

LESSON TWO: Revealing Process

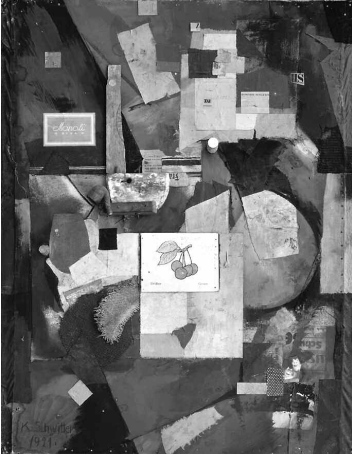


IMAGE FIVE: Kurt Schwitters. *Merz Picture 32A (The Cherry Picture)*. 1921. Cut-and-pasted colored and printed papers, cloth, wood, metal, cork, oil, pencil, and ink on board, 36 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (91.8 x 70.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mr. and Mrs. A. Atwater Kent, Jr. Fund. © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

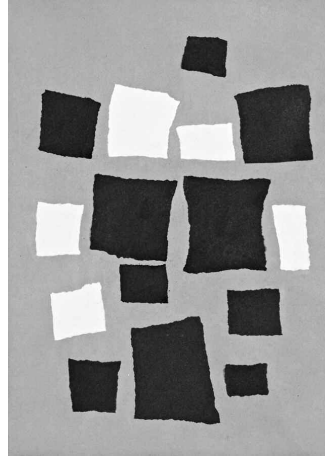


IMAGE SIX: Jean Arp (Hans Arp). *Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance*. 1916–17. Torn-and-pasted paper on blue-gray paper, 19 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (48.5 x 34.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase. © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

INTRODUCTION

Many Dada and Surrealist artists were critical of the dominant social structures and political strategies that led to World Wars I and II. To critique the systems that shaped society, they turned to new art-making strategies, including **collage**. As practiced by Dada artists, collage could involve chance. Collage could also rely on prefabricated sources, particularly magazines, newspapers, and other printed mass media, thus incorporating popular and commodity culture into a work of art.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will be introduced to the strategy of collage.
- Students will be introduced to the concept of chance and how it has played a role in the production of visual art.
- Students will explore how artists incorporated materials from everyday life into their works of art, including images from the mass media.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to describe what objects, images, and texts they have on the walls of their bedrooms or on bulletin boards. Ask them to consider what these objects and their arrangement reveal about them as individuals. Have your students name similarities and differences between school bulletin boards and their own walls or bulletin boards at home with respect to choice of content and how it is arranged.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Give your class a couple of minutes to look at *Merz Picture 32A (The Cherry Picture)* by Kurt Schwitters. Ask your students to describe what they see. Ask them to consider **composition, color, material, and images.**
- Ask your students to imagine how this picture was made. To help students explain what they are seeing, it may be useful to introduce them to the term “collage.”

Inform the class that Schwitters made this work from scraps and objects he collected from the streets of his hometown of Hannover, Germany. Although he scavenged the fragments, Schwitters carefully composed and affixed them with glue and nails to a painted board to make this collage.

Schwitters was trained as a painter, but as World War I came to an end he adopted collage as his preferred process, saying, “[...] everything had broken down in any case and new things had to be made out of the fragments.”⁹ *Merz Picture 32A (The Cherry Picture)* belongs to the so-called Merz series, a term Schwitters derived from a syllable of the German word “Kommerz” (commerce), which he included in one of his early collage paintings.

Merz Picture 32A has many layers. It might be helpful to guide your students in identifying the objects in the various layers. Light and dark paint on the board form the base of the collage and contribute to an illusion of depth. Affixed are various fabrics, an image of kittens, newspaper clippings, and a flashcard of cherries, onto which Schwitters penciled in German the ungrammatical phrase, “*Ich liebe dir!*” (I love she!). Three-dimensional objects, such as a wine cork and a broken pipe, protrude from the surface.

Schwitters stated that with his Merz project he aimed “to create connections, preferably between everything in this world.”¹⁰

- Referring to the objects your students named in the picture, ask them to draw connections between the fragments and to consider how they might be related.
- Now show your students *Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance*, by Jean Arp. Refrain from telling them the title right away. Ask your students to take a couple of minutes to look at the image and to describe what they see. Ask them to include **composition, color, material, and images** in their description.

Although they used different materials and techniques for their collages, Schwitters and Arp were friends who collaborated on many art projects and publications.

- Using visual evidence, ask your students to compare and contrast *Merz Picture 32A* and *Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance*. How are they similar and how are they different?
- Ask your students how they think Arp’s work was made.

9. Leah Dickerman, *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris* (Landover, Maryland: The National Gallery of Art, 2005), 159.

10. *Ibid.*, 163.

Inform your students of the title of this work, and read aloud the following passage by Arp's friend and fellow artist Hans Richter. Apparently, Arp, frustrated with a drawing he had been working on for some time,

[. . .] finally tore it up, and let the pieces flutter to the floor of his studio[. . .] Some time later he happened to notice these same scraps of paper as they lay on the floor, and was struck by the pattern they formed. It had all the expressive power that he had tried in vain to achieve. How meaningful! How telling! Chance movements of his hand and of the fluttering scraps of paper had achieved what all his efforts had failed to achieve, namely *expression*. He accepted this challenge from chance as a decision of fate and carefully pasted the scraps down in the pattern which chance had determined.¹¹

- **Ask your students if knowing how this collage was made changes their initial ideas about it. Why or why not?**

Arp made many collages according to chance. To remove his own artistic intervention even further, he sometimes used a paper cutter to cut the squares rather than tearing them by hand. However, there are accounts that Arp may have occasionally undermined chance and arranged the squares himself.

- **Ask your students if they believe that the artist made this work using chance, based on their evaluation of the collage's composition. Ask them why or why not.**

ACTIVITIES

Merz Picture 32A (The Cherry Picture) can be viewed as a journal of objects encountered by the artist. Ask your students to collect five objects, images, or fragments that they find over the course of a day or weekend, and make a collage. Ask them to write a journal to accompany the visual one of found objects, explaining the objects' significance and making connections between them. What objects did they collect? What objects did they leave behind?

Both Schwitters and Arp were forced to flee their homes due to military invasions leading up to World War II. In 1937, the Nazis confiscated thousands of modern works of art, including several of Schwitters's Merz pictures. Many of these were included in *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate art), a Nazi-organized exhibition in Munich intended as a platform to mock and condemn modern art. Ask your students to conduct research on this exhibition. How many works were in the exhibition, and why were they selected? How many people visited the exhibition, and how was it received critically? What affect did the show's reception have on the artists whose works were in the exhibition? Where did the works of art end up after the exhibition? After students have conducted their research, ask them to discuss their findings and debate issues of censorship in the arts.

11. Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2002), 51.