

Miniature Worlds: Joseph Cornell, Ray Johnson, Yayoi Kusama

March 12 – June 25 at the Katonah Museum of Art

Dear educators,

We are thrilled to welcome your students to *Miniature Worlds*, a thought-provoking exhibition that explores the friendships between Joseph Cornell and two pioneering artists—Ray Johnson and Yayoi Kusama—and brings their works together for the first time. By delving into the visual conversations and deep resonances that emerged from these two relationships, the exhibition offers a rare snapshot of the role social networks play in the process of artmaking.

Through visual investigation students will trace the dialogue between the artists and examine their use of **symbolic** imagery and **collage** and **assemblage** techniques. They will also consider the memories and associations evoked by objects and how artists use **found materials** to share new narratives and ideas. As part of their visit, students will have an opportunity to create their own assemblage art inspired by the works on view.

Class visits to the Katonah Museum provide a unique learning experience for students. While having the powerful experience of viewing original works of art, students will use artworks as **visual text** to:

- Practice close observation, and detailed description
- Use critical and creative thinking to interpret what they see
- Listen to each other and make connections between concepts
- Support ideas using evidence and acquired vocabulary
- Integrate acquired knowledge and classroom content into discussions

Included in this packet are materials to help prepare your students for their visit. Please share with all classroom teachers. They can also be downloaded from our website: www.katonahmuseum.org under [Learn-Educator-Resources](#)

- Exhibition introduction and artists' bios
- 3 images from the exhibition with questions for discussion
- Pre-visit activities: *The Meaning of Objects* and *Visual Vocabulary*
- Glossary and Book list



Look for this light bulb to indicate ideas for older students! This packet is designed with upper elementary school students in mind; please adjust for your grade level. Please call 914-232-9555, ext. 2969 to discuss the specifics of your tour. Thank you for choosing the KMA for your class visit.

Margaret Adasko
Curator of Education

UPCOMING PROGRAMS TO NOTE ON YOUR CALENDAR:

- **Craft and Connect Adult Workshop: Creative Assemblage:** Thursday, March 30th, 5:30-7:30PM
This adult artmaking workshop introduces the materials and techniques of mixed media, collage, and assemblage.
- **Miniature Worlds Up Close:** Two Thursdays, April 13th and June 1st, 5:30-6:30PM
Join scholars for two engaging, virtual talks that focus on the artistic friendships explored in *Miniature Worlds* and the artworks that these friendships inspired.
- **Family Day: Learning Center Birthday Celebration!** Sunday, May 7th, 12:00-4:00PM
Celebrate the Pollack Family Learning Center's 25th anniversary at our Family Day Birthday Party!

Introductory Text Panel

Miniature Worlds: Joseph Cornell, Ray Johnson, Yayoi Kusama explores the relationships between Joseph Cornell and two pioneering artists — Ray Johnson and Yayoi Kusama — and brings their works together for the first time.

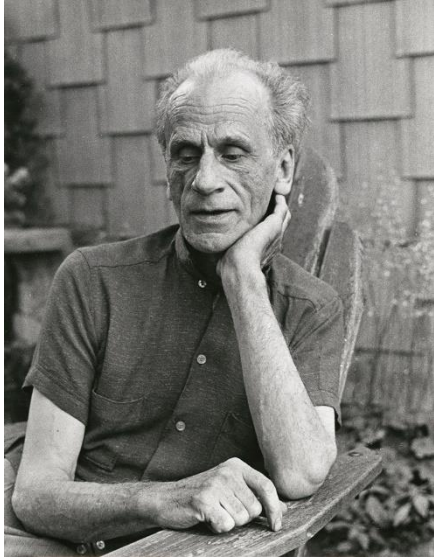
Johnson and Kusama each met Cornell in the 1960s, when they were becoming fixtures of New York City’s downtown art scene. Even in a milieu that prized experimentation, Johnson and Kusama were unusually and radically inventive. Their respective practices incorporated painting and collage as well as emergent forms like installation art, performance, and mail art. In many ways, Cornell was their polar opposite. A generation older, he had been exhibiting his box assemblages and collages in the city’s more conservative, uptown galleries and museums since the 1930s. Yet, for both Johnson and Kusama, Cornell was a friend, artistic lodestar, and model for cultivating a creative practice and, indeed, a creative life — on one’s own terms.

This exhibition concurrently examines the prominent role Cornell played within the lives and careers of these two younger artists and serves as a case study on the importance of social networks to the creative process. It elucidates Cornell’s imprint on the vast system of visual and textual references that Johnson synthesized from his every-day life into his artistic practice. It also traces how Kusama turned to collage as a means of evoking and commemorating Cornell. Like all relationships, these two friendships were microcosms unto themselves, complete with their own histories, languages, and complex emotional terrains. The intimate, small-scale works presented here were shaped by and reflect the profound impact of these miniature worlds.

Miniature Worlds: Joseph Cornell, Ray Johnson, Yayoi Kusama is curated by Emily Handlin, KMA Associate Curator of Exhibitions and Programs.

Miniature Worlds is made possible in part by Agnes Gund. Additional support has been provided by The Japan Foundation, New York.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS



JOSEPH CORNELL (American artist 1903-1972)

Joseph Cornell was born in Nyack, New York and from the time he was 12, lived in Queens, New York. He didn't go to art school, but studied the subjects he was interested in thoroughly and was a self-taught visual artist. He is best known for his assemblages, or shadow boxes. These boxes, usually with a glass front, were filled with collage materials like photographs, paper, fabric; materials from nature; and collected objects that he found in shops while walking around New York City. These boxes reflected his interests, his dreams, and his memories. He made boxes about birds, astronomy and outer space, Hollywood stars, ballet, and famous places. As a viewer, you may think of how these pictures and objects relate to your own life, and even see beauty in things that are commonplace. The Katonah Museum of Art exhibition has an assemblage that reminds us of childhood. See if you can find it.

Although Cornell knew many of the famous artists of the time, and his artwork was very well known, he was shy and reclusive and avoided public attention. He was, however, close friends with the artist Yayoi Kusama. They spent time together, exchanging ideas and keeping each other company. He sometimes gave her some of his artwork and when he died, he left Kusama a box of objects for her to use in her art.

Cornell Videos:

How did Joseph Cornell, a man who had never had any formal training, become an artist? Sarah Lea, curator of 'Joseph Cornell: Wanderlust', describes his unorthodox career path.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1r_CXS7bXtw



YAYOI KUSAMA (Japanese artist, born 1929)

Yayoi Kusama was born in Matsumoto, Japan. After studying traditional Japanese painting in school, she began to be influenced by abstract art, art that doesn't try to look like something real. Soon after arriving in New York City in 1959, she started creating huge paintings that sometimes filled a room, covered with just polka dots or "infinity nets" – connected lines, straight or curved, looking like a net, going right off the edge of the artwork. She also met and became friends with many of the well know abstract artists of the time. She was very busy and at first successful during

her time in New York: painting, creating sculptures of stuffed shapes, making films, writing poetry, and performing live art events called "Happenings."

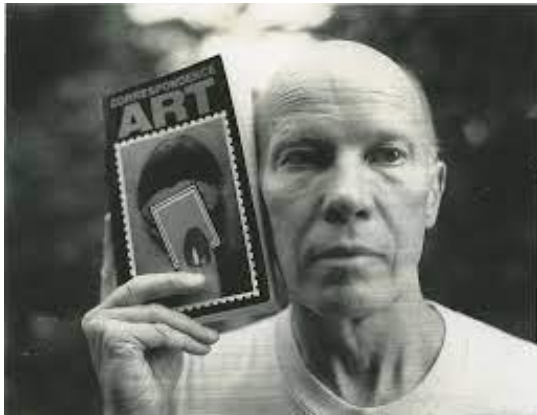
During that time, Kusama also met and became close friends with Joseph Cornell and was very sad when he died. In 1973 she returned to Japan and struggled until she discovered how she could use her art as a form of mental therapy and discovered art's powerful healing power.

Now, at age 93, Yayoi Kusama continues to paint and is sometimes called the “princess of polka dots,” covering objects large and small with polka dots, sometimes using mirrors to make them seem like they go on forever. Her paintings and even the clothes she wears have polka dots. She said, “Our earth is only one polka dot among a million stars in the cosmos. Polka dots are a way to infinity... they help us become part of the bigger universe.” She has become one of the most well-known and popular of Japan’s contemporary artists, exhibiting all around the world. Her artwork in our exhibit shows these dots, as well as an interest in nature and birds, perhaps encouraged by her association with Joseph Cornell.

Kusama Videos:

Kusama: Infinity, a 2018 documentary directed by Heather Lenz. It’s available at many public libraries and also several streaming services, such as YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJzNYgP5Yow>

This video from CNN celebrates a Hong Kong retrospective of Kusama, and of the 93-year-old artist's oeuvre: <https://www.cnn.com/videos/arts/2022/12/31/yayoi-kusama-retrospective.cnn>



RAY JOHNSON (American artist, 1927-1995)

Ray Johnson was born in Detroit, Michigan and studied art at Black Mountain College, where he met and befriended many famous artists. When he moved to New York City, he purposely avoided being part of the traditional art world yet he did unusual things to stand out and make him different, like destroying his own artwork. Johnson has been called “the most famous unknown artist.”

Johnson is best known for his carefully made collages, in which he pasted fragments of photos, newspaper, texts, and drawings onto paper. He developed “Correspondence” or “Mail Art” – sending small works of art to other artists through the mail with a note “please add and send to...” or “please add to and return,” or even, “please do not send to...” Like Yayoi Kusama, he was a performance artist, holding live artistic events, or “Happenings” which he called “Nothings.” Sometimes he did very little at these events, for example dropping spools on the floor that simply rolled around.

Ray Johnson had seen an exhibit of Joseph Cornell’s assemblages and wrote a letter to him afterward. That exhibit influenced Johnson’s work. In our exhibition, we have pictures from Johnson’s silhouette project – collages that include black and white shapes outlining the faces of famous people. Here you will see silhouettes of Joseph Cornell, a drawing of a flower, and a swan. See if you can find the swan in Joseph Cornell’s work in our exhibit. You will also see Johnson’s “Bunny Head” image, a funny cartoon rabbit that he frequently used, writing the names of other artists on it.

Johnson Video/Links

How to Draw a Bunny (2002, dir. John W. Walter, available on vimeo): <https://vimeo.com/110857936>

June 1988, filmmaker Nick Maravell recorded Johnson’s activities: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ac98kJbekOE>



Assemblage Art

An arrangement of various objects or materials combined into a composition.

Take a moment to look. Describe what you see.

Let's look at the individual components of the box and note the first things that come to mind when you look at each item:

- What's the first item you notice in the box? Describe it. How do you feel looking at it? Does it bring any memories to mind?
- Notice the metal rods, ball and ring. What could they be? Why might the artist have included this? Have you ever played with a game like this?
- Look at the image of the lady. What is she holding or doing? What material does this look like? Why might this be included in the box?
- What do you think the lines in the background represent? Do they remind you of anything?
- What's along the bottom of the box?

Consider the artist's choices. Why/how you think the artist arranged the items?

- Consider the color, placement, and connections between the different elements.
- How are items connected or interacting with each other?
- How does your eye travel around the box?
- What kind of materials do you think were used to make this artwork?
- Why do you think the artist chose to use a box structure?

What do you think the artist is trying to capture in this collection of objects?

- What ideas come to mind when you look at it?
- What does it remind you of?
- Imagine you could tilt this box. How would it change? What would move? Would it remind you of anything else?
- What kinds of things do you put in a box? Why?

Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Sun Box)*, c.1958

Wood and glass box construction with wood, metal, glass, paint and printed paper collage. 10 1/2 x 15 x 5 in. (26.7 x 38.1 x 12.7 cm)

Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY, © 2023 The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Untitled (Sun Box) is an example of Cornell's shadow boxes, in which he creates an arrangement of assorted objects, old photographs, and other found elements into a dream-like miniature tableaux. This box construction – one of a large body of related works – brings together several themes to which Cornell often returned, including astronomy and children's games. Cornell says of his box constructions "Shadow boxes become poetic theater or settings wherein are metamorphosed the elements of a childhood pastime."



Make your own:

What might you include in the next box within this series?

Or, start your own Shadow box series that explores some of your favorite themes.



Yayoi Kusama
1980

Collage

Look. Think. Wonder.

LOOK

Take a moment to look at this artwork.

- What do you notice first?
- List everything you see.

Consider the **elements of art** and describe what you see:

- What colors? Be descriptive and specific.
- What shapes? Describe placement, size and repetition.
- What lines? Describe different types that you see and where they are found in the piece.
- Names and describe textures or patterns that you see.

THINK

Describe the **composition**?

- How are all these elements arranged in the artwork?
- How are the elements interacting with the image of the bird?

The materials for this piece are listed as: collage, pastel, gouache (a type of paint), ink on paper

- What elements of the artwork might be collage? Or pastel? Or ink?

What does this artwork make you think about?

- What do you hear, smell, or feel?
- What memories, feelings or ideas come to mind as you look at it?

WONDER

What do you wonder about this piece?

What questions come to mind as you look at it?

Imagine a story about his artwork.

Yayoi Kusama, *Bird*, 1980

Collage, pastel, gouache, ink on paper. 25 7/8 x 20 1/8 in. (65.7 x 51.1 cm)
Private Collection, Courtesy of Omer Tiroche Gallery. © YAYOI KUSAMA

When Kusama left New York for Japan in 1973, she carried with her a box of collage materials given to her by Cornell. Over the next decade, she created many mixed-media collages, some of which incorporated these materials. This series features Kusama's familiar motifs of dots, nets, and cellular forms, but with the addition of brightly-colored bird cut-outs. The birds that perch within these works recall Cornell's *Aviary* series. Kusama, however, frees the birds from their boxes, suspending them instead within the boundless space of her infinity nets and polka dots. Kusama's ambiguous, mixed-media works are a homage to Cornell.



Make your own: Find an item given to you by someone you care about. Incorporate into a collage that tells us something about how you feel about this person, or the relationship you have with them.



6.18.91
DEAR
CRISTO

DAFFODIL
FROM JOSEPH
CORNELL'S
GRAVE, NYACK,
NEW YORK
APRIL 19, 1975

Ray Johnson 1983-85-86
-91

Symbols and Associations

Take a moment to look. Describe what you see.

- What do you notice first when you look at this image?
- Describe the objects, figure and writing that you see. What more can you find?
- Describe the colors the artist chose.

Composition

- Think about the arrangement of the different components of the image.
- What is overlapping?
- How are the different images interacting with each other?
- What is large or small; prominent, or hidden?
- What does this arrangement make you think of?

Symbols

- What elements of this image could be a symbol, or hold other meanings?
- What could the flower represent? How is this flower similar or different than a typical flower? What does this flower represent for you?
- What might the hat represent?
- What might the markings around the head represent?
- We see part of a figure in this composition. Why might the face be in shadow or profile or silhouette? Can you tell what expression the face has?
- What feelings do you think are expressed in this image/composition?

The title of this artwork gives us more information: *Untitled (Daffodil from Joseph Cornell's Grave)*. Ray Johnson sketched a drawing of a daffodil that he found when he visited Cornell's grave and used it in this artwork and others. With this in mind, reconsider the symbolic elements and what they might represent. What might the artist be expressing about his feelings about Joseph Cornell through this collage?



If you wanted to collage together a flower that's important to you with a beloved object or person, what flower and what person? What decisions would guide your process?

Ray Johnson, *Untitled (Daffodil from Joseph Cornell's Grave)*, 1983-85-86-91

Collage, ink on cardboard panel. 13 1/2 x 7 1/2 in. (34.3 x 19.1 cm)

11561. Courtesy of the Ray Johnson Estate © 2023 Ray Johnson Estate / Artists Rights society (ARS), New York

Several years after Joseph Cornell's death, Johnson visited his grave and found a daffodil growing from the soil. He made a pen and ink sketch of the flower, and incorporated photocopies of this drawing into several collages with the text "daffodil from Joseph Cornell's grave, Nyack, New York April 19, 1975." These collages exemplify Johnson's skillful free-association of imagery and textual elements, and his delight in creating visual jokes — for example, the daffodil blooming into a cowboy hat-topped silhouette.

The Meaning of Objects

Objects hold meaning. They evoke associations, memories, and feelings. They can communicate a lot about a person, place, event, or idea. Select one object from your home or school. Place it in the center (or photo or drawing of the object). Think about the object from many different perspectives and write down ideas in each box.

Describe a **memory** connected to this object.

Describe the physical attributes of the object. What color, shape, size?
How does it feel? Notice details.

Symbolic meaning: what bigger idea(s) relate to this object?

Place or draw an OBJECT here:

What **feelings** do you associate with this object?

Use your **imagination** to think of a story about something that happened or could happen to this object.

What do you **wonder** about this object?



Incorporate this object into an assemblage or collage artwork.

Personal Visual Vocabulary

The artists in the exhibition *Miniature Worlds: Joseph Cornell, Ray Johnson, Yayoi Kusama* each developed their own personal imagery and visual vocabulary. These images, like personal **pictograms** (pictorial symbols that represents words, phrases, or ideas), can be found throughout their work and hold personal meaning to the artists.



For Joseph Cornell birds were a symbol of freedom.



For Ray Johnson a round-eyed, long-nosed bunny head was his “self portrait.”



For Yayoi Kusama polka dots are a way to infinity.

In the space below, design personal pictograms that represent aspects of yourself. Think about what objects, animals, patterns, colors, memories, and/or feelings are important to you. Think of icons, emojis, and symbolic images for ideas.

A pictogram that represents a favorite activity	A pictogram that represents a place you love

A pictogram that represents part of your personality	A pictogram that represents something you care about or wish for



Incorporate this “visual vocabulary” into an artwork using any media of your choice.

GLOSSARY FOR *MINIATURE WORLDS*

Your Museum Visit:

Museum: An institution or building where works of art, scientific specimens, or other objects of value are cared for, studied, and displayed.

Collection: An accumulation of objects gathered for study, comparison, or exhibition or as a hobby.

Docent: A person who is a knowledgeable guide, especially one who conducts visitors through a museum and leads a discussion on the exhibitions.

Art Movements

Abstract expressionism: Abstract expressionism is the term applied to new forms of abstract art developed by American painters such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning in the 1940s and 1950s. It is often characterized by gestural brush-strokes or mark-making, and the impression of spontaneity.

Dada: Dada was an art movement formed during the First World War in Zurich in negative reaction to the horrors and folly of the war. The art, poetry and performance produced by dada artists is often satirical and nonsensical in nature.

Installation art: The term installation art is used to describe large-scale, mixed-media constructions, often designed for a specific place or for a temporary period of time.

Mail art: Mail art is a movement based on the principle of sending small scale works through the postal service rather than exhibiting or selling them through conventional commercial channels. Starting in the 1950s New York artist Ray Johnson posted small collages, prints of abstract drawings and poems to art world notables giving rise to what eventually became known as the **New York Correspondence School**.

Nihonga: Nihonga developed as an art movement in direct response to the transformation of Japanese society during the Meiji Period. As Japan opened its trade borders for the first time in over two centuries, a push toward modernity occurred in all sectors of the country's society. Nihonga artists, though, felt the need to preserve the heritage of classical Japanese painting and techniques, resulting in a reinvigoration of the form that paid homage to the past while updating it for the newly sophisticated times of global exposure and artistic influence.

Pop art: Pop art is an art movement that emerged in the 1950s and flourished in the 1960s in America and Britain, drawing inspiration from sources in popular and commercial culture. It began as a revolt against the dominant approaches to art and culture and traditional views on what art should be.

Surrealism: A twentieth-century literary, philosophical and artistic movement that explored the workings of the mind, championing the irrational, the poetic and the revolutionary. Surrealists wanted to free their minds of rational thought, to write or paint the ideas that were buried deep in their minds. These artists did not wish their work to make simple, logical sense.

Art Concepts, Materials and Techniques

Assemblage: Assemblage is art that is made by bringing together disparate materials – often everyday objects scavenged by the artist or bought specially. The use of assemblage as an approach to making art goes back to Pablo Picasso's cubist constructions, the three-dimensional works he began to make from 1912.

Background: A term in visual arts that describes the part of a composition that appears to be farthest from the viewer.

Collage: The technique and the resulting work of art in which pieces of paper, photographs, fabric and other mostly two-dimensional materials are arranged and stuck down onto a supporting surface.

Composition: The plan, placement or arrangement of individual elements in a work of art.

Elements of Art: The basic components used by the artist when producing works of art



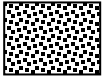
Color: The hue produced when light reflects off a surface. Color is an important element of art that can affect mood, feeling, balance, energy, and memory.



Line: A continuous mark between points. Line may define space, create an outline or contour, form patterns, or express movement. Lines can be horizontal, diagonal, straight, curved, jagged, thick, thin, etc.



Shape: A flat, two-dimensional area enclosed by line.



Texture: The characteristic surface of a material; how it feels to the touch, or the visual appearance of texture on a 2D surface.



Value: The relative lightness or darkness.

Gouache: Gouache is a type of water-soluble paint that is opaque so the white of the paper does not show through.

Infinity nets: Kusama's infinity net paintings are based on [tiny and meticulous] repetitive patterns.

Metaphor: A figure of speech that describes an object or action in a way that isn't literally true, but helps explain an idea or make a comparison. (As in, drowning in money.)

Mixed media: A term used to describe artworks composed from a combination of different media or materials.

Motif: In works of art, a motif is an important and noticeable element or feature that typically appears throughout the work. It can relate to the theme, or it can be the dominant or central idea itself.

Pattern: A series of lines, shapes, or pictures that create a repeated design

Pictograms: Pictorial symbols that represents words, phrases, or ideas

Readymade: The term readymade was first used by French artist Marcel Duchamp to describe the works of art he made from manufactured objects. It has since often been applied more generally to artworks by other artists made in this way.

Shadow box: Using the Surrealist technique of unexpected juxtaposition, Joseph Cornell's best-known works are glass-fronted boxes into which he placed and arranged Victorian bric-a-brac, old photographs, dime-store trinkets, and other found elements. Generally referred to as "shadow boxes," the resulting pieces are dream-like miniature tableaux that inspire the viewer to see each component in a new light.

Tempera: The technique of painting with pigments bound in a water-soluble emulsion, such as water and egg yolk, or an oil-in-water emulsion such as oil and a whole egg.

2-Dimension vs. 3-Dimension: Two-dimensional art is flat, such as a drawing or painting. Three-dimensional art has volume as well as height and length, such as a sculpture.

Visual Vocabulary: Visual vocabulary consists of images or pictures that stand for words and their meanings. In artistic terms, it refers to the imagery and visual elements frequently used by an artist in their work.

Miniature Worlds books in the Learning Center

Joseph Cornell books

Joseph Cornell: Secrets in a Box (Adventures in Art) by Alison Baverstock, 2005

Mr. Cornell's Dream Boxes by Jeanette Winter, 2014

The Amazing Collection of Joey Cornell by Candace Fleming, illustrated by Gerard Dubois, 2018

Yayoi Kusama books

Yayoi Kusama Covered Everything in Dots and Wasn't Sorry by Fausto Gilberti, 2020

Yayoi Kusama: From Here to Infinity by Sarah Suzuki, illustrated by Ellen Weinstein, 2017

Yayoi Kusama: Ready-to Read Level 3 (You Should Meet) by May Nakamura, illustrated by Alexandra Badiu, 2021

Other books

Making a Great Exhibition by Doro Globus and Rose Blake, 2021

Meet Me at the Art Museum: A Whimsical Look Behind the Scenes by David Goldin, 2012

The Art Lesson by Tomie dePaola, 1989

The Dot by Peter H. Reynolds, 2003

The Museum by Susan Verde, illustrated by Peter H. Reynolds, 2013

The Museum of Me by Emma Lewis, 2016