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Claire Le Thomas

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From one collage to another: the roots of cubism's pasted papers

Claire Le Thomas, independent scholar

When talking about the **beginning of collage** in modern art history, this technique is often **presented** as a **Cubist's radical innovation**. It seems like there was **no real precedent** to Braque and Picasso first paper's works in 1912. Following this reading, they were the **first thinking of cutting and pasting papers to make a work of art**. From these first pasted papers, **come out next, new processes of creation**: collage and assemblage. Nevertheless, opposed to this modernist reading, **Pierre Daix** remembers Picasso saying "**he has always seen collage**"¹. And it is what **appears** when looking **beyond the traditional definition of high art**. African and Oceania art, just art folk art, often **use readymade objects and paper as creative material**. **Collage and assemblage** as artistic categories precisely **invite us to enlarge our vision of art by focusing on technics, processes and materials** rather than the finished art work. Therefore, numerous **books** on collage or assemblage history **talks about previous cutting and pasting experience**. However, they **hardly bring into play this background** information to rewrite the history of these artistic practices. This conference will thus try to do so:

- First **by analysing a widely spread domestic leisure** from the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries using papers, scissors, glue or nails to make decorative objects;
- Then **by comparing this material and technical culture** surrounding Braque and Picasso **to cubists works** in order **to demonstrate the many ways in which these ordinary creative activities played a role in the invention of pasted paper**.

A material and technical culture of making

First, **what kind of practice and things** are we talking about? The material and technical culture I would like to draw your attention on is that of **leisure activities** which are **done inside home**, or at immediate proximity, and consist in **making usual or decorative objects** such as

- **cardboard flower pot holder** or **lampshade** ornamented with drawings or glued pictures
- **Weaving Umbrella stand**
- **Half barrel** as **flower pot**
- **Richly decorated jewel or candy boxes** with silk, embossed or gold paper
- **Rabbit hutch**
- **Filigree flower hair pin**
- **Terracotta vase** with modelled flower and enamel paint
- **Letter-opener** in pyrography, repoussé stain or copper

¹ W. Rubin (ed.), *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art/Harry N. Abrams, 1992, p. 73-91.

In other term, to use **present-day expression**, they belong to **DIY** and **creative hobbies** which were **growing fast** during the last third of the nineteenth century.

This period is indeed well-known for its **taste for décor and its overdecorated architecture**. One only needs to think about **eclecticism**. But this taste for décor also **spread to the entire society** and **interior were congested** with furniture and objects as we can see in **Atget's series *Intérieurs parisiens***. **Walls are crowded** with hanging canvases and furniture disappear under ornaments, trinkets or knitting and fabrics pieces, **even in workers home**. As a consequence, **people crafted more and more objects**. We can see it both with

- the **growing of a published literature** to help beginners, with its collection, authors...
- the **expansion of art and craft shops and products** which sell ready-made product to ornate with paint, engraving, papers...

This domestic leisure **pursues a beautifying and well-being goal**: they aim to *“maintain in good condition one's home”, “ornate your home with your own hands”*, in order to get *“more comfort, more well-being”*, to quote the handbooks of the time. By « well-being », we must understand to **give a sense of intimacy**, to **adapt domestic interior to oneself**. But they are also **driven by the desire of creating with one's own hand**. *“Everyone wants to create and show his work. We want to spend our time creating objects that make a mark, and carry our name by the slight work we do on small useful or only pleasant object accredited by fashion and that we offer as souvenirs²”*. Making handmade object is thus a mean to **single out oneself** and **customize one's home**, to **show the owner taste or personality**. It **meets** then the recent **importance gave to home**.

However, there is also a **financial reason** to domestic creative practice as **handiwork “offers the easiest and cheaper manner to set up house and to make or repair all the little thing that are so easy to do but so expensive when paying for³”**. The activities, then, also consist in

- **Fixing straw seat, hiding furniture wear and defects** or embellish ordinary items
- **Crafting objects instead of buying them** like goldened pine Christmas decoration, iron wire candlestick or nutshell toy boat
- Or **creating fake for unaffordable object** such as fake Etruscan vase or fake Japanese porcelain. The latest is made of **cut pattern from fabric** glued on a vase and varnished.

Therefore, because of the **double craft and financial constrain**, they **make the most of cheap, ordinary or reuse material**: iron wire, paper, cardboard, wool... They create **flower out of beach shells**, “crack/break mosaic” from broken dishes, rustic frames from recovered plants. Sometime **recycled items are quite surprising** like eggshell for miniature vase (with cardboard handle) or chocolate foil wrapping. Moreover, **to solve the maker lack of skill, creation processes are simplified**. Most often **crafting consist in pasting or putting together readymade forms** such as

- **Natural items** (dried leaves, flower, nuts, insects...)

² *Album des arts utiles et amusants qui peuvent être cultivés par les Dames, les Jeunes Personnes et les Jeunes Gens*, Paris, Chez Dentu imprimeur-libraire, 1840, p. 1.

³ Marcel BOURDAIS, *Livre d'or des connaissances utiles, Arts et métiers de tout, sur tout, pour tous*, Paris, H. Dunod et E. Pinat éditeurs, 1908, p.3.

- **Printed work** (cut out images from various medium books, advertisement, models, fabrics...)
- **Factory made objects**: vases, boxes, stencil, mould ornaments sold in stores... like we can see in those Dupré catalogues where one can buy ready-made stencil or leaves.

Similarities: borrowing and appropriation

How did this **widely spread material and technical culture of making found its way into Braque and Picasso pasted paper**? First, **living in Montmartre**, a very specific neighbourhood of Paris, both poor and rural, they were **embedded among this alternative creative culture**. Braque, Picasso and their friend at that time even sometime **realized everyday object with recycled material**: Picasso crafted a doll for Van Dongen daughter; Gris made his own slipper cutting old shoes; Derain and Vlaminck framed themselves their canvases for the 1905 *Salon des indépendants*. It was a **shared culture**. Second, we know **Braque and Picasso taste and empathy for poor and middle-class culture**: they **enjoyed humbles ways of living** and **liked the same entertainments** (circus, movie theatre, tavern or night-clubs); they **dressed like workers** and **found interest in modest and everyday life artifacts**. Then, the **practices** of self-creating decorative objects **they were surrounded with, resurfaced** when looking for a solution to cubist's problems.

It was for instance a **technical repertory** as we can find **all the new cubists process** in domestic leisure:

- **Stencil letters** recalls **drizzle paint** which consist in blowing paint on an item to get a negative silhouette.
- **Sand paint** can be compared to **covering objects**, like frames, **with sand**, sometime painted, to **get a united surface** hiding recycled materials.
- **Fake wood** (using a comb), **fake marble** are ways to imitate precious substance and mask poor material.
- **Ripolin** is employed **to coat** craft creations because it is cheap, robust and ready-made (there is no need to prepare the paint)
- **Paper sculptures** reminds **paper toys**.
- And above all they **both use ready-made objects for the same easiness purpose**. If Aragon quoted: "**Picasso found useless to depict if one can put the object itself⁴**", the **ordinary creator's motto** could be this statement of Jean Emile-Bayard, a handbook author: "**instead of coping your models, chose and use them directly⁵**".

Domestics crafters were indeed **masters in collage or assemblage processes**: they **assemble** pine cones, shells or seeds **to decorate frames**; they **create pictures with stamp** or **cut images** from newspapers or engravings, they **glue fabrics, plants to ornate** lampshade. Some technics, like **cartophania** or **lithophania**, even consisted in **depicting only with layers of paper**. All the **image** is then obtained **through the superposition of papers, fabrics**; the **drawing** is the **result of the cuts and change of colours**, textures... creating an **inverted perspective** just like the one in **analytic cubism**. The different **layers give the image depth's**; **depicted figure moves toward the viewer**. The ribbon is behind the hand, the glued plant comes out the frame, akin to the violin in Braque's painting.

⁴ Louis Aragon, « La peinture au défi », préface du catalogue de l'exposition de collages, Paris, galerie Goemans, mars 1930, repris dans Aragon 1918-1980, p. 33.

⁵ J. Émile-Bayard, *Les arts de la femme. Encyclopédie pratique*, Paris, Charles Delagrave, 1904, p. 73.

Therefore, what is very striking about ordinary crafting and cubism technics, is that, not only they are alike, but **they offer similar stylistic and artistic effects** as well, which means **domestic leisure was not only a technical repertory** for Braque and Picasso **but also an artistic example, an inspiring model**. To continue with ready-made object for example, the **use of recycled material comes across Aragon collage's analysis**⁶. For Aragon, ready-made objects are generally **used as citations as they quote the replaced item**. He subsequently divides quoting-items in **three categories**.

- The first one is the **literal quote: instead of depicting an object, it is pasted**: the natural plant on the panel plant, the pack of cigarette in Braque's collage.
- The **second level** quotation is **when the pasted object is an imitation, a depicted image** like the cane in the Picasso painting or the Japanese patterns (taken from fabrics) in the ordinary craft.
- At last, the **metaphorical quote** stands for **non-imitative use of pasted object**. A piece of cardboard stands for guitar strings; shells for flowers petals.

Pasted material can also **have a textural, colour purpose**: the **visual effect of the work** is created by the **association of different pieces of fabric, paper**, the slight **differences of surfaces, tints**. This **disparate result** recalls that of **patchwork** or "**crack/break mosaic**". Furthermore, ordinary craft **draw Braque and Picasso attention on heterogeneity possibility**. Using different kind of material and technics, **domestics leisure has no stylistic unity just as synthetic cubism** where the same work can associate cubist fragmented objects (the figure) and illusionistic sign (like guitar strings, rope, stencilled letter). This **stylistic heterogeneity is also that of materials** with the association of chromos, lace and ribs or newspapers, partition and wallpaper...

"Inventing collage": a misappropriation into art

Braque and Picasso **borrowed numerous technical and formal innovation to ordinary crafting**: when looking for a solution to cubism's problems, such as finding non illusionistic signs to exit the hermeticism of analytical cubism or experiencing the possibility of a stylistic diversity in representation, **they draw answers from this common creative culture as they are no real cut between every day and artistic gestures**. The **way we use objects or materials doesn't totally change from one human area of activity to another**. It is this **circulation of techniques** that allowed Braque and Picasso to **appropriate ordinary craft processes and materials**. They founded in ordinary practice of creation an **inspiring example of what can be done with unartistic means**. It was **both a repertory of technical and formal innovation and a discovery of a new way of creating**: collage and assemblage. **Collage and assemblage** origin can in consequence be **rooted in the material and visual culture of the time**, they are the **result of ordinary creative practice dissemination to artistic avant-garde**. But while **moving from everyday life to art**, they **changed purpose and signification**. Braque and Picasso **misappropriated these activities and converted them into art**.

If **domestic leisure** can be related to **aesthetic goals**, ordinary crafters **do not** have real **artistic ambition**. They **want to decorate** their home and **create objects** submitted to **aesthetic judgement**; they often want **to distinguish**

⁶ Louis Aragon, « La peinture au défi », préface du catalogue de l'exposition de collages, Paris, galerie Goemans, mars 1930, repris dans Aragon 1918-1980.

themselves, to **show creative qualities** and sometime, **make a real commitment of it** but they **do not try** to participate to **art history**, to integrate into art. The **use of recycled material** or collage process, for example, can be construed as **default choice rather than a deliberate choice**. It is **first the outcome of technical reasons**: domestics crafters **lack skills**, especially **drawing abilities**, to do otherwise. Ready-made material is **part** of other **tips and tricks** told in handbooks in order to **“make art without being artist”⁷**. Pantograph help enlarging or reducing patterns; multiple ways of tracing are described to copy models; mirrors allow creating new decorative design. **Second**, it is driven by **financial reason**. Not everyone can afford buying ready-made material sold in stores. **Thirdly**, ordinary crafters have an **important time pressure**. Being a leisure, crafting is **constrained by the available free time**. One manual⁸ even reveals a two hours method to make a painting. But creating quickly is also a manner **not to discourage crafters whose wish is to finish fast the ongoing work**. Anyway, all those **tricks can’t replace authentic objects and technics**; hence the **artifices to hide** poor material like sand, fake wood, ripolin painting....

On the contrary, **for Braque and Picasso collage and heteroclite materials are artistic means**. They enhance domestic leisure novelty to criticize high art traditions, **transforming a compelled and unwilling freedom in an avant-gardist line of attack against traditional art**. By doing so, they **“invented” collage and assemblage for the art world** and make use of **ordinary crafting**, finally, as a **moral backing for this unprecedented transgression**.

To conclude, I would like to stress that, **when focusing on collage as a technic, there is no real specificity of works on paper**. they have in common with other creative practice **another process for making art**: cutting, gluing, nailing ready-made material; employing reality scraps to create. Thus, **they can be compared with ordinary crafting even though they are nothing alike in terms of ambition, aims or aesthetics**.

⁷ Marie de GRANDMAISON, *L’art de faire des jouets avec rien pour les enfants de 4 ans à 10 ans*, Paris, Librairie Artistique de la Jeunesse, Raphaël Tuck Editeur, 1906, p. 67.

⁸ M. Chevalier, *L’Immense Trésor des sciences et des arts ou les secrets de l’industrie dévoilés, contenant 650 recettes et procédés nouveaux inédits*, Saintes, Chez Fontanier libraire-éditeur, 1856.