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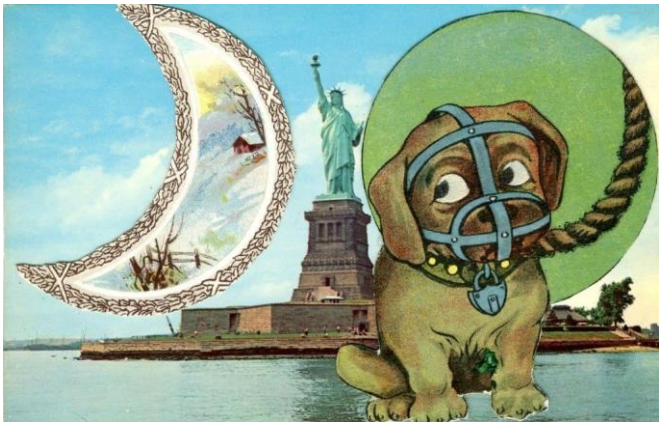
ARTSY

# Why Famous American Poet John Ashbery Made Hundreds of Collages

By Julia Wolkoff



John Ashbery “Muzzle,” ca. 1972

In his 1975 masterwork *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, the late American poet John Ashbery (1927–2017) meditates on Francesco Parmigianino’s painting of the same name. The emotional intimacy of the Renaissance artist’s sensitive, tender-hearted portrait captured Ashbery’s imagination: “The soul establishes itself. / But how far can it swim out through the eyes / And still return safely to its nest?”

The sprawling poem is often interpreted as evidence of visual art’s influence on Ashbery’s eccentric and complex writing style, which mimicked the increasing complexities of 20th-century American culture. But it also introduced one of the most consistent themes in his work: the very nature of creativity.

Francesco Parmigianino, “Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror,” 1524/John Ashbery – “Still-Life,” 2015

Over the course of his life, the giant of 20th-century poetry won nearly every major literary award, including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the Yale Younger Poets Prize, and a MacArthur “Genius” Grant. But the visual arts were not merely a Sunday hobby that fed his central writing practice. Since the very start of his life, Ashbery had engaged with collage, a medium he didn’t consider all that different from his poetry.

Two concurrent exhibitions in New York serve as potent reminders of the centrality of the fine arts to Ashbery’s life and work. “The Construction of Fiction,” at Pratt Manhattan Gallery through November 14th, presents a large selection of over 120 collages, as well as ephemera from the last decade of his life. Additional works are on view in “Oh, What Fun! Collages 2015–2017,” at Tibor de Nagy through October 14th.

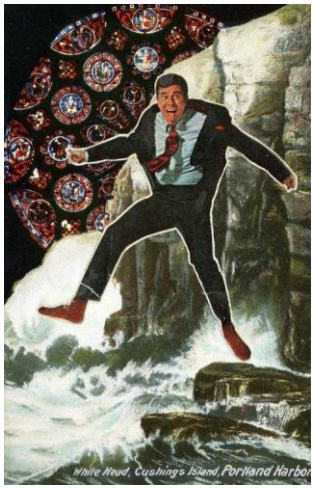
“In his collages, everything comes together,” said Antonio Sergio Bessa, curator of the Pratt show and director of curatorial programs at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Bessa, who is also a scholar of concrete poetry, maintained that while many misconstrue Ashbery’s foray into the visual arts as a late career reinvention, it was actually a *return* to the medium.

John Ashbery “Summer Dream,” 2008

Ashbery began making collages as an undergraduate at Harvard, where he studied English literature. His earliest known collage, a collaboration with Fred Amory, appeared on the cover of the *Harvard Advocate* in 1948. He was engrossed by Surrealism
; early experiences with idiosyncratic works by Max Ernst, Joseph Cornell, and Kurt Schwitters inspired his own work in all mediums. But it was Ashbery’s lifelong ties to New York School artists like Joe Brainard, Jane Freilicher, and Kenneth Koch—an artistic circle that encouraged hybrid approaches to creativity—that increasingly drew him to the visual and literary arts.

That interdisciplinary spirit can be seen in one 1952 work included in the Pratt show, *“controls”*, which couldn’t feasibly be called either a poem or a collage—it’s quite literally a collage-poem. Ashbery pasted lines of found text on a sheet of lined notebook paper. “Here is everything for everyone,” it begins.

Pivotally, Ashbery also supported himself as an art critic for *ARTnews* in the 1960s and ’70s. “He developed, through that practice of writing reviews, a fantastic eye to look at art,” Bessa said. It was also during this period that Ashbery published many of his well-known volumes of poetry, which often took the form of rambling, book-length cycles. At the same time, his collages were, for the most part, constrained to small works on postcards.

John Ashbery “Poisson d’avril,” 1972/John Ashbery “Curshing’s Island,” 1972

Ashbery’s poetry increasingly adopted a collaged aesthetic, commingling art-historical imagery with kitschy Americana and pop-cultural explorations of identity. “His poems are famously difficult because they go to four different places at one time,” Bessa observed. “That clash prompted an idea of the concept.” During a sojourn in Paris, Ashbery labored on his 1962 collection of poems, *The Tennis Court Oath*. The book is “beyond comprehension,” Bessa said, “because he was collaging a lot of different sources.” Ashbery’s poetry is generally elliptical, with references cut-and-pasted from film, pop culture, literature, and art history. The lines of the 2009 poem “They Knew What They Wanted,” for instance, are entirely composed of movie titles beginning with the word “they.”

Ashbery’s collage work is equally enigmatic. In a 1972 work, *Cushing’s Island*, a magazine image of a man in a suit, his tongue out, leaps over breaking waves pictured on a regional postcard inscribed “White Head, Cushings Island, Portland Harbor.” The dramatic, silly scene is framed not by a setting sun or rising moon, but by a stained-glass rose window that crests above the craggy cliffs.

A more politically suggestive postcard piece from the same year, *Muzzle*, features a muzzled cartoon puppy looking adorably forlorn, tied up with a rope leash. The pup sits right on the edge of the Hudson River, nearly eclipsing the Statue of Liberty behind him. A large crescent moon embedded with a quaint winter scene floats in the blue sky. The small collage is highly suggestive, as well as ambiguous. Does the dog represent an immigrant, perhaps leaving the old world and its wintry cabins behind? Is he a representation of the American people, muzzled by political indifference or corruption?

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John Ashbery “A Dream of Heroes,” 2015

It’s the last 10 years of Ashbery’s life that proved to be the most prolific and ambitious, in terms of his artmaking. Not only do these later works increase in size, the imagery they feature also seems more demanding. Appropriated works of high art feature very frequently, and Ashbery seemed to delight in undermining their perceived cultural significance. A serene Amadeo Modigliani nude poses before a cartoon baseball diamond in *Minnie from Maude* (2014); in *A Dream of Heroes* (2015), Howdy Doody and a pair of jeans are among the images superimposed atop Gustave Courbet’s famous self-portrait, *The Desperate Man* (1844–45). In his poems, Ashbery privileged humor and playfulness; he’d do the same when working with images. “In his collages, language and visual arts come together in a way that’s not pretentious,” Bessa offered. “They’re not too self-important or trying to make a historical statement. They’re just playing with sources and quotations.”

Bessa believes that the way we use language is also very collagistic. “Everyone says collage is quintessential in modernism,” he said, thinking particularly of Pablo Picasso and the Cubists. “You can even make a link to MTV videos, which are collages of images.” To Bessa, collage has dual implications, both of which Ashbery embraced. “There’s a very homey aspect to it, doing humble things with one’s hands,” he said, but there’s also “a very deep understanding of language, so that you don’t become a slave to language. You fool language by using the words of others.”



John Ashbery "Royal Family," 2014/John Ashbery "La Mano," 2016

Ashbery's personal treasure trove of imagery provided him with source material for his collages. The vintage board games, old postcards, magazine ads, and other knickknacks stored at his homes in Manhattan and Hudson, New York, allowed Ashbery to play with visual meaning. Ashbery's collages "are a vindication of childhood, or a rediscovery of childhood," Bessa said.

Indeed, some are exceedingly fanciful, yet cheeky. To cite just one example: In *Poisson d'avril* (ca. 1972), a cherubic little boy in a little blue suit—perhaps ripped from a Victorian-era magazine—carries a basket of roses on his back. A frilly circle of pink fabric, with a fish cresting at its top, acts as a halo around the boy. Yet Ashbery has made him a kind of Hansel figure: Lost in a low-resolution forest, he stands atop a muddy puddle.

Bessa had a sense that Ashbery's open, naïve approach to both poetry and art will appeal most strongly to young visitors to this exhibition. He even installed the frames a bit lower so it would be easier for kids to observe the work. "I never meant this show to be too highfalutin or conceptual," he said. Bessa hopes to connect adults to their inner children, as well as to inspire a new generation to consider creating their own collages and poetry, but without feeling compelled to distinguish between the mediums—just as Ashbery himself would have wanted it.

Julia Wolkoff is Artsy's Art History Editor.