

# Cut and Paste Collage in the Digital World

by  
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*The Return of Arthur*, © 2004 Walton Mendelson

Collage is a remarkable medium. Although it was a coinage from 1915-1920, from the French *colle*, paste or glue, gluing together cut out pieces of illustration or colored paper has existed for hundreds of years. Perhaps the most famous collages were those of the Cubists, who juxtaposed real objects and clippings, etc., and the Surrealists, Max Ernst particularly, who incorporated incongruous images. See Jonathan Talbot's listings at [www.collageart.org](http://www.collageart.org) for lists of contemporary collagists.

A problem that faces the collagist, is plugs. The spaces between pieces, do you fill them or not? And if you do, with what? These processual decisions are one of the hallmarks of what most people think of as collage.

Several things draw me to the material I use. I love the quality of engravings and lithographs from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Line work seems to lend itself to a much different way of working than the half-tone images of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The material is in the public domain, and therefore avoids the liability of copyright infringement. For copyright purposes, collage is considered derivative, and the new work, the collage, can be copyrighted if the artist (author) of the collage has the right to use

the original material. If the copyright has expired—leaving aside the technical questions of whether it contained a copyright notice or whether the copyright was renewed—then there is no copyright to violate.

In the example for this article, *The Return of Arthur*, I saw two images: *Windsor Castle*, drawn and engraved by Stephen Miller, and *Morte d'Arthur*, probably drawn and engraved by Stephen Miller, both from *The Art Journal*, 1869. These seemed to be interesting together. Later, I added two mountains and a sky from Thomas Moran's *Colburn's Butte, in Kannaro Cañon*, from *The Aldine*, 1874-1875.

As I was developing this article I was worried that the many examples, and many more could have been included for instructional purposes, would be confusing or overwhelming. But there is a way to think of all that follows so that it will make sense: This is just cut and paste collage done digitally.

Damaged pieces must be restored. Then the images are cut out. They are placed in layers, moved around, and they can be moved above or below other pieces.

The advantage to working digitally is that books need not be destroyed, images can be used and reused, resized, flopped, distorted, colored, etc. The paper in some old books and magazines is quite brittle and difficult, if not impossible to cut sometimes. Finally, your cat won't knock the pieces all over the floor.

For the most part I work in Photoshop, but any other good photo imaging application will do. Occasionally, if I am going to add type, I'll import the Photoshop image into PageMaker. I have also incorporated Corel Painter and Illustrator files.

## The Process

For line art I usually scan at around 300dpi. I do not try to pre-adjust settings to get a "perfect" scan. See *Scanning and Moiré Patterns* at the end for problems and suggestions.



The beautiful *Morte d'Arthur* was part of a group of loose pages in a box that was sent to me. As you can see the right side had broken off and part was missing.

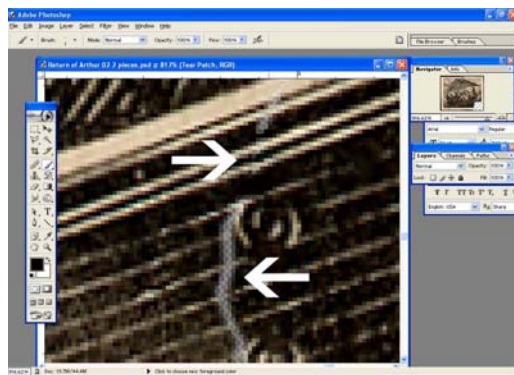
If I wanted to use the image, I felt I needed to restore the missing corner, at least enough to have the boat in its entirety. Usually I work from books, but to get images and to not pay huge amounts of money, I willingly take damaged books. Here is a place where the decision to use the piece at all is handily resolved by working digitally.



This is the same image scanned in two sections. They were placed together in separate layers and nudged together until they fit. It has been cropped, and parts of the hull and sails were gone over with the dodging tool to bring out the engraving lines, which were choked in the original. The color shift is due in large part to the size of the files and the amount of compression for this article.



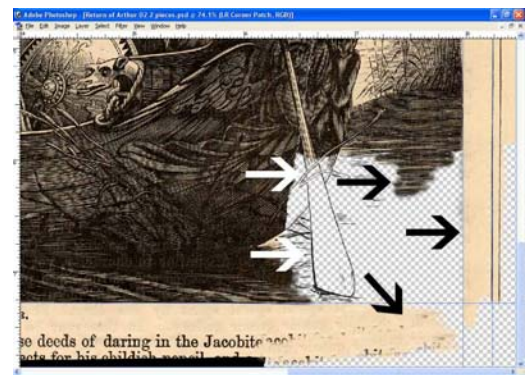
Before I start to cut out the boat, I need to remove the seam between the two pieces and I need to restore at least the boat in the lower left corner.



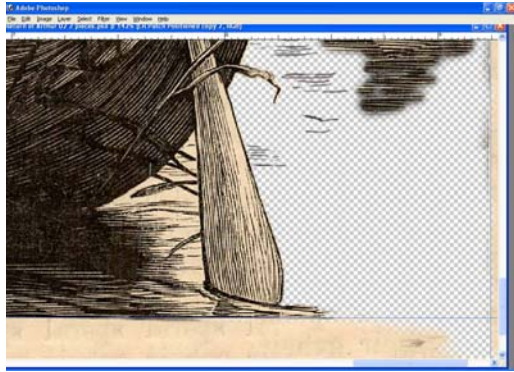
I usually do this sort of work at 400-500%. I can see the pixels but I can still discern a little of what I'm working on. The lower arrow is pointing to the white line of the seam between the two part of the torn image. I do this work on a separate layer, so that I do not destroy anything, and all layers are locked. The upper arrow is pointing to what I have repaired.

I sample the existing colors and paint. I try to vary the colors within each hue, so that the repair blends into the whole better.

On one layer, I've loosely drawn in the missing steering oar, lower white arrow, a piece of plant, upper white arrow, and a few ripples in the water. I have also cloned some of the water, upper black arrow. On another layer I've roughly cloned in the edges of the paper, just to help frame the missing section.



I have most of the oar painted in and some of the water. At this stage I didn't think I need much more of the water restored, but I wasn't sure. The lower arrow points to "chatter" from the cloning the water. If I were going to keep this area, I would work on the engraving lines and spaces to remove the chatter and make them continuous.

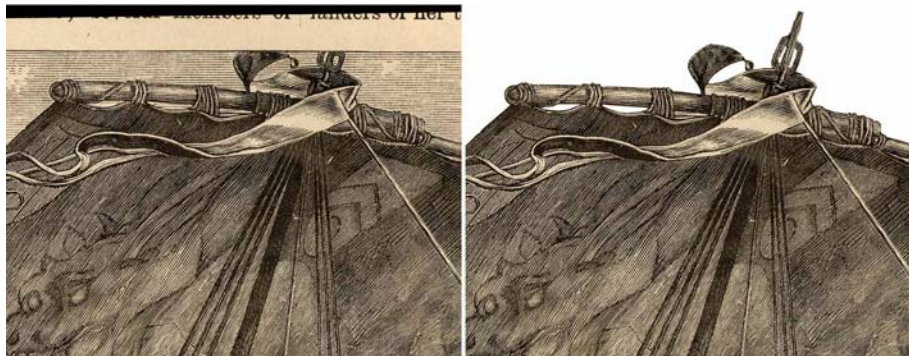


I decided to quit here. I knew I could always come back and fill in more, but I thought that this is all I would need.

This is the entire image at the same stage as the detail above.



The top of the masthead wasn't in the original, on the left. On the right, I've drawn it in and I am showing it against the white that I will paint in, see below.



After the repairs have been made, I started to prepare the image to be cut out (extracted). Again on a separate layer I painted out the sky: the black arrow points to the paint brush cursor; for larger areas, I select larger sections using the polygonal lasso tool and fill that area: the white arrow points to a selected area.

I have tried other methods of extracting images, but this is the most reliable. I paint or fill with a color that does not exist anywhere in the image itself.

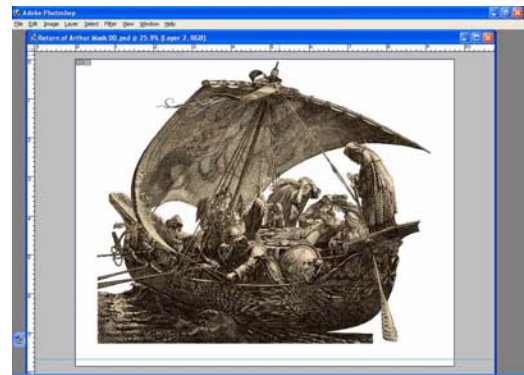




Here is the area from the previous example painted in.

I have flattened the image into two layers, the image and the white mask. To cut out the image:

- 1) With the Magic Wand select the white on the white layer.
- 2) Invert the selection: Select>Inverse.
- 3) Make the image layer active and copy it.
- 4) Select File>New
- 5) Check the box for transparent and past the boat into it, see below.



This is the new file with just the boat on a transparent background.

This is the raw scan of the background. I have cropped it.





When I pasted the boat into the Windsor Castle scene, it automatically was the top layer, but if I wanted to change that, it is easy to move layers up and down. I have also resized the boat a little so that it doesn't take up the entire picture. When I nudged the boat closer to the left edge, I became aware of several problems.

I would have seen it anyway, but the sudden lightness of the swans pulled my eye towards them. The white arrow points to the seam, and the problems. I could erase the water around the boat or redraw the water lines to make them seamless, but I would also have to deal with drawing three oars, and the swans would continue to be a problem, pretty though they are.



The solution I chose is outlined in white. I decided to clone and paint reeds across the foreground: hiding the seam, some or all of the swans, and the missing oars. A darker foreground would also keep the eye within the picture. The reeds will also create more of a middle ground, giving more depth to the image.

This is the reed patch, made from cloning the reeds from the corner, with some drawing, in nine separate layers.



The boat is a nice size, and it is moving in, which pulls the eye into the picture. The viewer has a more clearly defined position relative to the what is happening in the picture.

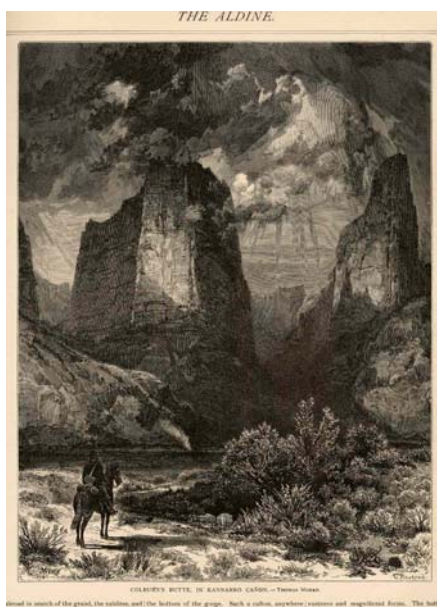




I printed this file on good paper. It couldn't be better, I said to myself. I copied the file, flattened it, and saved it. I went to bed satisfied with the work.

In the morning, however, I found the sky simply to bland. As a narrative piece, Arthur's return needs something dramatic. As a composition there is nothing interesting happening in either of the upper corners. Corners and edges are very important. Usually they need life, and two corners and one and one-half edges are dead.

I remembered a sky from a Thomas Moran landscape.



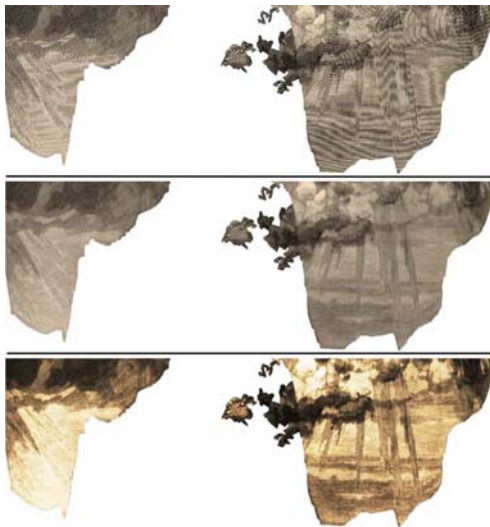
I was only looking for a sky, but this image also has two mountains. The sun is coming from behind the viewer's left shoulder in the picture above, and, fortuitously, the highlights on the mountains looks like it is reasonably consistent. If not, I could flop the picture, or work on it with the dodging and burning tools to adjust the highlights, but this is a good first step, just as it is.



On a separate layer, I painted out the sky, including around the tree leaves, and amidst them where there appeared to be the suggestion of voids. I think that the ultimate image is more believable and marvelous if the viewer can see between things as he would in real life.

I used the white as a mask, selected the sky and cut it out, moving it to another layer.

I pasted the Moran sky into the image and moved it behind the foreground. The mountains seem fine, with light and shadow, the sky in the middle could be exaggerated, but the upper left corner is too dark.

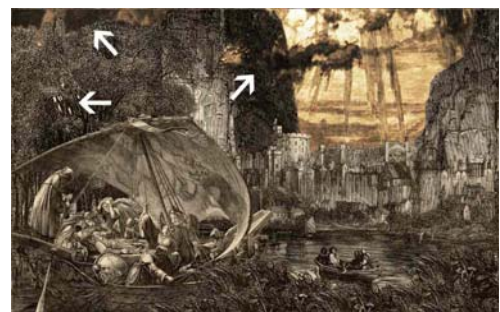


Here are the next three steps. First, I cut out the Moran sky from his mountains, copying them to a separate layer. I was disturbed by the moiré patterns in the clouds. I could rescan and play around for a day and maybe get rid of them, or maybe not. But I knew from previous collages that there were a few tricks I could try. If worse came to worse, I could look for another sky.

In the middle example, I blurred the clouds, just to the point where the individual engraving lines disappeared.

Finally, sometimes drama helps drama: I applied curves to the blurred clouds.

Arthur is getting the drama he deserves, but it's still missing. The interior openings in the trees are like little beacons, pulling my eye towards them, with nothing there. The upper left corner is still too dark, but I do not want to slide the clouds up because I like how they are positioned in the middle. And the clouds over the face of the middle mountain are too dark and lost.



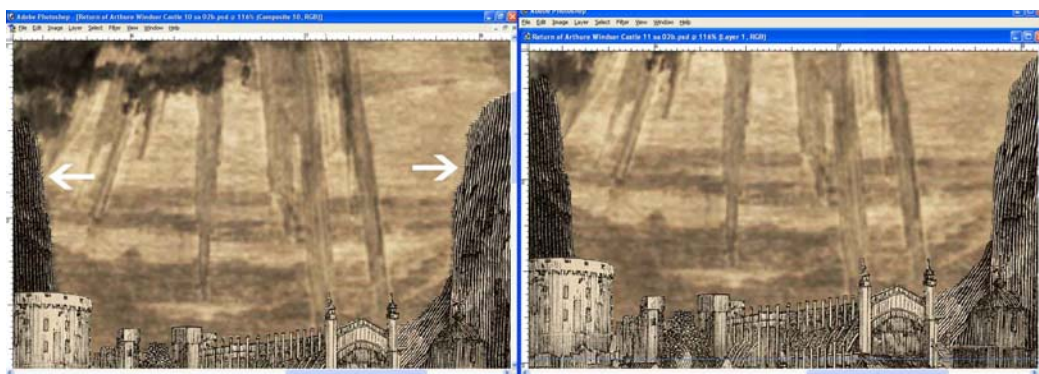




A layer over just the Moran sky and mountains, I drew and cloned a corner patch.

Not shown in these examples, I also cut a patch of the trees and put it above the tiny holes I had cut out.

This is the above example with the foreground and middle ground pieces visible. The sky is very close.



A quick check at the edges showed that the blur filter has left a feathered edge, which the white arrows point to. In a separate layer, using the cloning tool, I extended the blurred clouds to the edge of the mountains.

Here is the final image. The sky has been toned down a little by working with the curves; and the clouds across the front of the mountain were worked with both the dodging and burn tools, in highlights, middletones, and shadows, to make them more believable.



If this was your first exposure to this kind of work, it may look daunting. With the repair, which took a long time, it was sixty hours. Some images take less, some a lot more. With practice a simple extraction for an average piece, like the boat or the sky takes more or less a half hour. But at its core this is simple cut and past collage.