

# the warhol: resources & lessons

## Artists Who Collect: Joseph Cornell

Joseph Cornell's process of collecting was about keeping things he bought, found, and liked. Cornell collected source material for his work, which became artistic creations about his inner thoughts, desires, and imagination. Most days Cornell scavenged for relics in New York junk shops and flea markets. He sorted his purchases into categories and filed them in boxes along with his own mementos, creating his art boxes from this archive. People who visited his home said it felt very much like stepping right into his art. Inspiration for his boxes came in the form of women with whom Cornell had fallen in love, exotic places, imagined adventures Cornell never took, and childhood memories. Cornell was also interested in ballet, music, and art. He collected his inner thoughts, feelings, and fantasies in a diary.

Cornell was born in 1903 in Nyack, New York. The family moved to the Queens section of New York City after his father died in 1917. As an adult, Cornell continued to live with his mother and brother. Around 1921, without formal training in any field, he worked as a salesman in the textile industry. At this time, he also began his collection of objects and his art constructions.

In 1931, he saw an exhibition of Surrealist art and later met Surrealist writers and artists at the Julien Levy Gallery. Cornell liked the magical quality of Surrealist art in the 1930s but shied away from the darker revolutionary fantasies of the art movement.

Surrealists explored new imagery and expressed their ideas freely in the wake of the Dada movement. Dadaists had created a stir by voicing cynicism about the world and by showing in their art the irony and absurdity they saw in the chaos of Europe after WWI. Surrealists also embraced Sigmund Freud whose controversial theories on dreams and the subconscious were picked up in their methods. They created dreamlike images containing realistic subject matter that were simultaneously irrational and fantasy-filled.

### Research:

Surrealism, Assemblage, Collage

### Comprehension Questions:

Explain Cornell's artistic practice:

1. What did Cornell collect?
2. How did he make his artwork?
3. What inspired Cornell?
4. Explain the connection between Surrealist and Dada art and Cornell's boxes. How are they similar? How are they different?
5. Interpret one of Cornell's pieces.



Joseph Cornell  
*Untitled (Cocotoo and Corks)*, c. 1948,  
14 3/8 x 13 1/2 x 5 5/8 in.  
Private Collection

# the warhol: resources & lessons

## Artists Who Collect: Joseph Cornell



Joseph Cornell  
*The Crystal Cage*  
(Portrait of Berenice) 1943, detail  
Case with documents, 39.6 x 50.3 cm.  
Richard L. Feigen, New York

Joseph Cornell  
*Untitled (Cocatoos and Corks)*, c. 1948,  
14 3/8 x 13 1/2 x 5 5/8 in.  
Private Collection

