GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE ACQUIRES JOSEPH CORNELL CORRESPONDENCE WITH SUSANNA DE MARIA WILSON

Unpublished letters, ca. 1963-68, from the artist to his early assistant feature poetic, philosophical musings and collages

LOS ANGELES – The Getty Research Institute announced today the acquisition of a cache of unpublished letters from American assemblage artist Joseph Cornell (1903-1972) to Susanna De Maria Wilson, one of the artist’s early assistants. The letters, from 1963-1968, feature philosophical and poetic musings, practical information on materials, and some of the exquisite collage work for which Cornell is best known. The collection also includes ephemera from the New York art world and letters from others related to the artist’s death in 1972.

“Artist letters such as these are a crucial aspect of our collections,” said Thomas W. Gaehtgens, director of the Getty Research Institute. “They are an important source for understanding an artist’s work – especially of an artist as mysterious and multi-layered as Cornell.”

The letters were mailed over a period lasting from 1963-1968 to Susanna De Maria Wilson, who was then married to Minimalist sculptor Walter De Maria (American, 1925-2013), when she worked as Cornell’s assistant. As the first letter notes, the two met in the spring of 1962, when De Maria Wilson was working at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The letters document diverse aspects of their working relationship, including Cornell’s directions concerning where De Maria Wilson might find source material for his collage and assemblage work, guidance on what kind of images appealed to him, and even sample images.

Interspersed with social notes – holiday cards and thank-you notes – many of the letters are very reflective, offering his thoughts on process, dreams, and mythological ideas.
Throughout, the writing is typical of the artist's allusive and laconic style, although there are surprising moments of humor.

Cornell's mail is also strongly visual. Even the most mundane letters and postcards appear to have had stamps affixed with great care. Some of the correspondence contain multiple envelopes to be opened in succession, producing a layered experience of reading and viewing. One envelope, stamped February 13, 1964, contains a collage bouquet of pressed flowers and paper angels, especially demonstrative of Cornell's artistry.

"The aesthetic composition of these letters is as important as the textual content of this correspondence," noted John Tain, curator of modern and contemporary art at the GRI. "It is as much a collection of collage work on paper by Joseph Cornell as it is an archive of art historical documents."

Together with supplemental ephemera, these letters, written when Cornell was 60 to 65 years old, also capture his curiosity about, and his connections to, the art scene in Manhattan during the 1960's. For example, he inquires about "Happenings" and discusses screenings of films from his collection.

The small archive joins significant collections on surrealism, including earlier letters written by Cornell to his friend, poet and artist Charles Henri Ford (American, 1913-2002). A bibliographic record of the archive will be available to researchers online in late 2014.

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