

Collage as a Method of
Form-Giving in Design

Fragment, Transformation, and Identity

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Abstract

This article examines collage not only as an artistic technique, but also as a method of form-giving and a mode of design thinking. Its central research question is how the collage principle can participate in the creation of form without being reduced to the decorative layering of images. A critical review of the concepts of collage, photomontage, assemblage, decoupage, and mixed media establishes their distinctions and points of intersection. The analysis traces the transition from Cubist collage and avant-garde practices to architecture and contemporary design. It proposes an operational model of collage-based form-giving that includes selection, fragmentation, juxtaposition, layering, contextual displacement, material transformation, and integration into a new whole. The article considers the relationships between heterogeneity and unity, stasis and movement, authorship and appropriation, as well as the potential of collage to contribute to the construction of individual and cultural identity. It concludes that the analytical value of collage in design lies not in the mere presence of different components, but in the deliberate organisation of the relationships between them.

Keywords: collage, form-giving, design, fragment, transformation, identity, assemblage

1. Introduction: From Technique to Method

Design reflects its environment while simultaneously participating in its transformation. In contemporary material and digital culture, forms emerge amid accumulated images, technologies, objects, memories, and cultural codes. They are rarely created in complete isolation. More often, the designer selects, separates, juxtaposes, and transforms already existing elements. It is this logic that makes collage significant beyond the boundaries of the two-dimensional image.

The expression 'design as collage', however, entails a methodological risk. If every form composed of more than one element is defined as collage, the term loses its analytical value. We must distinguish between heterogeneity as a merely technical condition and heterogeneity as a deliberate principle of form-giving. In this article, collage is understood as an organised system of operations in which fragments of different origins are removed from their initial contexts and placed in new relationships.

The new whole does not completely erase the differences between its parts; rather, it turns those differences into carriers of meaning.

The research question is: how can collage function as a method of form-giving in design rather than solely as a technique for producing images? The aim is to identify the principal operations of collage thinking and to analyse their role in constructing form, movement, materiality, and identity. The article argues that collage acquires design value when the selection and transformation of fragments lead to a new structural and semantic whole rather than to random or decorative accumulation.

The method combines a critical review of the literature with a visual and formal analysis of selected works from the original version of the text. The examples serve an illustrative purpose and are not intended to be statistically representative. The findings therefore offer a conceptual model that can be tested and developed through future design and educational research.

2. Terminological Boundaries

According to Tate, collage denotes both a technique and a resulting work in which paper, photographs, fabric, and other fragments are arranged and attached to a supporting surface (Tate, 'Collage'). Two features of this definition are especially important: material heterogeneity and the visible act of combination. Collage is not simply an image of different things; it stages a real encounter between fragments that retain traces of their previous use or context.

Photomontage works primarily with photographic fragments and places particular emphasis on rupture, disjunction of scale, and the construction of a new visual reality. Assemblage extends a related principle into three dimensions by bringing together heterogeneous, often found or everyday objects (Tate, 'Assemblage'). Decoupage, by contrast, is primarily a decorative technique in which cut-out images are applied to a surface. Mixed media is the broadest term: it merely indicates the use of more than one material or medium and does not necessarily imply a collage logic.

For the purposes of design, it is useful to introduce the term collage principle. This principle does not necessarily require physical adhesion. It describes a design sequence that includes selecting, isolating, relocating, juxtaposing, and transforming elements. It can be applied in graphic and product design, architecture, fashion, digital interfaces, and spatial installations. In this way, collage moves from a specific technique towards a means of organising form and knowledge.

3. Historical Transition: From the Avant-Garde to Design

Practices of cutting, applying, and combining materials predate the twentieth century, but collage was established as a self-conscious artistic method through Cubism. In 1912, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque introduced actual papers, wallpapers, and other everyday materials into their works. This gesture did more than add a new texture. It disrupted the boundary between the image and material reality and directed attention towards the very construction of the artwork (MoMA, 'Georges Braque. Guitar. 1913').

Dada developed collage and photomontage as critical instruments. Fragments drawn from print culture, advertising, and political propaganda were assembled into images that exposed the conflicts of their time. Surrealism employed related operations but directed them towards dreams, the unconscious, and unexpected associations. Constructivism likewise made active use of photomontage; Alexander Rodchenko's experiments of the 1920s demonstrate how a collage structure could combine a social message, typography, and dynamic composition (MoMA, 'Collage and the Photo-Image'; Tate, 'Photomontage'). Collage should therefore neither be confined to a single stylistic lineage nor presented as absent from Constructivist practice.



Figure 1. Left: Ralph Ueltzhoeffer and Laura Maria May, *Projects: 3-Frames 'MISSING'*, installation view at Ground Zero, New York, 2008. Right: Hannah Höch, *Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser Dada durch die letzte Weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands* [Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany], 1919, paper collage on cardboard, 114 × 90 cm. Images from the official pages of MoMA Projects / MoMA PS1 and Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

In architecture and design, collage gradually shifted from a means of representation to a means of project development. In *Collage City*, Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter counter total planning with a city capable of accommodating heterogeneous historical layers and small, partial utopias (Rowe and Koetter, 1978). Jennifer Shields traces the influence of collage on both architectural representation and the ways in which space, programme, and material are conceived (Shields, 2023). Sarah Wehmeyer considers collage simultaneously as artefact, design medium, form of communication, and means of producing specific design knowledge (Wehmeyer, 2021). This transition is decisive: collage no longer merely represents an intended form; it participates in the form's discovery.

4. Operations of Collage-Based Form-Giving

4.1. Selection and Framing

Collage begins with selection. From the continuous flow of images, objects, and materials, the designer isolates particular fragments while temporarily excluding others. Framing is not a neutral act: it

changes scale, removes part of the context, and directs attention towards a specific quality. In the design process, selection can occur through photography, sketching, a material sample, a digital model, or a found object. Each of these fragments carries a different kind of information.

4.2. Fragmentation and Juxtaposition

Fragmentation disrupts an element's original completeness while freeing it to enter new relationships. A part may retain its recognisability or become an abstract structure. Juxtaposition generates tension between similar and different, old and new, organic and geometric, handmade and industrial. This tension is productive when governed by a clear design intention. Without such an intention, the result remains an accumulation rather than an act of form-giving.

4.3. Layering, Time, and Movement

Layering allows different moments and viewpoints to coexist. In two-dimensional collage, this is expressed through overlap, transparency, and interrupted contours. In objects and spatial environments, the same logic may take the form of strata, articulated joints, modules, replaceable skins, or successive states of use. Time is thereby incorporated into form. Movement need not be physical; it may be perceived as a transition between fragments, scales, and material states.

4.4. Material and Technological Transformation

Collage thinking becomes particularly significant when it moves from image to material. Ceramic fragments may form a wearable sculptural structure; paper fibres may alter the character of clay; a digitally cut component may be combined with a hand-modelled form. In these cases, the materials are not merely placed side by side. Their physical properties, histories, and modes of processing participate in the meaning of the work.



Figure 2. Left: Li Xiaofeng, *Classical*, 2008, Song-dynasty porcelain fragments, 162 × 55 × 25 cm, front and back views; official catalogue image from Red Gate Gallery. Right: Paola Paronetto, objects from the *Bottles* collection, paper clay; official image from the artist's website. No individual year or dimensions are given for the pictured group.

Here, form-giving emerges through translation: from fragment to structure, surface to volume, image to object, and one technology to another. Translation is precisely what distinguishes

transformation from mechanical assembly. The parts must be reconsidered in relation to function, construction, tactility, and the way in which the whole will be perceived.

4.5. Integration into a New Whole

The final operation does not erase differences; it organises them. Unity in collage does not mean homogeneity. It is achieved through rhythm, repetition, contrast, proportion, structural interdependence, or a shared idea. The new form should allow fragments to be read simultaneously as autonomous traces and as parts of a whole. In this sense, collage raises a question relevant to every design: how much difference can a form sustain before it loses its coherence, and how much unity can it impose without destroying the character of its parts?

5. Collage, Object, and Identity

In the original text, collage is associated with the search for one's own identity. This idea can be retained provided that identity is not understood as a fixed essence that form merely represents. Identity emerges through relationships between inherited images, personal choice, cultural memory, and a specific context. Collage makes this process visible because its parts often retain recognisable origins, while the new whole reveals how they have been selected and transformed.

The system of objects is not a neutral backdrop to human presence. Objects participate in the construction of social distinctions, desires, and self-images (Baudrillard, 1968/2003). Contemporary design further extends this role through personalisation, modularity, and the capacity for change over time. The user does not always receive a finished and immutable object; at times, they participate in choosing its configuration, material, or visual code.

This participation should not automatically be called collage. It acquires a collage character when selection preserves the visible difference between elements and enables them to form new semantic relationships. Individualisation then ceases to be an external embellishment and becomes a change in the relationships through which the form is recognised and used. Design 'narrates' the object through the materials, connections, and traces it organises.



Figure 3. Left: Shadi Ghadirian, untitled (from the Like Everyday series), image no. 1 on the artist's official page, 2000, C-print, 50 × 50 cm. Right: Levi van Veluw, Landscape II, 2008, mounted C-print, versions measuring 120 × 100 cm and 60 × 50 cm. Images from the artists' official websites. Both examples use juxtaposition and material transformation to problematise identity.

In this context, the metaphor of the human being as assemblage should be understood not as a literal definition, but as an image of identity as a continuous act of arrangement. A person works with the givens of body, memory, culture, and environment, yet is not their passive sum. As in collage, meaning arises from the ways in which different layers meet, contradict one another, and temporarily form a whole.

6. Reuse and Ecological Limitations

The collage principle creates opportunities for reusing waste materials, found objects, and components from existing products. Zac Freeman's assemblage portrait, for example, transforms discarded everyday objects into an image perceived differently at close range and from a distance. At the micro level, the individual objects retain their material and cultural traces; at the macro level, they construct a new image.

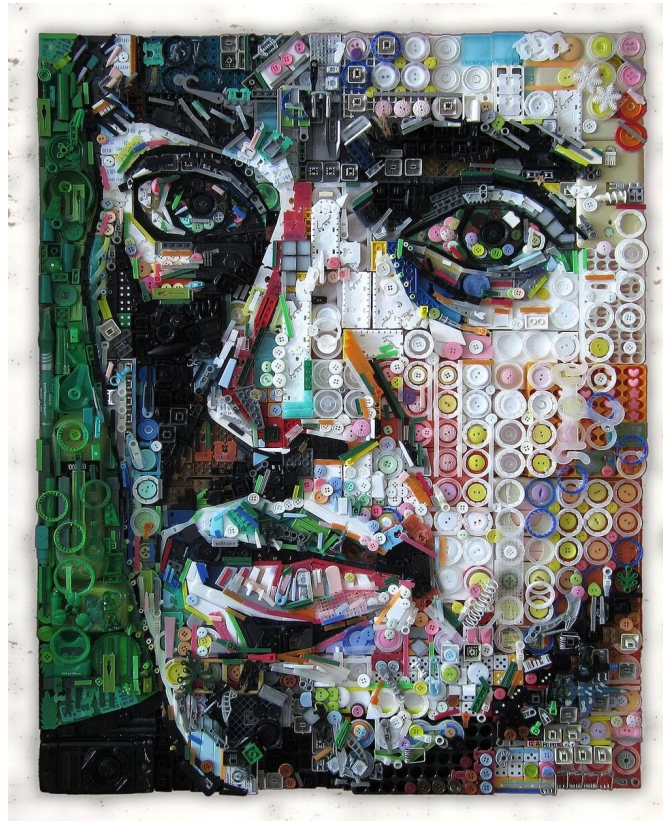


Figure 4. Zac Freeman, Garrett, 2009, assemblage of found and discarded objects on board, 26.25 × 33 in (approximately 66.7 × 83.8 cm). Image from the artist's official portfolio.

Not every combination of discarded materials, however, is sustainable. Adhesives, coatings, and inseparable connections may hinder subsequent disassembly and recycling. Ecological value must therefore be assessed in relation to a product's life cycle, reparability, material provenance, and modes of joining. Collage can support sustainable design, but it does not constitute automatic proof of sustainability.

A more productive concept is design-led reuse: existing parts are not concealed but accepted as initial conditions for a new form. Their limitations guide the solution. In this way, the collage method works not only with visual associations but also with the actual resistance of material, construction, and technology.

7. Collage as a Reflective Design Tool

In the early stages of design, collage allows apparently incompatible ideas to be brought together rapidly. It makes visible assumptions that cannot yet be formulated as a final solution. This aligns it with Donald Schön's understanding of designing as reflection-in-action: the designer makes a move, observes its unexpected consequences, and reframes the problem (Schön, 1983). Collage materialises this conversation between intention and outcome.

As a research tool, collage can focus, abstract, and transfer ideas onto a visible surface. Wehmeyer emphasises its capacity to generate design knowledge through the very process of making rather than merely illustrate a conclusion reached in advance (Wehmeyer, 2021). This is an important distinction.

When collage functions solely as a presentation board, it displays an already selected direction. When it participates in research, it calls initial relationships into question and permits new solutions to emerge.

Digital tools accelerate cutting, scaling, and layering, but they can also reduce collage to a superficial effect. Its design value is not measured by the number of fragments or by visual complexity. It becomes evident in the capacity to reveal a problem, test a relationship, or transform a material and spatial structure. Collage is thus both a liberating and a disciplining method: it enables unexpected encounters while demanding critical evaluation of every connection.

8. Discussion

The proposed model defines collage-based form-giving as a sequence of interconnected operations: selection, fragmentation, juxtaposition, layering, contextual displacement, material transformation, and integration. These operations do not necessarily constitute a linear method. The designer may repeatedly return to the selection of fragments, alter their scale, or reformulate the intended whole. The method is iterative and remains open to the unexpected properties of materials and images.

Collage reveals several fundamental tensions in design: between difference and coherence, memory and novelty, authorship and appropriation, free association and structural necessity. It does not automatically resolve these contradictions; rather, it makes them visible and manageable. This is precisely where its critical potential lies.

A limitation of the present study is its reliance on selected visual examples and theoretical sources without empirical observation of a specific design process. A subsequent stage could apply the operational model to a form-giving assignment and analyse how students move from a two-dimensional collage to a material model or object. The proposed operations could thereby be tested as an actual method rather than solely as an interpretative framework.

9. Conclusion

Collage is not simply an unrestricted means of combining disparate images. Within design, it can be defined as a method of form-giving in which existing elements are removed from their original relationships, transformed, and integrated into a new structure. Its value derives from the visible tension between fragment and whole.

A dynamic and multilayered environment requires forms capable of accommodating difference, change, and memory. The collage principle offers a tool for working with these conditions, but only when selection is reasoned, material relationships are consciously articulated, and the new whole does not conceal the origins of its parts. Collage then ceases to compensate for a lack of unity and becomes a way of constructing unity through difference.

The search for identity in design therefore does not culminate in a final image. It remains a process of arranging, testing, and transforming. Collage renders this process visible and allows form to carry, simultaneously, traces of the past, the conditions of the present, and the possibility of future change.

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Author's Note

This text is a substantially revised authorial version of the 2011 paper 'Collage in the Context of Design / Form-Formation in Search of Our Identity'. The revision includes a new title, research question, terminological framework, structure, updated sources, and refined conclusions. It does not replace the historically published version. Full bibliographic details of the original publication should be added once they have been established.

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Figure 2, left — Official gallery catalogue: Red Gate Gallery, Li Xiaofeng, p. 11. Classical, 2008, Song-dynasty porcelain fragments, 162 × 55 × 25 cm. The catalogue image showing front and back views is used. [Official gallery catalogue](#)

Figure 2, right — Official artist source and image: Paola Paronetto, Bottles. The page presents the group as a family of sculptural objects; paper clay is confirmed as the artist's medium in her official biography. No individual year, dimensions, or photographic credit are provided for this image; the website states 'All rights reserved'. [Official collection page](#) [Official biography](#)

Figure 3, left — Official artist image: Shadi Ghadirian, Like Everyday series, 2000; image no. 1 from the artist's page is used. Technical data for the series were cross-checked against the online exhibition of the Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon: C-print, 50 × 50 cm; © Shadi Ghadirian, courtesy Silk Road Gallery, Tehran. [Official artist page](#) [Institutional source](#)

Figure 3, right — Official artist source and image: Levi van Veluw, Self portraits part I. The official page identifies the image as Landscape II, 2008, mounted C-print, 120 × 100 cm and 60 × 50 cm. [Official artist page](#)

Figure 4 — Official artist source and image: Zac Freeman, Artwork. The image appears in the official portfolio under a filename containing 'Garrett'. The title, the year 2009, and dimensions of 26.25 × 33 in were cross-checked against an archived 2010 publication; the official website confirms the medium as found and collected discarded objects glued to a wooden substrate. [Official portfolio](#) [Archived 2010 publication](#)

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