



The Scrapbook History Podcast

Episode 1: The early history of scrapbooking

Cherish Watton:

Hello, and welcome to the first episode of The Scrapbook History Podcast with me, your host, Cherish Watton. This series explores how people like you and me recorded their daily lives in 20th century Britain, with the help of scrapbooks. Together, we'll look at why people created scrapbooks, how they made them, and what topics inspired them. We'll talk to people who made scrapbooks, archivists who now care for them, and historians like me who study them.

Over the last few years, I've become fascinated by scrapbooks, books which include a variety of media, saved within their pages. The books themselves take on a variety of forms, including elaborate hardback volumes bought from stationary shops, to simple homemade books made from brown paper, linen and paste. Whatever the cover however, the pages are always host to a whole world of artifacts, newspaper clippings, photos, trinkets, hair, food wrappers, and flowers. You name it, somebody somewhere has saved it and filed it away in a scrapbook.

Every item is one that someone touched and saved, sometimes carefully, sometimes haphazardly, but they nevertheless decided it was important enough to be added to their book. This means that each scrapbook compiler brings their own character to their scrapbook, allowing us to gain glimpses into their lives, and to read history over their shoulders. Within scrapbooks people recorded their lives as they were lived.

This history might be the history of the exceptional kind, events such as weddings, war, professional and personal achievements. Or it could be what some of us might see as the mundane, a chronicling of everyday life through newspaper clippings, or food packaging. Either way, they are intensely personal collections, which help us uncover what was important in the lives of 20th century scrapbookers.

Despite the material richness of scrapbooks, historians don't tend to work with these sources very often. In some ways you could blame them. We often can't talk to the person who put a particular scrapbook together, which can make it incredibly difficult to make sense of what the scrapbook may mean.



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Scrapbooks can also sometimes appear to be nothing more than an eclectic mix of clippings, brought together on a page, in a somewhat random manner. However, it is the ways in which this apparent randomness opens up to reveal partially hidden histories, which I find so intriguing, as is customary for a PhD student. Parents, friends, fellow academics, well, they frequently ask what I'm studying. When I tell them a history of scrapbooking in 20th century Britain, I'm often greeted with a mix of surprise, bemusement and fascination, closely followed by an anecdote of their own memories of making a scrapbook, or of finding a scrapbook made by a family member.

This has shown me that even the idea of a scrapbook can trigger a range of memories, as people recount the topics on which they or their family members scrapbooked, as well as questions about where those scrapbook might be now. Was it thrown away in a house move or relegated to a box in the attic? The scrapbook is both a concept and a physical object, prompts questions, memories, and fascination, as people think about willing, a pair of scissors to record a moment in their lives.

Over the course of the next few episodes of this podcast, we'll unearth scrapbook that line our archives, attics, bookshelves, and phones, to reveal the hidden history of the humble scrapbook. While this podcast is firmly rooted in the 20th century, scrapbooking has a much longer history. To tell us more about the origins of scrapbooking in its various forms, I was thrilled to speak to Dr. Freya Gowrley, Lecturer in the Department of Arts at the University of Bristol.

Freya uses collaged objects, such as scrapbooks, amongst other things, to explore connections between identity, visual and material culture in 18th and 19th century Britain. She's also curated an exhibition on collage at the National Galleries of Scotland, and written a chapter on the early history of collage. She also convenes the Collage Research Network, which provides a great space to meet like-minded people who research all things collage. As I'm sure you can see, Freya is the perfect person to kick off The Scrapbook History Podcast.



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Freya, can you tell us a little bit then about the evolution of the scrapbook that we know today, and its roots from the commonplace book, and the key moments in the evolution of the scrapbook?

Freya Gowrley:

Yeah. This is a really interesting question, I think in part, because there is no one clear answer. In a way, it would be really neat for a podcast format to have a kind of unfolding history of how the scrapbook develops over time. But I think actually, it's not as clear as that, as much as we would like it to be. So commonplace books, which are volumes, primarily of extracts from printed texts, and things that you would be reading, and then you would write those down in a manuscript and volume. They're often conceptualized as a kind of predecessor for scrapbooks as we know them today.

People made commonplace books from antiquity, but then they were revived as a practice in the Renaissance, in part because of the interest in all things classical at that time. That was a practice that remained consistent, that's often associated with men, of letters, and other intellectual cultures from that time, and that persists right through until the 18th century, in which you get all kinds of famous figures who make commonplace books and record their thoughts, their reading entries, which is really interesting if we're trying to work out what people like David Hume were reading and absorbing.

But across that time, that practice really develops into what we call album culture, and albums are a bit like commonplace books. In fact, in archives and museums, often you'll find albums labeled as commonplace books, and commonplace books labeled as albums. And that is maybe one of the big issues with some of this material, is the slippery terminologies that we have around them.

But albums are essentially compendiums of material that were gathered by individuals, and that might be images, messages from friends. Most often actually, albums tend to collect contributions from family members or members of one circle of friends. They might be little bon mot on specific topics, or poems dedicating your love to your friend. And they often reference the album form



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themselves, so they often compare the affection that they have for their friend, to the kind of physical form of the album. So they might talk about the album as someone's heart, and the album pages as kind of the leaves of their friendship and stuff like that.

But these are interesting, in part for the history of scrapbooking, because they do start to integrate scrapbooked elements. So often in albums, you'll find little pasted inclusions, so everything from visiting cards, and little sprigs of flowers, and any kind of paper ephemera that was popular at the time. So in this practice, what we really see is a kind of beginning, a conceptual kind of birth for scrapbooking as we know it today.

Then for me, I think the really key moment in which those kinds of practices are transformed into scrapbooks, is really all to do with technological advancement. So specifically the invention of chromolithography in the late 19th century, which basically invents the scrap, as we know it. And so actually what we have at that point, in this late 19th century, where you have this abundance of color printed materials, that these kinds of albums become repositories for the preservation of those new visual and material forms, which really make use of this new kind of technology, and bright color, and pattern and shape and texture, and all those interesting things that Victorian stationers were experimenting with.

Cherish Watton:

That's fantastic, so a really wide variety of people who are making scrapbooks, and as you say, it's so difficult to necessarily paint that very neat chronology of how it changed, when people are labeling them different things. I wondered if you could talk a little bit more about that, because obviously scrapbook suggests on the surface, that perhaps actually this is a fill of scraps, and nothing particularly worthwhile?

I wondered if you could talk a bit about those issues you've come across with the naming of these volumes, and perhaps how that's actually affected how academics are deciding to work with them?



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Freya Gowrley:

Yeah. I think this has been a really crucial issue in the way in which scrapbook history has been done, or not really done to date. You sort of gestured towards this, that we, particularly as art historians, are very used to talking about made by artists, which I'm using in air quotes, in a serious way, as a form of high art. But scrapbooks are often, even if they're made at the same time, completely separated out from those kinds of narratives. Collage is studied from 1912 onwards, which is sort of conceptualized as a birth of collage, the invention of collage by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque.

But interestingly, that narrative separates what artists are making, from what I think is a much broader and more interesting range of material production. Everything from album making and scrapbooking, to quilting and things like shell work, and other multimedia kinds of art. There's a really good quote in the exhibition catalog, to an exhibition that was held at Tate Liverpool. It was curated by Peter Blake and Dawn Ardes, and it put Peter Blake's collage works in relation to his collection of collage.

There's an opening quote by the art historian Dawn Ardes who talks about how, when Picasso and Braque started gluing things to their pictures. This was everything to do with art, and nothing to do with people gluing things to screens. I just think that's a really interesting binary, a really strange opposition to draw, but I think it's worth noting that this is a deliberate division between high and low, between art and craft and inevitably, between the kinds of things that male artists make and women artists, or crafts women specifically make. So it's a really gendered distinction between those two things.

For me, I think that's one of the key reasons in which scrapbooks have not been paid as much attention, is in part because they're not deemed as artistically important. There are other issues obviously, in part the slippery words that we use to describe these kinds of manuscript volumes, in catalogs, for obvious practical reasons, different people give different things, different kinds of names. And so actually for the researcher, it can be frustrating to try and find your materials.



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But also, I think that sometimes these terminologies can be quite limiting. And actually if we try and separate out categories like commonplace books or scrapbooks and albums into these separate categories, that can keep them apart in an artificial way. And then I think finally, and maybe Cherish, you found this in your own work. One of the real difficulties around dealing with scrapbooks is their anonymity. So often we don't have supplementary materials or diaries or letters, that help us to understand and rationalize what's happening in the scrapbook.

So what you have is this sort of inscrutable document, that sometimes can be quite strange and difficult to rationalize. And then you, as a scholar have to unpick its narrative, or maybe it doesn't have a narrative, and that's the other potential issue. There's lots of potential pitfalls I think, around doing a history of scrapbooking, although they're incredibly rich and wonderful and exciting documents, they are inherently difficult to try and understand.

Cherish Watton:

I can definitely relate to the fact that many of the scrapbooks I look at, there's so very little information on the person who made them, and sometimes you just don't know anything. So it's really having to be a bit of a detective in trying to what work out how the different items are put in, and then fit them into a wider context of scrapbooking.

Do you get a sense that the people who have made scrapbook, that kind of group of people have changed over time, or maybe historians have decided to focus on different groups of people who have made these different albums, scrapbooks, commonplace books, over time? How much consistency do you think there is in the people who are putting together the scrapbooks?

Freya Gowrley:

Yes. I think that there is, obviously if we take scrapbooking and these kinds of practices from their very beginning to today, there's a huge shift in the kinds of people who are making them. If we think about commonplace books, for example, this is very much an elite practice. As I said earlier, it's often associated with male greats of literature. So one famous common-placer from history is



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Robert Southey, the romantic poet, and he has an extensive commonplace book, which was then published.

But actually what I think is interesting, if we start to think about Southey and his family, is that his daughters also start commonplacing and album making. His granddaughter also makes a commonplace book, which is about the Bronte family predominantly, so she's kind of a bit of a fan girl. So I think it's interesting, if we look beyond Southey's own commonplace book, we see more of a diversity. We see women engaging with these practices. Still very elite throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, in part because these are practices which require time and resources.

And so actually to have the leisure time available to scrapbook, to spend time transcribing texts into documents, to meet with friends and transcribe poetry into each other's albums, these are all kind of very leisured activities that require a certain amount of free time. So this isn't a kind of laboring class activity, certainly in the 18th and early 19th century.

One of the things that shift things of course is this invention of chromolithography, in part because what you have then is a kind of democratization of print or of printed materials. Things are cheaper, things are more mass produced, and so there's just more material profusion that really arises at that time, as a result of these industrialized processes and technological developments, and that makes a broader audience, I think, for scrapbooking. It becomes something that children do more, a wider class variety as well.

Cherish Watton:

So that's really interesting then how this technology has been so critical actually, to opening out the number of people who can actually participate in making a scrapbook and making an album. And perhaps you wouldn't necessarily think a scrapbook is actually so reliant on technology, in order to be able to be put together and actually shared with such a broad audience.



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Coming back to your own research, you look quite a lot at histories of composite culture and material culture. What first attracted you to studying scrapbooks and these types of items more broadly?

Freya Gowrley:

Basically it was something that came up during my PhD. My PhD was on women's interactions with material culture in the 18th century. And then the book version of it is very much focused around domestic space, and the role of objects in the home in the 18th century. In a couple of the houses that I was looking at, so specifically in Llangollen, in North Wales, and A La Ronde, in Exmouth, in Devon.

Both of these houses had examples of surfaces, and spaces and objects, that were ornamented with this really intricate kind of bric collage type work. So shell work or feather work or paper, that was all gathered together in a new kind of formulation. That was a craft practice that the owner of the house undertook, and used to ornament these spaces. I started to think of this as a kind of collage, and then I went to go and do research on the history of collage, in this period in the 18th and 19th centuries, before modernism, and there was just not really you very much information.

There's a couple of pages dedicated to collage before 1912, for example, Eddie Wolfram's History of Collage. But the way in which these sort of longer histories treat this, as a sort of weird, conceptual, hinter land for... Gosh, well, there's this stuff, but a bit weird and it's not quite the same thing. And so I was increasingly frustrated by that kind of interpretation, which I thought was maybe a little bit conceptually lazy, and specifically gendered, and that was one of the things that kept annoying me about it is, okay, but everything we're dismissing is women's work.

So I wanted to sort of explore that further and basically I kind of got pushed onto this route, of working on this project, which is about collage before modernism, and really trying to untangle how we might think about this proliferation of objects, of composite cultural production, which is the term that I used to talk about it. Which embraces a whole range of objects, that essentially



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bring different kinds of things, different kinds of materials together in juxtaposition, and dialogue with each other.

So within the project, I look at everything from traditional scrapbooks, paper collage, albums, commonplace books, herbaria, quilts, assemblages, and furniture decorated with pieces of scraps and other kinds of materials, and other kinds of craft practices as well, so shell work, feather work, that kind of thing. And really, I just want to understand the motivation at this time, in the 18th and 19th centuries, to stick stuff together in the most simple and most basic way, because it was so pervasive. I think it's partly about this new material abundance at this time. We often talk about the 18th century as the age of the consumer revolution, where more stuff was available to more consumers than ever before. And so for me, I see this as a cultural moment in which people are processing this new materiality, through these collage like practices.

And so for me, it's really important to think about scrapbooking within that broader history, because I see it as one of many interrelated practices that are all happening at this time, but which obviously have distinct manifestations, and scrapbooking is probably one of the practices from that time, that is still the most practiced today.

Cherish Watton:

Definitely, and I think that's really important in our podcast series that is dedicated to one former specific composite culture, that we really do appreciate that this is one example of lots of other types of work that's being carried out, and by lots of different types of people.

You mentioned actually how scrapbook is continuing to endure today. Why do you think it is one of those practices that people are still doing in their thousands and hundreds of thousands.

Freya Gowrley:

Yeah, it's really interesting how popular scrapbooking is. And obviously I'm aware of scrapbooking websites and scrapbook.com, and sometimes I look longingly at all the stationary on there. But I think it's to do with the possibility of memory keeping and self-chronicling, that scrapbooking really taps into. I



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think often, scrapbooking, as I understand it, as it's practiced today, is very much about capturing special moments, special occasions, that kind of thing.

I think it just taps into this social media age obsession with self-chronicling, with taking photographs, documenting one's life. And maybe actually it marries quite nicely up with social media, because instead of this ephemeral digital snapshot, which you post and then maybe don't really look at again. Scrapbooking has a kind of material manifestation of that urge to document and preserve your memories.

I was thinking about this a little bit in terms of something like Project Life, which is where you print your photographs off and put them into, I think, little plastic sleeves and with note cards and all that kind of thing. I was just thinking about, actually that is the inheritor of these practices today, is a kind of combination between maybe Instagram and Project Life, and scrapbooking I think, sits really neatly within that urge to document our very fast paced lives today.

Cherish Watton:

Absolutely. I think when people are posting things on Instagram, on Facebook, on Pinterest, they perhaps wouldn't necessarily think that they're participating in that kind of scrapbooking habit, but actually there is such an overlap in the ways that you're picking out and representing yourself, using different forms of media, across a range of website and images, and drawing on lots of different types of material.

We've obviously moved into the digital realm, but I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about the variety of scrapbooks that you've seen through your research. I know this is a hard question, but is there a particular favorite that stands out to you?

Freya Gowrley:

That is a hard question. One of the joyous things about doing this research, is that I've been able to look at so many scrapbooks, and obviously one of the things that makes them so special is that they are all completely unique. Every one is made by a specific individual, and so it is always possible to think about that person, what they might have been thinking about. Maybe they weren't



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thinking about anything, to look at their aesthetic choices. I think it's just such a wonderful thing to sit down with in person. I mean, often they're kept in quite bad condition. Cherish. I don't know if you found this in your research.

Cherish Watton: Yes, it's heartbreaking, isn't it?

Freya Gowrley: So often you'll get them kind of crumbling into your lap as you look through them, which is a bit stressful. But I'm thinking about a couple of examples of things that might be my favorite scrapbooks, and I'll pick two, which is greedy of me.

Freya Gowrley: The first example that I want to pick is the McIntosh family collection of scrapbooks, which is at the University of St Andrews in their special collections. It's a collection that relates to William Carmichael McIntosh, who was professor of marine biology at St Andrews in the late 19th and early 20th century. It also relates to his sisters, Agnes and Roberta McIntosh, and some of the family members.

But collectively, the family all make different kinds of albums, scrapbooks and commonplace books. There are 13 specific family scrapbooks, which are dedicated to William's career primarily, but interestingly they're made by Agnes, his sister. So there's sort of a celebration of William Carmichael McIntosh's life and career, and also Roberta McIntosh's career. Roberta was a natural history illustrator, and she made designs for William's published works. So actually it's kind of a very familial business, and Agnes makes these scrapbooks, which preserve the work of both her brother and her sister.

I just think as documents, they work together in such an interesting way. I think they really show how scrapbooks can reflect all of these different kinds of identity, so everything from professional identities. So William as professor of natural history at St Andrews, Roberta's productive work, her artistic practice, but also these intimate familial links. So several of the pages are dedicated to the death of their mother, for example. So I think it really typifies how



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scrapbooks can tell all of these different, complex narratives within a single item.

Then the other scrapbook I'd pick is maybe the wildest thing I've ever seen.

Cherish Watton: Wow.

Freya Gowrley: It is what is called the Blood Book, and it is at the Harry Ransom Center, at the University of Texas, and it is a late Victorian piece. It's really hard for me to describe. Everyone must go and look it up. I don't know if there'll be a picture available.

Cherish Watton: Yep. Yeah, we can definitely share a picture in the show notes.

Freya Gowrley: But it is a very ornate series of pages, which combine small extracts from the Bible, lots of religious iconography, Masonic iconography, flowers, snakes, and then it is covered on top of this, with these kind of blood drips all over the pages. It's really cool and interesting.

Cherish Watton: Oh my goodness.

Freya Gowrley: It's made by John Bingley Garland, who was a Canadian and it was given to his daughter as a betrothal gift.

Cherish Watton: Wow. There's a lot to unpack there.

Freya Gowrley: There is a lot to unpack and I'm in the process of trying to unpack it. As far as I know, no one has really been able to rationalize and unpack this incredible object before. It was actually owned by Evelyn Waugh as well, at some point in his life before it passed into the collections of the Harry Ransom. So it has a really interesting provenance, but it's just this incredible object, and I've never seen anything like it. I'm hopefully going to spend some time writing about that soon, but yes, the joy of it can only be captured in the images. I'm probably not doing it justice.



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Cherish Watton: That sounds such an interesting scrapbook to come across, and we'll definitely watch that space then, for when you're able to kind of piece together some of that really interesting history.

Well, thank you so much, Freya for taking the time to talk to us today, and really highlight that real history to scrapbooking and album making, and commonplace books before the 20th century, where we're coming in the podcast today.

Freya Gowrley: Well, thank you so much for having me, Cherish. It's been a real pleasure to talk about scrapbooks. I could do it all day.

Cherish Watton: In the episodes which follow, we'll be lifting more covers, turning more pages, and uncovering some of the stories archived on shelves, in boxes, and in people's memories, as we chart the history of the humble scrapbook.