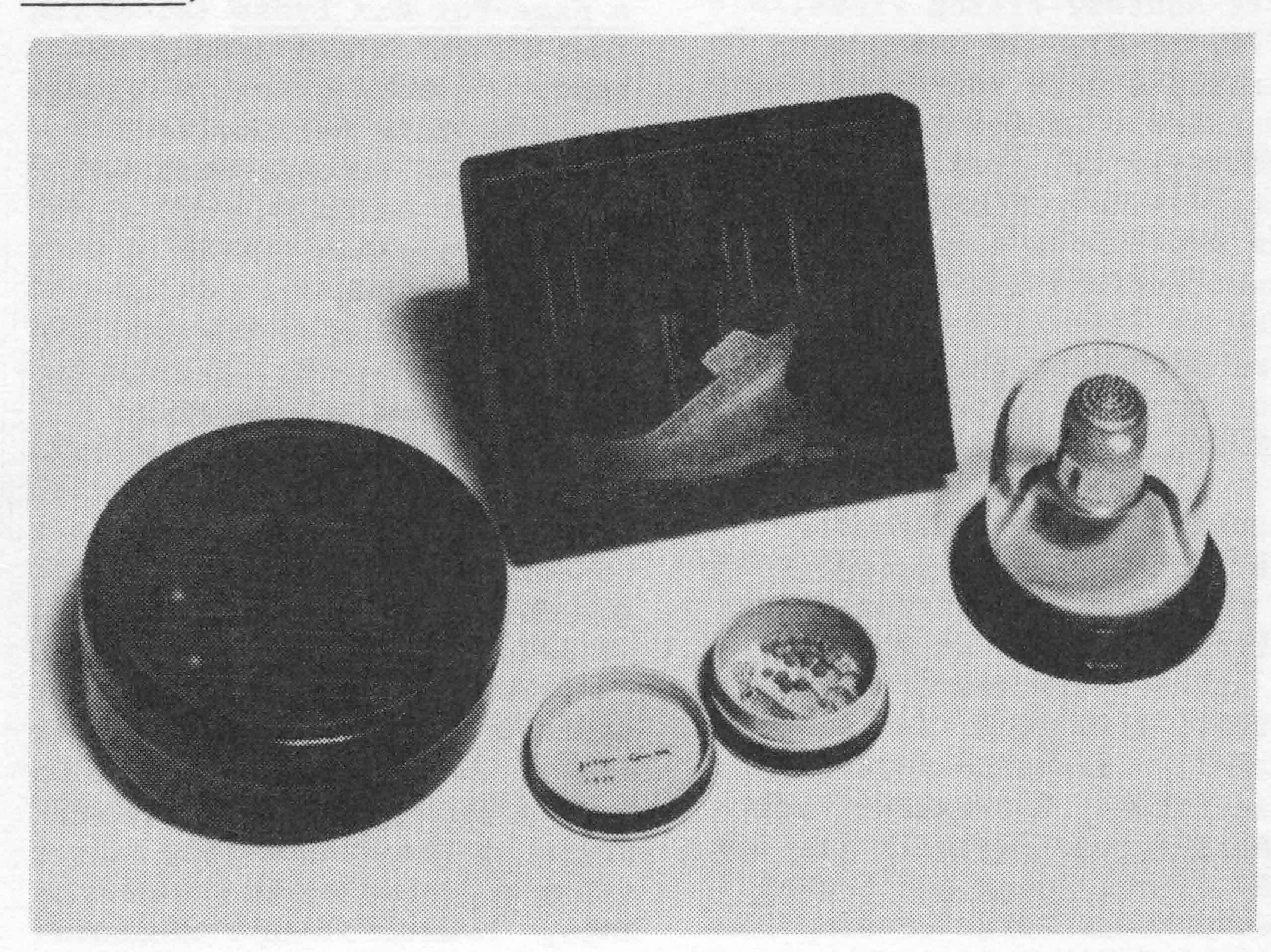
Untitled, 1933



Joseph Cornell did not describe himself as an artist. In 1936 he responded to a biographical inquiry from the Museum of Modern Art with the following: "Education: Went to Andover, No art instruction, Natural talent." Twenty-four years later he stated, "I've never called myself an artist. On voter registration, I call myself a designer." (A Joseph Cornell Album by Dore Ashton, Viking Press, 1974, p. 4). In one sense, Cornell's work represents an isolated interior journey seemingly divorced from the art "issues" of his time. His mysterious collages, box constructions and films may each be seen as representing a microcosm of the fantasies that pervaded Cornell's private, often reclusive life.

Cornell, however, did not operate totally independent of the modern tradition. This current MATRIX unit focuses on an early period in his career, 1930-1940, in which Cornell's links to modernism, specifically Surrealism, are clearly seen. Cornell adapted many of the ideas and techniques of Surrealism to his own sensibility, creating a body of work that remains one of the most unique American extensions of this European movement.

Early in his career Cornell had contact with many European Surrealist emigres living in New York prior to World War II. It was through his dealer, Julien Levy, that Cornell first met and exhibited with Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, Picasso, Man Ray, Pierre Roy and others. While Cornell remained somewhat of a loner, and intermittently rejected the notion that his work was Surrealist, his early work nonetheless shows clear

affinities with that movement.

The paperworks in this MATRIX unit, for example, utilize the technique pioneered by Max Ernst in his 1929 collagenovel La Femme 100 tetes of collaging various engraved and photographic images into a single composition. Cornell specifically sited Ernst as the source of inspiration in the early series of 16 collages entitled Story Without a Name-for Max Ernst (c. 1932), four of which are presented here. In both of their collage works of this period, Ernst and Cornell incorporated the Surrealist technique of pasting together cut-up and fragmented images in an unlikely coupling of disparate forms and subjects, attempting to break down preconceived notions of logic and formal composition which they felt acted as barriers to the subconscious mind. Reference to the Surrealist poet Lautremont, is made in the Untitled collage of 1932 depicting a large table upon which a woman's body is being spun from a sewing machine, echoing that writer's famous passage, so often repeated by the Surrealists, "Beautiful as the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table." While utilizing the Surrealist method of disorientation through unexpected juxtapositions, Cornell's works of the 30s reveal a disarming playfulness and innocence that set them apart from the darker and more disturbing effects sought by his European contemporaries.

Cornell is best known for his box constructions containing souvenirs and other personal memorabilia which he choreographed into an intimate sculptural space. One finds precedence for the use of the box as a formal device in a

number of Surrealist works, specifically Kurt Schwitter's Lust Murder Box II, 1920, Ernst's Two Children are Threatened by a Nightengale, 1924, and perhaps more importantly for Cornell, Salvador Dali's painting, Illuminated Pleasures, 1929 depicting box images containing various objects. Dali's work had a strong impact on Cornell when it was exhibited in the historic 1932 Surrealist group show--including some of Cornell's earliest collages -- held at the Julien Levy Gallery. None of the Surrealists, however, explored the possibilities of the box format as thoroughly as Cornell, establishing it as his primary form of expression.

Like his collages of this period, Cornell's early constructions have an almost child-like individuality that isolates them from doctrinaire Surrealism. Unlike his larger and better known constructions of the 40s and 50s, Cornell's constructions of the 30s are extremely intimate in thier scale, many measuring no more than a few inches across. We refer the viewer to the c. 1959 work Sand Fountain, located in Gallery 4 for a typical example of Cornell's later work. As Cornell was an avid follower of the ballet, these diminutive containers can be seen to represent a kind of condensed stage set in which familiar, household objects form a magical and timeless drama. Many of these early works invite the viewer's participation, taking the form of pocket-size games which are for the most part impossible to win or lose, but which allow the viewer to continually rearrange the formal composition of the work.

Cornell also experimented with film in this early period of his career. Like many of the Surrealists (notably Dali and Bunuel), he was attracted to film's potential for fantasy and poetic disorientation generated through unexpected changes in image sequence. In his boxes and collages, Cornell combined various found objects and images in enigmatic relationships. Similarly, his films consist of strangely, often humorously organized clips of existing movies or unedited footage shot by other filmmakers under his supervision. Cornell began several short movies in the 1930s, beginning with Rose Hobart, which was a collage film made of images from the 1931 Columbia Pictures movie East of Borneo, and named after its star.

Rose Hobart was first screened in 1937 at the Julien Levy Gallery as part of a program entitled "Goofy Newsreels." Cornell also began a trilogy of works during this period with the spearate titles Cotillion, Midnight Party and The Children's Party (all of which are part of the Museum's film collection). Consisting of collaged clips from old Hollywood movies, documentaries and "Little Rascals" films, these works were begun in the 30s and later completed, according to Cornell's instructions, by filmmaker Larry Jordan. The temporal scale of these works parallels the diminutive physical scale of his early boxes as the longest film lasts only 13 minutes. While Cornell's approach to film was clearly informed by his concept of juxtaposing found objects and images, one can conversely see in his collages and constructions the influence of film, particularly in the kind of

cinematic luminosity that seems to characterize much of Cornell's static work. As part of this MATRIX exhibition, these films, plus a brief documentary on Cornell by Larry Jordan, will be screened in the Museum Theater at 2:00 and 3:00 p.m. on Saturday, December 1 and December 8.

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Works in MATRIX:

With the exception of Untitled, 1933 and all films, the works in this exhibition have been lent by the Estate of Joseph Cornell, courtesy Castelli/Feigen/Corcoran, New York and Los Angeles.

Untitled, 1933, four mixedmedia constructions. Lent by Sterling Holloway, South Laguna Beach, CA. Mémoires Inédits de Madame La Comtesse De G., c. 1939, box construction, 1 7/8" x 4 1/4". Untitled (OBJECT), 1933, box construction, 5 1/8" x 4 3/16" x 7/8". Untitled (GRASSHOPPER BOTTLE), c. 1933, bottle construction, 8 1/8" x 3 1/2" x 2 1/4". Untitled (SOUVENIR-CASE). c. 1940, box construction, 1 7/8" x 4 9/16" x 3 1/2". Septentrion, Dieu de L'amour, 1933, collage, 9 15/16" x 7 7/16" (image). Nine Untitled collages, c. 1930s, ranging in size from 3 15/16" x 4 1/2" and 7 7/16" x 6 7/16".

FILMS:

Cotillon, 1930-68, 7 1/2 min., b/w, silent, 18 FPS.
Collection, University Art
Museum, Berkeley.
The Children's Party, 193068, 8 min., color (filter

tinted), silent, 18 FPS.
Collection, University Art
Museum, Berkeley.

The Midnight Party. 1930-68,
3 1/2 min., b/w, silent, 18
FPS. Collection, University
Art Museum, Berkeley.

Rose Hobart, c. 1937, 13 min.,
color (filter tinted), 24 FPS.
Cornell 1965 (by Larry Jordan),
1979, 8 min., color.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Julien Levy Gallery, NY '39,
'40; Copley Galleries,
Beverly Hills, CA '48;
Pasadena Art Museum, CA
'67; The Solomon R. Guggenheim
Museum, NY '67; Metropolitan
Museum of Art, NY '70; National
Collection of Fine Arts,
Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC '73-74; Leo
Castelli Gallery, NY '76;
James Corcoran Gallery, LA
'76.
Selected bibliography about

Selected bibliography about Cornell:

Barr, Alfred H. Jr.
Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism
(New York, '36).

Ashton, Dore. A Joseph Cornell Album (New York: Viking '74).

Waldman, Diane. Joseph Cornell (New York: George Braziller, Inc. '77).

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