



Historical Society of the Nyacks

Newsletter

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JOSEPH CORNELL: AN AMERICAN ORIGINAL

by Gini Stollendorf, Editor

The Nyack villages have been home to many people in the arts. One of the more prominent was sculptor, Joseph Cornell, a descendent of old Dutch families in Nyack. Cornell's great-grandfather, Commodore William Voorhis, was in the steamboat trade and is also credited with the founding of the Nyack Water Department. In 1870, Voorhis was instrumental in persuading the Erie Railroad to extend its tracks to Nyack. Cornell's father, Joseph I. Cornell, was a designer and buyer of menswear. He married Helen ten Broeck Storms, who trained to be a teacher. The Cornells were part of the fabric of Nyack and were considered to be moderately well-to-do. In 1903, Joseph Cornell was born, the first of four children.

JOSEPH CORNELL AT THE MOVIES

Anthology Film Archives, at 32 Second Avenue in New York City, is a repository, preserver, and exhibitor of films of particular interest to movie and history buffs alike. On June 30, it will feature several Joseph Cornell movies, which are some of the earliest collage movies ever created. The program guide describes Cornell as "The poet of magic realities. Pioneer of recycled (found) images." For more information, check out www.anthologyfilmarchives.org. —Information provided by Tom Morrison, HSN member

Both parents were very interested in the arts and would often take the children by train into New York City. They frequented plays, vaudeville shows, and strolled along Times Square. Young Joseph became fascinated by the magic of lights. On one of their trips into the city, the family attended a performance of Harry Houdini's and Joseph became an immediate fan and especially infatuated with the medium of magic. The Cornells frequented the two movie theaters in Nyack and Joseph performed in a production of Gilbert & Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*.

In 1910, Joseph's brother, Robert, was born with severe cerebral palsy, which affected him physically, but not mentally, and in time would be confined to a wheelchair. It never occurred to the family, however, to remove Robert to an institution. Private tutors were engaged to provide him with a "school education." Joseph and his two sisters tended to their brother and all were very close.

Elizabeth (Betty) Cornell, the eldest daughter, showed an



Joseph Cornell Historic Marker on house in South Nyack.
Nyack Library, Local History Collection.

interest in art and took lessons from Nyack-born Edward Hopper, who was by this time living in lower Manhattan. Hopper would come to Nyack by train on Saturdays and give lessons at the Hopper home on North Broadway.

In 1917, the Cornells' lifestyle dramatically changed with the sudden death of the father. The family left their house on South Broadway and moved to Queens, N.Y., where they had relatives. They rented a house and Helen started to work part-time as a baker and knitter in order to support her family. Young Joseph was sent (on scholarship) to Phillips Academy in Massachusetts. He remained there until 1921, then returned to Queens to be with his family, getting a job as salesman of woolen goods. As he traveled around the metropolitan area, he began to visit art galleries, frequent the opera, the ballet, and movie theaters, a passion he developed while living in Nyack.

Cornell became a chronic collector of balls, stuffed birds, clocks, newspapers, magazines, illustrations, antique trinkets, and an assortment of nostalgic paraphernalia, which were assembled into "boxes" with glass fronts that would become signature pieces of his art. He also designed the apparatus for mounting these boxes on the wall, his way of elevating the beauty of small commonplace things.

The family finally bought a house on Utopia Parkway in Flushing, Queens. In time, the two daughters married and moved away, but Joseph, with his mother and brother, would remain in this house for the rest of their lives.

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LOCAL HISTORY IS SO REAL AND SO CLOSE YOU CAN REACH OUT AND TOUCH IT

Cornell, continued

By 1931, Cornell had already seen the works of such modern artists as René Magritte, Alberto Giacometti, and collages by Max Ernst, and was fascinated by them. In this same year, he saw a Surrealist exhibition at the Julien Levy Galleries in New York City. Within a few weeks, Cornell returned to the gallery with some of his collages of scenes he created from cutting and rearranging old engravings he had collected. Later that year, Levy organized another exhibit and included Cornell's collages and encouraged him to make more. This experimentation continued into 1936 with the development of the boxes. His fascination with movies also continued as he produced short films, such as *Monsieur Phot* and *Rose Hobart*.

During this time, he met Marcel Duchamp. Both Cornell's and Duchamp's works were included in a 1936 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art titled *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, which attracted a lot of attention and was a huge success for the MoMA. Besides showing his works in major exhibitions, Cornell was a freelance designer for *Vogue* and *House & Garden* magazines and a designer of fabric for the Traphagen Commercial Textile Studios.

In 1942, Peggy Guggenheim included works by Cornell in her inaugural show at her New York gallery, Art of This Century. The exhibit also included works by Robert Motherwell and Max Ernst. Cornell continued to exhibit and, in 1949, the Charles Egan Gallery (NYC) organized an exhibit titled *Aviary by Joseph Cornell*, which included 26 of his boxes. As his work began attracting more and more attention in the 1950s, he became very well known in the U.S., but possibly even more so abroad.

During the 1960s, his mother and brother died and he started what he referred to as his "retirement." Joseph Cornell died in 1972.

In Nyack, in 1977, the Hopper House staged its first exhibition, and it was of Cornell's work. The show included more than a dozen of his box constructions, as well as his photographs and memorabilia from his early life in Nyack. The exhibit was organized with the help of one of his sisters, Betty, who noted that her brother loved growing up in Nyack.

In 1980, the Museum of Modern Art staged an exhibition of Cornell's work titled *Cosmic Travels*, which highlighted his collages from their permanent collection and was designed to "explore this Rockland County man's fascination with the metaphysical and celestial wonders."

Joseph Cornell's work is currently featured in the exhibition, *American Legends: From Calder to O'Keeffe*, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Madison Avenue at 75th Street, NYC, on view through the end of this year.

Support Local History. Join the Society:
See next page or visit: www.nyackhistory.org



SPRING MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

by Win Perry, AIA, Society President

This spring, I offer a mix of unrelated thoughts:

One—Nyack's Hidden History: West Nyack has a grand historical marker to celebrate an ancient horse watering trough by the side of Strawtown Road. Nyack has an ancient horse watering trough also, carved from a handsome piece of locally quarried red sandstone, and located in a public place where it may have sat for centuries, but with no historical marker.

Piermont had a fine ceremony to commemorate a historic roadway bridge over the Sparkill, which has stone arched faces and a brick vaulted interior. Nyack has one also, but it hasn't had a ceremony, although we drive over it every day.

Whoever first emails me at winperry@nyackhistory.org correctly locating both of these treasures will get a free one-year extension of their Historical Society membership and recognition in the next Newsletter.

Two—Exhibit and Sale of Astrith Deyrup Art: Opening June 8, we are pleased to offer an exhibit and sale of works of art in a variety of media by Astrith Deyrup, late of Upper Nyack, whose story appears in this issue. Her residual collection was left to Michael Overn, who has generously given much of it for us to sell jointly with the Rivertown Film Society. The exhibit is augmented with pieces loaned by private individuals to illustrate the broader range of her work. The exhibit and sale will be held through the summer at our museum, 50 Piermont Avenue, which will be open Saturdays from 1:00 to 4:00, and during Art Walk in Nyack (June 14-16).

Three—Upper Nyack's Old Stone Church: The oldest extant building constructed for worship in Rockland County, and probably the oldest place of public assembly for any purpose, is celebrating its 200th birthday this year. Now owned by the Village of Upper Nyack, it has been renamed the Old Stone Meeting House to include its new purpose as a community meeting place. The Village is asking for recollections and souvenirs. If you have anything to give, lend, or record, please contact me at winperry@nyackhistory.org. The building will be open Sunday afternoons during June and July.

Four—It's probably time to renew your membership: Most memberships renew in May. Please check the date on your mailing label and send us your renewal. Happy springtime!

ASTRITH DEYRUP—A BIOGRAPHY

by Betty Perry, HSN Trustee

Astrith was the youngest of seven children born to Alvin Johnson and his wife, Edith. Dr. Johnson had grown up in the Midwest with immigrant parents from Denmark. He was an author, scholar, and an innovative educator, best known for establishing the New School for Social Research in New York City. In 1918, the Johnsons bought the house at 309 North Broadway in Upper Nyack and spent part of each year there (and part in NYC), planting gardens and raising chickens and other animals. And it was in a house on this property that Astrith spent her final years as well.

Home schooled, the Johnson children all earned advanced degrees. Their professions included pediatrician, lawyer, economist, slug physiologist, painter, and batik artist. Astrith painted every day of her life, in oil and watercolor, and in enamel on copper, but she was particularly talented in creating batiks. A few years ago, while in a New York City hospital, she had a sketch pad and markers and covered the walls of her room with pictures, which she gave to the attendants and her visitors.

Astrith was also a talented piano and flute player and loved to be surrounded by flowers. Generous and loving, she shared her talents with children in the New York City afterschool programs, visited schools to teach tie dying to children, and gave free batik workshops at the Nyack Library. If you asked her for lessons you would be invited to paint in the studio at her home looking out over the Hudson River. Boats, trees, and the river were favorite subjects, but then, so were flowers.

Astrith designed fabrics for Fuller Fabrics, Roger Bachmann Design Studio, International Paper Company, and Studio K. She exhibited at many universities, libraries, and galleries. Some of her batik hangings are in the permanent collection of Western Illinois University. Her three books on batik and tie dying are still used by students and artists today.

In her final years, Astrith had several



Astrith Deyrup, photo by Win Perry exhibits of her work at her home in Upper Nyack and one in the storefront of the *Seven AM* building at the corner of North Broadway and School Street, famously painted by Edward Hopper.

When Astrith died in 2011, at age 87, the Garden Club of Nyack planted a redbud tree in her memory at the Old Stone Meeting House in Upper Nyack, where she had been baptized and where her sister Natalie was married.

Astrith left her paintings to her tenant and honorary son, Michael Overn. Michael has generously given some of them jointly to the Historical Society of the Nyacks and to Rivertown Film Society. They are on sale from June 8 through the summer at the Society's museum at 50 Piermont Avenue in Nyack. The proceeds will be shared.

NYACK LIBRARY NEWS

In May, two history displays will be shown in the glass cases of the Carnegie-Farian Room. One case will feature photographs of groups of people, with some of the individuals identified. We are asking for help in putting names on the other faces. The pictures are dated from the 1940s to the 1960s, and are of young children at an egg race, fourth graders in Upper Nyack School, nursing students, politicians, a ground-breaking ceremony, and more. Please stop by and leave comments and IDs about the events and faces.

The second case will include images of some of Nyack's infamous storms, including the blizzard of 1888, the county-wide flood of 1903, floods on Route 59 in West Nyack in the 1930s, as well as later storms. All of the photos are from the Nyack Library Local History Room collection.

In June and July, author Carson

Historical Society of the Nyacks

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RENEW / JOIN

Please take a few moments to benefit local history. Your support helps us to maintain and enhance our museum in the DePew House and enables us to continue popular activities such as our acclaimed House Tour, our John Scott Armchair Walking Tours, and other special lectures and programs. See the mailing label for your membership status.

Mail your payment to Historical Society of the Nyacks, P.O. Box 850, Nyack, NY 10960

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McCullers will be featured in the display cases. This compilation is being organized by Local History intern, Isabella Costa.

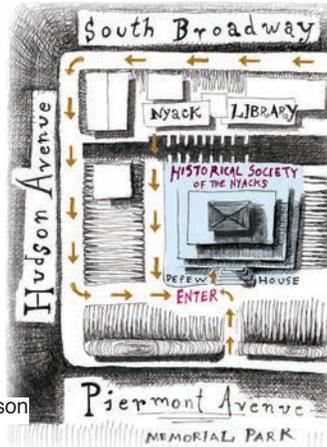
—Information provided by Carol Weiss, HSN Trustee

LOCAL HISTORY IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER

Our museum is open from 1 to 4pm on Saturdays and is located in the lower level of the Depew House, 50 Piermont Avenue (directly east of the Nyack Library).



Bill Batson



AT THE MUSEUM SATURDAYS FROM 1 TO 4PM

THROUGH JUNE 1: TOWERS OF NYACK

A photographic exhibit showcasing many of Nyack's most dramatic architectural features. The photographer is Bob Goldberg, long time leader of Nyack Walking Tours and of the John Scott Armchair Walking Tours.

OPENING JUNE 8: EXHIBIT AND SALE OF ASTRITH DEYRUP ART

Works of art in a variety of media by Astrith Deyrup, late of Upper Nyack, whose story appears in this issue.

Newsletter



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