

A HISTORY OF COLLAGE:

# MARY DELANY

*Collage pioneer*

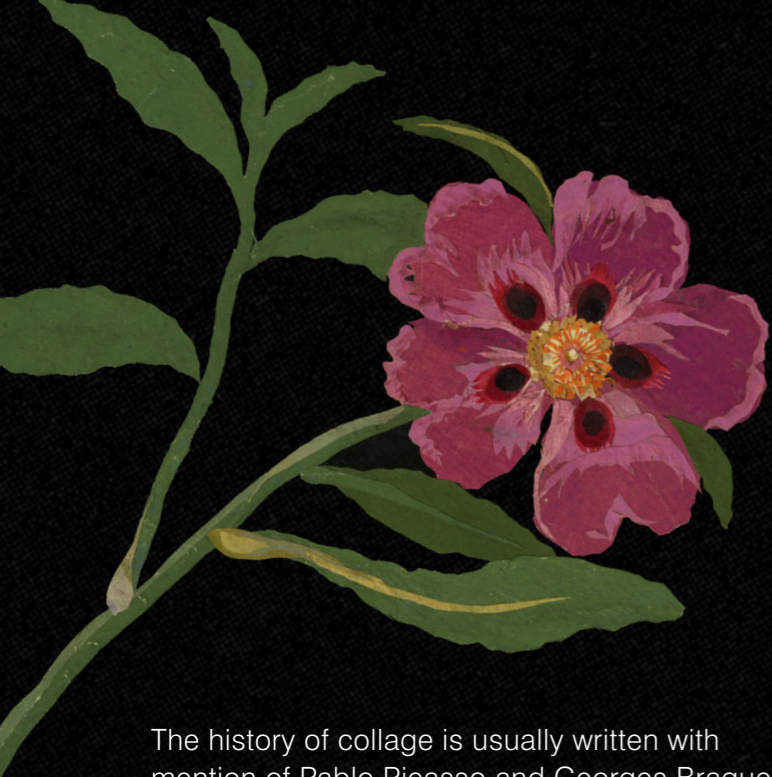
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By Rhonda Barrett

*Aloe perfoliata. Var.  
Tree Aloe*

A small, stylized signature or monogram, possibly 'MD', located in the bottom right corner of the collage.



The history of collage is usually written with mention of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque who started creating assemblages around 1910. But perhaps history is a little short sighted and we should look farther back to find a woman named Mary Delany, in 1772, at the age of 72, busily creating 985 intricate 'flower mosaiks', as she named them. And perhaps, we can look back farther still to the Japanese art of chigiri-e, which her work resembles in both aesthetic and technique.

Mary Delany was born in England, and after a short, miserable marriage at 17 which ended with her becoming a widow at 23, she happily married an Irish clergyman named Dr. Patrick Delany, whom she shared a love of gardening with in Ireland. Spurred on and supported by Dr. Delany to maintain her study of the arts, continuing from her training to be a lady in waiting to Queen Ann, she studied painting, needlepoint, and decoupage. She also wrote wonderful letters that have been published and distributed the world over.

The 1700's are a period of history in which the natural world was an appealing source of entertainment and the Delany's spent a lot of time working on the gardens of their estate. The Delany's and their friends spent the days discovering new plants or studying and classifying those already known. People in general appreciated the work needed to create a good garden, but Mary had the education and acquaintances that allowed her to both visit the best gardens and to learn about the plants found within them.

One of Mary's best friends was Margaret Cavendish Bentinck, who later became Dowager Duchess of Portland, and the richest lady in England. Upon the death of Dr. Delany in 1768, Mary lived with the Duchess in Bulstrode Hall for months at a time from 1768 to 1785, and was privy to what was called 'The Hive'. The Hive was a group of artists and scientists employed by the Duchess to process her many collections and catalogue them. It included botanists, entomologists and conchologists. Therefore Mary, an avid gardener and artist on her own, was given even further insight into the world of plants by having these associations and friendships.

One day, Mary noticed that a red paper on her bedside table had the same colour as a geranium that was also there. An idea came to mind that would send her on a ten year quest to produce 1000 paper collages representing flowers from the gardens she had grown and admired. This work was as much scientific as it was artistic; Mary made sure to note on each collage the botanical and common name of the plants and information about how she came to have knowledge or access to a sample of it.

One such source was Sir Joseph Banks, who sent flowers from the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. He was a botanist who was quoted as saying that Delany's work could 'describe botanically any plant without the least fear of committing an error'. They can still be viewed at the British Museum to this day and are examples of realistic and accurate collage work.



*“Delany’s work could describe botanically any plant without the least fear of committing an error.”*



*Helianthus annuus*  
Great Sun-flower.

MD



“Likely using an egg wash or a flour and water mixture as her fixative, Mary pasted the hand cut pieces of paper into the likeness of her chosen plant.”



*“Mary was building an image by cutting up to 200 individual pieces of hand coloured paper and layering them upon each other to create shading and variation of hue.”*

Acknowledging that paper could be used as a vessel of colour that could then be cut and placed to create another image was also not a new concept. Japanese artists used the technique 1000 years ago when they used hand-dyed papers and tore them and placed them in a technique called chigiri-e. Is it possible that the well educated and cultured Mary Delany was aware of this? Or was she informed by her ability to decoupage? Either way, her idea of using coloured rag papers was paired with her dexterity around a pair of scissors to create in a way that was utterly different than traditional decoupage.

Mary was not simply cutting out an image and pasting it down. Mary was building an image by cutting up to 200 individual pieces of hand coloured paper and layering them upon each other to create shading and variation of hue. The opacity of her paper allowed this, but, she also touched up some images with watercolour

once assembled. Likely using an egg wash or a flour and water mixture as her fixative, Mary pasted the hand cut pieces of paper into the likeness of her chosen plant. She wrote to her niece in 1772 that she had ‘invented a new way of imitating flowers’. She was not cutting out a ready image to decorate an object; she was creating an image from disparate parts by layering them into a new form.

Fanny Burney describes Mrs Delany’s “new art”. “It is staining paper of all possible Colours, and then cutting it out, so finely and delicately, that when it is pasted on Paper or Vellum, it has all the appearance of being Pencilled, except that, by being raised, it has still a richer and more natural appearance. The effect is extremely beautiful...They are all from Nature, and consist of the most curious flowers, plants and weeds that are to be found...”



*Pyrus Cydonia  
Quince*



*“Decoupage was in fashion, as was watercolour painting. Delany extrapolated both and combined them into something new for the time in England.”*

*Peonia tenuifolia  
feather-leaf'd Peony*

Mary Delany was creating collage. She created 985 of these paper mosaics before her eyesight failed in 1782 and she had to stop her work.

In 1781, just a year before her eyesight failed, Mary gifted Queen Charlotte an album of decoupage with 114 individual paper cut designs while she visited Bulstrode Hall. There were various motifs including intricate botanicals to more abstract and decorative cuts. These paper cut-outs, fashionable with the Queen and her daughters as well, also included silhouette portraits. Again, a paper art that sometimes involved cutting intricate designs, but did not use the same layering of papers that Delany became famous for. As with all art, techniques are learned, borrowed and extrapolated to create something new.

Decoupage was in fashion, as was watercolour painting. Delany extrapolated both and combined them into something new for the time in England.

She was so admired by King George III and Queen Charlotte that Delany was offered a home and annuity to stay at Windsor in 1785 to live out her last years. She died in 1788.

Her paper works were in the care of her family after her death until in 1897 when they were bequeathed to the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum by her great-niece Augusta Hall. They are examples of ingenuity, creativity and manual manipulation of paper that is undoubtedly collage. So, let's include her in discussions about the origin of collage shall we. It would make her Bluestocking heart proud I'm sure.



*Rose de Meaux.*

MD



*Pancratium Maritimum*  
*Sea Daffodil*

MD

ABOUT...

## *Rhonda Barrett*



Rhonda Barrett is an artist from Newfoundland, currently living in Nova Scotia, whose study of paper and Japanese arts finds her working in a chigiri-e style with newsprint. The waste-not-want-not lifestyle and nostalgia of her maritime upbringing is paramount in her choice of medium and also informs many of the images she captures. The use of newspaper as her primary medium is a nod to the temporal arts, frugality, and our ideas of material value. She works out of her studio in Halifax, NS.

Rhonda has a background in architecture and design, but left that career in 2015 to pursue her artistic calling. She is currently a member of Visual Arts Nova Scotia (VANS), and The Paper Artist Collective (UK). She also created the Canadian Collage Collective in 2020 to support, find and document the work of collage artists in Canada. Her work has been seen in solo exhibitions and group exhibitions in numerous galleries in Nova Scotia, Vancouver, BC and Montreal, QC. She has been featured in local Halifax newspapers and on Global Halifax News Morning. Her work has been published with Kolaj Magazine, Murze Magazine and by Urban Ivy in their Mother's in Time series.

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You can see more of Rhonda's work on her website: [www.littlebitsofpaperbigart.com](http://www.littlebitsofpaperbigart.com)  
and on her Instagram: [@littlebitsofpaperbigart](https://www.instagram.com/littlebitsofpaperbigart)

