



Smithsonian American Art Museum

## **Politics, Form, and Identity in Abstract Expressionist Collage**

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In 1943, Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century gallery staged the first large-scale exhibition of collage in the United States. This show was notable for introducing the New York School to the medium; its artists would go on to embrace collage, creating objects that ranged from small compositions of handmade papers to mural-sized works of torn and reassembled canvas. Despite the significance of this development, studies of abstract expressionism and collage consistently overlook the collages of the New York School. By examining those who based their careers on the medium—Conrad Marca-Relli, Robert Motherwell, Anne Ryan, and Esteban Vicente—my dissertation presents a comprehensive view of collage during the era of abstract expressionism. My project explores what collage meant to these artists, questioning how they understood the medium and its capacities. Collage, I propose, connected the New York School to a wealth of ideologies, ranging from the formal and the aesthetic to the social and the political. Locating complex histories of national identity, artistic production, and philosophic thought within the *papier collé* of these artists, I argue that they contested the formal complexities of the technique while imbuing it with a social relevance previously unnoticed by scholars. For example, Conrad Marca-Relli replicated manufactured forms in canvas, vinyl, and aluminum, creating “mechanamos” that reflected developments in technology. Anne Ryan’s compositions juxtaposed traditional formats with recycled materials, eschewing conventions of consumer culture and femininity. Esteban Vicente asserted his work’s physicality while connecting it to the traditions of his hybrid identity as a Spanish-born American citizen. And finally, Robert Motherwell executed an abstract tribute to composer John Cage on a large scale, conflating music with collage while testing notions of composition and historicism.