

Narrative Collage

Choose from a personal photo bank, then rebuild an image into a visual story

The discipline of collage in fine art is a relatively new form of expression. While cutting and gluing techniques have existed throughout history, it wasn't until the 20th century that mass-produced papers, newspapers, and magazines became readily available to modern artists who were eager to experiment with new materials. While commonly known as a two-dimensional discipline where found papers and images are glued onto a surface, similar techniques of finding, arranging, and attaching unrelated materials into a cohesive artwork can be found in sculptural assemblage, printmaking, collé, fabric collage, photomontage, digital collage, and mixed media.

In the mid-twentieth century, when the upheaval of the civil rights movement, Vietnam War, and counterculture was at its peak, collage was a perfect medium for social commentary and protest. Glossy images from magazines and photostat copies were common and recognizable. These images became part of rebuilding a familiar narrative that was, at times, at complete odds with its original source.

During this time, artist Romare Bearden became renowned for his collages that focused on the lives, culture, and ideals of African American people. Using found images and papers, Bearden turned to his own memories of growing up during the Harlem Renaissance as inspiration, but also found subjects in diverse places such as music, literature, comics, and religion. He felt as if the medium of collage represented "a coming together" and rebuilding of something from unrelated parts and used it as a means for advocating for African American artists.

Bearden's narrative pieces have inspired many next-generation collagists to continue experimenting with the medium in their own way while exploring similar themes of culture and community. Contemporary artist and illustrator Ekua Holmes is one such artist, building scenes of her childhood memories and neighborhood using found and painted papers. "With these scraps and remnants," Holmes says about her work, "I rebuild my world, putting in what speaks to my personal and cultural narrative."

Using their own digital or print photo bank, students will select an image to rebuild in paper and paint, telling a visual story about their chosen subject matter. Portions of the collage, such as faces and figures, may be printed in black and white on paper, cut out, and painted with opaque watercolor (gouache, pronounced "gwash").

GRADES 5-12 Note: Instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 24 students. Adjust as needed.

Preparation

1. Select an image from a personal photo bank on a phone, computer, or tablet. Look for imagery that represents a story rather than portraiture. An event or experience will make the best narrative and everyday settings and scenes will provide the most personal subject matter.



Materials (required)

Canson XL Mix Media Pad, 12" x 9", portrait, 60 sheets (12468-1023); share one across class

Savoir Faire Opaque Watercolor Gouache, Set of 10 colors, 10 ml tubes (00803-0029); share two sets across class

Royal & Langnickel Classroom Brush Assortment, Round/flat, Golden Taklon, set of 120 (06276-1019); share one across class

Roylco Decorative Paper Packs, assorted sizes and designs (11262-); share two across class

Decorative Paper, Assorted, 1 lb (12440-1001); share two across class

Yasutomo Nori Paste, Classpack of 20 jars, 1.84 oz (24000-1003); share one across class

Blick Essentials Value Foam Brush, 1" (06027-1001); need one per student

Westcott Titanium Scissors, 5", pointed (57059-1005); need one per student

Plastic 10-Well Palette with Cover (03068-1010); need one per student

Optional Materials

Yes Stikflat Glue, Pint (23836-0006)

Mod Podge Clear Acrylic Sealer Spray, 12 oz can, Matte (02916-1018) or Gloss (02916-1107)

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Preparation (continued)

- Print the image out in black ink/toner on a letter-size sheet. If desired, alter the image first by posterizing it (assigning just a few levels of gray). This will simplify the image for painting by limiting the tones and also uses less ink/toner to print.
- Gather papers to use for collage. It's best to have a variety of colors and patterns, including solids. Pages from books and magazines are acceptable, but avoid using copywritten materials as much as possible. Use only images that the student has taken.

In the past, collagists often incorporated published images and materials without consideration for the rights of photographers, artists, and authors. Since then, copyright laws have been strengthened so that anyone using an image without the consent of the owner, including collagists, can face repercussions.

"Fair use" is a legal doctrine that promotes freedom of expression by permitting the unlicensed use of copyright-protected works in certain circumstances. Criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, and research are all examples of instances that *may* qualify as fair use. It is important for students to realize that copyright laws are in place for the protection of artists and fair use can only be determined by the court system. There are no laws or set guidelines as to how much of an image can be shown or how greatly it can be altered for use within a collage to be completely legal. As best practice, only use images that the student has taken. Alter text pages and maps with paint and avoid illustrations.

Process

- Print the selected image on an inkjet or laser printer. Determine the subject(s) of the collage, including figure(s), faces, etc. Cut the subject away from the background of the image with scissors. Save the background portion of the image to use as reference.
- Using opaque watercolor and a small brush, paint the subject and set aside to dry. Use realistic choices or invented color. The paper will buckle with water, but will flatten again when glue is applied.
- Select papers to fill the background and describe anything that will be part of the image. Consider the narrative of the collage when selecting colors and patterns. Colors and patterns can provide clues to the storyline, set the scene, and determine mood or emotion. For best results, plan the placement of the papers prior to gluing them in place. Alter these papers as desired by painting, cutting, tearing, wrinkling, etc.



Step 1: Select a personal image that represents a story. Alter by posterizing, then print.



Step 2: Cut the subject away from the background and paint with opaque watercolor.



Step 3: Design the background using found and painted papers, then place the subject over the background.

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Process (continued)

4. Use a glue specifically designed for collage or decoupage work. If desired, glue may be slightly thinned with water to make it more brushable. Start by assembling the background, brushing just enough glue on the back of each piece of paper to lightly coat it. Press down with fingers and smooth away wrinkles. Repeat with all the pieces until the background is in place.
5. Position the subject of the collage over the background and glue in place. If desired, add more paper over the subject to describe clothing and other details.
6. Once dry, markers, or pencils can be used to help describe the details of the narrative collage.

Options

- Do not brush glue over the painted surfaces. Gouache is waterbased and will smear. For best results, seal the finished collage with a clear finish spray.



National Core Arts Standards - Visual Arts

Creating

Anchor Standard 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Connecting

Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experience to make art

Anchor Standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.