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MANUSCRIPT GUIDELINES
FOR THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM JOURNAL

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ABBREVIATIONS
MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art
MMAB The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin
MMJ Metropolitan Museum Journal

Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.
Although Joseph Cornell never owned a camera, the artist avidly amassed photography manuals. About 1941, he subscribed to *The Complete Photographer*, a serialized field guide replete with stylistic tips and technical advice.¹ Exhaustive as the magazine was on matters creative and chemical, Cornell remained a resolutely incomplete photographer, whose artistic practice engaged every aspect of camera work except for the thing itself.² He fabricated photographic constructions from found materials (fig. 1), and his diaries reveal a roving camera-eye, registering images everywhere.³ To sift through his notes is to assemble an ad hoc album of these images in absentia: there are the passersby and pigeons, the piece of plastic in the street. There—in the window—the teenager, the turkey sandwich, and
processes, from the unique—daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and tintypes—to the multiple and mass-produced: cabinet cards, stereographs, and cartes de visite appear in great numbers, as do all manner of photomechanical reproductions. In the latter category one might also count the many such prints that Cornell cut and incorporated into his collages. Yet if those works on paper presented raw materials for Cornell’s art making, it was their historic predecessor, the daguerreotype, that most clearly modeled the format of his work. The oldest of commercially viable photographic processes, daguerreotypy produced a direct-positive image on a reflective silvered surface, to be sealed behind glass. Often edged in brass and bound in velvet-lined leather cases with hinged lids, daguerreotypes resembled the glass-paned boxes that Cornell was then constructing. Part Kunstkammer, part collage, these boxes preserved thrift-shop specimens and scraps of history, reanimating the fragments of forgotten worlds. For him, the analogous form of the daguerreotype, with its casket-case and its glinting surface, offered a new point of entry into photographic practice.

Characteristically choosing the most esoteric possible path, Cornell had, by 1941, come into his own as a cameraless “photographer.” That year, as in all previous years, he photographed nothing. Working instead with scissors, sequins, glass, and glue, he transformed an interchangeable scrap of ephemera into a unique photographic object, designed to mediate between photography’s past and present. This object, evoked on the Complete Photographer envelope, engages the daguerreotype as a type of time machine with which to resolve the existential anachronisms of the artist’s life and work.

Beneath the rose-tinted glass of this rare Cornell creation, Tamara’s face flashes (see fig. 1). With head turned and eyes downcast, she accentuates an elegant profile. At her shoulder, embellishments twinkle along the trim of her dress. And around her likeness, ambient light bounces off a silver mirror, in a masterful illusion orchestrated by Cornell. The artist glazed and inset her photographic portrait in a leatherette specimen box, enshrining her in one of his so-called daguerreotype-objects. An enchanting, understudied work from 1941, Tamara Toumanova (Daguerreotype-object) was recently promised to the Photographs collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it was carefully disassembled, conserved, and exhibited in 2020. Not a daguerreotype in any traditional sense, the work synthesizes an entire history of photography, using a modern photographic reproduction to simulate a much older process.
Tamara’s image tricks the eye—though photographed in 1932 and appropriated nine years later by Cornell, it effectively evokes a nineteenth-century portrait by Matthew Brady or Southworth and Hawes. With her demure coiffure and expression, one might mistake her for a Victorian ingénue. Of course, viewers in 1941 were unlikely to have been so daft. She was the great ballerina Tamara Toumanova, then famous enough to insist a reporter call her “just Toumanova,” the very month this work was made (during a season when there were “too many Tamaras in New York”). But she appears in the portrait as an obscure Tamara on the cusp of fame, just after joining the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. She is twelve or thirteen years old, posing for one of her first professional headshots. The photograph was made at Studio Iris in Paris, where Toumanova was living in exile with her parents.11 Born on a trans-Siberian cargo train as her family fled the Russian Civil War, she had only been dancing for a few years when, at age six, Anna Pavlova plucked her out of ballet class to perform in a concert.12 She made her Paris Opera debut four years later, and in 1931 she caught the eye of George Balanchine. He recruited her for a new Ballet Russe company, where she and two young colleagues were lauded as the “Baby Ballerinas.”13 Toumanova’s star turns with the company won her an international following of fervent admirers, of whom Joseph Cornell was perhaps the least likely and most devoted.

Cornell first met Toumanova in December 1940, at the Fifty-First Street Theatre in New York.14 After haunting the backstage and raising the suspicions of the ballerina’s mother (a formidable chaperone), he finally won an introduction courtesy of his friend Pavel Tchelitchew, a painter and designer who had collaborated with Serge Diaghilev’s original Ballets Russes company and continued to work with Balanchine.15 Cornell and Toumanova began a tentative friendship, built on a shared love of ballet history. As touring Russian companies like hers began to cultivate a popular American audience for ballet, new scholarship on the art form emerged, fueling in Cornell a consuming fascination.16

Toumanova and her colleagues had first come to New York years earlier, in winter 1933. Dance motifs began to appear in Cornell’s work that very season, though their inspiration originated elsewhere. In November, the artist visited an exhibition of costumes and set designs from Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes.17 The show was mounted by Julien Levy, whose uptown gallery had become a gathering place for avant-garde émigrés and a proving ground for an American strain of Surrealism that Cornell would help to shape.18 His own work debuted there the previous year, alongside montages by Max Ernst and photographs by Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy. In this experimental milieu, Cornell found fresh angles to his antiquated interests, like a historian with spectacles recalibrated to the New Vision. Thus, the mode of modern ballet promulgated by Levy’s show, and by Balanchine and Tchelitchew, interested him primarily as a conduit to its Romantic precursor—that period begun in the 1830s, when choreographers started to reject neoclassical themes in favor of folktales and love stories, evoking otherworldly spirits in a sensuous style danced en pointe.19

Nineteenth-century cults of celebrity arose around Romantic ballet stars like Marie Taglioni, Fanny Cerrito, and Carlotta Grisi—women whose carte-de-visite portraits Cornell rescued from thrift shops, and whose legacies live on in his series of boxed Homage(s) to the Romantic Ballet. Such dancers were darlings of the picture press, illustrated, and eventually photographed, ad nauseum. That Cornell could find them, a century later, in the stalls of Manhattan booksellers was a happy accident of the antiquarian economy, but one that reflected the impressive scope of their earlier circulation.

Toumanova was the first living dancer to so captivate Cornell, seeming to him to embody this Romantic tradition. Years after the artist’s death, she recalled in an interview, “He saw me not as a living creature but as a dream; a spiritual creature beyond flesh and blood. I felt that Cerrito, Taglioni, and Grisi all seemed to come alive to him when I danced.”20 As if to foster this association in her work, Cornell brought photographic evidence to her dressing room; visiting backstage in 1941, he recalled “showing her some cartes de visite of old time Russian ballet.”21

To his trove of historic dance souvenirs, Cornell added contemporary evidence of Toumanova’s triumphs, filling a folder with her photographs and programs. He scoured the city’s bookshops for this ephemera, but the most precious to him were objects bequeathed by the ballerina herself: letters, cards, and even cuttings from her costumes.22 In exchange, he offered her artworks and imagined mementos of dancers past; among them, a necklace and a sewing kit that he told her were Taglioni’s.23 By adorning Toumanova in symbolic relics of the Romantic ballet, and incorporating her likeness into his archive, Cornell ushered her into an alternate plane of living history. Of his many works inspired by the dancer, only the Daguerreotype-object activates this temporal transference in form as well as content.
By the time of Toumanova’s birth in 1919, the daguerreotype process was long out of use, replaced by faster, cheaper forms of picture making. Critically for dance publishers and promoters, modern photographs—printed on commercially manufactured papers coated in light-sensitive emulsion—were also much easier to copy, thanks to advances in halftone photolithography. Photographed often and endlessly reproduced in print, Toumanova’s countenance graced newspapers, programs, and the pages of *Vogue*. (Cornell was far from her only admirer—even dance critic Edwin Denby, an avowed Toumanova skeptic, could not help but marvel at her “large, handsome, and deadly face.”) For his *Daguerreotype-object*, then, Cornell had no shortage of images from which to choose. His pick, the Studio Iris portrait of Toumanova, shows the dancer in her adolescence, months before her New York debut, and years before her acquaintance with Cornell. This selection, like so much else about the daguerreotype project, seems self-consciously arcane—especially at a time when artist and muse were actively trading pictures. Though Toumanova sent Cornell a number of her headshots, this is one photograph he likely never saw firsthand. Instead, he and many others encountered it in reproduction, as it circulated around the world in the 1930s and beyond.

An obscure portrait in a minor key, the Studio Iris picture nevertheless traveled widely. The same could hardly be said of Cornell himself, who rarely left New York except in his art. To the extent he knew of the portrait’s international reach, it may have roused his interest. It is illuminating to recapitulate a bit of its itinerary, tracing a trail of reproductive prints across several countries in the period before one of them found its way into the *Daguerreotype-object*.

The Studio Iris portrait reached its widest audience not on any broadside or ballet program, but inside a package of cigarettes. It appeared on a German cigarette card that was issued by the Eckstein-Halpaus firm in Dresden in 1933, as part of a collectible series illustrating the faces of dancers around the world (fig. 3). Had he smoked, one can imagine Cornell’s delight at opening a pack of Ecksteins to discover a tiny Toumanova inside. More plausibly, he could have encountered the card within a commemorative volume. In the early 1930s, albums of these ballerina cards were published annually in Germany and quickly became collectors’ items on the international dance circuit. Even if Cornell never found a Toumanova card for his own collection, he could have come across one at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA). The albums were likely part of the museum’s Dance Archive—a collection of ballet books and ephemera, where Cornell made frequent visits.

An analogous set of cigarette cards exists in Cornell’s own archive, though it is tricky to say when it was acquired. Dating to the 1890s, the set was published stateside by Admiral Cigarettes and presents photo-portraits of American stage actresses in all manner of costume. It is little surprise that such cards appealed to Cornell, but their format merits momentary attention for its affinity with the daguerreotype and the carte de visite. Setting aside material and technological differences—of which there are, admittedly, many—one might claim the cigarette card as a mass-market heir to these earlier portraits. Like cased photographs and later cartes, the boxed cards were collectible and closely held, small enough to slip into a pocket or cradle in a palm. In the right hands, either could become precious. As Toumanova’s portrait charted a course across the globe, it entered the collections of

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**fig. 3** “Tamara Toumanowa, No. 98” from *Tanzbühnen der Welt* 1932. Photomechanical reproduction on cigarette card, after a photograph by Studio Iris, Paris. Private collection

Portrait of Tamara Toumanova by Studio Iris, Paris, as it appears in a souvenir program for “Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo” at the St. James Theatre, New York, 1933–34 (fig. 4). Photomechanical reproduction, image 4 1/2 × 3 1/2 in. (11.4 × 8.9 cm). Irina Baronova Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York
countless fans—some, chain-smoking Germans, and others, American balletomanes. Eventually snatching this image from public circulation, Cornell alters it almost beyond recognition, investing it with personal significance.

About the same time that the Studio Iris portrait peered out of cigarette boxes, being crumpled, trashed, and traded by turns, it was reproduced on at least one poster and two ballet programs. One of these, a British playbill, allotted an entire page to the portrait, cropping into the image and printing it in a wash of dreamy blue ink. The second of the two was more significant to Cornell, as it would supply the actual print for his project. This was a souvenir program for the Ballet Russe’s first American season, which debuted at New York’s St. James Theatre on December 22, 1933. Eagerly awaited and warmly received, the company treated its audience to a lavish playbook wrapped in gilt covers and replete with original art. Alongside full-color production designs by André Derain and Raoul Dufy are more than a dozen pages of cast portraits. Among them appears the telltale Toumanova, sharing a page with fellow “Baby Ballerina” Tatiana Riabouchinska (figs. 4, 5). Here, Toumanova’s shoulder and décolleté are dodged out, in a gesture of modesty that handily makes space for a Studio Iris image credit.

The New York reproduction is, in truth, rather banal, lacking the lustrous tone of the British program or the dynamism inherent in the German card. Yet this is the version on which Cornell’s project depends, and his treatment of the work is so transportive that, seen in retrospect, the source material’s simplicity comes as a surprise. The portrait appeared to Cornell as it does to us: on a page of the St. James souvenir program—a page he found, trimmed, and transformed into his Daguerreotype-object. After assembling the work, he sliced off the lower edge of the page and pasted it to the back of the leatherette case, where it becomes a title card (fig. 6). To its identifying caption, Cornell added two flourishes: a typewritten subhead that approximates the printed slab serif of the program text, and beneath this, his signature.

The ephemera in this assemblage is original—at least, insofar as any mass-produced paper print can reasonably be described as such. Despite a sentimental tendency and a strong preservationist impulse, Cornell could be unsparing with scissors, slicing apart a prized portrait or postcard for purposes of collage. But at times, to maintain the integrity of his archive, or simply to adjust the size of an image, he supplemented his found material with photostatic reproductions, which he commissioned from a local camera shop. An early reproductive device, the photostat machine was essentially an oversize camera with a built-in lab, which yielded silver prints of desired documents. (The results were negatives of their source material, but could be ‘statted a second time to produce a positive copy.) In effect, it could make any scrap of paper into a photograph. By this process, Cornell replicated sheaves of ephemera, from bookplates of Renaissance paintings to cabinet cards from the Romantic ballet. Exchanging authenticity for convenience, the resulting photostats would institute one or two steps of additional removal between Cornell and a historical subject. Lost in these reproductions was the texture of immediacy that Cornell so relentlessly pursued in his collecting.

By contrast the Daguerreotype-object case contains a genuine article: the original page of a ballet souvenir. In 2020, treatment was undertaken by The Met’s Photograph Conservation Department to clean and consolidate the work’s case, as well as to clean its two layers of glass, allowing for better visibility of the image below. During the process, those two panes of glass were temporarily removed, exposing the paper surface of the portrait for what may have been the first time since the assembly of the object in 1941 (figs. 7, 8). Visual analysis of the print suggests that it was sourced directly from a page of the 1933 ballet program, and it is not the result of photostatic reproduction. While Cornell’s decision to use the “original” print necessitated the sacrifice of
fig. 7 Tamara Toumanova (Daguerreotype-object) (fig. 1) during treatment, with case lid and glass layers removed, revealing a photographic reproduction with mirror overlay and applied rhinestones. Photograph Conservation Department, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
one souvenir program, he managed to keep its contents close at hand; he never parted with the Daguerreotype-object, which remained with his family until after his death.45

By preserving this print beneath glass, Cornell elevates its status and symbolically halts its circulation. Though mechanically reproduced and not, at the time, especially rare, it appears in his 1941 Daguerreotype-object as a readymade relic. In essence, the work reverses the course of photography’s history, retrofitting a modern, mass-produced picture into the outmoded format of the medium’s first years. Cornell’s choice of image is also retrospective, insofar as it shows Toumanova younger than he ever knew her, before her face was recognized on the street or published in the paper. The daguerreotype—photography’s least reproducible format, yielding an edition of one—here halts the course of her fame. The artist fixes her there, in his sealed specimen case, as if to ward off the future and keep her to himself.46

Accentuating the flash of metal and glass, Cornell added embellishments to heighten the Daguerreotype-object’s verisimilitude. Around the image of Toumanova, Cornell overlaid a silvery surface (figs. 7, 8). This was not the sensitized silver of an actual daguerreotype but a contemporary dupe: a thin mirror, cut to contour the dancer’s head in an inverted silhouette. Silhouetting—that extractive tactic adopted with equal enthusiasm by Victorian scrapbookers and modernist monteurs—was by 1941 key to Cornell’s practice, deployed as often to impart meaning as to eliminate context. Thus, in a pair of 1939 works he made from cut-up cabinet cards, Cornell staged little contretemps between silhouetted subjects and the scenic voids from which they had been snipped. With such meta-silhouettes, he probed the tension between photography’s “negative” and “positive” poles.47

Here, however, Cornell operates in a more conventional mode. The mirror silhouette gestures to nineteenth-century portraiture and to conventions of ballet publishing, wherein the silhouetted heads and bodies of dancers distilled the shapes of their choreography.48 Cornell often worked within this idiom, creating and collaging ballerina silhouettes. Of these, the closest analogue to the Daguerreotype-object is an unfinished fragment, found in a sheaf of the artist’s so-called Toumanova dossier (fig. 9).49 It is a magazine reproduction of a photograph by Renato Toppo—New York portraitist to the stars—that Cornell cut into a silhouette and set aside for some unknown future use. As in the Studio Iris portrait, Toumanova here turns her head in profile, her sleek hair coiled to reveal the taut tendons of an elegant and powerful neck. The dating of this object is ambiguous. Photographed after 1933 and reproduced in a 1937 issue of Dance magazine, the image could have been cut out by Cornell anytime thereafter. The shape of the silhouette rhymes with that of the earlier Studio Iris portrait, and he may have considered it as a possible alternative for his Daguerreotype-object. But, larger and sharper than the St. James reproduction, the magazine print is crisply contemporary—as is its subject. Toppo’s Toumanova is not a “Baby Ballerina” but a modern dancer, casting a diffident gaze from beneath darkly lined brows. She bares a plunging neckline with confident carriage. Try as Cornell might to snip her from her stylish studio portrait, this Toumanova would never fit into his anachronistic image-world of the Romantic ballet and is instead consigned to an archive of unused clippings.

In the finished Object, silhouetting obscures as much as it reveals. Cornell’s silver overlay slices along the dancer’s sinuous profile, but departs, below her shoulders, from a faithful outline (fig. 7). Covering her chest with the mirrored glass, it obscures the studio mark so prominently featured in the St. James program (fig. 5). Returning to form along her right shoulder, it diverges again—just briefly—to soften the curve of the dancer’s neck. This edit adds an increment of grace, evoking the avian gestures of Odette and
Odile, the famous double roles Toumanova danced in *Swan Lake*. Viewers of the work are likewise doubled in this mirror, their faces briefly reflected into its closed world.

The mirror introduces a kinetic element to Cornell’s *Daguerreotype-object*, befitting both the dancer and her photo-historical frame. A nineteenth-century daguerreotype was designed to be held, requiring manual adjustments of angle and case opening to yield a clear view across its silvered surface. Such luminous dynamism—the flashing mirror, the dissolving subject—likewise suited Cornell’s interactive impulse; in his other boxes, objects roll and swing. If he could make a cigar box into a carnival game, why not invent a funhouse mirror in daguerreotype form? Cornell scholar Sandra Leonard Starr hits upon a similar note in her discussion of the *Daguerreotype-object*, reading in its reflective surface the performative spirit of the early, illusionistic panoramas and designs that Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre made for the Parisian stage. Her point, though apt, is as applicable to genuine daguerreotypes as to Cornell’s fictive *Daguerreotype-object*. Instead, to the extent that he convincingly replicates a nineteenth-century image, Cornell engages the theatrical enchantments to which all photography is heir.

To perform on Cornell’s silvered stage, a reflective costume was evidently required. He added rhinestones to the surface of the Studio Iris print, atop Toumanova’s left sleeve (fig. 8). There is reason to suspect that these were snipped from the dancer’s own attire; at least once, in 1940, Cornell slyly assembled trimmings from her outfits, then returned them to her in a bespoke box. She willingly granted such treasures from time to time, and the prospect preoccupied Cornell. One senses his disappointment in an episode from his diary when, after spotting Toumanova backstage “in wings in streetclothes,” she “promised to bring the costume pieces [to the] gallery. Nothing happened.” She would eventually make good on this promise, sending him labeled scraps of silk and velvet by mail in 1942.

Either freely given or furtively gotten, costume pieces and their provenance became the ostensible subject of an intervening Cornell box, constructed in 1941 (fig. 10). In his *Little Mysteries of the Ballet: Homage to the Romantic Ballet*, a note inscribed inside the lid (and thus obscured in the reproduction here) itemizes some of the box’s contents: “pink slipper-lace, silver hairpin, white rose—actual pieces from the ballet costume of Tamara Toumanova . . .” from her performance in *Le Spectre de la rose*. Additional objects, including a rhinestone ornament and three pearls, go unmentioned there. But a second inscription on the box’s exterior wonders how those other items got inside:

Into a souvenir-case guarding its sealed treasure of fragments from “La Spectre de la Rose”—how explain the intrusion of jeweled and faded tokens of a ballerina of an earlier day, accented with a renegade blonde hairpin loosed from the chevelure of some Cinderella in her midnight haste.......Reward.

The riddle, to which Cornell requests an answer and proffers a prize, proposes the existence of two ballerinas: Toumanova and a historic, blonde-haired double, who appears from the past and leaves baubles behind. But, as any Hitchcock fan could guess, the woman and her double are one and the same, at least in the collapsing space of Cornell’s construction. Toormanova appeared to the artist as a Romantic ballerina reincarnate—“in wings in streetclothes”—and, eager to bridge the gap between historic dance and its modern counterpart, Cornell here puzzles over an appropriate mechanism. The trinkets he collects are charged with meaning, but their container is insufficiently neutral, tied to no specific time. Enter then, the
work’s true subjects. Rimbaud’s likeness is incidental by comparison, though Cornell may have intended this effect (perhaps to evoke the poet’s experimental verse, or the pandemonium of his personal life). The arrangement of the glass fragments highlights negative space in the cased enclosure, which more readily resembles a shadow box than a daguerreotype. Absent a silvered image surface or a smooth-paned frontispiece, the work tests the elasticity of its namesake form.

Stranger still is Cornell’s 1938 daguerreotype-object of the painter and poet Mina Loy, which takes as its source a photograph by Man Ray (fig. 12). Cornell had first encountered Loy’s work at the Julien Levy Gallery, where a 1933 show of her atmospheric blue canvases preoccupied him in years to come, as the two artists developed an abiding friendship. Alluding, perhaps, to those paintings, he outfitted his object with blue-tinted glass, which shades Loy’s likeness a deep sapphire. At a glance, the choice better approximates a true daguerreotype; even the color evokes the early years of the process, when overexposed plates ran the risk of blotching blue. Peering from beneath this blue glass, Loy assumes a classic three-quarter pose. She is silhouetted, like Toumanova, though the ground around her is a hybrid expanse of mirrored silver and shimmering stars—an allusion to the astrological motifs in her poetry. But any semblance to a historical daguerreotype would disappear once the object was handled, as its surface started to move. Sliced into tiles, glass pieces were designed to slide across the object’s

Daguerreotype-object, in which this problem finds its solution. Fixed in history and roughly coincidental with the period of the Romantic ballet, the daguerreotype offers a perfect case for Cornell’s conundrum. Into its recognizably nineteenth-century setting, new characters can be introduced. Slipping Toumanova’s face into a Daguerrean frame, he draws her backward into the era of their favorite dancers. The Daguerreotype-object itself is Cornell’s reward.

This work is arguably Cornell’s most successful daguerreotype-object, but it was not his first. He started experimenting with this format about 1935, revisiting it intermittently in the years to follow. Although Cornell’s engagement with photography was by that time well established, the Daguerrean constructions mark a shift in his practice. For the first time in these works, Cornell endeavors not only to collect photography or to mine it for source material but to fabricate photographic objects of his own. Those early “daguerreotypes” adopt an experimental approach to the form; each secured a photographic image inside a specimen-box enclosure, but the format was otherwise flexible. In what seems to be the earliest published example, Cornell appropriates a famous portrait of a teenage Arthur Rimbaud, which the artist likely cut from a cabinet card (fig. 11). The photograph appears behind fragments of broken glass, the snaggled shards of which transgress the picture plane in a crude overbite, asserting themselves as the
face, distorting Loy’s features into a shape-shifting mask. Part kinetic experiment, part game of chance, the work evokes its subject’s avant-garde affiliations. Cornell constructs a vivid portrait of Loy but, in so doing, explodes the already loose parameters of his DIY daguerreotypy.

If, as these experiments suggest, the daguerreotype format offered Cornell a productive playground, it also fueled a brisk business: curator Diane Waldman describes him building daguerreotypes as “objects to order, as Christmas gifts.” By 1940, Cornell’s friends were pestering him with requests: his collaborator Charles Henry Ford wanted a daguerreotype with his sister, and his dealer Julien Levy later wrote on behalf of someone who “would pay a reasonable price” to have one made. This mercenary enterprise finds Cornell at cross-purposes in 1941, by turns debasing his daguerreotype practice for income and adapting it to increasingly sophisticated ends. Contradictory as this may seem for Cornell—a habitually unemployed dreamer, underfoot in his office job and unreliable with commissions—it is typical of daguerreotypy, a practice whose meteoric ascent was inextricable from capitalist enterprise. Like an art photographer with a commercial trade, Cornell here divides his efforts between personal and professional projects, effectively playing (for once) the role of the “Complete Photographer.”

The 1941 *Daguerreotype-object* marks a break from these early experiments and pictures for hire. The previous year, in Cornell’s *Exhibition of Objects* at Julien Levy Gallery, he presented an entire group of “daguerreotypes.” When Toumanova attended the opening that December, mere weeks after meeting the artist, she would have seen these works firsthand. But if she remarked on them, Cornell—consummate archivist of their every interaction—seems not to have remembered it. Instead, he recalled her gravitating toward one of his boxed devotions to the Romantic ballet. Lifting a piece of glass from the box, “she said she needed the ‘unworldly’ quality of it in her work.” Memorialized in Cornell’s diary, this observation may
have served as an artistic prompt. Soon thereafter, he would fix Toumanova’s likeness beneath its own piece of glass. Hazier than his early experiments in blue, the pink pane he selected acts as a filter for her photomechanical portrait, softening its sharp details, obscuring its halftone matrix, and thus blurring out evidence of its modernity.

Completed the next fall, this *Tamara Toumanova (Daguerreotype-object)* was Cornell’s first construction to authentically simulate a nineteenth-century photograph. If, in earlier “daguerreotypes,” the format was a container against which to rebel, the 1941 work finds Cornell embracing his glass box. With fewer explicit physical interventions, he locates drama in the photographic image itself. This work, which trades glass shards for tinted panes and reflective mirrors, still facilitates an active experience of looking, just one more typical of the historical form. Focusing his backward glance, Cornell selected as his source image a multi-valent view of the young Toumanova and, in a gesture of reverse animation, enshrined her in the “unworldly” realm of the Romantic ballet.

Where Cornell’s earlier daguerreotypes traded on surprising disjunctures of form and subject, his 1941 work effectively transports its sitter back a century. Cornell chose for this mission a resolutely modern image, mechanically reproduced and widely circulated. Transforming Toumanova’s mass-printed portrait into something particular and precious, he cycles backward in time, taking his audience with him. After all, in the mirrored surface of the *Daguerreotype-object*, it is impossible to avoid one’s own reflection. Entirely convinced of Toumanova’s charms, Cornell persuades viewers in turn; captivating us in her enchanted image, he keeps us there until the curtain falls.

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**NOTES**

1. Prepaid postage on a subscription envelope points to this date. Joseph Cornell Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter Cornell Papers), box 10, folder 31; *U.S. Camera & Travel and Photography Annual* are among the other publications he collected. Cornell Papers, box 16, folder 30.


3. Winking at Dziga Vertov, Cornell would periodically use this anglicized version of the Soviet director’s term for the autonomous and increasingly omniscient perspective of the modern camera, which transcended the capability of the human eye. In Cornell’s lexicon, the expression referred to a cinematic mode of stream-of-consciousness observation, as in Caws 1993, 171, 193, 223.

4. Ibid., 193, 232.

5. Though this inscription is open to interpretation, and could reasonably seem to describe several different artworks, it illustrates the extent to which Cornell’s thoughts of Toumanova coincided with photographic concerns. Cornell Papers, box 10, folder 31.

6. These mostly vernacular photographs are held in the Joseph Cornell Study Center at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC. Before it was sold, Cornell’s collection of fine photographs included works by Julia Margaret Cameron, Eugène Atget, Berenice Abbott, and Brassai. Hartigan 2007, 44, 89.

7. Gallerist Julien Levy recalls meeting Cornell in 1931, when he began making visits to Levy’s inaugural exhibition of nineteenth-century American photographs. His first impression of the artist—whom he would later represent—was that of “a gray young man... with some knowledge of the history of photography.” Cornell had by then already begun to build a modest collection of photographs, in which daguerreotypes and their cases were well-represented. Levy 1977, 76.


9. Reporter Elliott Arnold did not comply with her wishes when he published “Tamara Yearns for a Steak, or a Dance” in the...
October 3, 1941, issue of the New York World-Telegram. Cornell Papers, box 26, folder 5.

10 This dance company’s official name changed often in the course of Toumanova’s tenure, as a consequence of internal politics, periodic schisms, and the formation of splinter groups. Most iterations of the company hewed as closely to the “Ballet Russe” brand as they could legally manage, seeing deliberate confusion among audiences and advertisers. In the interest of clarity in this article, I refer consistently to the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, or simply the “Ballet Russe.” Except for her 1933 season in Paris with Balanchine’s short-lived Les Ballets 1933, Toumanova was consistently affiliated with the original Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo company, rather than its offshoots.

11 Located on Rue La Boétie, in the eighth arrondissement of Paris, Studio Iris catered to stage performers in the 1930s and produced portraits of many of Toumanova’s Ballet Russe colleagues. An original print from Studio Iris, showing Toumanova with Roman Jasinski in Mozartiana, was collected by Cornell and remains among his papers. Cornell Papers, box 26, folder 5.

12 Cornell also had a formative early encounter with Anna Pavlova, watching her dance The Dying Swan at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1923 or 1924. Hartigan 2007, 21.

13 The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo was conceived as a successor to Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, the dance group that became an international phenomenon in the 1910s and 1920s for its radical synthesis of modern choreography, art, and design. The new company’s teenage “Baby Ballerinas,” Toumanova, Irina Baronova, and Tatiana Riabouchinska, were lauded at the time of their New York debut as the company’s “chief attractions” (Martin 1940, 32). Publicity for the Ballet Russe played upon the dual innocence and sophistication of these young women, juxtaposing evidence of their beauty with amusing accounts of their youth. It is not surprising, then, that headshots like Toumanova’s accentuate the adolescent girl’s maturity, such that she seems considerably older than her twelve or thirteen years.

14 The theater was located a block from Cornell’s day job at the Traphagen Commercial Textile Studio, and he reportedly watched rehearsals there on his lunch hour (Solomon 1997, 116). Known today as the Mark Hellingringer Theatre and leased to the Times Square Church, the venue at 237 West 51st Street was originally built in 1929 to serve as a movie palace. Cornell, an avid filmgoer, may have seen movies there in the 1930s, before returning the next decade to see Toumanova perform.


16 Hennessey 1983, 8.

17 The exhibition, Twenty-five Years of Russian Ballet, was drawn from the collection of dancer and choreographer Serge Lifar, and presented at Julien Levy Gallery between November 2 and 18, 1933. See Lifar 1933.

18 Schaffner and Jacobs 1998, 21.

19 Hennessey 1983, 8.


21 Cornell Papers, box 10, folder 75.

22 Ibid., box 26, folder 5.


25 See, for example, Kirstein 1933, 29–30, and “Paris Panorama” 1933, 44–45.

26 Denby 1944, 135.

27 Original prints of this portrait do not exist in Cornell’s collections, nor in any New York collections to which Cornell would likely have had access.

28 Though the idea of travel, across continents and centuries, preoccupied Cornell and became a recurring motif in his work, the artist spent his entire adult life in New York. Obligations to his mother and his disabled brother restricted his movement, as did an intensely shy, reclusive nature.

29 The Toumanova card appears in a 1932 album titled Die Tanzbühnen der Welt (The Dance Stages of the World), published by Eckstein-Halpaus. It is collected in a section devoted to “The Dance Stages of Foreign Countries.”

30 The cards were distributed inside boxes of the popular Eckstein no. 5 cigarettes. Text on the back identifies Toumanova as a young ballerina trained in the Russian style of ballet, who emigrated after the Bolshevik Revolution.

31 Established at MoMA by dance impresario Lincoln Kirstein, this collection of research materials opened to the public in 1939, but closed within the next decade. In 1946, Kirstein’s founding gift of bound volumes was transferred to Harvard University. Two copies of the album in question, Die Tanzbühnen der Welt, are today held in the Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Cambridge, MA, and at least one of them could plausibly have come from MoMA.


33 In a photograph from the late 1940s or early 1950s, collected by the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, Moscow, Toumanova poses with an array of photographs and ephemera from past performances heaped around her in piles. In one such pile, a poster printed with the Studio Iris portrait is visible, though identifying details about the production are obscured. This is the only trace I have found of the poster, which Sandra Leonard Starr mentions in Joseph Cornell and the Ballet (1983, 61) and which likely promoted Les Ballets 1933.

34 Little else is known about this program. It was probably made for a London production of either Les Ballets 1933 or the Ballet Russe.

35 Martin 1933, X4.


37 Even so, if the collections of others are any indication, Cornell was not alone in attaching significance to the print; it turned up, torn from an identical 1933 program page, in an auction of historic autographs (Freeman’s Auctions sale 2015, lot 403). That version of the print is dedicated in the dancer’s hand as a “Souvenir of Tamara Toumanova,” but the stains across its rumpled surface read incongruously with the precious inscription.

38 We cannot be sure how the program reached Cornell, whether as a gift from Toumanova, or a bookshop find.

39 These appear throughout his papers, including in his Toumanova file at the Archives of American Art, where a set of photostats enlarges a studio photograph of the dancer to different sizes; Cornell Papers, box 25, folder 5. A comparable file at the Smithsonian Institution contains Cornell’s printing.
instructions for another Toumanova photostat; Cornell Study Center, box 21, folder 40.
40 Photostat Corporation 1936, 3.
42 In his diary, Cornell reflected on the aesthetic effect of the photostat process, comparing it to the “tabloid” look of photographs by Henri Cartier-Bresson. Caws 1993, 171.
43 This treatment was carried out with the full support and formal approval of the work’s present owners.
44 Exhibiting none of the sheen seen in Cornell’s photostats, the matte surface of the portrait, the scale of the image, and the quality of its printing all align with the corresponding page in a reference copy of the program. Though it was not possible to conduct a side-by-side comparison of the unglazed portrait against a Cornell photostat, I have examined other photostats used by the artist and found few similarities with the printed portrait. It is nevertheless worth noting that these findings are, as yet, unsubstantiated by scientific analysis. The 2020 treatment of the work was deliberately narrow in scope, designed to address the work’s case and glazing but not its image layer. Once the work joins The Met’s permanent collection, further research will be possible.
45 Another page of the St. James program, which features a different picture of Toumanova with dancer David Lichine, is preserved in his collection. Cornell Study Center, box 21, folder 41. Per Fraenkel Gallery (in conversation, October 2022), the artist’s sister, Elizabeth Cornell Benton, sold the work in the late 1970s to Castelli, Feigen, Corcoran Gallery, from whom Fraenkel purchased the work and later sold it to Ann Tenenbaum and Thomas H. Lee.
46 Toumanova recalled Cornell’s alarm at her growing fame. “He was afraid of losing me,” she told Starr (1983, 68).
47 These are Post No Bills: Object (Défense d’Afficher), in the Robert Lehman Art Trust, Washington, DC, and Variétés de Minéralogie: Object, in a private collection. See Hartigan 2007, nos. 40 and 41. Silhouetting would go on to figure prominently in Cornell’s cover and layout designs for Dance Index, the journal founded by Lincoln Kirstein in 1942.
48 For example, pages from a disbound nineteenth-century album, preserved among Cornell’s papers, show photographic reproductions of silhouetted dancers in a variety of poses. Riffing on this motif a century later, photographer Alexander “Sasha” Stewart made shadow portraits of the Les Ballets 1933 company (of which Toumanova was a member) for a photo story in The Sketch. Cornell Study Center, box 88, folder 6; Stewart 1933, 81.
49 Cornell cut this portrait from page 8 of the July 1937 issue of Dance, where it illustrated Anatole Chujoy’s article “Will Toumanova Desert the Ballet?”; Cornell Study Center, box 21, folder 40.
50 In July 1941, several months before Cornell made the Daguerreotype-object, Toumanova sent him tickets to Swan Lake: “Have never seen it before,” he noted in his diary, “but she tells me that it is one of her favorites.” Cornell Papers, box 6, folder 2.
51 Commenting on Cornell’s use of mirrors in his pseudo-photographic objects, one reviewer suggested that “the reflections which do not have the aid of quick-silver are images drawn from the unconscious.” Art News, December 23, 1939, quoted in Waldman 1967, 14–15.
52 Starr 1983, 62–63. See Pinson 2012 for more on the photographer’s early panorama paintings and diorama designs.
53 He evidently imagined them as earrings for the dancer, and titled the work Boucle d’oreille (Pour Tamara Toumanova). Starr 1983, 60, pl. 32.
54 Cornell Papers, box 4, folder 1.
55 These are, in all likelihood, pieces that Toumanova actually bequeathed to Cornell after a July 1941 performance of Le Spectre de la rose at the Lewisohn Stadium in New York. Starr 1983, 66.
56 To the extent that this work conjures a specific Romantic ballerina, her identity is in dispute. The text invokes Cornell’s other boxed homages to Marie Taglioni, but Starr (ibid., 68) proposes a plausible connection to Pierina Legnani, whose performance of Cinderella featured a record-breaking number of fouettés—a challenging pirouette technique that Toumanova had likewise mastered.
57 Introduced in 1839, the Daguerreotype reigned until the mid-1850s, when paper photography began to take its place. The period of the Romantic ballet stretched from the 1830s into the 1860s.
58 Rimbau’s portrait was photographed by Étiénné Carjat in 1871. The work was exhibited with the title “Object Daguerreotype” in MoMA’s 1980 Cornell retrospective (McShine 1980, pl. 32), where it was credited to a private collection. It appears to remain in private hands.
59 Man Ray made this portrait of her in or before 1920; an alternate view from the same sitting illustrates an issue of The Little Review (7, no. 3) published that year.
60 By 1938, Mina Loy was also Levy’s mother-in-law, and an agent for his gallery. Cornell made two other blue-tinted daguerreotype-object portraits of Levy about this same time. Schaffner and Jacobs 1998, 67–71.
61 This solarization effect was most apparent on the lightest part of a daguerreotype. Because, in portraits, the inadvertent tint would often appear on the white front of sitter’s shirt, some hack photographers practicing in the United States were ignominiously dubbed “blue bosom operators.” Newhall 1961, 63–64, 104.
62 The work also takes its title, “Imperious Jewelry of the Universe” (Lunar Baedeker): Portrait of Mina Loy, Daguerreotype-Object, from Loy’s poetry.
64 Waldman 1967, 15.
65 Cornell Papers, box 3, folder 5.
67 An exhibition announcement for the show, which ran from December 10 to 26, 1940, identifies this group and other categories of work to be presented, including “Miniature Glass Bells” and “Miniatiae.” Julien Levy Gallery Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Library and Archives, box 35, folder 3.
68 The box in question is Taglioni’s Jewel Casket, constructed in 1940 and now in MoMA’s collection (474.1953).
69 Cornell Papers, box 10, folder 31.
70 The pink glass may also allude to Le Spectre de la rose, a Michel Fokine ballet about an indubitably Cornelian subject: the souvenir rose from a young girl’s first ball. The ballet was in Toumanova’s repertoire, and is referenced in Little Mysteries of the Ballet: Homage to the Romantic Ballet.
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