

How to Create a Torn-Paper Collage, by Aisling D'Art (Aisling.net)

Torn-paper collages are among my *favorite* ways to illustrate an artist's journal.

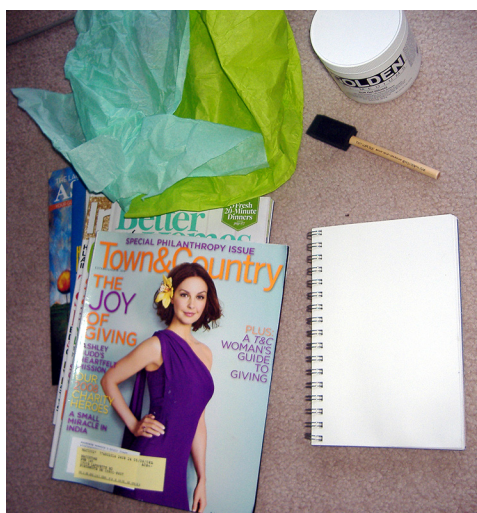
I've created a YouTube video to demonstrate this technique. You can see it at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOrHoOQeo08>

Here are the steps to create a torn-paper collage.

1. Gather supplies

All you really need are some pictures, something to use as glue, and something to support your collage, like a piece of paper.



My actual supplies for this collage. (I later decided to work on a file folder.)
Yes, I work on the floor. Or on the bed. Or on a table.

More details:

For pictures, words & phrases

Magazines, newspapers, printed materials, junk mail

I especially like fashion, travel and nature magazines for photos. "W" magazine is great for huge, almost surreal images, as well as great words & phrases. "Town & Country" magazine offers a nice mix of fashion, travel, home & garden photos, as well as yummy ads.

If I'm going to *sell* the finished work, I'm careful about using magazines such as National Geographic. Though their pictures are gorgeous, they have a reputation for being difficult about copyright issues.

However, for *personal* use, National Geographic can be a treasure trove of wonderful colors and images. Many public libraries have stacks of National Geographic magazines on sale for about a 25 cents each.

For words and phrases, I like health, fitness, religious and New Age magazines, as well as junk mail... including the envelopes, which are often better than whatever's enclosed in them.

I find *free* magazines at public libraries and sometimes at beauty salons, medical offices and laundromats (ask if they're ready to get rid of some of them).

I also love the free in-flight magazines on airplanes.

Adhesives and glues

For now, I'm using Golden Gel Medium (Soft Gel – gloss) with a sponge brush. However, I want to try other kinds of glues and mediums. *Golden works fine*, but I'm not thrilled with how they run the company, and I suspect that other, less expensive gel mediums work just as well.

When I use a sponge brush, I rinse it out completely as soon as I'm finished with it. I can usually use the same sponge brush for a week before it starts to fall apart.

When I'm applying the gel medium, I use an old phone book underneath my work.

Support for the collage

Anything can support your collage. I generally use a regular spiral-bound sketchbook for my daily collages. However, for this one, I used a file folder. I'm not sure why; it seemed like the right choice.

You could use poster board, canvas, wood, or almost any surface that will accept glue.

(Some dishes or tiles work well with collages, but others don't. Test different materials and adhesives to see what works for you.)

Embellishments

I like gold leaf and glitter, but that's a personal preference. Almost *anything* that you can glue to a surface can be used as an embellishment.

When I'm working with gold leaf, I use gel medium as the adhesive. I put some gold leaf on my finger and just press it onto the wet gel medium.

(This works best if the gel medium sits for about 20 seconds first, so it's nice and tacky. A little more gold leaf seems to stick each time I press onto the gel medium, so my finger works sort of like a pounce stick. I do a dab-dab-dab motion leaving lots of bits of gold leaf embedded in the gel medium. Yes, my finger gets gel medium on it, and picks up some leaf each time. However, it leaves more behind each time, too.)

2. Select images and words or phrases

Go quickly through your materials, and — without much thought — choose images, words & phrases that appeal to you. Tear out *the entire page* and set it aside.

Really, I'm practically flipping through my magazines as I work. If I spend more than two seconds looking at a page, the image doesn't have enough energy for me to work with. Allow no indecisions in this process! It's either, "Ooh, *yes!*" or it's not worth including in your collage.



The photos shows the actual pages I tore out for this collage. I didn't use all of them in this collage, but I'll probably use them within the week.

Even if you're only using *part* of a picture, tear out the whole page. Often, I discover that I need additional parts of the picture -- especially its background -- to "frame" the image to the full width of the collage.

Tip: If you like more than one element on a page, separate them. Otherwise, it's easy to *forget* that you were going to use more than one item from a single page.

I often select a word or phrase early in this process.

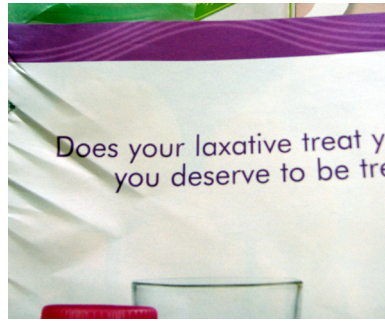
In the sample collage, I chose "Uncompromised" quickly, from a fashion magazine. (You can see it in the photo, above.)

The word "promise" is in red in it, and I realized (light bulb realization) that when I *compromise*, I'm breaking a promise to myself or to others. Even if it's just small and unspoken, it's still a betrayal (big or little) of an ideal that I held or aspired to.

That's a concept worth examining, as I work on daily priorities.

(Those are the kinds of insights I get from art journaling.)

Remember, you can use a word or phrase from a sentence. I chose the useful phrase “you deserve” from a laxative ad!



When you feel pleased with your collection of pages, or when you have a stack of about ten pages, pause and begin working with them.

Sometimes, I don't even stack my pages. I just see something, tear it to size, and glue it onto my collage.

Then, I find the next image that I like, tear it to size and glue it.

And so on.

However, though I do that now & then, my work usually turns out best if I select about ten pages (at the most) to start with. Sometimes I'll stop at five or eight pages.

3. Tear the images in the approximate size, and then to the exact size.

If a page is really large, it can be more difficult to tear out the precise element that I want. So, I tear the page around the general area of the element, and then tear more exactly.

When I'm making the final tear, I try to tear it all in one go, not inching along, a little at a time. A smooth tear usually looks nicer, unless you have a specific reason for a very jagged edge.



Also, when you tear the magazine page, there will be a white edge in one direction of the tear. Try it and see for yourself. I like to work with either all white-edged images, or keep all of my images without white edges.

Look at the image on the previous page. That's an example. If you hold the paper down with your left hand and tear towards you with your right hand, the left part will have the white edge.

4. Apply adhesive to the back of the image

First, you may want to place a few pieces on your collage support (the paper, or whatever will be underneath your collage) to see how it looks.

Remember, at this point, you're probably not working with every image that will be in your finished collage. Start with the big pieces. Or with one area. Or with the background.

Keep it simple!

Here's what I did, to see how I liked my general concept:



I wasn't happy with the top edge, so I decided to tear some extra pieces to give her more headroom. And, as I worked on that, I decided to put a couple of phrases above her as well.

Anyway, take a look at your design and see how it looks to you.

If you like it, you're ready to get started. If not, you may need to rearrange some pieces, add more, remove some, or... well, turn the paper sideways and see whether it's better as a horizontal or vertical collage.

Then, it's time to start gluing.

This is going to be a little messy... or even a *lot* messy. Revel in it!

With something underneath the image — so you can smear or practically *lather* the gel medium (or whatever glue) — apply the adhesive to the back of the image.



I use old phone books or boring pages of a magazine underneath as I'm gluing. Just turn the page, and you'll always have a fresh surface to work on!

If the adhesive is too thick, it can be lumpy underneath the image. If the adhesive is applied in a really thin layer, it can dry too quickly. However, as long as *some* of it sticks to the collage support, that can be enough.



The edge, shown above, isn't fully glued to the paper. It doesn't matter. That edge will be covered when I add the next layer.

If you're using gel medium, remember that gel medium (and some white glues) sort of *melt* with extreme heat.

You can use an iron (there are special irons made for this, but I've used a household iron) with some sort of release paper between the collage and the iron, so the iron doesn't get all gooey from the melting medium. The heat softens & reactivates the gel.

Tip: You can buy release paper, or something like it, at most fabric stores. There, it's sold to use between your iron and fusible interfacing, or any iron-on adhesive that sticks layers of fabric together.

Of course, that could give you some ideas for using a similar process for an all-fabric collage, too!

So, even *dried* gel medium can be reactivated and it'll suddenly adhere the entire image to whatever's underneath it.

I only do this when the collage is nearly completed — before I apply any glitter or gold leaf — and *only* if there's clearly a problem where part of the collage didn't adhere correctly.

Keep in mind that your lower layers (and at least some of their edges) will be covered by later additions to the collage.

Don't aim for "perfect" at this point. This is art. It's self-expression. For art to have *energy* and *life* in it, it won't be perfect... after all, *life* isn't cookie-cutter perfect.

(I often say about my *imperfect* fabric art, "If you want something perfect, shop at a department store.")

5. Place the image where you want it to be, in your collage

Try to place it exactly where you want it to be, or at least fairly close. If you lift, stretch, or drag a piece of magazine paper, it can stretch and look a little odd in your final work.



If your collage element seems to bubble, it's okay to *pat it flat*, but don't try to smooth it. (I learned that from collage artist [Claudine Hellmuth](#).)

If you brush it or rub it with your fingers to smooth it, it'll stretch the paper and the finished result might be disappointing. So, simply pat it.

Tip: I've successfully used a block printing brayer (costs less than \$10 at most arts & crafts stores) to flatten my collages. I put a piece of wax paper over the collage and run the brayer over that. The wax paper protects the brayer from picking up stray glue or gel medium as I'm working.

However, be sure to run the brayer across the work, briskly and firmly. Don't *drag* it, or you'll stretch the paper.

Bubbled paper seems to shrink back to shape as the adhesive dries, or at least some papers will do that. So, if you're going to put something over the bubbled piece, let the bubbled part dry, first. It might flatten out on its own.

6. Keep working. Build up more layers. Tear more images as you work, if you need more images

I usually tear out the first three or four images that I'm going to work with, and then start building the collage.

When I'm happy with them, or if I decide to add another image that I haven't torn out yet, I pause and tear out what I'll need next.



If I have a massive pile of torn paper — good stuff and paper that I may (or may not) use — it can become confusing.

There's a book about website design with a title that I love, "Don't Make Me Think!"

That's how this process can be for many of us: It's practically intuitive, after you've decided on the general design. (You don't even need to do *that* much, unless you want to.)

Generally, within the context of my initial concept, my process is simple: Tear (or pick up) the collage element; glue it to the page. Tear (or pick up) the next element, and glue that to the page. Continue!

7. Continue to build your collage

Remember that the first layers are usually the *background*. As you add layers, they'll be on top. (It's amazingly easy to forget this, sometimes.)

The focal point (or points) of your collage *should probably be on top*. That is, it'll be the last layer you apply to your collage. The leading areas tend to attract the attention of the viewer.

The exception is any image that contains a photograph of eyes. People tend to look at eyes, and then -- if they seem to be looking at something in the collage -- look in that direction, next.

If it's simply a model's face, or just the section with eyes, that seems to attract the viewer's attention quickly if not immediately.

Here's another idea: It's okay to tuck little surprises in the lower layers, for the viewer to "discover" as he or she explores the collage.

Don't despair if your collage looks messy. Some will be more messy than others. It's okay.



Here's what you need to know if you make a "mistake."

1. Milky areas will probably dry clear. In the picture above, the glops of white under the word "think" will dry so they're almost invisible. Sometimes, it's nearly impossible to avoid gloppy gel medium in spots where a collage element rested for a second before you moved it, or the medium oozed from under an element.

2. If the paper looks translucent in some areas, they'll probably turn opaque when the adhesive dries. Above the letter T in "think," you can see the yellow paper through the white. When it dried, the white was opaque again.

3. Anything that looks weird when the collage is nearly finished, can be covered with embellishments (glitter, gold leaf, threads, pieces of mica, paint, etc.) or you can cover it with another image or phrase.

To the left of the word "think," the horizontal whitish lines are scratches on the paper. I covered them later with glitter.

It's okay to change your mind.

For this collage, I'd selected a great image of a model looking in one direction. You can see it in the photo below, as I was applying gel medium to that side of the paper.



After tearing out the page, I'd discovered an even better photo on the back of it: Mulawi children in colorful, traditional clothing.

So, allow for serendipity as you work.

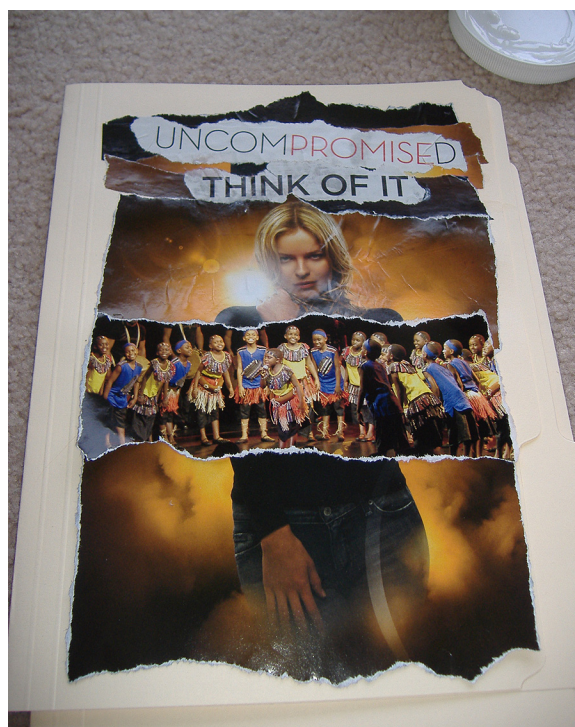
8. Keep building your collage until you're happy with it

It's okay to take your time. It's also okay to rush through this in a flurry of creativity.

You can start the collage, walk away from it, and finish it later in the day, or the next day, or the next week!

Tip: When you think to yourself, "I think this is nearly finished," it's probably finished. Stop! Take a break, and then take a fresh look at it.

It's better to stop too early than take the work too far.



In the example above, the collage was nearly finished. The lower half of the collage looked a little empty to me, but the rest of it looked pretty good.

I took a break, looked over the elements I hadn't used yet, and selected two phrases to add to the collage.

To finish it, and add even more visual balance, I added glitter and gold leaf embellishments.

Tip: If you're not sure if your collage is well-balanced -- though it doesn't *have* to be balanced at all -- turn it upside-down and look at it again. Sometimes, without the more obvious (upright) visual context, you'll spot things that can be improved.

Other tricks including taking a picture of it (or scanning it) and looking at it on your computer monitor. Or, place your collage on the wall and look at it from at least a dozen feet away.

9. Consider adding embellishments

I *love* embellishments, but you don't have to add any at all. Every artist has his or her own style.

Embellishments can include things like:

- * Glitter, tinsel, gold leaf (or copper leaf, etc.), feathers, or ribbon.
- * Tissue paper (it may remain translucent if you use gel medium over and underneath that layer).
- * Colored tape as a collage element, not just a way to attach stuff.
- * Thread, glued on or stitched on. Buttons can be glued or sewn on, as well. (You may need to use a stronger support behind them, on the hidden side of the collage support. See Aisling.net for suggestions.)
- * If it's a collage about healing, think about using first aid tape or a bandage in your collage or as a way to attach a collage element.
- * Beads, mica, sand, pieces of glass.
- * Paint, oil pastels, stencils, rubber stamp art.

You can even embed something that plays a tune or says something (like in greeting cards) in your collage, for people to press.

The possibilities are *unlimited*.

10. (Optional) Finish with a coat of gel medium

After the collage is fully dry, you can seal it with a thin coat of gel medium. It's not necessary, but it will give the collage a uniform level of gloss (or a uniformly matte finish, if you used a matte gel medium).

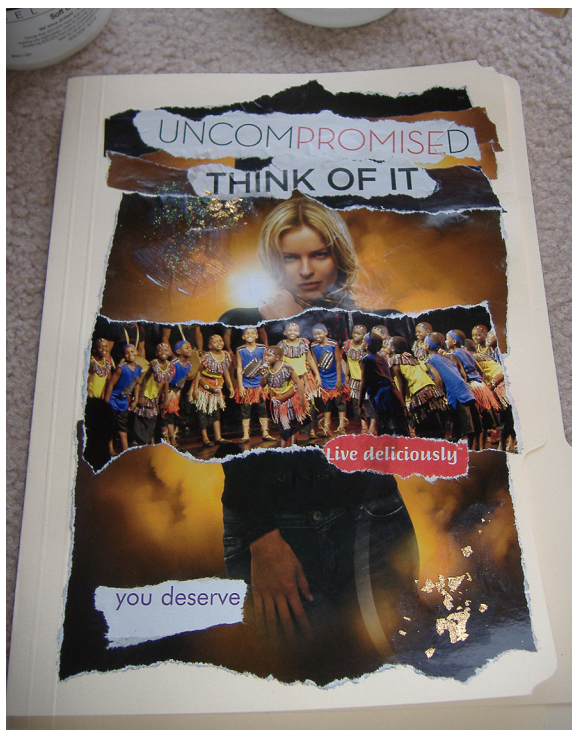
This will also protect the collage from dust and damage, if you want to leave it "as is" instead of displaying it under glass.

Tip: If you're using this in an artist's journal — such as a spiral-bound sketchpad — place a piece of wax paper between the collage and the facing page. That will prevent the pages from sticking together if the journal is stored where the heat might soften the gel medium.

My finished collage

Though I could probably explain all of the elements, it's true that "a picture is worth a thousand words." So, you can see my actual collage at Aisling.net:

<http://aisling.net/torn-paper-collages-how-to-video/>



The phrases are: "Uncompromised," "Think of it," "Live deliciously," and "you deserve."

I learn something from all of my collages. The more quickly (and intuitively) I chose the elements for it, the more I see in the work when I re-view it later in the day, or several days later.

Basically, this is about re-evaluating compromises... things that I decided were okay, short-term, as a step to a more important goal. For me, it's easy to let those to become long-term, semi-invisible issues.

The image of the happy children in colorful clothing is important to me. It's how joyous and self-expressive we all can be.

And yes, we *all* deserve to live *deliciously*, savoring every moment!

For more information about collages, artist's journals, and mixed-media art, visit my website, www.Aisling.net.

For basics about artists' journals, see ArtistsJournals.com

And, if you have questions, email me at: email@aisling.net