

The Art of Assemblage

with John Salgado

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Assemblage is a construction of sculpture, painting, collage and physical objects that tell a story or impart a message. And is thus, a composition of things. Assemblage adheres to the same art principles that form the structure of painting and collage: focal area; contrast and compliment; color; harmony and variety; balance; proportion; dominance; movement and economy. The use of objects in the artwork contributes to the story telling or statement the work intends to convey.

The impact of assemblage is the statement whether a remembrance of an individual (family, friend or important person); a remembrance of a place or historical moment; a theme developed from the focal object or image; or a social or political commentary. The assemblage may be minimalist in structure and color where less is best or be complex with multiple objects, color and imagery that hold the viewers interest. Or the assemblage may be an interactive construction with moving parts.

Assemblages are constructed using two methods. The first, is a collection of objects that form the entire art work and are not confined within a frame. The sculpture may be hanging (such as a sculpture made from bicycle rims and gears) or placed on a table to be viewed from every angled (such as an architectural model). A variation of this type is made by adding three dimensional objects to a painting. (Using a cradled board rather than a stretched canvas to support heavy objects is prudent.) Free standing assemblage may be small to room size.

The second type is a box construction where the assemblage is made within a frame or box. A glass front protects the objects used in the assemblage although it is not mandatory. Fold out doors can be added within the assemblage to protect some objects and provide interaction with the viewer. The art work can be placed in such varied 'frames' as: found boxes, handmade boxes, shadow boxes, collector's boxes, cabinets, window frames, screen doors, ammo boxes, lunch boxes, desk drawers, etc. The criteria are simply that the frame provides a dimensional space for placing objects.

Needless to say, assemblage is an art form for the collector. The list is endless and could include: fabrics like burlap, an old wedding dress, a flag, doll clothes and string; game pieces such as dice, marbles cards or tarot cards; old jewelry; the ribs from an old parasol; dolls and parts of dolls or manikins; natural materials such as shells, stones, palm fronds, leaves or other dried weeds, feathers, peapods or other dried pods; metal

pieces such washers, eye-hooks, parts from appliances such as a microscope or clocks; craft supplies such as cast or sculpted paper, corks, glass beads, wooden molding pieces, candle holders; an old garden rake; old papers, maps, books, letters, photos and other memorabilia.

Materials can be altered, disassembled or painted to compliment the assemblage. For old papers and photographs, use photocopies rather than the original especially if you wish to use it in additional works. Add gesso over the top of a collaged photo and then scrape back to the picture with a razor blade. For natural materials, cover with gesso to maintain the integrity of the fragile dried material and/or to produce a sculptural form from a collection of dried 'weeds'. Using a limited palette simplifies and unifies the composition. This approach filters a complex message with simple imagery.

Wooden pieces such as molding are used to create an interior construction within a frame and may be painted with gesso. This creates a sculptural depth that showcases the objects placed within the cubbyholes. Further, a simple uniform color focuses attention to the shadows created with changing light. Gesso is an equalizer as it adheres to most things and covers colors that may detract. To create an aged, peeling appearance to the gesso, place in the sun to dry. Use up to 25 coats dried in this manner. Use a good glue such as Tacky Glue to adhere objects within the assemblage.

The materials selected may be chosen with care to create a harmonious composition or a remembrance of a person, time or place. Statements or interactive constructions may be more haphazard with discordant imagery and objects. Regardless, the important feature in assemblage is the depth created by overlapping imagery and objects. This depth draws the viewer into the work.

Imagery or objects may be isolated to impart a simple message or jumbled to impart a more complex one. The challenge is to create within a relatively small space to tell the story. For very small boxes, mirrors can be used to reflect imagery and increase depth.

An assemblage may begin as an idea or be inspired by a person, place, time, poem, song, image or object. The ethics of being an artist is the process of starting and then finishing the telling of a story or the completing of a personal statement.

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