Stick ‘em up! A surprising history of collage

It’s not as modern as you think. As an enthralling new exhibition shows, people have been cutting and pasting for almost a millennium.

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BY SAMUEL REILLY

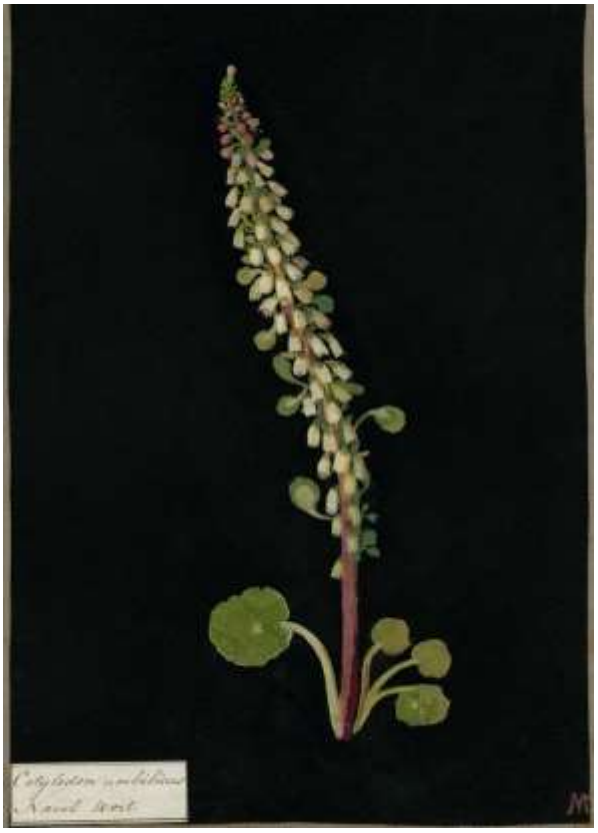
Collage is often thought of as an archetypally modern artistic technique. The word—from the French verb *coller*, meaning “to stick”—was first used to describe the Cubist innovations of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who began to stick newspaper cuttings and other materials onto their canvases in 1912. Since that moment, the story goes, artists have used the act of snipping and sticking as a means of bringing the world around us into unexpected, transformative combinations on canvas. But that narrative isn’t quite right, declares an enthralling exhibition at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh. Surprisingly the first survey of its kind, “Cut and Paste” shows that collage is both a much older phenomenon than is commonly thought, and one that extends far beyond the boundaries of traditional art history.

Japanese artists began to stick paper onto silk as early as the 1100s. In Europe, paper collage is first recorded in Europe in the 1400s. By the following century, the technique was being put to practical use in anatomical “flap-books” – woodcut prints layering skin and sinew over internal organs. In the Victorian era, collage in the form of scrapbooks and homemade Valentine’s cards became an immensely popular pastime. Many young ladies caught the bug; so too did Charles Dickens. He and the actor William Macready created a huge scrap-work folding screen, with 400 engravings collaged on both sides. Collage was not always a mere hobby. Early photographers developed a practice of splicing images together, allowing them to meddle with temporality and dissolve the boundaries between the natural and supernatural—a theme that the Surrealists would explore.

Collage proved especially well suited to the Surrealists. The act of splicing together disparate images and fragments of text mirrored their belief that meaning was generated by the subconscious. But collage as a technique has been more influential than Surrealism on the way we imagine (or reimagine) the world. The technique was taken up by feminist artists in the 1960s. In Carolee Schneemann’s “Body Collage” (1967), a watershed work in the history of performance art, she rolls around in shredded printer paper, her body painted in wallpaper paste, in what she called an “active collage”. The technique offered Pop artists like Peter Blake a means of incorporating everyday, ordinary objects into their work, disrupting the traditional hierarchies that determined what was “fine” and what was “folk” art. Likewise, it provided a *modus operandi* for the punk and protest movements of the 1970s and 1980s—think of the “ransom note” aesthetic of Jamie Reed’s posters for the Sex Pistols. Throughout the

20th century, collage has been used as a tool for disruption and subversion—a way of ripping up the rulebook and creating something new from the fragments.

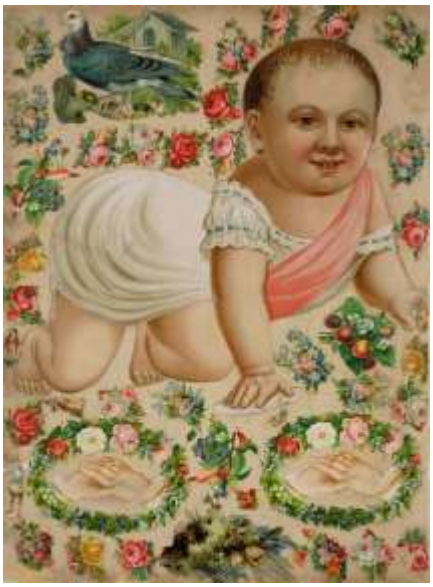
“I’ve come to recognize that the way I think is collage,” Louise Nevelson, an American sculptor, said in 1975. Collage has changed hugely over the centuries, and in our present era of PhotoShop and internet memes, the words “cut and paste” are more likely to call to mind a computer keyboard than glue and scissors. But perhaps, this original exhibition suggests, it is a “way of thinking” that we have always shared.



“Cotyledon Umbilicus, Navel Wort” (1779) by Mary Delany

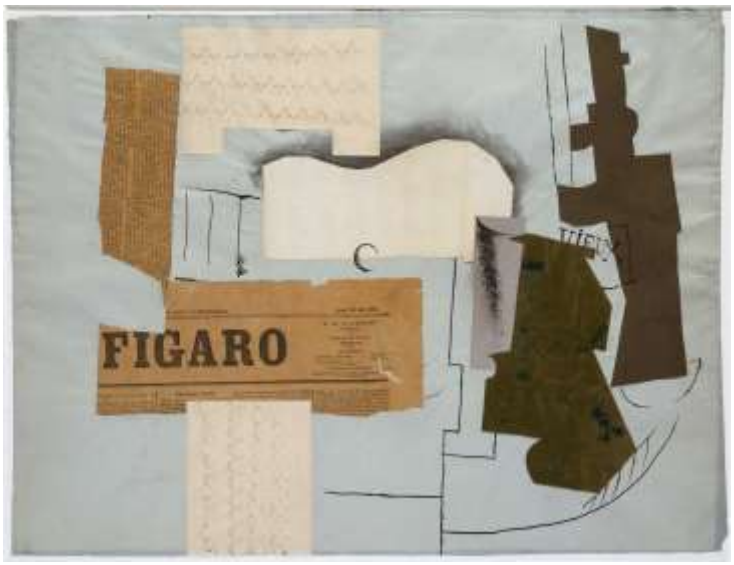
Born to an aristocratic family in 1700, the artist Mary Delany discovered the medium of collage late in life. Story has it that, at the age of 72, Delany was struck by how closely a piece of red paper on her bedside table resembled a geranium, and took up her scissors. “I have invented a new way of imitating flowers,” she wrote to her niece that year. Between 1772 and 1783, when her eyesight failed, Delany produced nearly a thousand botanical “paper mosaicks”. Sometimes using as many as 200 minutely cut paper petals for each flower, sometimes incorporating real dried petals and leaves, Delany’s collages were so accurate that the botanist Joseph Banks once declared you could look at them and “describe botanically any plant without the least fear of committing an error”.

British Museum, London: bequeathed by Augusta Hall, Baroness Llannover, 1897



“Baby” (c.1890) by Anonymous

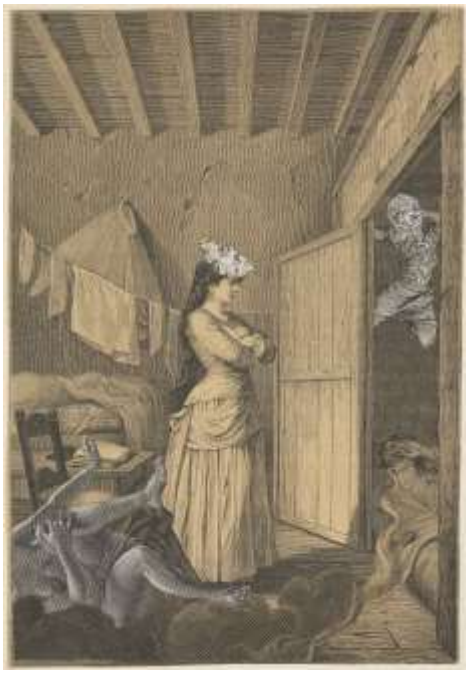
Such was the Victorian passion for “scrap-work” that by the 1880s and 1890s, industrial machines had been built for the express purpose of churning out color-printed, glazed and die-cut “scrap” shapes. These were sold in vast quantities; people glued them onto Christmas gifts, scrapbooks and Valentine’s cards, and they were used in nurseries and schools as decoration and teaching tools. In this anonymous collage from around 1890, a variety of these machine-prepared chromolithographic “scraps”—floral wreaths, little flower girls and storybook figures—have been arrayed around the central image of a baby.



“Bottle of Vieux Marc, Glass, Guitar and Newspaper” (1913) by Pablo Picasso

One of the chief concerns of the Cubists in the early 1910s was how to represent, upon the flat surface of the picture plane, a three-dimensional world. With the incorporation of collage into their paintings, they were no longer reduced to merely imitating the world; by sticking elements of the real world onto their canvases, they recreated the experience of interacting with it.

In this still life, Picasso stuck a scrap of real newspaper onto the canvas. The viewer can stand and read the words, if they want. Whether the specific story, about the coronation of Tsar Alexander III in Russia, was intended to have any specific symbolic meaning remains a moot point. By introducing a real newspaper into the composition, rather than painting one, Picasso has conjured a world that exists in time as well as space.

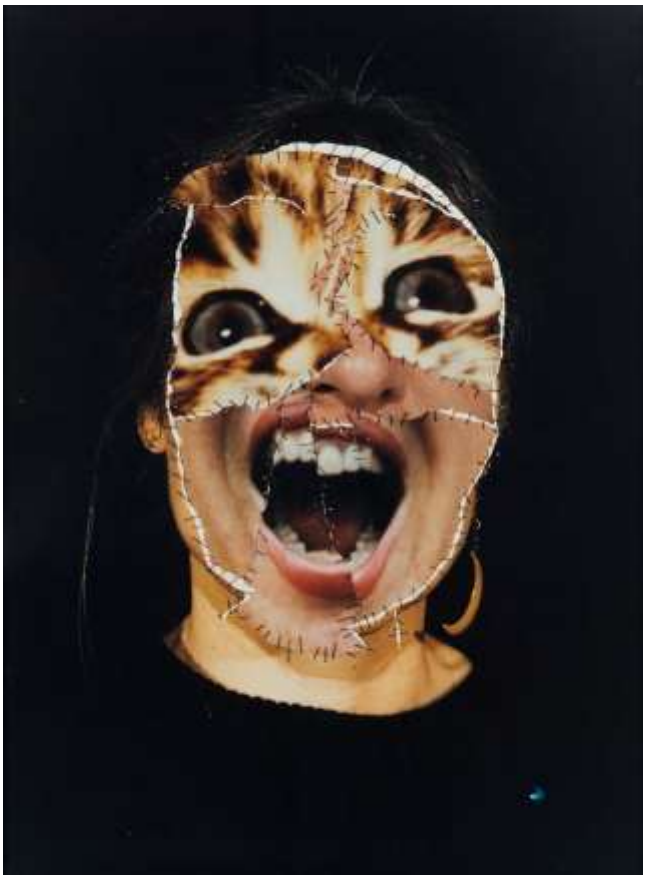


“Untitled (Unpublished collage for ‘Une semaine de bonté’)” (1934) by Max Ernst

German artist Max Ernst co-founded the Cologne branch of the Dada group in 1919 and later became a leading figure among the Surrealists in Paris. He developed a practice of collaging together old prints, taken from a vast range of sources, to construct visions of fantastical worlds – a way of working that has influenced everyone from fellow Surrealists like André Breton to Terry Gilliam, who made the “Monty Python” montages.

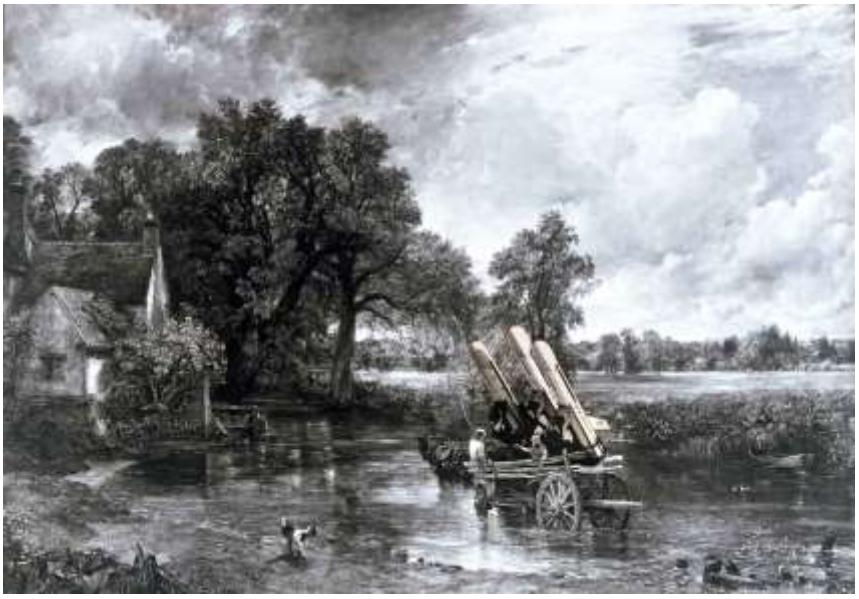
Yet Ernst was by no means the first to use collage to this effect. With its spectral, contorted figures, superimposed onto an illustration from a French pulp novel, this work recalls the famous “Cottingley Fairy” photographs of Elsie Wright and Frances Griffith, on show earlier in the exhibition. These two young girls from Cottingley, a village in

West Yorkshire, collaged pictures of fairies onto photographs of themselves in 1920, accidentally causing a media storm over the possible existence of supernatural beings.



“GRIMA – Selbst mit Katze (Der Schrei)” (GRIMA – Self with cat (The Scream)) (1986) by Annegret Soltau

In the work of Annegret Soltau, the act of collage becomes violent. In the 1970s, the German artist began tearing photos of herself apart and stitching them back together with needle and thread. In later images, such as her “GRIMA” series, photographs of Soltau are juxtaposed with fragments of images of other people, including her children, and animals. Her art makes visible the fragmented psychological states associated with sickness and ageing—linking her with a long lineage of artists who have used collage to blend the imagined and the real.



“Haywain with Cruise Missiles” (1980) by Peter Kennard

Disruptive by its nature, collage was perfectly suited to the culture of punk and protest that arose in Britain in the late 1970s. In 1980 this photomontage by Peter Kennard became the defining image of anti-nuclear protest in the UK. It was created and published after the announcement that American cruise missiles were to be stationed near Newbury, a market town in Berkshire. To allay public hostility to the decision, the Ministry of Defence issued a pamphlet, illustrated by a delicate watercolor in which the missiles were shown to blend harmoniously with the rural landscape. In Kennard’s venomously satirical response, he introduced three prominent cruise missiles into a bromide photograph of John Constable’s painting “The Hay Wain” (1821), a classic depiction of rural England.

“Cut and Paste: 400 Years of Collage”

Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, until October 27th, 2019