

MIRIAM SCHAPIRO AND MELISSA MEYER
Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into
What Women Saved and Assembled--FEMMAGE (1977-78)

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. She makes us think of the paper lace, quills 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 applique 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.

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.

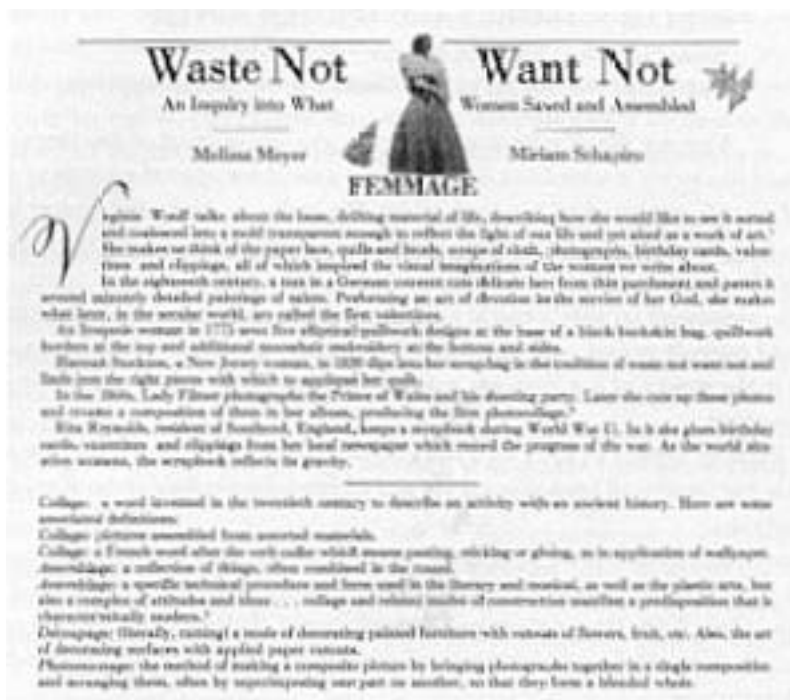
Assemblage: a collection of things, often combined in the round.

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.

Decoupage: (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.

Femmege: 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*....

Many of these ancestors were women who were ignored by the politics of art....

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.

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 archaeological reconstruction and deciphering....

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...

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...

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.

Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer, "Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into what Women Saved and Assembled--FEMMAGE." *Heresies* I, no. 4 (Winter 1977-78): 66-69.