

# The Collages of William Dole

## William Dole and Gerald Nordland

William Dole's painted collages are formal compositional inventions, balancing pictorial elements and sensitive saturations of color-form with un-intelligible signs—the calligraphy of type, symbol, diagram, and handwriting—which seduce your eyes and provoke uncertain readings. The artist also comments on his own work.

William Dole is a draftsman and painter who has worked for more than fifteen years in the painted and pasted-paper world of collage. He composes his collage paintings using many of the discarded papers of modern life—old contracts, envelopes, maps, or drawings. In addition to such detritus, Dole has a keen eye for more precious aspects of paper and printing—fine papers themselves, mathematical and scientific diagrams or illustrations, scraps of stylized handwriting from letters, receipts or other documents, fragments of printing with distinctive type-faces like German, Latin, and Greek, which he utilizes alongside sensitively washed or stained watercolor papers, marbled endpapers from discarded books, or the borders of a stock certificate.

This broad armory of paper materials, both found and made, provide the artist with a reservoir from which he works in forming his pictorial constructions. Each collage painting is a balanced compositional whole which invites examination and study much as does a neo-plastic painting by Mondrian. Dole's is a compositional strategy in which the two-dimensional surface is developed into a complex pattern which often breaks into three dimensional sensations through color planes opening into depth or standing in front of architectural spaces, before the tensions of the picture plane reassert themselves mysteriously.

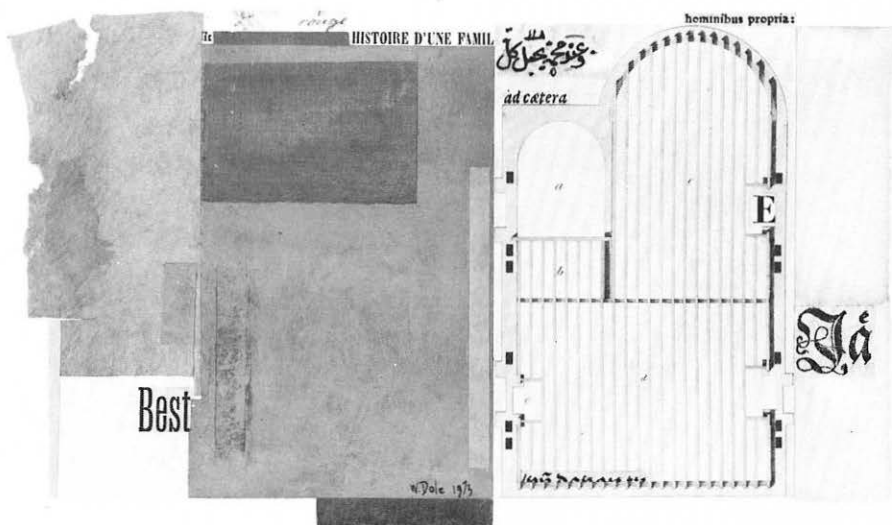


*Rigamarole*. Collage, 6-1/2 x 9-3/4 inches, 1974.  
William Dole. Staempfli Gallery, New York.

Dole's use of letterforms, words, and symbols may remind one of classical modern parallels from Braque and Picasso through Carra to Schwitters and beyond. His capital letters, ampersands, crosses, and circles command visual attention, take firm positions on the picture plane and serve to order space....

The elements in Dole's constructions are focused on broad variations in texture, subtle utilizations of ragged edges in paper, torn or feathered passages of transparent color. The calligraphy of type, symbol, diagram, and handwriting are pushed to underline the little dramas of his works. His over-all composition moves freely between scatter-balance to firm architectural divisions, from extended horizontal works to complex grid forms, always intelligent and usually surprising.

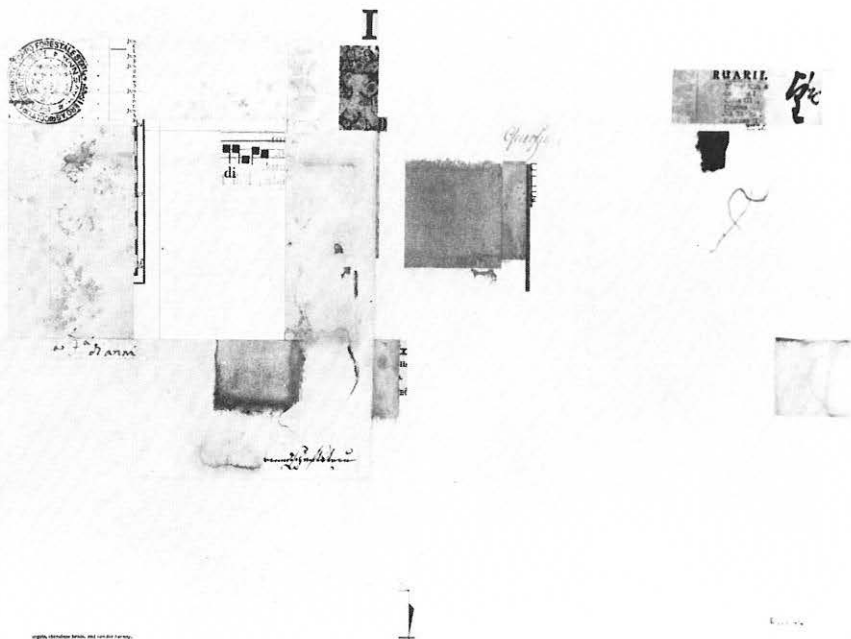
Finally, the spirit and quality of Dole's painted collages are



*Signet*. Collage, 4-1/8 x 7-1/4 inches, 1973.  
 William Dole. Collection, Mrs. Lois Brown.

different from the classical Cubist, Futurist, and Merz works. Dole's fine papers, stained colors, Latin and Greek printings, European and Persian handwritings, tend to evoke a secure nostalgia, a sense of peeking into almost familiar material, as do also his fragments of astronomical, mathematical, or scientific diagrams. Some of the larger color-plane works suggest a change of scale and an architectural space as in viewing a city block facade in old downtown New York. Essentially Dole's collage paintings are formal compositional inventions, balancing pictorial elements and sensitive saturations of color-form with unintelligible signs which seduce our eyes and provoke uncertain readings.

Collage has been disrespected since the great works of 1912-22. Only Kurt Schwitters' collage art has achieved classic recognition. Schwitters' sensibility was inescapably tied to his



*Pro Forma*. Collage, 11 x 17-1/2 inches, 1974.  
William Dole. Staempfli Gallery, New York.

generation. His materials—corrugated papers, devalued bank notes, check stubs, and bus transfers—carry an intense and passionate feeling consistent with his more orthodox Expressionist comrades. Dole's paintings build upon the same base but move more slowly in a counterpoint of visual chamber music, complex but faintly sweet, ambitious but never flamboyant, disciplined but never without unique personal warmth and tonal richness.

Gerald Nordland

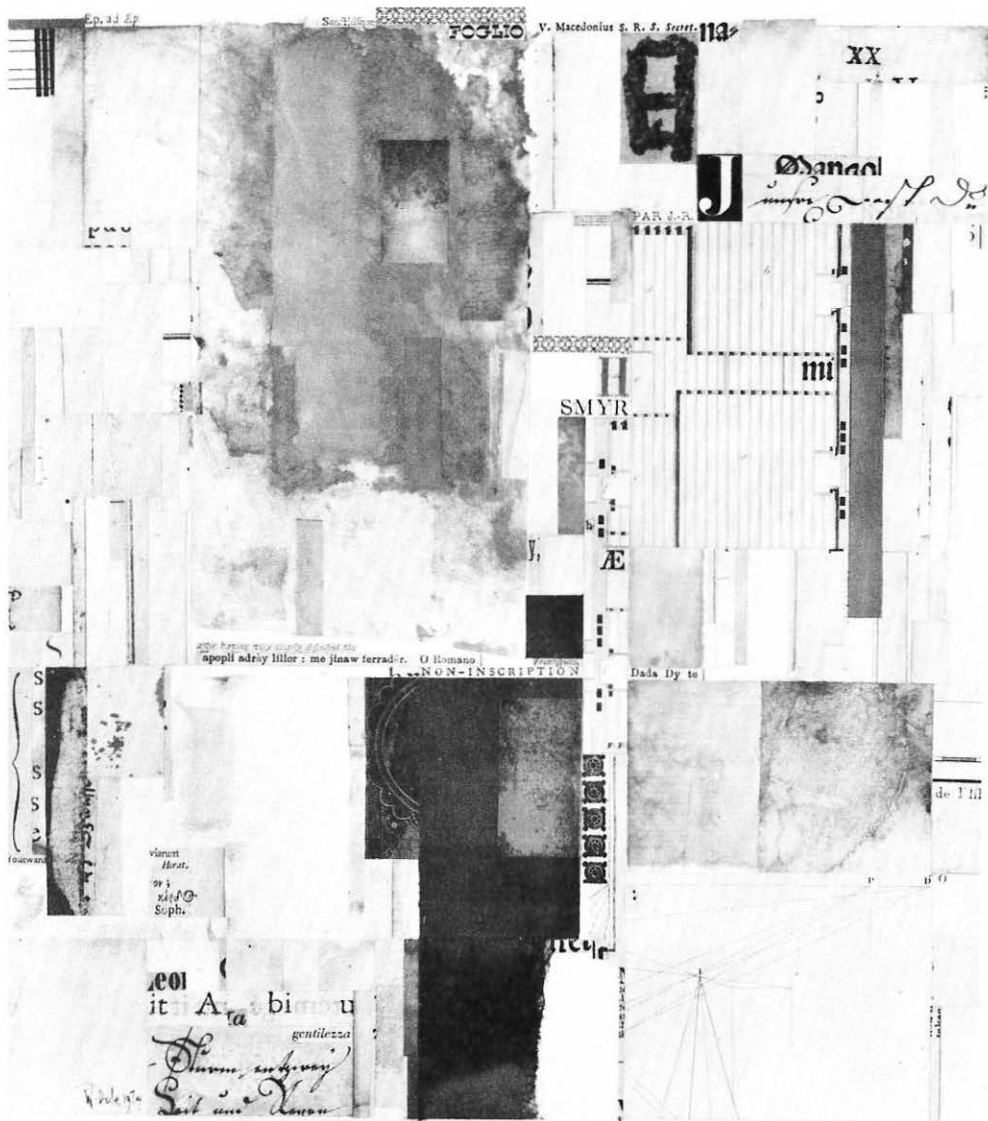
Gerald Nordland's statement is reprinted with kind permission from the catalog which accompanied the showing in late 1974 of William Dole—Recent Collages at the Staempfli Gallery in New York City. All of the illustrations are reproduced here courtesy of Staempfli Gallery, New York.

*William Dole presented the following statement at a symposium held at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1973.*

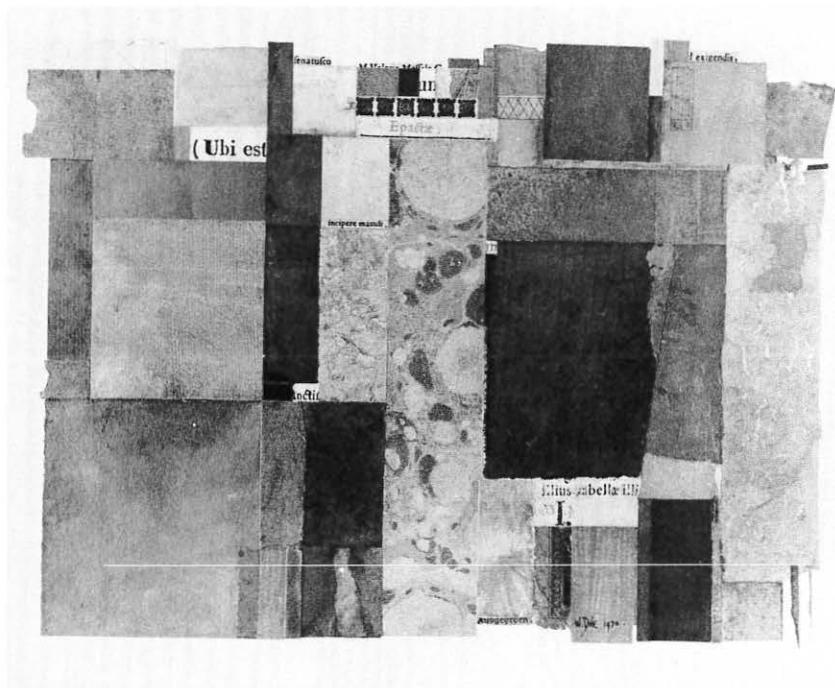
My method is chance; my intention: ambiguity.

I have chosen this statement as my introductory remark, as it has a ring of inevitable profundity. Actually it came to me one morning just before I woke up, and I have pondered on it from time to time since. As I hate to waste anything, I thought it might be useful in organizing some thoughts about my work.

First, on chance. For the past fifteen years or so I have worked mainly in collage. I have chosen this technique because of the control it permits me, the possibility for testing various combinations of shapes or color, and the possibility for endless change, refinement. This would seem to imply the opposite of chance. However, to begin with, I came to the technique quite by chance, and as the result of two separate incidents. First, I was given a collection of Japanese papers which would now be over a hundred years old, if I hadn't used it all up. Second, I bought a beautiful old leather portfolio in a second-hand store in Florence in about 1956. In the portfolio I discovered later a collection of old letters from the Risorgimento, marbled paper, pages from books (uncut and unbound), receipts, orders, maps, etc. As I said, I hate to waste anything, so I had to find a way of using these lovely things. I had admired the collages of Braque, and had seen the large Picasso exhibition in Chicago in 1939 and again in San Francisco in 1940. I knew of Schwitters' work through reproductions only, but I had seen collages by Motherwell and by Rauschenberg in New York in 1955. I had also seen an exhibition at Frank Perls' gallery of very large collages on linen by Rico Lebrun in about 1953 or '54. Rico had written, with his usual eloquence, a memorable statement about the propriety of the technique, both aesthetically and also in terms of its longevity with proper care. I should also mention here Chinese paintings with their accumulations of seals and inscriptions. The relation of pictorial (representative) elements and calligraphic or printed elements suggested interesting expressive possibilities, even though the verbal



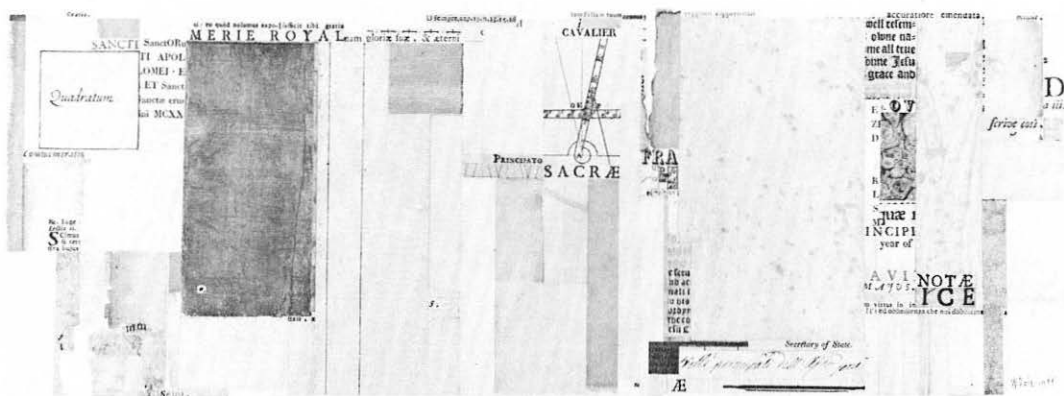
Chant. Collage, 10-1/4 x 9 inches, 1974.  
William Dole. Staempfli Gallery, New York.



*Albeit*. Collage, 7-1/4 x 10 inches, 1970.  
William Dole. Collection, Mrs. Donald Kellogg.

language was unknown to me. Then, too, there is all the bad art that influences one, that I don't choose to go into now.

People sometimes suggest to me that I must have a vast collection of materials to work with—the implication being that I have bins, boxes, barrels full of scraps. Actually I have a very modest collection to work with—a couple of shallow drawers full, and what can be spread out over a couple of work tables. In making a collage I do not plan it all out ahead of time and then fill it in, although this had been my usual working procedure in painting. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that I construct a collage, the idea and the physical process developing and proceeding simultaneously. Chance plays a part in the selection of each element since I can neither see nor remember all of my materials at once. The casual or accidental

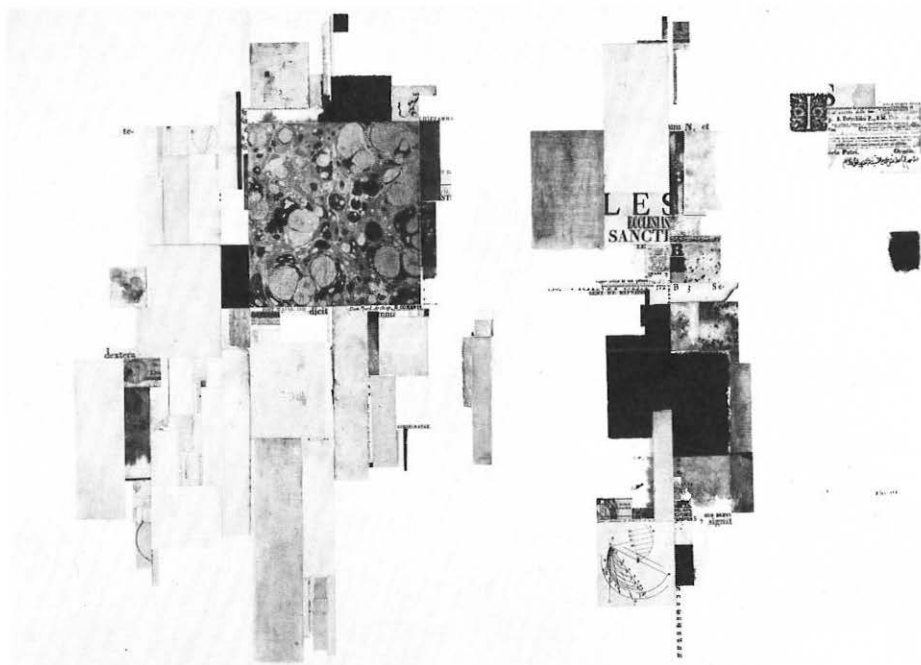


*Narrative*. Collage, 5-3/4 x 16-1/8 inches, 1966.

William Dole. Collection, The Pennsylvania Academy of The Fine Arts.

juxtaposition of two or more elements or colors often suggests a relationship which becomes a part of the final work, or the beginning of a new one. A search for some particular shape or color or texture may turn up something quite different and may change significantly the direction of the work.

I am superstitious perhaps about searching out materials to use in my collages. I prefer that they be given to me by others—as much of my material has been—or that I come on it by chance. This may be an unconscious reaction to the accusations that I must spend a great deal of time in libraries with a pair of scissors, snipping surreptitiously here and there. My liberal education has implanted in me a natural repugnance to destroy whole, useful books, and on the very few occasions when I have abandoned my scruples and bought a book to deliberately use, the result has been disastrous.



*Declaration*. Collage, 24 x 36-1/8 inches, 1968.  
William Dole. Collection, George Young.

I prepare all the colored papers I use by staining them—usually quite small pieces—with water color. Since they are prepared for possible future use and not in relation to a particular context, chance plays some part in the preparation—the reaction of different papers to paint, the mixture of colors, the method of application, etc., can become quite experimental when freed from a known or expected function.

As to ambiguity: I don't mean to be obscure or mysterious. I do believe, however, more and more as I grow older, that art can only be described in terms of paradox, that whatever may be said of it, the opposite is also quite likely true as well. This is particularly evident when I try to explain my own work. What I hope for in my collages is that they will contain several various levels of meaning. For example, having been brainwashed in the “integrity-of-the-picture—plane” syndrome early on, I am

very conscious of the surface pattern, and I believe that color relations work most strongly on this level. However, it is very difficult to make a two-dimensional pattern that does not have some three-dimensional illusion. The counterpoint between flat pattern and spatial effect is a kind of ambiguity in which neither has primacy. On another level my collages may appear to be architectural—in the sense of referring to buildings, or they may refer to documents of one kind or another. The reading may also refer to nature, although I rarely make overt reference to specific place or time. I don't want to suggest that I am setting up aesthetic Rohrschach tests, but neither would I be content to make merely pretty surface patterns. I find it most difficult to speak about the printed and written elements in my collages. Ambiguous they may be—but also important. The printed word—even in an unknown foreign language—has a sense of authority that no other graphic element has. Thus a polyglot pattern of words even though tacitly meaningless demands visual attention. This pattern, I feel, in my work creates another counterpoint to those of surface pattern, spatial extension, and referential suggestion. Increasingly, I think of these relations of words, parts of words, and individual letters as concrete poetry, unavailable for formal exegesis, impossible to scan in any conventional order of left to right in sequential lines (or in an Oriental order of vertical lines). Multilingual, truncated, and omnidirectional they (hopefully) perform a poetic function. And this is what I intend each of my works to be, at every level, a poetic statement.

Finally let me say that although I use the technique of collage, I claim no special privilege for it, no cachet, nor do I apologize for it. I feel that a work of art should be judged for what it does, rather than how it is made or what it is made from. A work in mosaic, or in plastic, or whatever material, is not a special category; it is only a way of getting on with the work.

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