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At the Heckscher, Works Torn From Life

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The exhibition at the Heckscher Museum in Huntington gets part of this narrative right, showcasing early collage works that resonate with the excitement of the new and slightly forbidden. The show is far weaker, however, when looking at contemporary art.



"Took for Granted" (2008) by Mark Wagner. Courtesy of Mark Wagner and Pavel Zoubok Gallery

Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque first discovered the advantages of collage for creating compositions in the early 20th century when they began to use torn and cut paper, rather than paint. Papier collé, French for glued or pasted paper, became one of the earliest types of collage, but its radical possibilities were embraced and extended by artists associated with Dada, Surrealism, Pop Art and other movements.

There are no works by Picasso or Braque here, but there are works by Hannah Höch, Jean Arp, George Grosz and Salvador Dalí. Höch, who was involved with Dada in Berlin after World War I, is represented by "The Dream of His Life" from 1925, a photomontage — that is, a collage using photographic source material — depicting a garlanded young woman that in its imagery also leans toward Surrealism and its Freudian obsession with dreams.

Arp's undated "Abstraction," a biomorphic shape made with paper, similarly negotiates the divide between Surrealism and Dada's love of the irrational and accidental, suggesting an embryo or a murky, unconscious image. Grosz, another Berlin Dadaist, is represented here, but the work is from much later, around 1958. "Moveable Feast"

retains the critical bite of Grosz's earlier years, however, and it is applied here to consumerism in a buffet of cut-up images of eyes, mouths and noses nestled amid an abundant spread of food.

Postwar consumerism was also central to Roy Lichtenstein's Pop Art, although the two collages here, both made in 1967 using shimmery Rowlux, are nothing like the paintings of comic strips and advertisements for which he is known.

Collage accommodated oddball 20th-century artists who worked at the margins of movements. Joseph Cornell, an American who lived and worked in Queens and is sometimes associated with Surrealism, is represented by "Penny Arcade (Lanner Waltzes Series)" from 1962, which looks like a greeting-card version of a face pasted into a nocturnal sky. It is an unremarkable assemblage — except that it was made by Cornell, who is something of a cult figure. Ray Johnson worked at the periphery of Pop (although it's debatable whether there was ever a "center"). His "Untitled (Peter Beard profile with Tarot Card, Cornell Bunnies, and Buddha)," carries a funny date — 1976-1987-88-89-90 — that conjures the adage that a work of art is never completed, merely abandoned. It also pays homage to Cornell, while mixing a bit of '60s mysticism into the Pop idiom.

Romare Bearden was one of the greatest collagists of the 20th century, and an artist who was allied with Picasso in a roundabout way. Bearden, an African-American, wrote about how Picasso's embrace of African sculpture in the early 20th century was not a "primitivist" gesture, but an affirmation of the contributions made by a continent often overlooked in global art discussions. Works from Bearden's "Ritual Bayou" series from around 1972 used paper and photographs to tell the story of African-Americans in the Deep South — and hark back to Jacob Lawrence's "Migration" series of paintings from the 1940s, which look a bit like collages.



"Byzantine Frieze" from the series "Ritual Bayou," circa 1972, by Romare Bearden. All rights reserved. Romare Bearden Foundation. Licensed by TADA, San Francisco.

PAVEL ZOUBOK GALLERY

Miriam Schapiro's "The Measured Heart," from 1982, puts forward a feminist narrative that is also subversive. Her fabric collage, which she called "femmage," looks like a garish 1980s ski jacket, and that is the point. Bold, colorful and emotive, her work is an aggressive argument against the coolness of Minimalism and other late-modern movements that championed the cerebral over the passionate.

When the exhibition moves closer to the present, "Ripped" hits a road bump. There is a fine 2005 collage by Jane Hammond, who mines materials from children's books and scientific manuals, and there are works by Jiri Kolar and Mark Wagner, artists represented by the Manhattan gallerist Pavel Zoubek.



Courtesy of the Heckscher Museum of Art

"Untitled (Peter Beard profile with Tarot Card, Cornell Bunnies, and Buddha)," 1976-1987-88-89-90, by Ray Johnson

Mr. Wagner's funny yet critical collages, made from cut-up United States currency, are a welcome inclusion. The one here, "Took for Granted" from 2008, remakes Grant Wood's "American Gothic" from 1930, and feels perfect for a moment in which economic problems dominate the national conversation.

But the show, which was organized by Kenneth Wayne, a guest curator, comes up short when it shows three or four works each by Ethel Camhi, John Digby, Steven Ford, Frank Olt and Nancy Scheinman. The pieces are generally competent, but these artists are granted an inordinate amount of wall space; one gets the sense that Mr. Wayne has run out of ideas. And that is too bad. It leaves us with the impression that contemporary collage is difficult to track down, which is far from true.

In fact, collage is one of art's most enduring and popular forms. Its core logic, found in the juxtaposition of disparate elements culled from existing or irreverently non-art sources, has informed everything from sampling in hip-hop and, more recently, mash-ups, to the celebrated sculptures of Jessica Stockholder and Rachel Harrison, which extend collage into three dimensions.

It is also interesting to note that collage has often been a mainstay for female artists, who didn't always have access to the same training (or achieve canonization within traditional disciplines, like painting) as men did. And here Mr. Wayne could have looked back even earlier, to the scrapbooks made by Victorian women in Britain, which turned cut photographs of family, friends and famous people into fanciful, Alice-in-Wonderland-like collages.

It is easy, of course, to re-curate a show in print. But collage, with its open-endedness, allows for just this kind of thinking. In our culture, which feels as though it has seen everything, perhaps all that is left to do is creatively reimagine and reconfigure what remains. Collage may have started with papier collé, but its logic has since exploded into every realm, including postmodern architecture and culinary experimentation, resulting in things like chocolate bars laced with bacon or mushrooms.

"Ripped" delivers a taste of collage's history and allure. But in the end, the exhibition underestimates its subject and fails to show viewers just how culturally significant the simple act of ripping paper or cutting up photos became within the swift course of a century.

"Ripped: The Allure of Collage," Heckscher Museum of Art, 2 Prime Avenue, Huntington, through Jan. 8. Information: (631) 351-3250 or heckscher.org.