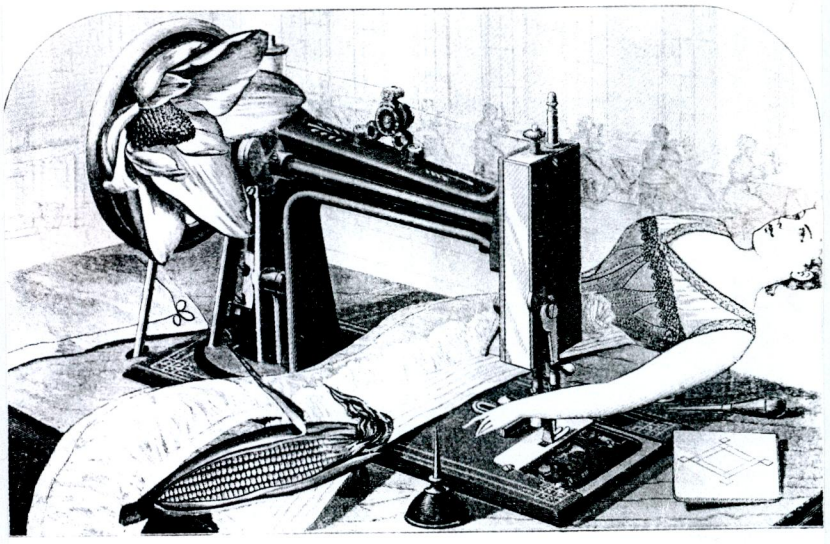
Cornell's first encounter with Surrealists and later, sharp turning away from the movement.

Cornell's first encounters with the work of the Surrealists largely comprised his frequent visits to their exhibitions in the Levy Gallery of his native New York. Their experimentation with objects and their exploitation of the visual impact of the object greatly excited him, in fact it would be true to say that Cornell fell in love with the visual side of Surrealism before every becoming acquainted with their theoretical preoccupations and this enthusiasm for the visual always remained with him.

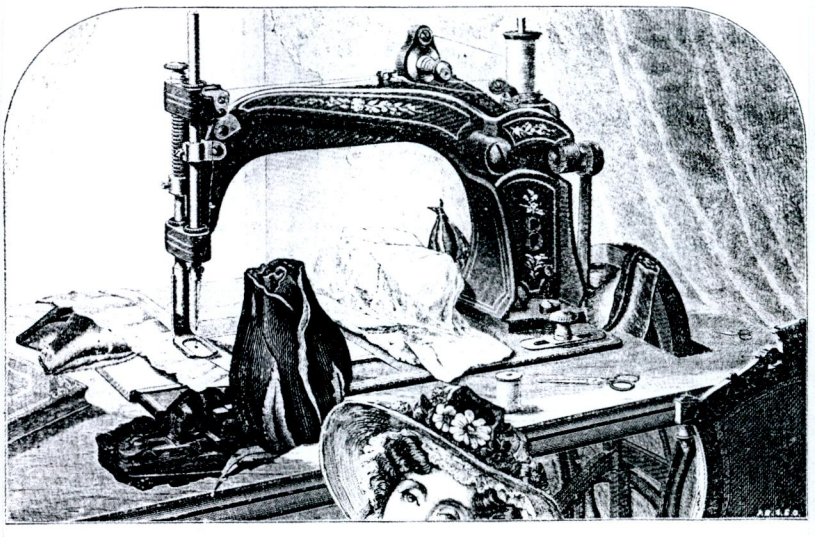
Julian Levy, apart from achieving a certain status of celebrity for his art collections was also an avid contributor to the plethora of Surrealist literature that had started to mount up at this time (Levy wrote a book called "Surrealism" published in 1936. He had in fact established the Gallery as a centre for studying and exhibiting historical and contempory and photography, Modern Painting and experimental film. Due to the fact that he had great sympathy for the Surrealist theories and philosophies that embodied the Surrealist movement, it was largely in his Gallery that their work was introduced to America. It was also where the artist Cornell first encountered Surrealist Art and literature. The way in which Julian Levy describes this encounter in his book "Memoir of an Art Gallery" 1977 has almost a fairy-tale like quality about it. In his account Levy tells of the occasion when he was unpacking crated pictures for the approaching Surrealist exhibition when Cornell, already a regular visitor to the Gallery lingered back to watch him.

> '"Closing time" I suggested, but he had already fumbled out of his overcoat pocket tow or three cardboards, on which were pasted cut-outs of steel engravings. Collages by Mac Ernst only just unpacked and stacked on the Book Shelf. But these were not any of these. "Where did you find these?" Was it not a blessing I hadn't thrown the man out, thought I. "I make them", Joseph said. And showed them to me. There was the image of a fashionable fin-de-siécle young woman being sewn together on a sewing machine table.....' (1, p.16)

This image of the sewing table and the incongruity of the young woman being sewn together (Fig. 7) struck Levy as similar to, something he



(a) Untitled 1930's



(b) Untitled 1931

Fig. 7
Joseph Cornell
Visual Interpretation of Lautreamont Verbal Collage.

seen before. It was Max Ernst's visual interpretation (through the use of Collage) of Lautreamont's famous quotation:

> 'As beautiful as the Chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table". (1, p. 16)

It later became obvious whether unconscious or not that Cornell had begun to assimilate many of the visual ideas from the Surrealist paintings he had seen in the Gallery, into his own work without actually knowing or fully understanding the implications of what he was doing. However, and this remains a major bone of the contention was this similarity die to the fact that Cornell just absorbed and reproduced what he saw in the Gallery or were there certain factors in his own life and experience that lead him to this form of artistic expression independent of ever seeing the work of the Surrealists? Certainly from the moment Levy laid eyes on his work he saw the resemblance to Max Ernst's work and practically accused him of artistic plagarism, something which Cornell always vehemently denied. Thus it made the discovery of Cornell's work more exciting and astounding in that he was a man geographically, culturally and theoretically so far apart from the Surrealists but who could still espouse the basic principles of the art in his creations. Cornell however did admit that the work of the Surrealists inspired him to move in various untraveled directions but he also stressed, by way of explanation perhaps, that the many other experiences in his life prior to the 1930's and the Surrealists were also germinal influences in his work, amongst them his experience's with French art and music and even his religion, Christian Science, and that these too, unconsciously moulded his art. It was true that much of his work resemble that of the Surrealists. For example his fascination with the object, his assembling and juxtapositioning of objects in confined places or boxes and also his fixation with spontaneity and naturalness (all issues that preoccupied the Surrealists) also challenged him and were obvious in his artistic work. Furthermore form 1931 it became increasingly obvious that these Surrealist influences began to show themselves more overtly in his work.

Surrealist theories and methods began to infiltrate Cornell's consciousness and through it, his Art. From this time on it become's easier to see how he incorporated many of their concepts.

Fig. 8
Joseph Cornell
(untitled) " Assemblage." 1942

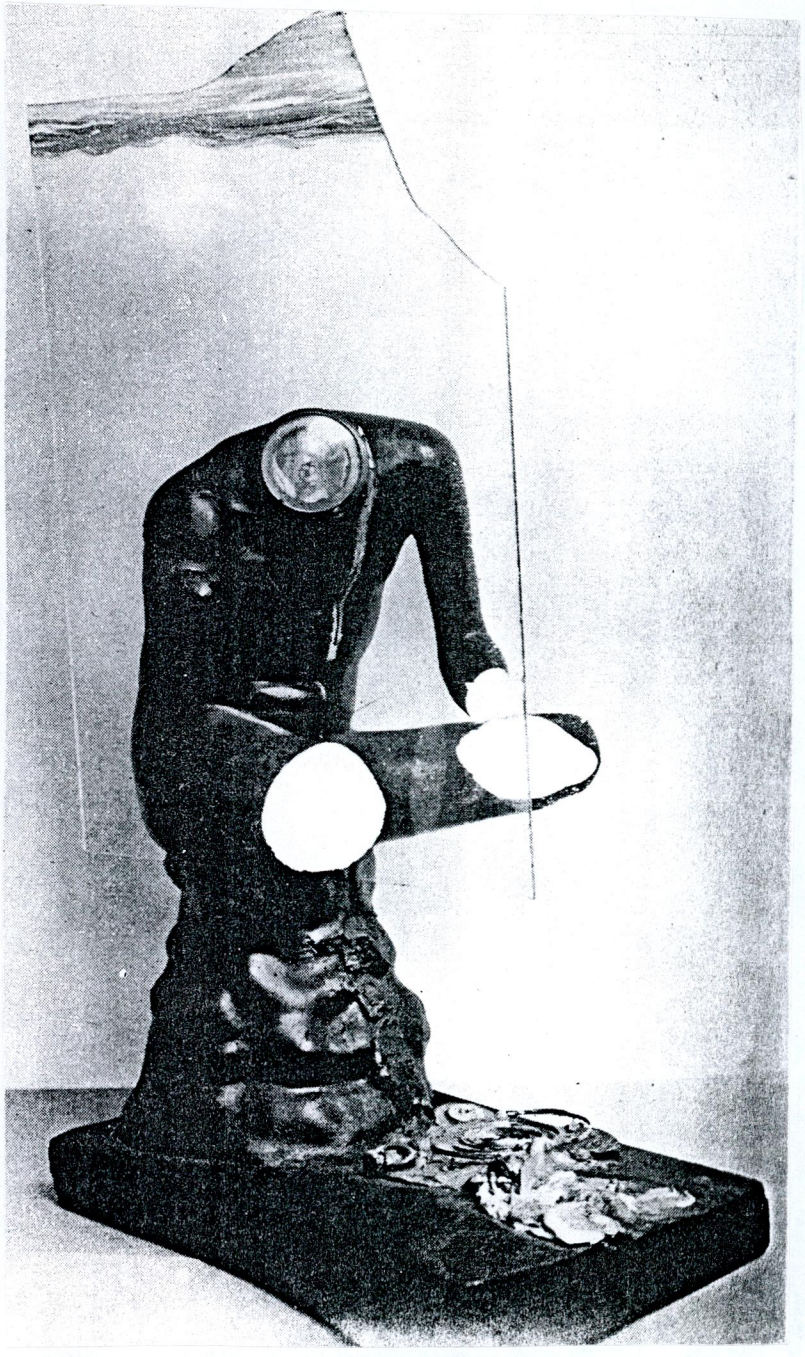
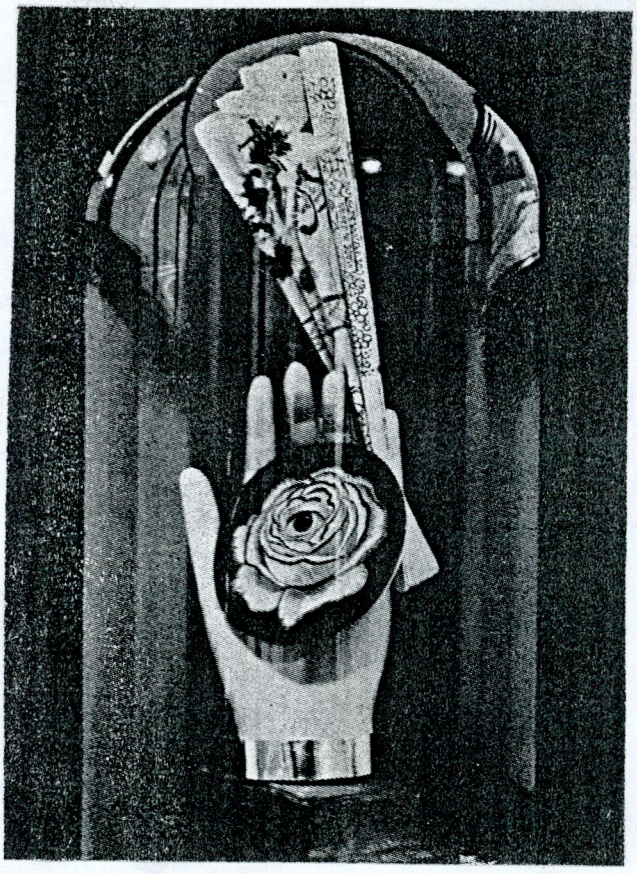


Fig. 9
Oscar Dominguez
<u>Conversion of Energy 1936</u>
INTERPRETATED FOUND OBJECT

(a)



(b)

Fig 10.
Joseph Cornell
(a) Bell Jar Untitled 1937
(b) Shadow Boxes Untitled 1940's

Collage for example which hitherto had been embraced by the Dadaists and Ernst alike, now became the main means of artistic expression for Cornell. The fact that Cornell had reached a level of excellence in this field is borne out by Levy's statement mentioned earlier that his work so resemble Ernst's Collages that he suspected him of copying Ernst's work. Cornell began to work in much the same way as the Surrealists did in that he primarily took his inspiration from either visual or verbal imagery, often a quotation or a poem and translated this into visual imagery of his own in the form of a Collage. The most famous example of this was the Collage he first showed Levy in the Gallery that fateful night. As already mentioned this picture was a visual translation of Lautreamont's verbal expression:
'As beautiful s the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umberella on a dissecting table' (1, p.16).

It is also obvious from Cornell's early efforts that he wholeheartedly accepted and used in his work, the Surrealists premise that all pictures, whether Collage or otherwise should be visual narratives, in otherwords they should contain within them the spark by which the viewers imagination would be lit. But Cornell did not just rely on this one mode of creative expression alone for he also used assemblage; the assembling of objects in a way so as to provoke or attract the reader's attention and also concentrated much of his attention in experimenting with the object and the various effects he could achieve if he juxtaposed these objects in certain ways. Cornell's experiments with ordinary, everyday objects in order to create or translate them into an art may be seen in particular in a series of assemblages known as the Shadow Boxes (Fig. 8) (Although Cornell actually declined to tile them). In these particular assemblages Cornell used circular containers and filled them with an array of ordinary objects. This was in direct connection with the work Surrealists had done years before when they had used banal everyday objects (which they called Interpreted found objects) (Fig. 9) and placed them in a certain pattern or position in order to imbue them with a particular relevance or meaning and

then left it to the viewer to puzzle out the "meaning" of their creation. Above all the effect was to be one of haphazard nonchalance and the aim of the Surrealists in creating such a piece was to provoke the viewers imagination to produce possible "meanings" for this artistic production. However Cornell did not stop at Collage and Assemblage, he now began to combine the characteristic elements of these two artistic methods and to confine the objects within "boxes". At first he constructed pine circular boxes in which to contain the objects (as see in the Shadow Boxes, (Fig. 10)) but then began to confine them within larger scale wooden boxes or bell jars (Fig. 10) with glass fronts or coverings. In so doing he showed that although heavily influenced by the Surrealists he still reveled in the freedom which allowed him to take the basic principles of Surrealism, espouse them in his work yet use them as a base for new and original ideas.

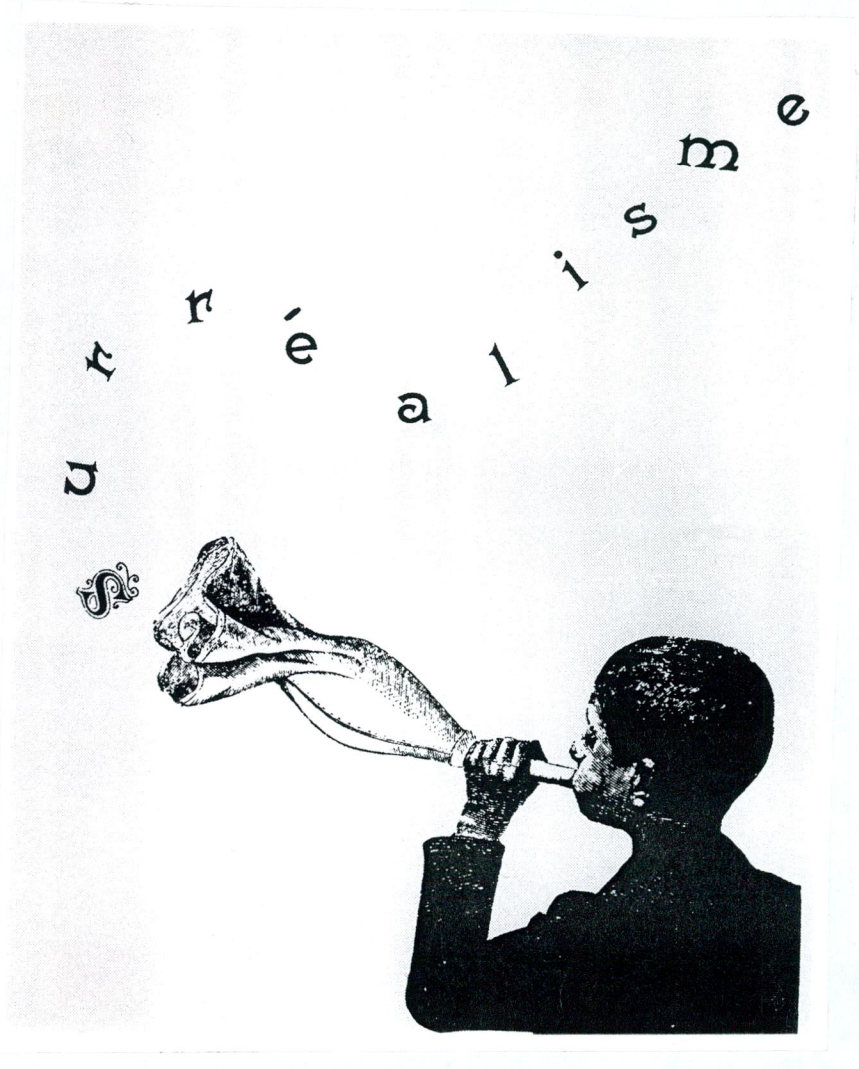


Fig. 11
Joseph Cornell
Cover for Catalogue Announcement 1932
Surréalisme

As his mentor Levy watched the development of this startingly original talent he became more and more convinced that Cornell was the epitome of all that a Surrealist should be and that indeed his work exhibited perfectly the principles and concepts of Surrealism. He began to exhibit Cornell's work alongside that of other Surrealists. In the winter of 1931 Levy first included Cornell's work and showed his absolute faith in Cornell by asking him to design the cover of the Catalogue Announcement, the now famous collage of a boy blowing a trumpet like an annunciatory lily, formed of an old engraving of a swirling victorian petticoat, (Fig. 11). In January 1932 and again later that year Cornell's work was exhibited. Further proof of Levy's notion that Cornell was the Surrealist par excellence appeared in an article in the 1936 edition of "Harper's Bazaar" where Levy said of him that 'he was one of the few Americans who fully and creatively understands the Surrealist viewpoint" (1, p.19).

But Cornell viewed this praise with a mixture of gratitude and bewilderment but also tinged with a growing sense of alarm. From the start of his involvement with the Surrealists he had always emphasized the fact that he was drawn first and foremost to the visual impact of Surrealism, rather than its theoretical concerns. But it soon became clear to him in order to prevent being further sucked into the maelstorm of Surrealism he would have to categorically restate and re-emphasise his position to the Surrealists. He now knew that he would have to be seen to actively dissociated himself from the Surrealist movement and its concerns and this he did with the following statement which he sent to the "Harper Bazaar" reporter who had interviewed Levy:

> 'I do not share in the subconscious and dream theories of the Surrealists. While fervently admiring much of their work, I have never been an official Surrealist and I believe that Surrealism has healthier possibilities than have been developed'. (1, p.19).

From this time on Cornell's work begins to show a new and divergent style, in fact one could say that it is at this point that Cornell's work actively experiments with the "healthier Possibilities" that he saw in Surrealism.

CHAPTER THREE:

Examination of Cornell's Artistic Career;

(1) Pre-Surrealist

(2) Surrealist

(3) Post-Surrealist

If one closely examines Cornell's Career it is practically possible to divide it into three main phases, pre-Surrealist; the work he completed before becoming acquainted with the Surrealist movement, Surrealist: or the period within which Cornell's work was most obviously imbibed with the Surrealist style and then finally Post-Surrealist: or the phase after which he declares himself separated from the Surrealist movement. When examining this "Post-Surrealist" phase of his work one must keep in mind that Cornell did not reject Surrealism out of hand rather he rejected some of their beliefs, in order to extricate himself from the intellectual brawls and stifling influences of their group. It is thus at this time that new and divergent influences in his work influences that in one way or another had been forced underground during his involvement with the Surrealists, began to resurface and show themselves agin in his work, amongst them his rigid adherence to the Christian Science religion, his devotion to his family particularly his brother, his ideas on imagination, his fascination with the modern metropolis as represented in New York, his experiments with film and cinematic photography and his obsession with France.

Cornell's conversion to the Cult of Christian Science was always to remain a fundamental and important force in his life and work. One of the foremost beliefs of the religion was that spontaneity and naturalness were vital. Cornell himself acknowledged that Christian Science had given him a sense of self discipline and organization that never left him and which he always lent on in his often time consuming and physically demanding work. But the Christian Scientist the material object was worthless, in itself it was an ontological vacuum, a nothing. This belief was obviously used by Cornell in his

boxes where he believed that to present objects to the public in "harmonious" juxtaposition was the best way to challenge or provoke the publics imagination. He always left the viewer to decide what the "meaning" of a box or assemblage was, this is why he deliberately left most of his work untitled, for he believed to title the work would only limit the viewers interpretation of his creation. This was in total contrast to the Surrealists who often labeled their works with the most outlandish titles. But again the fact that Cornell choose to leave his work untitled shows how much Christian Science did effect his art and also how it made his creations different from that of the Surrealists.

As we have already seen Cornell took the concept of assemblage and box and made it his own, in fact it has almost become an emblem of his work. But from the very beginning Levy always suspected that the speed and alacrity with which Cornell constructed these boxes, pointed to the fact that he was accustomed to making these boxes and it also suggested to him that he had been creating them for some time before his involvement with the Surrealists.

Several suggestions are offered as to possible sources of inspiration for these boxes. Levy himself suggested that Cornell's early box constructions might have been inspired by 'Old French puzzle boxes and watch springs in old containers with transparent covers (backed by views of the Arc de Triumphe)'. (1, p.18). However it is in the context of Cornell's particular family background that one comes upon a more plausible suggestion. Throughout the years Cornell's boxes have often been referred to as 'toys for adults'. This remark unwittingly perhaps points to the most probable source of Cornell's inspiration for these boxes, his brother Robert. Cornell's brother although confined to

a wheelchair had a lively and probing imagination and it is believed that it was in order to divert or entertain him that Cornell actually started making these boxes.

Indeed Lyrda R. Hartigan in the Collection of Essays on Cornell also points this out.

> 'Joseph Cornell for example often assembled Robert's train accessories and also helped him design and build an elaborate portable layout for his train-sets. The project may have contributed to the belief that Cornell's Art evolved from a desire to entertain his brother'. (1, p.102).

This point shows the remarkable and uncanny congruity that existed between Cornell's ideas on art and those of the Surrealist, particularly on the notion of the primary of the Child's imagination for the Surrealists (like the Romantic Poets, Wordsworth and Shelley before them) the state of childhood was one of innocence and purity, a time when one could view life with an unfettered imagination. But they knew that when one gets older the mind and imagination becomes cluttered by social concerns and anxieties. For Cornell then this idea was a more personalized one for in creating art in order to stimulate Roberts imagination or even using ideas from ripe imagination he realized this Surrealist idea in a most practical way in his work. In fact the eternal freshness and youthful enthusiasm of Cornell's work (often viewed as chaotic haphazardness) can thus be directly attributed to the fact that many of his boxes were made with a certain person in mind, his brother Robert as can the fact that many of the different objects he

Fig. 12

Joseph Cornell

Soap Bubble Set 1936

used in the boxes or assemblages are distinctly childlike in character for example the 'Soap Bubbles Sets' (Fig. 12). Thus so far we have seen how Cornell's personal background contributed to making his work different from the Surrealists. But the one main factor that totally separated his work from them and which gave it that added touch of originality and uniqueness, was his geographical isolation from them. After all the greatest point of difference between Cornell and the Surrealists was that he was an American and they were French Europeans. As an American, as an inheritor of the legacy of the 'New World', as a citizen of the Brave New World of the United States and as a participant and observer of all the monumental changes that was part and parcel of this 'Wonderland' Cornell's whole cultural and artistic consciousness was and shaped by a whole spectrum of social influences that the Surrealists remained oblivious of. To experiments, to push back boundaries, whether geographical as in the case of the pioneers or artisctic as in the case of Cornell, was the very essence of what it was to be American, and this is where Cornell began to depart from the Surrealists. Where they were content to experiment within the limits set by the two manifestoes. Cornell wanted to push these limits or boundaries back even further and to probe beyond them to see what else he could create. Similarly the social influences that Cornell was open to also moulded his work and the tow most tangible influences were the fledgling motion picture industry in Hollywood and the sprawling metropolis (epitome of all that was modern and new) of New York.

As previously mentioned, Cornell, like the other Surrealists, had an ongoing fascination with the moving medium of film. Although Cornell in common with Dali and Bunrel used poetic imagery and ideas

gleaned from french literature as basis for these films, he did not share in their enthusiasm of the violence or erotica that was often a major part of their films. Again his strict religious background would have militated against such an approach. Instead he concentrated on imagery and the effect film could have on the viewer and also included collage in his cinematic experiments for example in 'Rose Hobart'. Similarly his intense interest in poetry and the theatrical were also exploited to the full in his films. In his short "A Jabled for fountains: in 1963 he used the poetry of Fedenico Gavcia Lorca, in particular the poem "Tu Infancian en Menton". Furthermore his fascination with film also manifested itself in an obsession with the female starts that graced the 'Silver Screen', amongst them Hedy Lamarr and Lauren Bacall. In anticipation of Worhols pop art wherein he would duplicate the icons of the film and pop industry such as Monroe and James Dean, Cornell also used these women's faces in his Collage's and assemblages, something which the Surrealists did not do. His exploitation of these well known faces and his transformation of them into art is obvious in his untitled creation of 1945-1946 which has since been informally bobbed "Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall". (Fig. 1)

The second influence of modern society which in omnipresent in his collected works is his obsession with New York. From the isolation and anonymity of the big city to the architectural splendor of the skyscrapers his work shows an eternal fascination with this growing metropolis which was his home. Cornell viewed New York almost with an air of enchantment and never tired walking its streets, observing its inhabitants or rummaging through it plethora of shops strange though it may seem given the huge variety of influences, both national and international that are present in his work, he never traveled outside of

New York, such was his obsession with the city. For him the city was enough for his inspiration. Ordinary day events, buildings and people inspired him and became part of his collages and assemblages. From shooting Galleries to the souvenir shops of Times Squares, from the newspaper and magazine stores to the Cafeterias in the theatre district, none were too humble to be included in his work. For Cornell Times Square with its many Cafeterias, Soda fountains, Souvenir Shops and Penny Arcades was just as rich in variety and inspiration as Paris and its environs were for the Surrealists.

Fig. 13

Hans Namuth (Photograph)

Cornell's Workroom 1969

Throughout his career Cornell gathered memorabilia and second objects from jumblesales and secondhand stores always storing them ready for the time when he would eventually incorporate them in his art. In his basement workshop there was always a clutter of objects, in fact Kynaston McShine in his essay "Introducing Mr. Cornell" likened the workshop as a "Wunderkammer" or a "Cabinet de Curiosités" (Fig. 13). When one peers the huge variety of work he has left behind one sees New York in almost every creation, either in the material he has used in the Piece or the fact that he has used New York or some element of New York life as inspiration of the work. But the one that best captures his lifelong obsession with his hometown is again the "Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall".

Apart from these major forces in his work other influences are also obvious, for example his love of ballet, poetry, his interest in cosmology and also his enthusiasm for France and French culture, an enthusiasm which led to his acquaintance with the Surrealists.

CONCLUSION:

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At this point we return to the start in point of this discussion, to the main question, was Cornell a Surrealist or not? As we have proved he was undoubtedly aware of and absorbed mainstream Surrealist notions on art and artistic creation. However as has been explored these were absorbed not merely to be regurgitated or painstakingly reproduced but rather he took these ideas, but rejected those he found irrelevant to his own personal situation and reshaped those that he did accept. So whereas Freudian dream theory seemed to have no use for him, and here discarded, he accepted ideas on the object and assemblage. However this is not say that the ideas that the Surrealists had were so very different to his own. Many of the boxes and assemblages he had made before he was introduced to the Surrealists already incorporated these ideas. In fact this is what makes his work even more unique, he seemed to have had a reverence for the object and a fascination with assembling objects in oppostion to each other, even before these ideas were actualized by the Surrealists.

To blandly state that Cornell was a Surrealist and nothing more is to relegate him to the status of an artistic assimilation, an artist who merely stole the ides of others and painstakingly reproduced them and is also a total regation of the level of innovation clearly present in his work. Cornell's work, although initially resembling that of the Surrealists, moved on from that and became original and diverse enough to defy this over-rigid labeling.

Instead one must see Cornell's work in a different light. For far from being that of a pseudo-Surrealist (as is often claimed) it is rather that of a unique man who pushed back the boundaries between art and

reality, the banal and the marvellous and showed that both were actually two sides of the same coin and could be incorporated into Art.

If one is to adequately judge the work of Cornell one must return to the statement:

> "Joseph Cornell is a Virtuoso of fragments, a maestro of absences" (1, p.43).

For it was in this art, in its emblematic fragmentation, in its enforced isolation (in the use of the box) and its elliptic strangeness that he so eloquently captured the spirit of modern times. In answer thus to the question. Cornell, Surrealist or individualist, one must answer a resounding "Individualist!!".

Fig. 14

Hans Namuth (Photograph)

Joseph Cornell in his garden,

3708 Utopia Parkway, Flushing

New York 1969.

JOSEPH CORNELL. BORN 1903 / DIED 1972

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