

Notes from Insight Shrines workshop
by Aisling D'Art, © 2002, all rights reserved

Collage notes in general

Collecting images

My favorite sources for collage images include National Geographic magazines, and *W* magazine. However, I regularly raid my own stack of old magazines, and the recycling bin in the basement of our apartment building.

For old paper, flea markets and thrift shops can be fabulous resources.

Also, you can scan "old paper" in books and magazines from the library, then print them in sepia ink on a yellowed background, to look like the original.

Cutting images

I usually cut the images out with scissors first, leaving very wide margins. That's how I store them, to save space. Then, in most of my own work, I tear the edges leaving a white, ragged border. The finished size will vary with the project. Sometimes I'll save a full face image, and then use only the lips or the eyes.

Others work miracles with a *photomontage* technique that involves trimming the image with good sharp scissors. It's all a matter of taste, vision, and style.

Either way, I recommend trimming around each image, leaving a wide margin, before filing them for future use.

Filing images

I keep my images in a large, rigid artist's portfolio. This slides nicely on top of my filing cabinets, or under my bed.

Inside the portfolio, the images are sorted by categories, in manila folders. I started with "animal," "mineral," and "vegetable," plus a folder for words/text.

As the categories expanded, I created additional folders. For me, this includes flowers, people, and background images (pictures best suited to being that first layer of a collage).

After seeing a movie with remarkable use of color, I came home and created folders for images that are predominantly one color: blue, green, red, yellow, purple, and b&w.

If I don't have time to file my images, I throw them into the portfolio anyway. That keeps the paper rubble from taking over my studio!

Preparing images

If I'm going to use the iron-on technique taught by Jonathan Talbot, Claudine Hellmuth, and others, I coat the back of my image plus the surface it'll go on, with Golden Gel Medium (soft/gloss). When the surfaces are dry, arrange the images in place, then—with a medium-hot iron and release paper (or a nonstick pressing sheet)—iron the images. The heat melts the gel, acting as an adhesive. Jonathan Talbot sells a special iron for this purpose, and I've used it happily. He's also written a book exploring this technique in detail.

Preparing surfaces

If the surface is not exactly what I want for the background anyway, I usually gesso it. I use a white gesso for this. Any cheap brand is fine, and I apply it with a bristle brush so it goes on smoother than with a foam brush, but a foam brush can work nearly as well.

Whether it's a cigar box, paper, wood, or something else, gesso prevents the surface from soaking up the next layer that you apply. Also, the gesso makes the surface grip the next layer better. Finally, if you're working on something such as a cigar box with tacky printing on it, the gesso can cover the lettering/design, so it doesn't show through translucent colored tissue paper.

If I'm going to paint the surface with acrylics, I always underpaint with Cadmium Red Medium. Cheap stuff is fine for this, and I buy it in large supply because I use so much of it. This is a secret that I found in some correspondence from Monet, the French Impressionist artist. Even if the underpainting will be fully covered, it seems to lend an additional glow to the colors over it. So, if I want a glowing effect, I underpaint. If I want a subdued or flat/receding effect, I don't.

The first layer

For me, the first layer can be *anything*. Sometimes, it's a single layer of acrylic paint. Sometimes, it's a large image, or a page of text from an antique magazine or book. Sometimes, it's rubber stamping. (I'll "set" the stamps in place with a clear spray acrylic finish/sealer, so they won't smear as I add layers.) Sometimes I use layers of colored tissue paper that will remain translucent when the gel medium (adhesive) dries.

And sometimes, I'll mix several techniques.

If you're using acrylics and intend to mix several colors, stay with one brand. When you mix brands, you can sometimes end up with murky or plastic-looking colors. For jewel tones, I like the high-end acrylics. Golden works well for me, as do Windsor-Newton's top line, and some European brands.

Adding white to a paint, or working with a color that has a white base, can result in flat and/or murky colors sooner than if you work with translucent colors. Most acrylic paints offer a color sheet that explains which colors are opaque (pigment, or white-based) and which are dye-based, or translucent.

Adhesives for paper

Even if I'm not using the iron-on technique, I tend to use Golden Gel Medium as the adhesive. Yes, the paper buckles, but I *like* the process to be visible.

The only flattening technique I use is: I place a piece of wax paper over the collage, and then use a brayer (block printing supply) to roll the image/s flat. This eliminates some (but not all) of the bubbles.

However, if you prefer a flatter, more polished product, you may choose other adhesives. Some people swear by Perfect Paper Adhesive. Others are willing to risk the claims of certain rubber cements that promise not to yellow, crack, or stain. My mother lost her entire portfolio from art college to the oily stains of rubber cement after 20+ years, so I am not willing to take a similar risk. However, to be fair, I haven't studied this subject in depth. Others have, and I recommend doing research if you haven't found the "perfect" adhesive for your style/technique yet.

Adhesives for other collage/assemblage elements

For many light items, Golden Gel Medium is still the best adhesive for my work.

However, for heavier pieces, I'll turn to more industrial glues. I use hot glue (the "hot," high-temp kind), Household Goop, jewelry adhesives, and so on. I always try to use products that claim to be archival, when I can.

Other ways to attach things

If you're process-oriented, as I am, it can be fun to let the process show in the finished product. For this reason, I like to use very visible means of attaching assemblage items: wire, grommets, brads, string (esp. hemp twine), ribbon, masking tape, duct tape, bandaids, and so on.

Notes on Insight Shrines

Though you can create Insight Shrines on your own, at home, some of the most rewarding moments come from sharing the experience in a class. Truths emerge as we encourage each other through the process, and the support we lend to one another can help us find the strength we need to look at important—but previously hidden—truths.

The point of creating an Insight Shrine is twofold: In the process of creating the shrine, you will discover things about yourself. In the finished work, you'll have reminders of who you are, who you pretend to be, and who you've been in the past.

I like to work with a cigar box for most Insight Shrines. A cigar box has a definite “inside” and “outside.”

Start by sorting favorite images into two piles. One should be things that you reveal every day through casual contact. It could be how you'd like people to perceive you. It could be the sometimes-silly, “warts and all” person you think you seem to be when others don't know you well.

The second pile of images should represent the person you are, inside. Perhaps secret things about you. The raw aspects of your personality, and the things you're polishing so you can share them comfortably with the world.

Think in terms of contrasts. The outside should be very different from the inside. If there are parts of you that “spill open” from your inside world to the outside, consider placing those images inside the lid, perhaps peeking over the lip of the cover.

Think in terms of color and texture, as well as the subject of the image. In a recent shrine, I used industrial and city images outside, focusing on artificial color and the “natural” gray nature of skyscrapers and homogenized buildings. For the background, I used brown tissue paper. I tried to keep the exterior as flat as possible.

Inside, I used natural and sunshine colors, and scenes of the outdoors. I also added actual dried flowers and silk ivy, to add dimension that is lost in commercial settings.

The Insight Shrine can represent a single event or epoch in your life. Again, focus on what people saw outside, and what was really going on inside. Understanding that the treasures are inside, is what Insight Shrine work is all about.

In the class, we discuss important tips that make the process easier, as well as ways to make the final Insight Shrine more meaningful and durable, as you use it for inspiration and daily insights. But, no matter when or where you create an Insight Shrine, it can be a significant and helpful process, and reveal the wisdom you've held within yourself since time began.