

Waste Not

An Inquiry into What

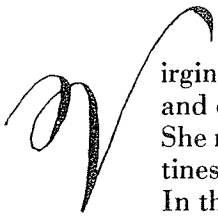
Melissa Meyer

Want Not

Women Saved and Assembled

Miriam Schapiro

FEMMAGE



Virginia Woolf talks about the loose, drifting material of life, describing how she would like to see it sorted and coalesced into a mold transparent enough to reflect the light of our life and yet aloof as a work of art.¹ She makes us think of the paper lace, quills and beads, scraps of cloth, photographs, birthday cards, valentines and clippings, all of which inspired the visual imaginations of the women we write about.

In the eighteenth century, a nun in a German convent cuts delicate lace from thin parchment and pastes it around minutely detailed paintings of saints. Performing an act of devotion in the service of her God, she makes what later, in the secular world, are called the first valentines.

An Iroquois woman in 1775 sews five elliptical quillwork designs at the base of a black buckskin bag, quillwork borders at the top and additional moosehair embroidery at the bottom and sides.

Hannah Stockton, a New Jersey woman, in 1830 dips into her scrap bag in the tradition of waste not want not and finds just the right pieces with which to appliqué her quilt.

In the 1860s, Lady Filmer photographs the Prince of Wales and his shooting party. Later she cuts up these photos and creates a composition of them in her album, producing the first photocollage.²

Rita Reynolds, resident of Southend, England, keeps a scrapbook during World War II. In it she glues birthday cards, valentines and clippings from her local newspaper which record the progress of the war. As the world situation worsens, the scrapbook reflects its gravity.

Collage: a word invented in the twentieth century to describe an activity with an ancient history. Here are some associated definitions:

Collage: pictures assembled from assorted materials.

Collage: a French word after the verb *coller* which means pasting, sticking or gluing, as in application of wallpaper.

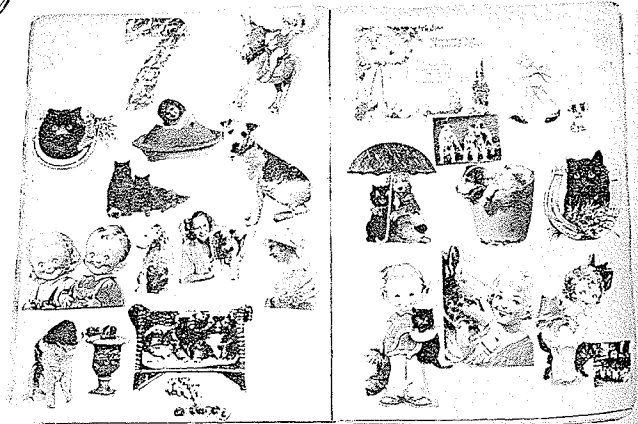
Assemblage: a collection of things, often combined in the round.

Assemblage: a specific technical procedure and form used in the literary and musical, as well as the plastic arts, but also a complex of attitudes and ideas . . . collage and related modes of construction manifest a predisposition that is characteristically modern.³

Découpage: (literally, cutting) a mode of decorating painted furniture with cutouts of flowers, fruit, etc. Also, the art of decorating surfaces with applied paper cutouts.

Photomontage: the method of making a composite picture by bringing photographs together in a single composition and arranging them, often by superimposing one part on another, so that they form a blended whole.

Rita Reynolds



SCRAPBOOK

This store-bought scrapbook (circa 1940s) was found in a London Flea Market. On first impression it seems banal, yet there is novelty in its contents: newspaper clippings, decals, some birthday and holiday cards with portions silhouetted (some are left whole) and commercially colored animal pictures.

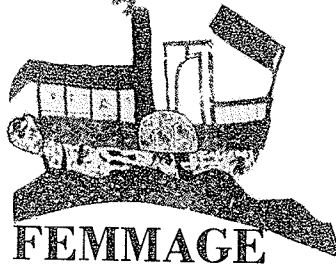
Rita Reynolds, in selecting her pictures, showed what was important to her, revealing her personal priorities. The seemingly unrelated information adds up to pre-war and wartime episodes that make "that loose drifting material of life" in fact coalesce into a work of art.¹⁰ This, then, is a visual artist's equivalent of a diary.

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Femme: a word invented by us to include all of the above activities as they were practiced by women using traditional women's techniques to achieve their art—sewing, piecing, hooking, cutting, appliquéing, cooking and the like—activities also engaged in by men but assigned in history to women.

Published information about the origins of collage is misleading. Picasso and Braque are credited with inventing it. Many artists made collage before they did, Picasso's father for one and Sonia Delaunay for another. When art historians mandate these beginnings at 1912, they exclude artists not in the mainstream. Art historians do not pay attention to the discoveries of non-Western artists, women artists or anonymous folk artists. All of these people make up the group we call *others*. It is exasperating to realize that the rigidities of modern critical language and thought prevent a direct response to the eloquence of art when it is made by *others*.

Our information on women artist-makers of the past was inspired by the definitive texts on collage written by critics and art historians Herta Wescher, William Seitz, Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh. We did not find our material in the main body of their works but rather in their introductions and in their notes in the back of their books, indicating they were unable to relax their modernist theories enough to appreciate the diversity, beauty and significance of the original makers of collage. Many of these ancestors were women who were ignored by the politics of art.

Janis and Blesh put it succinctly: "Collage was once only the simple pleasant fold art or pastime of cutting and pasting bits of paper into pictures or ornamental designs. It was no concern of serious artists. . . . Its origins began so many centuries ago. . . . It is only with this century and the advent of modern art that this quondam delight of schoolgirl and housewife came to the attention of serious artists grappling with revolutionary ideas. . . ." It is in fact the "schoolgirl" and "housewife" we must look at more carefully to understand the aesthetics of our ancestors and their processes.

William Seitz includes this information in his work on assemblage: "Valentines, postcards, and folk art of various kinds incorporating pasted elements as well as pictures and objects made of butterfly wings, feathers, shells, etc. were common much earlier. Indeed various stamped letters, passports and official documents can be looked at as a form of unintentional collage."⁵

Now that we women are beginning to document our culture, redressing our trivialization and adding our information to the recorded male facts and insights, it is necessary to point out the extraordinary works of art by women which despite their beauty are seen as leftovers of history. Aesthetic and technical contributions have simply been overlooked. Here, for example, we are concerned with the authenticity and energy in needlework.

Hannah Stockton

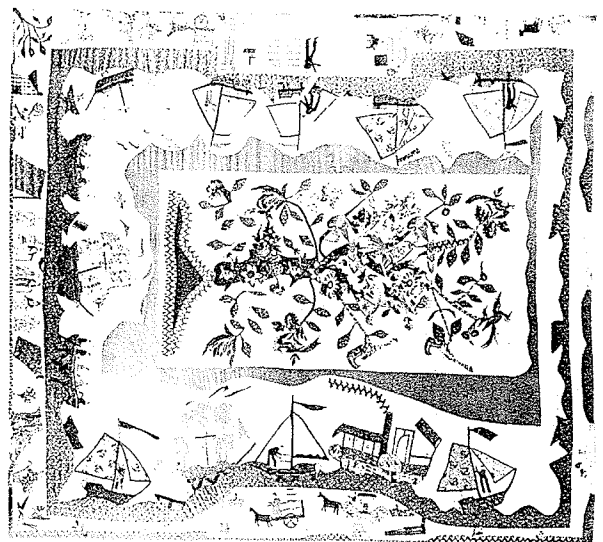
LAND AND SEA

This unusual quilt does not adhere to any formula for quilt-making. It has no set pattern—block, brick, half drop or diamond form; there are no predictable geometric or imagistic formulas here. It appears to be a crazy quilt with a theme.

Crazy quilts are made of freely cut pieces of cloth which may seem to be randomly placed. Here the theme is carried out in motifs of land and sea cut from imported English chintz of Oriental design (the technique called *broderie perse*).

Holstein says, ". . . so popular was this technique that in the early nineteenth century, chintzes were printed with patterns especially designed to be cut out and used for the centers and corners of appliqué quilts."⁹

A 103 inch by 91 inch quilt is a large work. Visual control is as impressive in this work as it is on the small devotional pieces.



Calligraphy by Marcy Kass.



FEMMAGE

When it becomes possible to appreciate a sewn object like a quilt (even though it was created for utilitarian purposes) because it employs thirty stitches to the inch, and uses color which by all standards is rich and evocative, contains silhouetted forms which are skillfully drawn and connects perfectly measured geometrical units of fabric, then it will be clear that woman's art invites a methodology of its own.

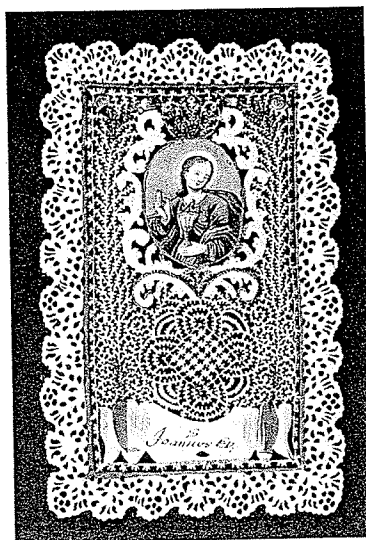
Women have always collected things and saved and recycled them because leftovers yielded nourishment in new forms. The decorative functional objects women made often spoke in a secret language, bore a covert imagery. When we read these images in needlework, in paintings, in quilts, rugs and scrapbooks, we sometimes find a cry for help, sometimes an allusion to a secret political alignment, sometimes a moving symbol about the relationships between men and women. We base our interpretations of the layered meanings in these works on what we know of our own lives—a sort of archeological reconstruction and deciphering. We ask ourselves, have we ever used a secret language in our works? Patricia Mainardi, in her essay, says: "Women not only made beautiful and functional objects but expressed their own conviction on a wide variety of subjects in a language for the most part comprehensible only to other women . . . There was more than one man of Tory persuasion who slept unknowingly under his wife's "Whig Rose Quilt" . . . women named quilts for their political belief . . . at a time when they were not allowed to vote."⁶

Collected, saved and combined materials represented for such women acts of pride, desperation and necessity. Spiritual survival depended on the harboring of memories. Each cherished scrap of percale, muslin or chintz, each bead, each letter, each photograph, was a reminder of its place in a woman's life, similar to an entry in a journal or a diary. Cynthia Ozick says, ". . . a diary is a shoring-up of the ephemeral, evidence that the writer [we substitute artist-maker] takes up real space in the world."⁷

Women's culture is the framework for femmage, and makes it possible for us to understand "combining" as the simultaneous reading of moosehair and beads, cut paper and paint or open-work and stitches. Our female culture also makes it possible to see these traditional aesthetic elements for what they are—the natural materials needed for spiritual, and often physical, survival.

In the past an important characteristic of femmage was that women worked for an audience of intimates. A woman artist-maker always had the assurance that her work was destined to be appreciated and admired. She worked for her relatives and friends and unless she exhibited in church bazaars and county fairs, her viewers were almost always people she knew. In their book, Joel and Kate Kopp tell about Mrs. Eleanor Blackstone of Lacon, Illinois, who in the years between 1880 and 1890 hooked six large rugs, all recording events in the history of her family. These rugs show her six children, their pastimes and their pets including actual strands of the children's hair worked into the individual portraits.⁸

Anonymous Nun

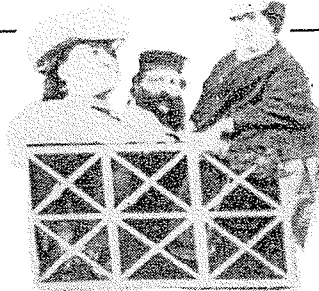


S. JOANNES EV.

Works like this paper femmage were made to be carried in a prayer book. This devotional work, approximately five inches by two inches, was an homage to a saint that the artist-maker, a nun, wished to honor. In this case St. John the Evangelist sits in his oval surrounded by ornate cut paper simulating lace. The whiteness of the lace is offset

by an illusionistic rendering of the saint himself. The cutting exhibits an astonishing capability in the use of knives and scissors as tools. The paper lace is pasted around the painting of the saint and part of it is painted as well. The appeal of these works is their delicacy and the tour de force of the cutting. The artist's process echoes her purpose. The love lavished by this nun on the little object is visible.

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FEMMAGE

We feel that several criteria determine whether a work can be called femmage. Not all of them appear in a single object. However, the presence of at least half of them should allow the work to be appreciated as *femme*.

1. It is a work by a woman. **2.** The activities of saving and collecting are important ingredients. **3.** Scraps are essential to the process and are recycled in the work. **4.** The theme has a woman-life context. **5.** The work has elements of covert imagery. **6.** The theme of the work addresses itself to an audience of intimates. **7.** It celebrates a private or public event. **8.** A diarist's point of view is reflected in the work. **9.** There is drawing and/or handwriting sewn in the work. **10.** It contains silhouetted images which are fixed on other material. **11.** Recognizable images appear in narrative sequence. **12.** Abstract forms create a pattern. **13.** The work contains photographs or other printed matter. **14.** The work has a functional as well as an aesthetic life.

These criteria are based on visual observation of many works made by women in the past. We have already said that this art has been excluded from mainstream, but why is that so? What is mainstream? How may such an omission be corrected?

The works themselves were without status because the artists who made them were considered inferior by the historians who wrote about art and culture. Since the works were intimate and had no data or criticism attached to them and were often anonymous, how could these writers identify them as valid, mainstream history?

Mainstream is the codification of ideas for the illumination of history and the teaching of the young. What a shame that the young remain ignorant of the vitality of women's art. Yet the culture of women will remain unrecognized until women themselves regard their own past with fresh insight. To correct this situation, must we try to insert women's traditional art into mainstream? How will the authorities be convinced that what they consider low art is worth representing in history? The answer does not lie in mainstream at all, but in sharing women's information with women.

Toward this end we have evaluated a selection of women's art and looked for similar elements which appeared most frequently. As we recorded them, we discovered with pleasure that they presented a form in many guises—a form we call femmage.

1. Virginia Woolf, *Self Explorations, Diarists in England and America*, Exhibition catalog (New York: 42nd St. Public Library, May 2-September 15, 1977) (excerpted from "A Writer's Diary"). 2. *Women of Photography, An Historical Survey*, Catalog (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, April 18-June 15, 1975). 3. William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), p. 10. 4. Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh, *Collage Personalities Concepts Techniques* (Philadelphia/New York/London: Chilton Book Co., 1969), p. 3. 5. Seitz, p. 150, note 5. 6. Patricia Mainardi, "Quilts: The Great American Art," *Feminist Art Journal*, Winter 1973, p. 19. 7. Cynthia Ozick, *The Loose Drifting Material of Life*, New York Times Book Review, Oct. 2, 1977, p. 41. 8. Joel and Kate Kopp, *American Hooked and Sewn Rugs, Folk Art Underfoot*, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975), p. 72. 9. Jonathan Holstein, *The Pieced Quilt an American Design Tradition*, (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphics Society, Ltd., 1973), p. 21. 10. Virginia Woolf, 42nd Street Public Library Exhibition (see #1).

Lady Filmer

PRINCE OF WALES SHOOTING PARTY

Lady Mary Filmer was an early practitioner of photography, a contemporary of the more celebrated Julia Margaret Cameron. But Lady Filmer took photography to another place. She cut, rearranged and pasted her pictures onto album pages, sometimes adding watercolor. Her work pre-dated the papier collé of Picasso and Braque and the photomontages of Hannah Hoch and Raoul Hausmann. In Lady Mary's circle, most women did fancywork.

Today this term is used disparagingly by cultural historians whose aesthetic remains uninformed by women's culture. In their hierarchical sympathies, they elevate the camera above the crochet needle. Although we believe Lady Filmer's photocollages were admirable achievements, the other women of her time were accomplishing equally interesting work.

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