

Joseph Cornell's Cosmos: An Artist's Modern Interpretations of Astronomical Myths

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Abstract. The American artist Joseph Cornell (1903–1972) devoted his career to making collages and box constructions touching on a dizzying assortment of personal interests, reflected in an eclectic array of materials. Among his wide-ranging obsessions was the history of astronomy, especially myths of the constellations. Throughout his career, these stories provided the foundation for works that allude to modern advances in science, his own personal traumas, and popular culture. For instance, he employed the story of Andromeda to explore to new theories about the size and age of the universe; he labored for two decades on a Duchampian *boite en valise* devoted to his desire for an imaginary little girl astronomer named Berenice, embodied in the constellation Coma Berenices; upon the death of Marilyn Monroe he produced a commemorative assemblage with Custos Messium playing the part of a custodian to guard the deceased actress. Cornell's creative process offers a case study of the complex relations between myth and art, and the ways in which psychological myth theory can be applied to personalized reconfigurations of established tales of the stars.

From the 1930s until his death in 1972, the American artist Joseph Cornell (1903–1972) made collages and box constructions touching on a dizzying assortment of personal interests. He is best known for his assemblage boxes, filled with strange objects and pasted paper elements, which he began making in the 1930s. He also made flat collages, affixing printed materials onto two-dimensional surfaces. While his artistic interests were remarkably eclectic, with works on topics that flitted from butterflies to ballerinas, he maintained a life-long interest in astronomy.¹ An article

¹ For a detailed overview of Cornell's interest in the stars, see Kirsten Hoving, *Joseph Cornell and Astronomy: A Case for the Stars* (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 2009). See also Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, 'Geographies of the

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58 Joseph Cornell's Cosmos: An Artist's Modern Interpretations of
Astronomical Myths

published in *Life* magazine in 1967 perceptively highlighted his 'imagined universe stored in boxes', 'put together with the precision and balance of an algebraic equation', but still 'delicately enigmatic', according to the author.²

Cornell was interested in the stars from an early age, and over the course of his lifetime he amassed many books about astronomy and astronomers. He clipped articles on these topics from newspapers and magazines, and he even collected old maps of the constellations. Books by the nineteenth-century astronomer Camille Flammarion (1842–1925), especially his study of the stars, *Les Etoiles*, were important sources for Cornell, who would take these books to a local Photostat maker to make cheap copies that he could cut and paste in collages and boxes. Photostat technology developed in the early twentieth century as an inexpensive way to make black and white positive and negative facsimile copies of flat material. Photostats were frequently used by commercial artists, including Cornell, to design layouts, and Cornell used them in his own commercial work. He was particularly intrigued by Flammarion's illustrations taken from seventeenth-century celestial atlases by Johannes Hevelius (1611–1687), as well as the more recent constellation maps by Johann Bode ((1747–1826), published in 1801.³ Cornell knew Flammarion's books from the beginning of his career, when he was probably given them by his gallerist, Julien Levy. In an early note in the Archives of American Art Cornell referred to taking 'Flammarion Astron bks' from Levy's gallery.

Although Cornell produced boxes directly based directly on scientific themes, such as *Radar Astronomy* and *The Birth of the Nuclear Atom*, throughout his career he was drawn to the myths of the stars. They were important to him on multiple levels: as age-old stories that imposed order on the heavens, as locations for modern scientific research, and as veiled codes for his own repressed desires. To examine how Cornell found multivalent meanings in the stars, it is especially instructive to look at two particular constellations that featured prominently in his creative life: Andromeda and Custos Messium.

Heavens', in *Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

² 'Imagined Universe Stored in Boxes', *Life* (15 December 1967): pp. 52–53.

³ Joseph Cornell's papers, including his voluminous clipping files, are archived in two separate collections: the Joseph Cornell Study Center at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Archives of American Art. The Joseph Cornell Study Center also contains the contents of his library at the time of his death.

As established by Claudius Ptolemy, Andromeda was the daughter of King Cepheus of Ethiopia and Queen Cassiopeia, who offended the sea nymphs by claiming that she was more beautiful than they were. As punishment for Cassiopeia's boast, Poseidon sent a sea monster to destroy Cepheus' lands. Consulting an oracle, the king learned that the only way to appease the monster was to sacrifice his daughter, Andromeda, who was therefore chained to a rock to die, but rescued by Perseus. Upon their deaths, Athena commemorated Andromeda by placing her in the night sky, along with Cepheus, Cassiopeia, and Perseus.

The myth was popular in the history of art, offering a pretext for painting a virginal female nude in bondage at the exciting moment of her rescue. Titian (1488-1576) and Rubens (1577-1640) produced sensuous paintings of Andromeda in chains, as did Delacroix (1798-1863) and Burne-Jones (1833-1898) in the nineteenth century, to cite just a few examples. On one level, this myth gives form to a certain star configuration, and it acts as a narrative map to define relationships between various groupings of stars. As an origin myth based on the position of stars, the tale offers an etiological explanation for celestial geography, through personification. However, the story also pivots on other themes found in many myths: female vanity, ritual human sacrifice of an innocent victim, and divine intercession and deliverance, often by a male hero. For Cornell, these themes of beauty, sacrifice, and deliverance would be central in his artistic interpretations of the Andromeda myth throughout his career.

Cornell first turned to Andromeda as a subject for collages in the early 1930s, producing two early works that, unlike those of his predecessors, avoided the sensual side of the story. He copied two early clothed personifications of the constellation from *Les Etoiles*, and altered them with applied grid lines, color, and other collage elements such as the saucepan that he included as a stand-in for the Big Dipper in one of them.⁴ It is not surprising that Cornell would have been interested in Andromeda in the 1930s. Astronomical research was frequently in the news, especially in the *New York Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor*, from which he clipped numerous articles. The Andromeda galaxy featured largely in reports of new discoveries about the size of the universe and the speed with which it was thought to be expanding, as it was often said, like a giant soap bubble.⁵

⁴ These early collages are in private collections. Reproduced in Hartigan, *Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Stars*, plates 110 and 111.

⁵ See, for example, 'Andromeda Nebula Big as our Galaxy', *New York Times* 7 December 1933, p.20.

60 Joseph Cornell's Cosmos: An Artist's Modern Interpretations of Astronomical Myths

As Cornell's art evolved, he expanded his interpretation of the Andromeda myth. In the early 1950s, Cornell embarked on a series of so-called "observatory boxes," to be shown in a solo exhibition he called 'Night Voyage', at New York's Egan Gallery in 1953. The constellations featured prominently in these works, especially Andromeda (figure 1). In a series of boxes on the theme, he adapted Hevelius's somewhat androgynous depiction of a partially-clad figure seen from behind, and included a real chain that dangles loosely in front of her. With her bare back to us, she faces a starry sky that seems to be receding.

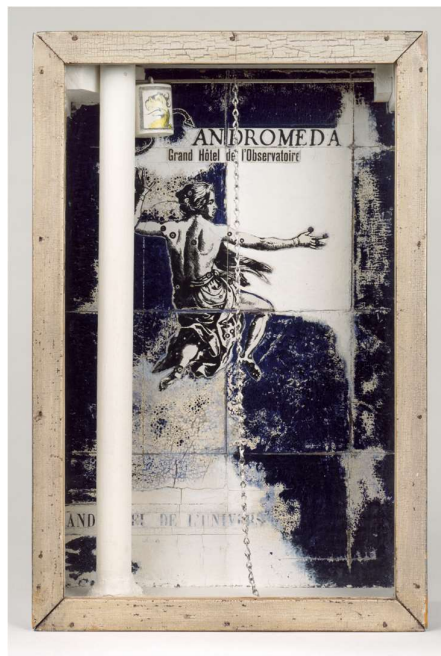


Figure 1: Joseph Cornell's Andromeda.

Whether Cornell faced the figure to the right or left in his various Andromeda boxes, he always pasted the carefully trimmed figures sitting on the incised line of an enlarged grid, looking out to a vast expanse of distant stars. Often, he attached references to hotels along with Andromeda's name, suggesting that the constellation offered a temporary resting place on a journey into the deeper heavens. He was no doubt inspired by new discoveries increasing the size and age of the universe that

were being made at this time by studying Andromeda. As physicist George Gamow (1904-1968) put it in *Scientific American* magazine in 1954, ‘the present-day photograph of the great Andromeda Nebula shows that group of stars as it looked about two million years ago, for it has taken that time for its light to reach us’.⁶ At the same time, Cornell may have also imagined Andromeda balancing on the telephone wire in his own backyard, as he did with other constellations he included in rough drawings of his night skies. To Cornell the constellations were beloved friends, and, despite their increasing age and distance, he brought them close to home by creating human avatars for them.

As Cornell reached middle age, the erotic charge of the myth became increasingly important to him. Cornell was a bachelor who lived with his mother and invalid brother all his life. Although details about his gender preference remain a mystery, his firm friendships among New York’s gay community, have led some scholars to assign him a queer identity.⁷ Nevertheless, in the 1950s, he began saving female erotica, clipping and collaging pictures of nude women, particularly those who reminded him of the constellation Andromeda. He found a parallel between the pose and bare back of a picture of the actress Jackie Lane (1941-) and a star chart on which he scrawled “Jackie Andromeda” at the top (figure 2). He copied the photo of Jackie Lane and used it in a variety of Andromeda collages (figure 3). Clearly part of the appeal of the Hevelius personification of the constellation that Cornell relied on so heavily was the thrill of thinking about a nude woman, cutting her out, and pasting her down in his boxes and collages, just as she had been chained to her rock by the sea.

Cornell’s perhaps prurient interest in Andromeda was nevertheless offset by her mythical narrative, in which she is an innocent victim volunteered for sacrifice to appease angry gods. Cornell titled another collage, also using this clipping, now doubled, *Allegory of Innocence*,

⁶ George Gamow, ‘Modern Cosmology’, *Scientific American* 193 (March 1954): p.50.

⁷ For innuendo about Cornell’s gender identity during his own lifetime, see David Bourdon, ‘Enigmatic Bachelor of Utopia Parkway’, *Life* 63 (15 December 1967): pp.63, 66. The first ‘outing’ of Cornell came in Wayne Koestenbaum and Tony Kushner, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Sexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseiden, 1993), p. 64. For a comprehensive biography of Cornell, see Deborah Solomon, *Utopia Parkway: The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1997).

62 Joseph Cornell's Cosmos: An Artist's Modern Interpretations of Astronomical Myths

signifying his understanding of Andromeda's role in the myth.⁸ Having sacrificed much of his own life to care for his family, Cornell forged an imaginary personal connection with Andromeda, whose innocence he celebrated in this and other works. Other renditions of Andromeda, however, are less innocent. In one collage he pasted a photograph of a nude woman on a rock as the waters rise around her, with her eventual fate as a constellation presaged by the star pasted to the binding around her neck.⁹



Figure 2: Joseph Cornell's "Jackie Andromeda".

⁸ Reproduced in Sarah Lea, Sabine Haag, and Jasper Sharp, eds, *Joseph Cornell, Fernweh* (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 2015), p.219.

⁹ Reproduced in Hartigan, *Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Stars*, plate 97.



Figure 3: Joseph Cornell's Andromeda Collage.

From his study of early constellation charts in Flammarion's books and the traditional mode of representation codified by artists like Titian, Cornell knew that Andromeda was traditionally shown topless and enchained, and in some respects he was simply updating her image by using a realistic photograph in place of the idealized images. But with that realism comes a sexual charge that was not lost of the artist. In cultural terms, myths can function as outlets for sexual expression, allowing normally repressed desires to take a safe form in a fantastic story. Perhaps this is how Andromeda functioned for Cornell, as a culturally sanctioned vehicle for desires he would otherwise suppress.

While Cornell may have found an outlet for his private sexual longings in the myth of Andromeda, other star stories offered him ways to confront public loss. On August 5, 1962, the movie-going public was shocked to learn of the suicide of Marilyn Monroe (1926–1962), leading millions of people, including Cornell, to mourn the death of the star. Within days, he considered creating a work to honor her, which eventually took the form of several boxes referred to in his notes as *Custodian*, *Silent Dedication to MM*. A week after her funeral, he started jotting down ideas. He wrote, "image of 'the Custodian,' add ASTRON. Chart. Marilyn."¹⁰ He saved articles about her in a special file, adding notes and even a star chart (figure 4).

¹⁰ Notes in Cornell's Marilyn Monroe clipping file, Joseph Cornell Study Center.

64 Joseph Cornell's Cosmos: An Artist's Modern Interpretations of
Astronomical Myths



Figure 4.

The most significant symbol, however, came to him from an actual experience: a glimpse of a young boy going through a subway turnstile, which he saw as both a symbol of innocent childhood and a parallel to passing through the gates of heaven. In his Marilyn Monroe notes he recalled, ‘a look of unspoiled youth, a kind of wandering wondering, then “suddenly” . . . in a flash. . . this “youth in blue” . . . CUSTOS MESSIUM—the Custodian—the wandering night companion of the “Little Bear” and Camel-leopard. He is a forgotten constellation’.¹¹ For his file of materials about the actress, Cornell copied a page from Flammarion’s *Les Etoiles*, showing Bode’s 1801 map of *Les Voisins du Pôle*, which includes among the neighbors of the North Pole the constellation Custos Messium, located above Camelopardalis, the camel-leopard giraffe.

Unlike Andromeda, Custos Messium, also known as ‘Le Messier’ was not a constellation with ancient roots; rather, it was invented in the eighteenth century by Jerome Lalande (1732-1807) to honor the astronomer Charles Messier (1730-1817), who published an astronomical catalogue of nebulae and star objects. The M-designations still used today by astronomers refer to Messier’s catalogue. For instance, the Andromeda Galaxy is known to astronomers as M-31, based on Messier’s catalogue. The constellation was illustrated by German astronomer Bode) in his beautiful *Uranographia* of 1801, and was later reproduced in

¹¹ Cornell’s Marilyn Monroe clipping file.

Flammarion's books, from which Cornell, in turn, had Photostat reproductions made. Bode introduced seven new constellations, including modernized configurations like the *Machina Electrica*, the electrical generator, and *Officina Typographica*, the Printshop. But Cornell's interest lay in star personifications to which he could assign personal significance, rather than in Bode's contemporary objects.

Custos Messium lay between *Cepheus* and *Camelopardalis* in what is now northern *Cassiopeia*, next to another defunct constellation, *Rangifer* the Reindeer. Pictured as a guardian figure wearing a cap and carrying a staff, 'Custos Messium' punned on Messier's name, as well as his role as the custodian of the sky. Its brightest star was the present-day 50 *Cassiopeiae*, of 4th magnitude. The constellation remained in star atlases for about a century, but by the 1870s it was in decline, falling off the lists of constellations in astronomy texts.¹² By the early twentieth century, observational astronomers required a uniform set of clearly bounded constellations for the naming of newly-discovered variable stars. In 1922, when the International Astronomical Union codified the eighty-eight constellations recognized today and determined their non-overlapping boundaries, they eliminated the already largely-forgotten *Custos Messium*, along with other modern configurations that celebrated Herschel's telescope, the hot-air balloon, and moveable type. Many of the nineteenth-century star maps in Cornell's collection pictured these constellations in great detail, in figurations based on Bode's atlas. Although the IAU's efforts were heralded as evidence of modern international scientific cooperation in the wake of the first world war, Cornell was not ready to abandon the custodian constellation, which he envisioned as a night companion for Marilyn Monroe. Instead, he created a myth where none existed. Having spied a child in blue passing through the subway gate, he translated that actual moment into an incarnation of *Custos Messium*: the perfect celestial protector for the actress. Just as Perseus had rescued Andromeda, in Cornell's cosmos *Custos Messium* would ensure Marilyn Monroe's safety.

Cornell may have envisioned himself as the guardian not only of the movie star, but also of the abandoned constellation. Although *Custos Messium* had disappeared from astronomical maps and lists by the end of the nineteenth century, Cornell seems to have assigned himself the task of making sure the constellation would still be remembered. He used Bode's

¹² For a detailed discussion of *Custos Messium*, see John C. Barentine, *The Lost Constellations* (Berlin: Springer Praxis Books, 2016), pp.119–36.

66 Joseph Cornell's Cosmos: An Artist's Modern Interpretations of
Astronomical Myths

version of it in a variety of different artworks, perhaps to infuse a feeling of nostalgia for an abandoned star configuration whose demise resulted from a need for astronomical precision, not poetry. Indeed, Cornell's fascination for antiquated constellations often combined a desire to return to an earlier age of star-gazing with his own needs for surrogates, even forgotten ones like Custos Messium.

When he created his *Silent Dedication to MM* (figure 5), he attached a reproduction of the constellation to the inner back, reorienting the map so the guardian is upright, and colored the giraffe, Camelopardalis, yellow. He removed the large striding figure of Cepheus, leaving only his legs, perhaps because the larger figure distracted from the smaller figure of Custos Messium, although the remaining huge legs and shadowed crotch add an ominous note of sexual threat. Thus Cornell created another allegory of innocence, this time with the manufactured myth of a guardian constellation. Indeed, Cornell also seems to have extended Custos Messium's role as protector for Andromeda. In his collage with Jackie Lane, the constellation appears as a young boy leaning on a staff in the background (figure 3). The notion of constellations as guardians figured largely in Cornell's appreciation of the stars, and in other works and notes, he assigned such properties to other constellations as well. The constellation Auriga, 'the charioteer', was particularly meaningful for Cornell, who most likely associated it with his brother, Robert, who was confined to a wheelchair his entire life.



Figure 5: Joseph Cornell's *Silent Dedication to MM.*

One of the last collages Cornell made visualized his lifelong fascination with his 'neighbors', the familiar constellations he loved. On the front, he pasted a photograph of his backyard quince tree, then stained it brown and used his fingerprints or another device to create two distinct shapes (figure 6). Their meaning becomes clear on the back of the collage, where Cornell attached the map of *Les voisins du pôle*, with Camelopardalis, the Giraffe, and Custos Messium, the Custodian, striding through the heavens. A second look at the front reveals that the brown shapes are shadows of these same constellations. On the back of the collage, along with the star chart, Cornell pasted a general address label with his address on Utopia Parkway, changing the singular 'resident' to 'residents'. He specified those residents with another bit of collage, the title of the map taken from Flammarion's book. A decade earlier he had envisioned Custos Messium as a protector

68 Joseph Cornell's Cosmos: An Artist's Modern Interpretations of
Astronomical Myths

for the spirit of a suicidal movie star. Now he placed the Custodian and his fellow-constellations over his own home, and over himself.



Figure 5.

Joseph Cornell found inspiration in myths of the stars that led to idiosyncratic, personal interpretations. Translating the literary narrative of Andromeda into unorthodox works of art, he made the myth modern. And, inventing a role for Custos Messium, he imagined a starry guide for a movie star. Cornell depended on myth to enlarge his artworks, to transform them from strange collections of unrelated objects into personalized visions of the stars. In the process, he found universal psychological themes in the myths that spoke to his need for companionship, intimacy, and deliverance from the bounds of his own earthly existence. The sky did indeed ‘talk’ to Cornell, and its messages sustained the artist throughout his life.