

Grade 7

Art with a Message - Collage

February

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec "Moulin Rouge (la Goulue)"

John Baldessari "Letter"

Artwork Overview:

About the Artist:

(See the following pages)

Topics for Discussion:

1. What is the subject of each of these artworks?
2. Which presents a clearer message? Why?
3. How are letters and words used with images to create each work?
4. Do each of these works show line or movement?
5. Which artwork do you think is more expressive? Why?
6. Which artwork do you think was used as a poster for advertising? Why?

Hands on Art Activity: Collage Art with a Message

Materials: Tagboard
Newspaper, magazines and other collage materials
Markers and cray- pas
Pencils
Colored Pencils
Scissors
Glue

*Please refer
to supply
list in
supply room.*

Teacher Preparation: Have students bring magazines and newspapers to class.
(See attached note to copy and distribute to the class).

1. First have students think about what they want to say in their collage. They can look through the text in the collage materials for words to cut out and glue onto the collage.
2. Arrange the words with pictures to make a composition. Be careful that pictures are not haphazardly stuck all over the paper. The students need to take time to think about their ideas.
3. Carefully glue pictures and words. Blank spaces can be left blank or designs can be added with markers, cray-pas, pencils or colored pencils.
4. Sign the front when complete.

Attention 7th graders:

Please bring in a couple of old magazines and newspapers to be used for a collage in our next Meet the Masters project. Be sure to have your items at school **no later than**

Thank-you,

Your Meet the Masters Volunteers

Collage and Assemblage

John Baldessari, *Letter*



John Baldessari (ball-deh-sahr-ri), American, 1931–
Letter, 1986, black and white photographs, acrylic,
107½ x 48½-in.

Photo: Douglas M. Parker.

Courtesy of Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles

The Artist

As a child growing up in a small, somewhat isolated town near the California-Mexican border, John Baldessari remembers feeling different and ignored by the other children. He liked art and wasn't good at basketball even though he was already 6-ft.-4-in. by junior high. Baldessari also loved to read, and this shows up in his early art where he combined written text with images on canvas. By high school, Baldessari was pursuing art earnestly, but he was troubled by questions that would affect the work of his career: What is art? What is not art?

Baldessari studied photography in high school and was confused that, at that time, art and photography were not considered as one field of study. He majored in art at San Diego State University, also taking philosophy courses in an effort to answer the questions that bothered him as he produced what was considered *traditional art* at the time. After attaining his M.A. degree, he abandoned an earlier desire to become an art critic in favor of teaching art at both the high school and college levels.

Baldessari spent twenty disappointing years as a painter, finally coming to the conclusion that he actually hated painting! With the help of friends, he gathered canvases representing thirteen years of work into one space and shredded and burned

every piece. The act was documented and *performed* as an art experience which he titled *Crementation Project* (1970). He placed the ashes in a book-shaped urn which is itself displayed as art. From that day, he vowed never to paint again.

In 1970, Baldessari was offered a teaching position at California Institute of Arts (Cal Arts), the Disney-funded experimental college near Los Angeles. He continued his exploration of "an alternative aesthetic," returning to his first love, photography. He avoided the traditional subject matter of portraits, landscapes, and still lifes because they did not reflect reality. "I wanted things the way they were, with ugly wires and telephone poles, without beautification, and with the quality of newspaper reportage," he explained.

From the late 1960's to the mid-1970's, Baldessari explored language and image by placing words with photographs. But when, in the mid-1980's, this became a widely acceptable form of artistic expression, Baldessari turned in another direction, "zeroing in on the emotional meaning" of a work. At the end of the 1980's, he was recognized as a major talent whose art represents a significant contribution to the movement to revolutionize traditional ideas about art. Called Conceptual Art, it is defined as art in which an artist conveys an *idea* rather than creates an art object.

The Art

John Baldessari's art is in part about making choices. He has made a series of choices to create the art, and he has given his audience choices for viewing, understanding, and appreciating it.

One choice we have is about what we see and how we label what we see. In *Letter*, are we seeing people's heads or are we seeing curved cut-outs taken from a photograph? Are the heads looking down because they are engaged in some focused activity? Or because their gaze helps direct our own gaze, causing us to move on to other parts of this photomontage?

Another choice we have is how we are going to appreciate and understand the piece. We can simply tell a story, perhaps starting at the top-most image on the left. What do you see? You could say, "This story is about a man and a woman." The panel beneath this shows a man on the extreme left looking into the center of the piece. Several other faces follow in a straight line, but they are hidden by colored dots, two white, a gold, then two more white. Finally, on the far right, a woman looks off

the canvas, away from the man. Are these the same two people as in the photo above? Does it matter? You might conclude, for the sake of your story, "The man and the woman are having a fight. The woman is leaving on a plane."

You could continue your inspection of this piece, noting that the only other gold-colored item in the montage, the letter, is further down on the canvas, and in a vertical line with the gold dot. You might arrange this information into your story, feeling that the colors connect the images in a meaningful way. "The woman has decided to leave because of a letter." Can you tell the rest of this particular story?

Or we might skip the story line entirely and look only at the cut-out shapes. We know the work is titled *Letter*. What might the connection be to the shapes? Perhaps the shapes are punctuation marks in a letter!

Where do you see text in this piece? "*NO!*" on the lapel of one of the men. Do you think Baldessari wanted us to consider this single emphatic statement as an important element of the story? As the eye travels up and down between the two gold images, it is interrupted each time by this exclamation. Do you suppose this is intentional or accidental?

What other "meanings" can you find by looking carefully at this photomontage?

Guided Analysis

Subject:

What is the subject of *Letter*? If you said the letter itself, did knowing the title influence you? What if the same piece were named *Meeting*? *Journey*? *Palm Tree*? What else influenced your decision about the subject? *Perhaps color, location, shape, size.*

Baldessari invites his audiences to make their own interpretations of his art — whatever idea or question it puts in the mind of the viewer! Here, the subject is not necessarily the letter but the questions of art themselves. What is art? Does it have to be beautiful? Does it have to follow established rules?

Media and Technique:

In this and other photomontages, Baldessari has collected photographs and stripped them of their original meanings using several methods. The horizontal upper panel of this piece is a "still" from a movie, a favorite source of photographs for the

artist. The faces of the actors are obscured with colored dots so we cannot recognize them, which also creates a certain mystery for the viewer.

Another method Baldessari uses is the cutting and reshaping of photographs, removing those elements that he considers irrelevant to his "story." In this way, he refocuses our attention from the whole photograph to a part. He does this by deciding where to place the newly shaped part in the whole of the artwork, letting us construct our own story, regardless of *his* original intent.

Interpretation:

John Baldessari's work is intensely introspective, aiming first at pleasing himself and only secondly at connecting with the viewer. Baldessari insists that the viewers' interpretation of his works should be personal, and he wants them to simply enjoy the work. There are no "right" answers to art, only what our personal feelings tell us.

Comparison:

"The ideal art for me would be complex for myself and simple enough for the public," Baldessari said. "It would have to satisfy both those needs. I try to make my things look deceptively simple. I think this is the test of good art or literature. So Matisse has always been a great model for me. Those things look so easy. Child's play. And you know how many times he redrew them..." In what ways does *Letter* compare to Matisse's *Beasts of the Sea*?

What does Baldessari mean when he says, "What is not in a piece is as important as what is there?" How might this apply to both *Letter* and *Beasts of the Sea*?

Judgment:

John Baldessari's style has been called "information as art." We are perhaps more familiar with the idea of "art as information." Is there a difference? Give as many examples as you can to support your ideas.

How would *you* define art? What makes something art? Is it the subject? The process that went into creating it? The final form or shape it takes? Is it the idea as it starts in the mind of the artist, even before it is actually produced? Could it even be the response or experience the piece evokes from the viewer? Test your definition of art on things around you. Does it work? In your opinion, what objects are not art?

Activity: Make a collage based on a theme using photographs from magazines or pictures you have taken. Cut them into curved shapes combining similar elements and add color with markers.

Printmaking

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Moulin Rouge (la Goulue)*



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Moulin Rouge (la Goulue)*, 1891, lithograph, 191 x 117-cm. (75 x 46-in.)

Mr. and Mrs. Carter H. Harrison

Photograph © 1996 The Art Institute of Chicago

The Art

When Toulouse-Lautrec's poster *Moulin Rouge: La Goulue* first appeared on the streets of Paris, his celebrity skyrocketed. With this, his first, poster, he enthusiastically plunged into poster design and the color lithography process.

Here we see La Goulue (the Glutton), a plump, blonde dancer and the unrivaled queen of the can-can in Paris. She wears a red and white polkadot blouse, layers of frothy petticoats, billowing pantaloons, and colored stockings. Her hair is piled on her head in a bun, or "chignon." She is the adored focus of an audience of silhouettes, their stylish hats showing movement and energy even in their blackness.

La Goulue is dancing with Valentin-le-Désossé, a café manager by day, but at night an agile and seemingly boneless figure who shows up in more than one of Lautrec's studies.

The bold lettering at the top of the poster advertises the Moulin Rouge and its star. It also tells the reader there is a ball every evening, and according to the lettering at the bottom, Wednesdays and Saturdays feature a masked ball.

Lautrec has signed his name with a logo of sorts, a capital T and L, linked by a line that makes an H, a clever symbol indicating Henri Toulouse-Lautrec as well as Toulouse Lautrec.

What do you suppose the tiny writing at the bottom right indicates? The printer's name and address.

The Artist

There have been few artists who have expressed so much of their lives in their work as Henri Toulouse-Lautrec.

Born in 1864 into one of France's oldest and noblest families (his father was a count), young Henri was an avid sketch maker and caricaturist, as the pages of his old school books testify.

Always a frail child, at the age of 13 Henri broke first one leg, then at 14, the other. His legs stopped growing, and because of a bone disease he also suffered, he never fully recovered. He spent the remainder of his life dwarfed, ugly and misshapen even in his own eyes. He was always well liked, though, and those who came to know him forgot his appearance soon enough, focusing instead on his quick wit and fun-loving nature.

Before he was even 20, Henri turned his back on his privileged upbringing and moved to Paris to live the life of an artist. He lived in Montmartre, a colorful neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. Lautrec discovered a lifestyle in Montmartre that felt more comfortable and natural than he had ever known. It was also to serve as the richest inspiration for his art. In the narrow, gritty streets lived the outcasts and eccentrics of Paris — political radicals, prostitutes, criminals, struggling actors, writers, and artists, including Degas and van Gogh. Lautrec was no more nor less conspicuous than any of these, and he delighted in painting the frenzied scene around him.

By the age of 30, the abuse of alcohol and wild late nights in dance halls and cafes had taken their toll on Lautrec's body and mind. His condition had deteriorated to such a point that his family placed him in a mental asylum. There, he completed a wonderful series of circus scenes, all from memory.

When at last Lautrec was released, he determined that he could no longer do his art, that his work had none of its former energy or originality. In despair at losing the only thing he truly loved, he lost the will to fight. In the end he was stricken with paralysis and died in 1901 at the young age of 36.

Guided Analysis Elements and Principles of Design

This poster catapulted Lautrec to fame, and the process of color lithography to the status of fine art. His posters, like his paintings, use clear, strong colors that were rarely mixed.

What counted to Lautrec was the human figure — and movement. There is motion everywhere in this scene. In fact, there are three layers of activity in the scene. Can you describe them? The black silhouettes almost seem to be bobbing their heads as they admire La Goulue. In the middle ground is La Goulue herself, the center of attention as she shows off her high kicks in the quadrille, or can-can. But as we study the unusual point of view in the pose Lautrec has chosen for the dancer, our eye is also drawn to the sinister near-silhouette of Valentin-le-Désossé in the foreground.

Of these three scenic elements, which one gets our attention first? Close your eyes then open them; where do your eyes go in the picture? Explain why. Lautrec draws us to center stage and its star, not only by her placement in the center of the picture but also with the brightness and active line quality of the white petticoats. Valentin commands the

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Moulin Rouge (la Goulue)*

bottom of the scene with his sheer size, fluid profile, and the interesting feature of his escaping the frame of the print, but he is a muddy color whose contrast cannot compete with the whites of La Goulue, the only whites in the scene. Further, the lines of the plank floor lead directly to her, ensuring Lautrec's intent to celebrate the dancer and her art.

What do you suppose the large yellow blossom-like object is at the left of the picture? Does our knowing affect our response to the overall piece? How is balance achieved in this picture?

Subject

After working in his studio all day long, Lautrec would spend the nights until dawn in the cafés and dance halls that were springing up like weeds in Montmartre. One of his favorites was the Moulin Rouge, a red-draped, mirrored hall that drew night owls from near and far to revel in the gaudy spectacle.

Lautrec sat for hours at a small table, sketching the rowdy activity on napkins, scraps of paper, even the tabletop itself, with burnt match sticks, if nothing else was handy. Night after night, he happily immersed himself in an atmosphere of smoke, perfume, liquor, and sweat. He tirelessly documented the flamboyant men and women in their bright, fashionable clothing, their faces tinged green under the gas lamps. In all the scenes he recorded, the figures are actual characters in and around Lautrec's life. He knew these people and celebrated their colorful uniqueness in his art.

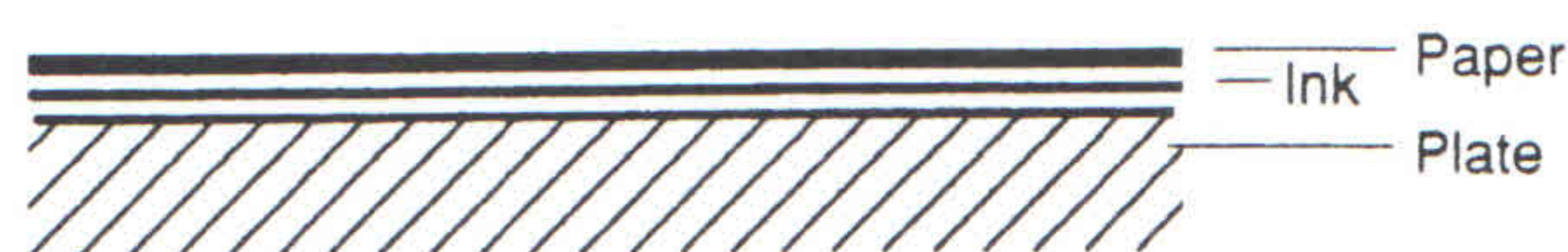
Style

Lautrec's early career as a painter showed skillful and original adaptation of the Impressionist technique. He later developed a style closer to that of Degas, whose subjects and themes were also of more interest to him than the outdoor scenes of the Impressionists.

Like Degas and a number of other artists at this time, Lautrec was intrigued by the beauty of Japanese prints: their formal composition, foreshortening of planes, bringing forward and off-center placement of important pictorial elements. He applied these to his art with his own highly original sense of design and superb draftsmanship. He expressed these most brilliantly in his incomparable posters and lithographs, of which *Moulin Rouge: La Goulue* was the first and most celebrated of the 21 posters he made.

Media and Technique

Toulouse-Lautrec was the pioneer of color lithography. The innovative vividness of Lautrec's work in this medium established a style that was to shape the future of graphic art. His posters were hung all over Paris, commanding the attention of those who passed by with their flat, simplified forms, brilliant colors, dynamic movement, and bold line work.



Lithography is a planographic (surface printing) technique that depends on the fact that oil and water don't mix. Lautrec drew his designs in reverse with a greasy crayon on limestone. Today, aluminum or zinc plates are used, though the process is essentially the same: the stone or plate is then "etched" with a solution containing a little acid, then wet with water and inked over with oil-based ink. The ink adheres to the greasy drawing but is repelled by the wet areas. The stone is pressed onto paper, and many copies can be "pulled" simply by repeating the wetting and inking steps. For color lithography, separate stones or plates are used for each color run. Today, we also use a photomechanical process known as "offset" lithography.

Comparison

Look at a painting or sketch by Degas, one in his dance series. Both Lautrec and Degas have portrayed dancers, but in what other ways do they compare? Movement, line, expressive form with little detail, the viewer is an on-looker at the scene . . . How do they differ? Degas' line was motion, Lautrec's emotion. The movement in Degas' work is the expression of physical motion. With Lautrec, movements are acts. Degas was detached from his subjects, and they were detached from emotion. Lautrec's characters were always present, always specific people behind their painted portraits. They suffered, laughed,* mocked, played, worked, and lived real lives. There is more "art" in Degas' work, more life in Lautrec's.

Judgment

Gustave Courbet, a Realist and artistic rebel painting in the mid-1800's, said, "The museums should be closed for twenty years so that today's painters may begin to see the world with their own eyes." What do you suppose he meant? How might this bold statement pertain to Toulouse-Lautrec and his art?

Until "modern art," of which Lautrec is considered an "Old Master," it was common for an art student to spend many hours copying paintings in the museums. The results were paintings of paintings. Lautrec was a superb draftsman and careful observer. He had the ability to convey rapid movement, while trying always to portray the truth of the subject matter. He studied and painted life from life, not from the idealized portraits in the museums.

Activity

Make quick blind contour drawings of children playing on the playground. Try to capture the essence of their movement and form in a continuous (or nearly continuous) line. In the classroom, go over the line with black ink or paint, adding a line here and there to complete the drawing. Fill in the shapes with bright, bold colors. Will you place a figure in a setting?