

COLLAGE EDUCATION

It is rather unusual to come across an artist today who uses the old technique of collage in a new creative way—the first collages were created by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso in France in the early 20th century. Jean-Charles de Ravenel, the subject of an exhibition this month at Hollyhock, in Los Angeles, is one such artist, a titled Frenchman who lives in and works out of a studio which literally drips down from a seaside villa on an island in the Bahamas. He has not forgotten that collage found its roots in the European Dada movement as a reaction to the First World War. The method allowed artists such as Hannah Höch to challenge sexist and racial codes in turbulent Weimar Germany, and American artists such as Man Ray to solarize photomontage portraiture in the 1930s. Even the great Matisse produced staggeringly beautiful, colorful cutout works during the last creative period of his life (currently on exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art).

De Ravenel, on the other hand, although well versed in its early development, uses this powerful medium to portray moments of history such as the Hellenistic period, Greco-Roman culture, the Grand Tour, and pre-revolution Russia—mixing maps with authentic documents, mementos, stationery, stamps, photographs, and even telegrams to create the atmosphere of the era. Judgment, artistry, and taste are his weapons. He realized, too, that recording events in photo albums was a tradition kept alive only until the intrusion of the modern digital camera. Frustration led de Ravenel to re-create what the old photo album did in a way that would satisfy his aesthetic taste.

These breathtaking creations portraying people in their personal historical context have become treasured possessions of collectors such as Valentino and the de la Rentas. Symbolically, de Ravenel has been able to plunge his hand into the soul of his subjects and put together character sketches that are emotional artistic revelations. The works challenge the viewer to engage in inner scrutiny.

Amazingly, de Ravenel has shown that personal objects—sensitively molded together—are equal in expression to paint itself. It is a magnificent achievement. —CHRISTOPHER ONDAATJE

PHOTOGRAPH BY JONATHAN BECKER

