A NEW BOOK BY JESSICA HELFAND

SCRAPBOOKS:
AN AMERICAN HISTORY

A gorgeous visual history of American scrapbooks and their evolution over more than one hundred years. 242 pages, 450 photographs printed in full color.
combining pictures, words, and a wealth of personal ephemera, scrapbook makers preserve on the pages of their books a moment, a day, or a lifetime. Highly subjective, rich in emotional meaning, the scrapbook is a simple and often quirky form of expression in which a person gathers and arranges meaningful materials to create a personal narrative. This richly illustrated book is the first to focus close attention on the history of American scrapbooks—their origins, their makers, their diverse forms, the reasons for their popularity, and their place in American culture.

Jessica Helfand, a graphic designer and scrapbook collector, examines the evolution of scrapbooks from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the present, concentrating particularly on the first half of the twentieth century. She includes color photographs from more than 200 scrapbooks, some made by private individuals and others by the famous, including F. Scott Fitzgerald, Lillian Hellman, Anne Sexton, Hilda Doolittle, Carl Van Vechten, and Stan Brakhage. Scrapbooks, while generally made by amateurs, represent a striking and authoritative form of visual autobiography, Helfand finds, and when viewed collectively they offer a unique perspective on the changing pulses of American cultural life.

Jessica Helfand is a partner at Winterhouse, a design studio in New England, and a founding editor of Design Observer. She has been on the graduate program in graphic design at Yale University and has curated several major exhibitions of graphic and cultural objects. She lives in Essex, CT, with her husband and their two children.

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The scrapbook was the original open-source technology, a unique form of self-expression that celebrated visual sampling, culture mixing, and the appropriation and redistribution of existing media. Over time, it came to mirror the changing pulse of American cultural life—a life of episodic moments, randomly reflected in a news clipping or a silhouetted photograph, a lock of baby hair or a Western Union telegram. As a genre unto themselves, scrapbooks represent a fascinating, yet virtually unexplored visual vernacular, a world of makeshift means and primitive methods, of gestural madness and unruly visions, of piety and poetry and a million private plagiarisms. As author, editor, photographer, curator and inevitable protagonist, the scrapbook-maker engaged in what seems today, in retrospect, a comparatively crude exercise in graphic design. Combining pictures, words and a wealth of personal ephemera, the resulting works represent amateur yet stunningly authoritative examples of a particular strain of visual autobiography, a genre rich in emotional, pictorial and sensory detail.

Dreamily, she packs her suitcase, stowing her clothing, her make- shift trousseau and her few personal belongings. She places her papers in an envelope, tucking a hatpin and a headband into the slatted paper. Closing the suitcase shut she checks her watch, turning, at long last, to leave. But as she reaches the door, she stops short. Hurrying to the desk in the corner of her bedroom, she pulls the drawer open with an impatient, forceful tug. And there it is, nestled between the handkerchiefs and the stationery with their soon-to-be obsolete monograms: a long, lean box, still tightly wrapped in its shiny cellophane skin, which she quickly tears away. She lifts off the lid to reveal a book—but this is no ordinary book. It is completely empty, page after page of blank, white space. There is nothing there, yet somehow it calls out to her, in that moment, with unspeakable promise.

It is a scrapbook. And it is hers. In the days and months that follow, she will begin to save things, filling her scrapbook with the countless items that mark her passage into married life: the motel room key from her wedding night; the apology card that follows her first marital quarrel; even a set of miniature firecrackers from an Independence Day fête. She will fill silhouetted cutouts—a drawing of a Campbell’s soup can, a photo of Rita Hayworth—and paste in laundry lists, gin rummy tallies and swizzle sticks, a program from an ice follies performance and ticket stubs from a Red Sox game.

To look at her scrapbook now, long after it has been retired from active duty, is to observe at once a deep, unspoken—of herself, of her identity—and a kind of remarkable clarity, an emerging vision pieced together quite literally from strips of paper, shards of a life.

And through it all, because of it all, she writes. At turns funny and flirtatious, coy and cryptic, a young woman’s poetry begins to find form and with it comes a poet’s voice: irresistible and daring, a firestorm of pathos.

It would be another sixteen years before she would win the Pulitzer Prize, another quarter of a century before she would tragically take her own life. But that one, perfect year, Anne Sexton had a story to tell. It was a happy story. And she recorded it in her scrapbook.

It is August 1949, and a young woman in a small New England town is preparing to leave home. She is twenty years old and she is hopelessly, desperately in love. Tonight, she is ready, and after weeks of clandestine planning, she is going to elope. And everything is about to change.

Excerpts from Scrapbooks: An American History
Anyone can make a scrapbook—and it sometimes seems that everyone has. From this most democratic of art forms, Jessica Helfand has created a national self-portrait of remarkable breadth, depth and beauty.

Michael Bierut
Graphic Designer and Partner, Pentagram

The history of scrapbooking long predates the recent explosion of interest in this hugely popular hobby. Jessica Helfand uses her subtle curatorial eye and her sharp critical perspective to shed light on this indigenous creative discourse. Scrapbooking is a form of visual autobiography that is available to everyone. It is part of the underground legacy of graphic design. This book will be an invaluable inspiration to anyone practicing the art of scrapbooking today, as well as to anyone fascinated with American visual history, photography, and popular culture.

Ellen Lupton
Curator of Contemporary Design, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution

Helfand’s richly detailed account integrates the chronology of scrapbooks within philosophies of public and individual memory. In this scholarly and engaging work, readers are presented with moments of delight recorded by various people as they made their own way towards remembering themselves.

Susan Tucker
Curator of Books and Records at Newcomb College Center for Research on Women, Tulane University; Co-editor, The Scrapbook in American Life

Advance Praise for Scrapbooks: An American History