

Peter Clark

by Ricc Freeman-Zachery

Peter Clark's work causes the kind of double take you do when you look at a piece and think, "Oh, very nice!" and then say, "Wait a minute; is that a map?" And then you look again and see not only a map, but postage stamps and maybe part of a cigarette pack and the corner of a label from an old tin; and soon you're wishing you'd brought your magnifying glass so you won't miss a single detail. Peter's garments and dogs and other "beasts" are fabulous constructions incorporating all manner of choice bits from his vast collections of paper ephemera, and they have become popular with collectors across both the US and in Europe. He began his collage career as an illustrator who was fascinated by little bits of paper, and it took off from there. The illustration work, in turn, began with a lifelong love of drawing.

Growing up in Yorkshire, in the north of England in a tiny farming community, Peter remembers sketching and compiling study books from things he saw on nature walks. After graduating from Manchester College of Art and Design with a degree in graphic design, illustration and animation, he took on design jobs in the UK and in Amsterdam and, eventually, in Los Angeles.

"I worked on many advertising campaigns — like Pepsi Cola, Vauxhall cars, bra drawings, shop products, foodstuffs," Peter says. "I worked in Hollywood animation houses designing characters and backgrounds for commercials, mainly at one called Spungbuggy on Sunset. Also TV graphic stuff for NBC, where I enjoyed doing animated illustrative links on a Carpenters' special. I worked on magazines, anything from German *Playboy* to women's short stories or

celeb portraits, some comic strips and greeting cards." The work was widely varied and never, ever boring — Peter couldn't allow it to be that.

"Because of my low boredom threshold I changed my style constantly from, say, crayon work to airbrush work to free-moving brushwork," says Peter. He did a lot of black-and-white pen and ink drawings for children's books and for poems or jokes — whatever needed an illustration and paid the bills. One of the most exciting jobs — just in terms of sheer creative pressure — was for the *Sunday Business*, a weekly British newspaper.

"I did very quick watercolor portraits of businessmen, done in the press room whilst the paper was being put together — a really enjoyable adrenalin rush!" For the most part, though, he worked at a less frenetic pace out of his home studio, a large ground floor room next door to the studio of his wife, Karen Nicol, a textile artist. As Peter was working happily enough with the varied media and the various jobs, he began to notice bits of collage material insinuating themselves into the illustrations. ➔





“I got into making paper clothes pieces when several of us were planning a show, and all the others were textile designers; so I figured that perhaps some paper version of what are usually considered to be fabric-made would be both interesting and fun.” It was a lot of fun, and the garments were very well received, giving Peter the opportunity to continue exploring the ways vintage paper scraps could be brought to life. He thoroughly enjoys working with old ephemera; and a large part of the satisfaction of the collage is that it’s made by hand, out of actual materials, rather than being created digitally. Peter admits that his work is, in part, “a reaction against the onslaught of computer work, which I found tedious. I look at collage rather like music mixing and multiculturalism: exciting and, if done sensitively, it can go anywhere and do anything. But you must avoid the ‘you can do anything on computers these days’ syndrome.”

To that end, Peter resists computer manipulation and photocopying, preferring instead to do hands-on work with actual pieces of paper and glue.

“For example, I did a street drawing with various people going about their business, but a flower seller’s flowers would be collage; or just the building would be made from photographs in various size scales. Or a woman’s hat might be made from a photomontage of bread loaves, and so on. Then one day I was playing with some printed nonsense — text from my computer — and I randomly made it into a dog. No particular breed, just a D O G shape rather like a kid’s illustration — fun, charming, and obviously appealing, as several of the people who were working for Karen loved it. So I did more and more and began to use a wider range of papers, airmail letters, stamps and so on; and so began a series of animals made totally from collage. I loved it, and people reacted enthusiastically and picked up on it. My new career was born!” At first it was just the dogs, and then he added the various other “beasts,” as he calls them, and then the garments.





“I don’t think photocopied stuff has the charisma or integrity or the particular paper quality and finish of the original, and I also feel like a bit of a cheat if I use it! The real papers, whatever the age, are real, which I feel is important.” This authenticity is obvious in his work. No matter how much effort is put into making new paper look old, it’s never quite the same as truly old paper.

“I am, of course, concerned about the archival quality of the pieces that I use. I lean very heavily toward old paper because of its characteristics; and I think that when paper is 100 years old and has survived everything over all those years, it is like saving this ephemera for posterity. I like the idea of it being given a new life and being taken forward and appreciated anew, and it will be kept as safe as possible behind glass whilst still being able to be enjoyed.” It’s not the valuable, one-of-a-kind collector’s scraps — the ones that sell for amazing sums on eBay — that fascinate Peter, but rather the stained and scuffed and torn bits and pieces of people’s everyday lives. He and Karen both use a lot of found material and love the thrill of hunting for that perfect scrap of paper. →







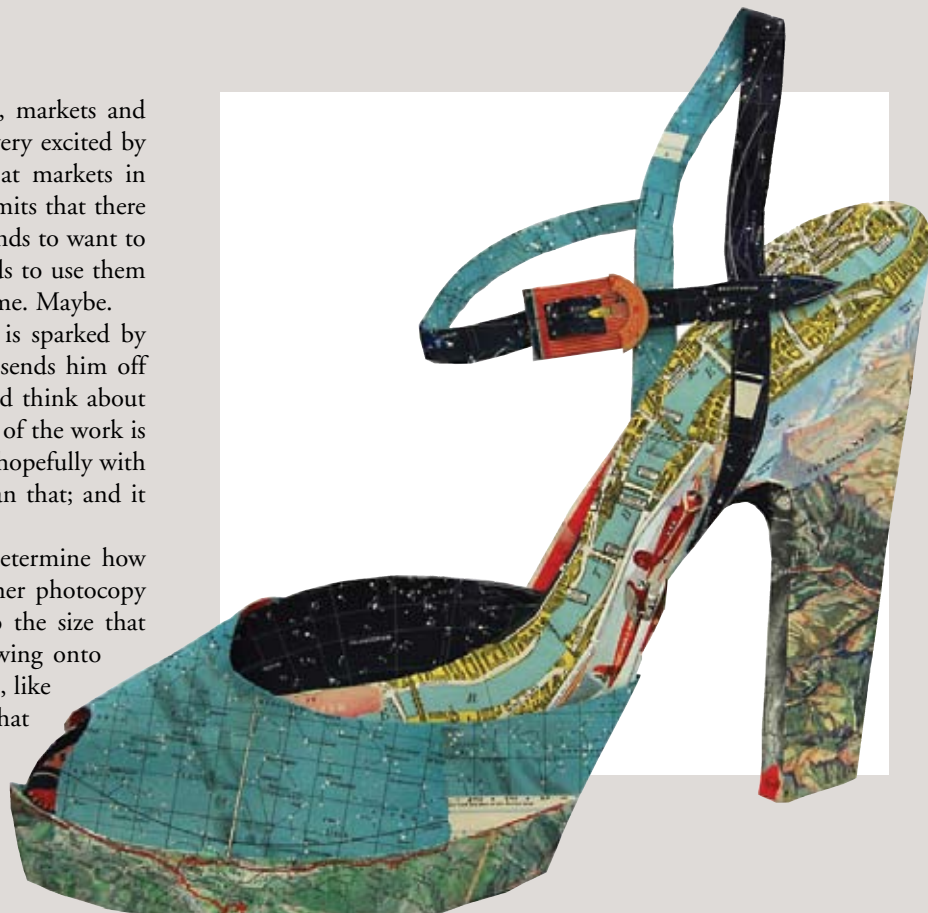
huge collection of maps, charts, postage stamps, post cards, cigarette packs, match boxes and paper labels of all kinds, he must find exactly the right papers for the collage. He says this part can happen instantly, in the blink of an eye; or it can take forever. He rummages through the dozens of plastic bins that line the walls of his studio, hoping for that moment of serendipity. When it comes, life is good; and he can lay out the papers and begin working with them.

“I position these so that the colors work, the line works and the mood works. I want the papers to merge. I want it to feel like I’m painting with the pieces of paper! When I’m happy with my choices, I tear, cut, fold, scrunch and rip and compose the piece. Some of this process is very calculated, and some just happens, though one must know that it’s happening and go with it. Then there are total accidents that are wonderful: I love this part! Throughout this I leave it regularly and come back with a fresh eye.” He and Karen take numerous breaks during the day, walking to one of the local cafes for a café latte or perhaps a cup of peppermint tea. They sit at the outdoor tables, even in the coldest weather, and bounce ideas off each other and catch up on the day’s work, sometimes visiting with friends who wander by. →

“We happily travel to antique fairs, car boots, markets and such places all over the UK and Europe and get very excited by chance finds. Also we have adventured looking at markets in the US and China and India a few times.” He admits that there are, occasionally, pieces he likes rather a lot and tends to want to hang on to. Not to say “hoard,” as he fully intends to use them someday, on something special, at just the right time. Maybe.

Each of Peter’s wonderfully detailed creations is sparked by a word or phrase that strikes him somehow and sends him off to the dictionary and thesaurus to really study and think about how he can illustrate the concept. His explanation of the work is disarmingly simple: “I interpret the written word, hopefully with humor!” There is, of course, much more to it than that; and it always starts out with his first love: drawing.

“I usually do lots of thumbnail sketches to determine how I want the image to look layout-wise. I then either photocopy my chosen sketch to enlarge it or draw it up to the size that I’m happy to work with. I then transfer my drawing onto tracing paper so that I can see my papers through it, like working with a silhouette.” Then comes the part that he says is both the most difficult and the most satisfying, depending on how it goes. From his





“I get a lot of ideas from talking with people, mainly my wife. We are soul mates, which is an amazing blessing. We both act as sounding boards to each other’s work.” Their coffee break over, they return to their studios.

“If it’s going well, then that’s it: fabulous! If it’s not going well, persevere! Curse and destroy!” Peter laughs. When things are going particularly not-well, he favors taking long, aimless walks through downtown London, just half an hour away, looking at people and taking in colors and textures — sometimes all it takes to get things moving in the right direction. For Peter, inspiration is about studying everything — from colors to shapes to people and animals — as he walks along the street. Although he doesn’t keep a formal sketchbook, he does carry some sort of notebook and a small digital camera, always on hand to capture what inspires him.

“Ideas come from anywhere and everywhere,” he says. “Magazines, fashion, TV, people-watching, walking down streets and through woods, looking at the sky, being aware of one color against another in any and every situation. The key point is looking, really looking, all the time, wherever you are.” ✦

To see more of Peter’s work, go to his website at www.peterclarkcollage.com or that of the Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery at www.r-h-g.co.uk. Peter also encourages you to see his wife Karen’s work at www.karennicol.com.

*Ricë Freeman-Zachery is a writer and artist living in Midland, Texas. Her latest book, *Living the Creative Life: Ideas and Inspirations from Working Artists*, is available at bookstores everywhere. You can reach her at www.voo-doo-cafe.com or voodoocafe@clearwire.net, and you can read her journal at <http://lvoodoonotes.blogspot.com/>. Join her Creative Life group at <http://lgroups.yahoo.com/group/thecreativelife/>.*

