

COLLAGE

Before I began my research into COLLAGE I had very little knowledge of its beginnings, who came up with the idea, and what he might have been trying to say. All I knew was that the process involved different materials being arranged and glued to a backing, and that very often the materials had little or no apparent relationship with each other.

I dipped into many the index of many art books to try and find a starting point for my research. The indexes took me into chapters dealing with DISTORTION, ABSTRACTION, and CUBISM, and that is where I started my research to try and understand what the artists in question were trying to say with their work.

What I found out is that at the beginning of the twentieth century a number of artists claimed that traditional or representational art that portrays images as if frozen in time was too limiting on their work, and they felt that their art should not have such limitations imposed on it.

Paul Cezanne, in the work he did towards the end of his life, began to treat traditional subjects, both figure studies and landscapes, as designs of inter-related forms. It was this approach to his chosen subjects, together with a general interest in primitive art, and particularly African art, in the early part of the twentieth century, that inspired PABLO PICASSO and GEORGE BRAQUE to turn their backs on traditional art that had been common place for some 400 years up to then and, with their new approach, they revolutionised painting and sculpture.

This new approach to art became known as CUBISM. The artists saw their new approach as freeing them from a single and only way of looking at the object they sought to capture with their work. CUBISM allowed them to freely move around in space in portraying their object which people viewing their work would be able to visually experience more completely, and often in fragmented planes.

In short, CUBISM became the new method whereby three-dimensional objects could be represented on a two-dimensional surface without resorting to illusion.

In moving away from the traditional method of reproduction, 'as it has always been seen, frozen in time and place' way, Picasso, Braque and their followers aimed to portray objects as they were comprehended by the intellect, as the viewer on examining their piece of work would understand them to be. This new approach also called for an abandonment of traditional perspective, and replaced it with the adoption of a multiplicity of viewpoints, so that different aspects of the same object could be viewed simultaneously. In approaching their subject in this way Picasso and Braque challenged the very foundations and traditional beliefs that artists had accepted without challenge until then.

In essence this new approach freed artists to portray objects as they chose without the need to feel locked into the accepted method or reproduction that until then had limited the artist to portray his subject as it had always up to then been seen. Artists were now free to invent original and independent methods of portraying their subject without restriction. This new approach resulted in works of art that were less representational and increasingly abstract.

COLLAGE which is, in essence, the incorporation of any extraneous matter on to the picture surface, was introduced to the art world by PICASSO as part of this new freedom.

PICASSO used collage for shock effect. There is something a bit disturbing when you view a work of art and discover that part of a still life image is not simply a painted image, but a piece of cut-out and pasted-on matter.

PICASSO's use of collage was as a means of challenging the way in which the public viewed his work. Logic often seems to fly out of the window with much of the imagery. He can be presenting us with one object that turns into another, such that a piece of flowered wallpaper can turn into a table-cloth, and newspaper can turn into a violin. Other artists who followed his collage method were less daring, so where they pasted on to their picture some wood-grained paper it would be incorporated into a subject such as a table or a guitar.

Picasso's collages do not mirror the real world. Instead, they seem to belong in a world of their own.

I found an interesting quote from Picasso where he remarks that the purpose of collage,

“..... is to give the idea that different textures can enter into a composition to become the reality in the painting that competes with the reality in nature. If a piece of newspaper can become a bottle, that gives us something to think about in connection with both newspapers and bottles too. This displaced object has entered a universe for which it was not made and where it retains, in a measure, its strangeness. And this strangeness was what we wanted to make people think about because we were quite aware that our world was becoming very strange and not exactly reassuring”.

A number of the Picasso pictures at first glance appeared to me to be abstract. As I spent more time looking at them I picked up on the clues that the painter had left for those prepared to seek out the clues. In the case of the picture VIOLIN AND GUITAR the clues come in the form of the curves of the instruments generally and, in the case of the guitar the clue comes in the form of the hole in the body of the guitar.

The collage paintings of Braque were always a lot easier to identify. The artist appeared to give his audience less of a challenge to identify the subject matter of his paintings. His paintings contained less distortion of the images. An example by way of comparison with Picasso is his picture called GUITAR AND CLARINET. There he does not pull apart the musical instruments, and he uses shadow to emphasise their shapes, giving them an almost three-dimensional effect, and their identity is obvious from the start. I did find some examples of his work where he displayed almost as much sense of adventure as Picasso. An example of this was his LA TABLE DU MUSICIAN. Here he gives us his clues in the form of the vague fragmented shapes but you really have to look hard for them.

Braque also used letters that he stencilled on to his work to give us clues as to the subject of his picture. Picasso on the other hand appears to have used actual newspaper or wrappings to give out the clues, as in the case of his picture called BOUTEILLE DE VIN, JOURNAL SUR UNE TABLE (Bottle of Wine, newspaper on a table).

My research took me into a description of Braque's method of collage. He called it papier colle, and it describes the way in which he would stick strips or fragments of paper to the surface of his paintings or drawings. Picasso's way of using collage was more daring in that he would use objects other than paper strips for attachment to his work, and this was clear from his very first experiments with collage.

Picasso first used the technique of collage in 1912 with his picture called STILL LIFE WITH CHAIR CANING. This picture uses a real object, a piece of oil cloth, pasted onto the canvass, to represent chair caning, and above which there is painted a wine glass and a lemon. Had any other artist before then presented us with such an image he would have done so in the traditional method by using the same materials throughout the work. In preparing a work of art in this way the artist is spared the task of using laborious techniques to create the image in paint, and this allows him to work that much more rapidly.

Picasso and others influenced by him would go on to use, for the purpose of their works that incorporated collage, cut-out paper from sheet music, newspapers, stamps, cigarette packets, decorative patterns, wallpaper, lettering or veneers. These materials would be used as components in a pictorial framework of broken facets or fragmented planes so as to provide the viewer of the work with multiple viewpoints or simultaneous representation.

In 1914 Picasso used as part of a collage a piece of upholstery fringe which he stuck to a piece of projecting wood to give the image of a table. In another he stuck a spoon to a piece of glass to create a confusing image that I cannot start to identify.

In his picture called GUITAR he uses pieces of wallpaper, newspaper and coloured paper all in collage process. It was stuck to the canvas, charcoaled, pencilled and painted over in watercolour. The guitar itself is broken up into different sections, and then rearranged in an unrealistic but still recognisable manner, so it is not abstract.

I have tried to analyse the method by which the collage process is used to put together a work of art, frequently in a cubist style, and this is how I see it:

- 1 The artist selects and arranges an overlapping group of objects, some if not all of which possess a decorative pattern and/or lettering
- 2 He then decides how and where to cut into the individual form of some or all of the objects, breaking them up in the process
- 3 He then makes a decision about the dividing lines, particularly looking at the possibility of cutting two or more objects in line, rather than going for purely arbitrary divisions, and in so doing he examines the variations in the vertical and horizontal division of these objects and the angle such divisions take
- 4 Once the division has been made, each object is then adjusted and given a different position or size, with the idea of creating different viewpoints. The artist pays particular attention to what can be achieved through alterations of letters, patterns or stripes
- 5 Often, with a view to giving a fuller sense of form and space, the objects and fragmented planes are rearranged so as to reflect a new set of circumstances, as the altered state of the objects can change their apparent inter-relationship.
- 6 Once this process has been undertaken, the artist is able to examine the manner in which his picture is capable of being enhanced by elements introduced by way of collage.

That certainly appears to have been the method favoured by Picasso. Others seemed to use the approach in an almost random manner, again with a view to perhaps shock or for humour.

While I feel that PICASSO took his work seriously, I cannot say the same about MAX ERNST. Where Picasso's cubism work was never abstract, you could not say the same for a lot of Ernst's work.

This is what my research into MAX ERNST reveals. He was born in Germany in 1891. He studied philosophy at university. Aside from his studies he took an interest in works of art created by mental patients. He went out of his way to avoid any formal art tuition. Apparently he was obsessed with the notion that he should not study anything that might ultimately provide him with skills from which he might earn a living.

Ernst also got caught up with the DADA movement, people who did nonsense art, often intended to provoke an emotional response from anyone viewing it or provide a satirical or humorous outlook to its subject matter. The combination of the work of mental patients combined with the DADA influence clearly got to him in such a way that the overall impression you get looking at his work is that he was a very troubled man, and one who liked the idea of trying to shock the public. That might explain also some of the crazy things he got up to.

Along with some colleagues called Baargeld and Arp he produced a series of collages known by the name of FATAGAGAS. These were regarded as “undesirable” by their local artists union, and ultimately were displayed in the back room of a beer-house. These works of art included a fish tank filled with blood red liquid, holding a lock of hair, a wooden hand and an alarm clock, and a collage derived from an engraving of Adam and Eve by Albrecht Durer that was considered by some to be pornographic.

Ernst’s paintings round about the early 1920s show how fond he was for the uncanny combination of unrelated objects by way of collage, and the manner in which he combined them so as to give off an air of mystery and the bizarre, and occasionally with a sense of humour.

At or about that time he put together something called THE MASTER’S BEDROOM IT’S WORTH SPENDING A NIGHT THERE. It is a picture of a fairly bare room, drawn with an odd perspective. He has brought into the picture by collage a number of animals, all of whom are out of scale as to their size. You have in the foreground a whale that is only marginally bigger than a bat that is alongside of it, while to the rear of the room is a sheep that extends from floor almost to the ceiling. To the side of the room there are three items of furniture, also out of scale in size when compared with the animals. The picture therefore challenges all your expectations as to the size of the objects within it.

Another picture, OEDIPUS REX, uses the same approach, and is equally disturbing because of it. It features a massive hand holding a walnut, two animal heads, and a tiny air balloon in the distance. While Ernst might have known how these images related one to the other, I had no idea at all. What is more all the images in this picture appear to be painted and presented as if it had been produced by way of collage. I reckon that having done collage, he now felt free to paint with a greater freedom.

His picture of a floating headless woman called THE PLEIADES is very disturbing, all the more so because he uses photomontage for the woman’s body. The overall feel is of something deathly cold and disturbing.

In 1920 he put together HERE EVERYTHING IS STILL FLOATING from cut-out photos of insects, fish and anatomical drawings, all arranged to suggest the multiple identity of the things he depicted.

Esser did a work called TWO CHILDREN ARE THREATENED BY A NIGHTINGALE in 1924 that is very weird. While it does indeed show the children being chased by a tiny bird, the bottom left hand corner by way of collage contains an open gate that extends beyond the picture's frame. In the right hand corner it has, also by way of collage, a small wooden building with a sloped roof. Above this structure, he has painted a small figure, apparently standing on the roof, and reaching out to a real bell push attached to the picture frame by way of collage. It is a very odd piece of art that makes me chuckle. While the basic idea is I suppose meant to be silly, the three-dimensional collage draws you into the artist's strange world. I guess the idea is that you ring the bell to be invited through the gate into the strange world beyond.

The techniques of collage and photomontage suited his purposes so well that he also put out novels made up of his collage works. One was called THE WOMAN WITH 100 HEADS.

In 1925 he began to use a technique called frottage that amounted to pencil rubbings of such things as wood-grain, fabric or leaves, and another process called decalcomania which simply involved him transferring paint from one surface to another by pressing the two surfaces together. In essence he was by chance creating shapes and patterns that he used in his drawings and paintings. Such artistic style was very different from all other artists before him who appeared to take their work far more seriously.

Robert Rauschenberg is far more contemporary. He is an American who uses the methods of both Picasso and Ernst and takes them a stage further, always challenging himself as to how far he could go in the name of art. Looking at his work you realise that like Ernst he too did not take himself or his work seriously. Whether you love his work or hate it, you do find yourself questioning what he is up to. I think he has to be one of the founders of what is called pop art.

Some of his early work involved him layering canvas with newsprint and then over-painting it with oil paint, and in some cases he would add any of the following: wood, fabric, glue, metal, mirror, printed matter, pieces of string, even an umbrella and some nails providing a random abstract appearance. A model of a rooster appears in some of his works, a goat's head within a rubber tyre in another, a model of a bald eagle in another, and a set of wheels on yet another. In some instances instead of painting the imagery onto canvas he applied these materials to free-standing screens or pieces of furniture. One of my favourite pieces is entitled Nabisco Shredded Wheat. It is far removed from anything that PICASSO started the collage process off with, and comprises a series of opened and partially unopened cardboard boxes mounted on plywood and giving the appearance of a large aerodynamic object.

Often I found myself looking at his work and chuckling because of the humour in it. I did find something satisfying nonetheless with the imagery on display. It is not threatening, unlike the work of Ernst, it is not as serious in concept as that of Picasso. It is simply fun.

While a lot of Rauschenberg's work looks strange because of the combination of odd items he uses by way of collage, none of it disturbs me as much as Ernst's work. Rauschenberg is not the troubled soul that Ernst was, and there is a lightness and sense of fun about most of his work that I find appeals to me.

Something that is common to Rauschenberg's pictures is his regular use of a line of dripping paint. It gives the effect of something melting or having been left out in the rain. Very often it is accompanied by a clock face or two, or seemingly unrelated objects, introduced into the picture by way of collage. Occasionally there is a logic, as in the case of pictures that feature President Kennedy and space travel, the message being that the picture celebrates a special time in history. His regular use of the American flag too suggest his patriotism.

What all my research made me realise is that the collage process is something we now take very much for granted, particularly in the world of advertising and packaging, such that the collage process eventually led to artists presenting coca cola lids and bottles and tins of soup as works of art. This form of art has become the stuff of everyday advertising.

Modern day use of collage can be found all over the place. Record sleeves very often use it. Perhaps the most famous example is the Beatles album of Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band that was put together by Peter Blake, and featured by way of photomontage the heads and bodies of about 100 celebrities. There was a Rolling Stones album in which the artwork used a working zip fastener by way of collage. Another album that used collage was Peter Weller's Stanley Road. I can also remember seeing a Live Aid concert poster that comprised a map of the world on to which was added photomontage of different nationalities of people, concert tickets, a picture of Wembley stadium, and pictures of aeroplanes and communications satellites, so all the items did have an inter-relationship.

The development of computer art techniques has made it easy for anybody to collect images, and then to layer them in a chosen manner, in the same way that Picasso or Ernst might have chosen to do. While these modern day images are only two-dimensional, they follow in the tradition of artists such as Ernst and later Magritte, painting these strange images to give a similar effect to collage. Indeed, in some cases during my research I have had to stare closely at some works of art to see whether it was or was not produced by collage, or if it had been painted in such a way as to appear to have the depth of a three-dimensional work achieved by collage.

So, at the end of my research I came to realise that much of the imagery we all today take for granted might never have happened had it not been for the bravery of the likes of Picasso, Ernst and Rauschenberg.

My further research into collage took me to the work of KURT SCHWITTERS. His work appealed to me most. I found something very satisfying and right about most of his pictures. Even in his most abstract work I find something very satisfying as to the manner in which he combines his materials and then arranges them to compose his

picture. My attempts to try and copy his style made me realise quite how difficult it is to achieve, and just how much time you can spend in arranging images, only to keep on re-arranging them when you think that you might find another arrangement that works better. My admiration for SCHWITTERS grew as I got to see how much of his work I regarded as perfect.

Another artist I came across was an Englishman called John Piper. His picture called NEWHAVEN, THE CASTLE struck me as a cross between Picasso and Braque. While I had no trouble in identifying all the images in this picture, the use of strips on to which he painted the image of a boat reminded me of Braque, while the piece of roughly torn newspaper reminded me of Picasso. I did also find some totally abstract work by this man that contained no clues whatsoever, presumably leaving the public to make of his work whatever they might.

MY PRACTICAL WORK IN COLLAGE TECHNIQUES

Inspired by my research I went on to try and copy and adapt the work of the pioneers of collage, and as I have already commented, I did not find it as easy as I thought I might. I found that it took me far longer than I ever anticipated cutting images and arranging them and rearranging them before I felt happy with what I had achieved.

I found Picasso's work very difficult to emulate. Instead of copying any one particular piece of his collage work, I decided to put together something in the spirit of his early collage work. This piece of work involved me finding a series of images of toy cars, breaking them up and then using the images to try and give the effect of showing more than the standard two-dimensional feel of each object. I also tried to introduce a little humour as Ernst might have done.

I attempted two versions of the work of Max Ernst. The first one I took on was his picture entitled THE MASTERS BEDROOM, IT'S WORTH SPENDING A NIGHT. Ernst's idea is to play around with perspective. In the foreground of his picture we have a whale, alongside a bat and a fish, none of which are painted to scale, so we have a whale that is only a little bit bigger than the bat. At the back of the room we have a sheep that appears to be huge in size, it stretches almost from floor to ceiling. To the right of the picture Ernst gives us three items of furniture that appear almost suspended in air. I painted a similarly bleak room and, to demonstrate an artist playing with perspective, I applied by way of collage a tiny collection of playing cards in the foreground of my picture, and a regular-sized similar collection of cards to the rear of the room. In essence, I reversed what one would expect to find if everything appeared correct in size and perspective. I also attempted to copy Ernst's use of furniture to give the picture balance.

The other Ernst picture I chose to copy in my own way was the one he entitled TWO CHILDREN ARE THREATENED BY A NIGHTINGALE. My interpretation of the picture is that it shows the children and the bird in another world, while the frame to the picture is the dividing line between that world and the real world. This would serve to explain the bell on the right side of the frame itself, and the gate in the bottom left hand corner. I think Esser has the bell as the means of requesting permission to enter the other world, and the gate is the way into the other world if permitted to enter. My version of the picture similarly has a bell on its frame for requesting permission to enter the other world, and a ladder (in place of the gate) to do so if permitted. I also included by way of collage a wooden structure similar in appearance to Esser's.

I attempted too a number of pictures in the style of Rauschenberg. I took from him some of the common elements to his pictures, while at the same time avoiding some of what I regard as his wildest ideas. My pictures follow his patriotism. Where he celebrated the life of President Kennedy and showed a reference to space travel that occurred while he was President, I went back in time to follow his style. I chose an image of Churchill, and combined it with references to his war-time achievements.

In my other attempts at the style of Rauschenberg I used paint to draw attention to aspects of the collage I put together.

Some of my other works of collage show me very much influenced by pop-art. An example of this is my collage of the PEPSI brand name. My influences here I like to think also include Andy Warhol.

Other influences on my collage included Peter Blake, and many of the un-named people who have worked on contemporary advertising campaigns that used collage imagery. Over the last couple of weeks I have noticed a series of advertisements for Sunsilk hair preparations all of which use collage as Ernst might have. Each such advertisement shows a woman's head of hair. Where you might expect to find a hair slide you instead find, the size of a hair slide, a rugby goal or a life raft, appearing by way of collage. I liken the approach to Ernst because of the total absence of perspective and the humour at combining two such unrelated objects.

I remember too, a year or so back, another advertising for a motor car. You could be out and about seeing these huge placard posters, and there in the middle applied by way of collage, was the entire front of the motor vehicle in question. It was ever so eye-catching because of the three-dimensional impact of the collage. Had the poster contained a photo or some art work of the car it would have lacked the impact created by the use of the collage.

The constant use of collage in advertising makes me realise how much of a debt we owe to the likes of Picasso, Ernst, Rauschenberg and their followers.

