

The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

JOSEPH CORNELL

A major retrospective of the work of the American artist, JOSEPH CORNELL will open at the _____ on _____ remaining on view until _____. The exhibition, directed by Kynaston McShine, Senior Curator of the Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, is a travelling version of Mr. McShine's major retrospective of Cornell's work which was shown at the New York museum from November 17, 1980 to January 20, 1981. Touring Europe under the auspices of The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art, the exhibition will also be seen at _____

and _____.

A final showing at the Art Institute of Chicago is scheduled for January 23 - March 21, 1982.

Joseph Cornell has been variously termed a true eccentric, an idolator of innocence, a master dealer in nostalgia, a trader in fantasy and, above all else, a poet. His works have been characterized as mysterious,

obsessive and elusive. In 1953 the American artist Robert Motherwell wrote the following:

"What kind of man is this, who from old brown cardboard photographs collected in secondhand bookstores has reconstructed the nineteenth century "grand tour" of Europe for his mind's eye more vividly than those who took it, who was not born then and has never been abroad ... who with full consciousness of twentieth-century plasticity ... can incorporate this sense of the past in something that could only have been conceived of in the present, that will remain one of the presents of the present to the future - what kind of man indeed."

Identified primarily by his small-box constructions enclosed behind glass, in which he arranged a variety of objects, pasted papers and reproductions, Cornell created his own universe within. Some 80 objects as well as about 55 collages will be on display in the forthcoming exhibition with loans from major museums, private collections and works from the artist's estate that have never been publicly seen. A film program will also be presented, which include "collage" films that Cornell himself made from found film footage and other films that Cornell conceived and directed.

Joseph Cornell was born in Nyack, New York, a small town not far from New York City, on December 24, 1903. The son of a textile designer and salesman, he lived in Nyack until the age of 14 when, following the death of his father, Cornell moved with his family to Douglaston, Long Island. Cornell attended Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. Instead of attending college, he returned to Queens, a borough

of New York City, following graduation from Andover and lived with his mother, two sisters and a brother. He took a job as a textile salesman in Manhattan; it was during this period - the 1920's - that Cornell began to discover New York, attending the cinema, theatre, opera and concerts, exploring various neighborhood streets, visiting antique shops, used-book stores and the New York Public Library. Objects of all types, both rare and commonplace, were collected for inclusion in his boxes.

In 1929, the family moved to a house on Utopia Parkway in Flushing, a section of the borough of Queens in New York City. Cornell was to live there until his death in 1972. Three years later, in 1932, his first shadow boxes were shown by Julian Levy as part of his gallery's group exhibition SURREALISM, and Cornell's life as an "artist" was launched. With a few, short-lived exceptions, Cornell abandoned outside employment altogether to concentrate his time, energies and imagination on his work.

His home became the repository of a large collection of ephemera and objects - empty cages, mirrors, clay pipes, postage stamps, marbles, thimbles, charts of the stars, corks, rare books, watch parts, butterflies, toys, seashells, art reproductions, cordial glasses - from dime stores, secondhand shops, and the beach. All were filed in cardboard boxes and large envelopes for future use as elements in his constructions. "Everything can be used," Cornell once said, "but

one doesn't know it at the time. How does one know what a certain object will tell another?"

"The success of Cornell," wrote critic Harold Rosenberg, "depends upon the inner references of the objects and their spiritual arrangements within the preconceived limits of the box." The principal technique Cornell employed was to juxtapose recognizable but unrelated objects. In so doing, he would fashion a composition in which the objects often retained their individual meanings while at the same time were transformed into a larger entity.

Ever present in Cornell's art are references to European culture, particularly nineteenth-century France and Renaissance Italy, of which the self-taught Cornell had an extraordinarily deep and abiding sense. Without ever having visited Europe, Cornell was able to effectively refer to a civilization with which he was thoroughly familiar basically only through his readings of the literature of the countries as well as through the major travel guidebooks such as the Baedekers. Through his imagination, Cornell traversed European civilization without ever having journeyed further than the perimeters of New York.

While Cornell's style evolved from an early Surrealist influence from such artists as Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp to a later rather formal, spare presentation, certain themes repeat themselves throughout his

oeuvre. Among them are aviaries, habitats, pharmacies, hotels, palaces, constellations, astronomy, sandboxes, homages to ballet, literary and art history figures and homages to movie stars. Within each of these thematic classifications, Cornell often executed a specific series. For example, within the aviaries which are most often populated by parrots and cockatoos, there is a group of boxes which often serve as part of his hotel series.

Cornell did a series of constellation boxes, including Observatory Corona Borealis Casement, 1950, which will be on display in the exhibition. Boxes which are dedicated to movie stars, in whom Cornell had a certain fascination, such as Penny Arcade for Lauren Bacall (1946), celebrate the glittering, make-believe world of film and the theatre.

The work of Joseph Cornell was first seen in Europe in the group exhibition "Exposition internationale du surrealisme" organized at the Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris, by Andre Breton and Paul Eluard in 1938. Since then his work has been included in group exhibitions outside the United States in London, Paris, Berlin, Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm, Kassel and Tokyo. His first European one-man show took place at the Galerie Galatea, Turin, in 1971; other one-man exhibitions in Europe have been at the Gimpel und Hanover Gallery in Zurich in 1972 and the Kestner Gesellschaft, Hannover, in 1972-73. In the United States Cornell has had one-man exhibitions at the Walker Art Center in

Minneapolis (1953), the Pasadena Museum (1967) and New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1967). The Museum of Modern Art first exhibited Cornell's work in 1936 as part of FANTASTIC ART, DADA AND SURREALISM and later in such group exhibitions as THE ART OF ASSEMBLAGE (1961), AMERICAN COLLAGES (1965) which was also directed by Mr. McShine, MODERN AMERICAN SCULPTURE (1965-66), an exhibition organized for showings in Paris, Berlin, and Baden-Baden, and DADA, SURREALISM AND THEIR HERITAGE (1968).

The English language book, Joseph Cornell, published by The Museum of Modern Art in conjunction with the New York showing, will be available at

A broad critical survey of Cornell's work, it includes essays exploring the ideas and contributions of this unique artist. An introductory essay by Kynaston McShine, director of the exhibition; an essay analyzing Cornell's relationship to other twentieth-century artists by the English critic Dawn Ades; a detailed biography by Lynda Hartigan; an essay by Carter Ratcliff discussing Cornell within the context of both American and European Romanticism; and an essay on Cornell's imaginative forays into filmmaking and the writing of scenarios by P. Adams Sitney are accompanied by 33 color and 250 black-and-white illustrations. The

will

produce an illustrated -language catalogue which will include a chronology of the artist's life, Mr. McShine's essay and an essay by