RAUSCHENBERG
CANYON

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In 1959 Robert Rauschenberg received a telephone call from a friend, the artist Sari Dienes. Dienes lived in the Carnegie Studios—working and living spaces allotted to artists above New York’s celebrated concert hall. As Rauschenberg told the story, Dienes’s neighbor was one of the last of Teddy Roosevelt’s Rough Riders. When he died, the janitors pushed his belongings out into the common hallway. In the junk heap, Dienes spied a taxidermied bald eagle with wings outstretched and contacted Rauschenberg to ask if he wanted it. This kind of question was not unusual for Rauschenberg to receive. He had lately become famous for incorporating all kinds of found objects into his art work, and he was often offered things, odds and ends that his friends ran across, but they usually got it a bit wrong, and he would end up turning them down. In this case, however, he said yes at once.

Bringing the stuffed eagle back to his studio loft on Pearl Street in lower Manhattan, he attached it to a canvas on a stretcher—the traditional support for ambitious fine art painting—cutting off the bird’s tail to fit it closely against the fabric surface, so that it appeared to emerge directly out of it. Below, as if clutched in the raptor’s sharp talons, he affixed an open cardboard box, painted black. From the lower end of a wooden beam he suspended a small pillow, covered with messy daubs of white paint. On the canvas behind the eagle/box/beam/pillow combination, amid strokes and patches of paint, Rauschenberg applied a seemingly incongruous variety of things, including a photograph of his son Christopher as an infant; a postcard of the Statue of Liberty; a man’s white shirt, cut and opened up; a crumpled tube of paint; fragments of printed words; and an industrial metal drum. When he first showed the finished work in 1960, he called it *Canyon*, perhaps riffing on the word fragment “CAN” that appears near the center of the work.
In the years since World War II, contemporary American art had become recognized for the large-scale gestural abstraction, often accompanied by lofty existential rhetoric, that was seen in the work of Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still. Rauschenberg, in seeming defiance of this quintessential American style, plucked things directly from the world around him—including the Carnegie Studios junk heap—and put them into his artwork. Canyon has become one of Rauschenberg’s best-known Combines, the word he used to describe the works he made that mixed painting and other art materials with things found in daily life. With an eagle thrusting forth from its center, it is still one of his most startling and enigmatic pieces.

Rauschenberg had worked with found materials well before he began making Combines in 1954. In the middle of the fall term in 1948, he joined his soon-to-be wife, Susan Weil, at Black Mountain College, situated in a serene mountain valley near Asheville, North Carolina [FIG. 2]. It was a very different place from the Kansas City Art Institute, where Rauschenberg had first studied art. Founded in 1933 by John Andrew Rice, a classics professor, Black Mountain was unusual for an American college at that time in putting the arts at the center of its curriculum. For Rauschenberg, as for many others who attended, the school’s experimental approach to art and life and the mix of creative people there had an impact on his development. "I’m not sure I didn’t learn more just from being there," recalled Rauschenberg, "than any particular class." Because the school was always short on financial resources, as well as committed to communitarian principles, every student had to perform some sort of community labor. Rauschenberg and Weil volunteered for garbage collection: "I would go through everybody’s garbage and take out the things that we would like to have." Many of these abandoned treasures ended up being repurposed in Rauschenberg’s artworks and in the outlandish costumes he and Weil made for performances at the school.


FIG. 2. View of Black Mountain College on Lake Eden in Asheville, North Carolina, c. 1940.
Perhaps in part reflecting his background as the son of a craftsman, Albers disdained emotional excess in discussions of art, and his classes, at both the Bauhaus and Black Mountain, were focused on exploring the properties of materials. Students transformed them through a variety of simple operations (cutting, bending, folding) to fulfill a given task (“Can you fold a piece of paper so that it will twist?” for example) and explored the possibilities in discussion [fig. 3], with Albers all the while warning them away from the dangers of “self-expression.” Assignments often focused on examining how different juxtapositions of things—colors, surfaces—changed one’s perception of them. The word “combination” became a virtual mantra at Black Mountain.8 Albers maintained an egalitarian approach to materials—everything was admitted. Students worked with a wide range of “non-art” elements, such as automobile parts, thread waste, broken glass, cardboard, cigarette butts, scraps of tin, bark, lichen, and autumn leaves [fig. 4].9 Albers, however, did little to encourage Rauschenberg: “I represented everything he hated most. . . . I was Albers’s dunce, the outstanding example of what he was not talking about.”10 Something about the younger artist seems to have defied Albers’s sense of order.11 (“Albers’s rule is to make order,” Rauschenberg once reflected. “As for me, I consider myself successful only when I do something that resembles the lack of order I sense.”) But Rauschenberg always spoke about Albers as his most important teacher. Years later he insisted, “I’m still learning what he taught me.”13

Key for Rauschenberg was the teaching of Josef Albers. Albers had been a student, then a teacher at the Bauhaus, the influential German school of art and design that operated from 1919 to 1933. His wife, Anni Albers, a weaver and a fellow teacher at the Bauhaus, was Jewish, and the Bauhaus, now based in Berlin, had just closed rather than accept Nazi-appointed faculty; an invitation by telegram to join a start-up school in a place the couple had never heard of provided an option preferable to staying in Germany. In the move, Albers brought certain defining tenets of the Bauhaus’s innovative pedagogy with him. He was a formidable and atypical presence at Black Mountain—stiff in appearance, authoritarian in demeanor, and speaking rudimentary English in a way that put off some students.6 Rauschenberg, however, had decided to come to Black Mountain after reading in Time magazine that Albers was “the greatest disciplinarian in the United States.”7
Rauschenberg’s interest in found objects emerged again in the work that he made during a six-month trip to Italy, Morocco, and Spain with the artist Cy Twombly. Twombly had met Rauschenberg and Weil at the Art Students League in New York, where they were all taking classes. In the summer of 1951, after the birth of their son, Christopher, Rauschenberg and Weil returned to Black Mountain, where Twombly was now enrolled. It was an emotionally stormy season at the school, marked by a series of events that made Rauschenberg’s homosexuality apparent to those most concerned and led to the breakup of his marriage.14 Rauschenberg wanted to get away, and he and Twombly began to make plans to travel to Italy together. Twombly applied for a fellowship from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts that they intended to share, and the two departed in August 1952.

Once in Rome, Rauschenberg took scores of photographs on the streets and at the flea market (Twombly was an avid antiquer). Rauschenberg had studied photography at Black Mountain with Hazel Larsen [Fig. 5], attended lectures on the history of the medium given by Beaumont Newhall there, and had seriously considered pursuing photography, rather than painting, as a primary medium.15 In Italy he seems to have tested this possibility, and his lens captured in found juxtaposition the sorts of quotidian objects that would later enter his Combines: shoes, wheels, posters on the street, automobile and bicycle parts, fabrics, with a clear penchant for the well worn, broken down, and outmoded [Fig. 6].16

Fig. 5. Hazel Larsen (American, 1921-2001). Robert Rauschenberg and Elizabeth Schmitt Jennerjahn. Gelatin silver print, 6⅝ x 9⅜” (15.9 x 23.3 cm). Estate of Hazel Larsen Archer.

Fig. 6. Robert Rauschenberg. Rome Wall (III). 1953. Gelatin silver print, 15 x 15” (38.1 x 38.1 cm). ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION.
Money soon ran out—Rauschenberg claimed that Twombly had bought one too many antiques—and Rauschenberg headed for Casablanca to get work for a couple of months, with Twombly joining him there. In Morocco and then on their return to Rome, Rauschenberg began making small-scale assemblages, often with materials he had gathered in North Africa. In some, which he called feticci personali (personal fetishes; fig. 7), materials—sticks, beads, mirrors, fur—were tied together with string and sometimes suspended (another strategy that would reemerge on a larger scale with the Combines). Others, scatole personali (personal boxes), were boxes with found objects placed loosely inside; some were left open so other things might be added [fig. 8]. The statement Rauschenberg wrote for the exhibition of these works in a two-man show with Twombly at the Galleria dell’Obelisco in Rome in 1953, arranged by the Italian artist Alberto Burri, gives a sense of his attraction to certain components: “The Material used for these Constructions were chosen for either of two reasons: the richness of their past: like bone, hair, faded cloth and photos, broken fixtures, feathers, sticks, rocks, string, and rope; or for their vivid abstract reality: like mirrors, bells, watch parts, bugs, fringe, pearls, glass, and shells. . . . You may develop your own ritual about the objects.”

The things Rauschenberg chose for these early assemblages either suggested an embedded sense of time, the quality of a relic, or were particularly materially and sensorially rich. These criteria for selection continued in his later Combines.
The ritualistic quality of the *feticci e scatole personali* that Rauschenberg stresses may have been prompted by artifacts he had seen in North Africa and at the ethnographic museum in Rome. For an artist who had a full-blood Native American grandmother, as Rauschenberg did, it is perhaps also significant that when questioned by a customs officer about some of these works he was bringing back to the United States, he said on the spot “that they were ceremonial objects made by American Indians, and added the information that he had been lecturing in Europe on the culture of the American Indian.”

Having just arrived back in New York, Rauschenberg visited an exhibition of Dada work organized by the artist Marcel Duchamp in 1953 at the Sidney Janis Gallery, where he saw collages and assemblages by the German artist Kurt Schwitters [*fig. 9*]. Rauschenberg later recalled that he felt as if the display of Schwitters’s work “had been made just for him.” The works by Schwitters were not only composed from fragments of paper and printed matter, bits of newspapers and advertising, as earlier collage makers like Pablo Picasso had done [*fig. 10*], but also incorporated refuse of other kinds—twine, broken china, and fabric—things that did not assimilate themselves as easily to the two-dimensional surface of traditional painting and drawing. “I called my new manner of working from the principle of using any material MERZ,” Schwitters had declared, coining a neologism from the torn fragment of an ad for the

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*Fig. 9.* Kurt Schwitters (German, 1887–1948). *Das Kirschbild (Merzbild 32 A.* The cherry picture). 1921. Cut-and-pasted colored and printed paper, cloth, wood, metal, cork, oil, pencil, and ink on paperboard, 36 7/8 x 27 7/8” (93.6 x 70.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mr. and Mrs. A. Atwater Kent, Jr. Fund

*Fig. 10.* Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973). *Guitar.* Spring 1913. Charcoal, wax, crayon, ink, and pasted paper, 26 7/8 x 19 1/2” (68.4 x 49.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Nelson A. Rockefeller Bequest
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