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Looking for Love: Identifying Robert Rauschenberg's Collage Elements in a Lost, Early Work

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In 2012, while considering questions of loss, the archive, and the digitization of everything, I decided to conduct an experiment by remaking paintings that had been destroyed and were otherwise known only from old photographs. What is the experience of seeing this object IRL, I wondered, instead of as a photograph, a negative, or a JPEG?

The impetus for this project was a cache of photographs of paintings Gerhard Richter destroyed in the 1960s. I soon turned to a destroyed painting I have thought about and wanted to see for a long time: one of the earliest known works by Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), *Should Love Come First?* (c. 1951; fig. 1).¹ Like Rauschenberg's later Combines, *Should Love Come First?* was a composition of paint and collage on canvas. Remaking it meant identifying the collage elements from the lone photograph of the work; so far it has taken five years.

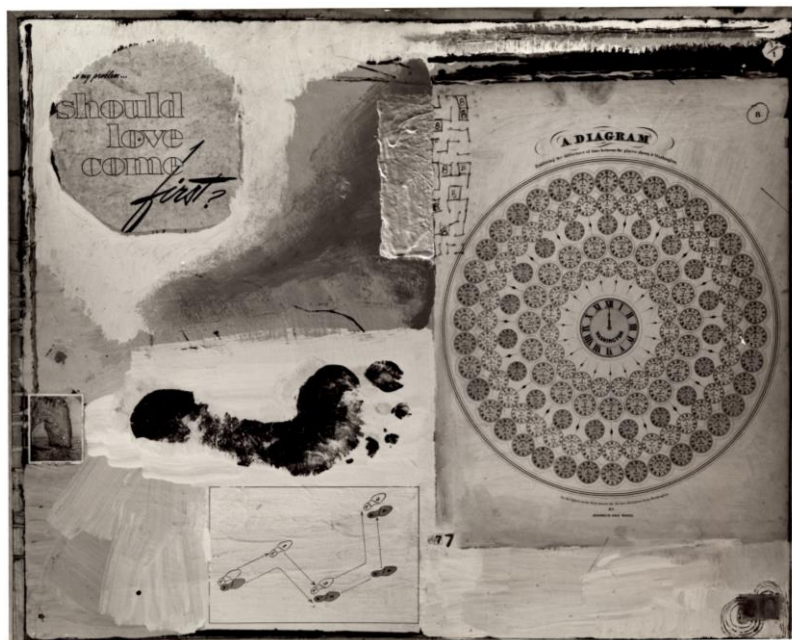


Fig. 1. Robert Rauschenberg, *Should Love Come First?* 1951. Oil, printed paper, and graphite on canvas, 24 1/4 x 30 in., original state photographed by Aaron Siskind for the Betty Parsons Gallery. No longer extant. Repainted by the artist in 1953; now known as *Untitled (Small Black Painting)*, (1953; Kunstmuseum Basel), image courtesy Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York

This endeavor was predicted and mocked by eminent scholars in equal parts. In 1997, Leo Steinberg foretold, "We shall have dissertations galore, including perusals of the fine print in the newspaper scraps that abound in Rauschenberg's pictures."² In 2006, Yve-Alain Bois was dismissive of "sleuthing" into the minutiae of, ironically, Rauschenberg's *Minutiae* (1954; private collection): "What could the pinpointing of individual elements achieve, especially as they might branch into different stories in the minds of the iconographer-sleuths? Would we finally have found Waldo?"³ The apparent plaintiveness and autobiographical transparency of *Should Love Come First?*, and its early prominence in the then unknown Rauschenberg oeuvre, felt intensified by its obliteration by the artist himself. If ever an artwork had a story worth sleuthing, I figured it was this one, even if it was just the story of its own production.

Should Love Come First? comes into being—and then disappears—during a frenetic time in Rauschenberg's life and career. In the summer of 1950, he and Susan Weil (b. 1930) got married, over the opposition of her mother.⁴ They moved to a studio apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and began making paintings solo and photograms together, while attending classes at the Art Students League. In the fall, Rauschenberg walked work into Betty Parsons's gallery for a critique, leading Parsons and Clyfford Still to visit his studio and offer him a solo exhibition in the spring. Rauschenberg painted over some of the paintings selected by Still in the intervening months, and made others.⁵

By spring 1951, Weil was six months pregnant, and Rauschenberg had started a relationship with Cy Twombly (1928–2011), who also attended the Art Students League. In May, Edward Steichen put a Rauschenberg and Weil photogram in a Museum of Modern Art exhibition,⁶ and Rauschenberg's exhibition opened at Parsons's gallery.⁷ Nothing sold, but the artist did give one painting away, to John Cage.

While Weil stayed behind to have the baby, Rauschenberg followed Twombly to Black Mountain College (BMC) for the summer. He went to his in-laws in Connecticut to meet his son,⁸ and then he headed back to BMC through the fall and winter. A fire at Weil's parents' house destroyed several of his paintings from the Parsons show, but others, including *Should Love Come First?*, were stored at Jack Tworokov's place in New York and survived. Rauschenberg and Twombly took off to Rome on Twombly's travel grant. Weil and Rauschenberg finalized their divorce in October 1952. On returning to New York in 1953, Rauschenberg painted at least two works black from the Parsons show: Cage's, and *Should Love Come First?* which is now known as *Untitled (Black Painting)* (1953; Kunstmuseum Basel).

The painting is twenty-four by thirty inches, stretched canvas with a slat frame. The original state of *Should Love Come First?* is known from one black-and-white photograph, taken by Aaron Siskind, who regularly documented artwork for Parsons. It was included in the 1991 Walter Hopps exhibition catalogue, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, as *Untitled (Black Painting)*, in both its original and current states.⁹ Hopps described the constituent elements of the work:

Collage elements include printed paper reading "my problem . . . should love come first?"; perforated-edge reproduction of Monet painting (from *Étretat* series, 1883–86); dance diagram for progressive waltz (male position); circular diagram indicating time and distance by air to various world cities from "Washington" (center clock face); pair of images with postage-cancellationlike lines; and printed

numeral "7." Imprint of male foot and drawn gridline maze with numeral "8" repeated eight times. On BPG checklist.¹⁰

Hopps also had probably the most extensive interpretation of the painting, which has been largely echoed by writers and curators since:

Another revolutionary work from the [Parsons] exhibition also would drift into a comparable obscurity . . . The work *Should Love Come First?*, a title that evokes the kind of word play prevalent in later Pop art, contains an array of disjunctive images collaged, drawn, painted, and imprinted: words, diagrams, footprints, reproductions, numbers, and abstract passages. This is Rauschenberg's most conspicuously imagist work of the early fifties. Both the subjects of the images (such as footprints or clocks) and their mode of representation (found diagrams or the artist's incised drawing) compare and contrast through complex sets of linkages and dualities.

Foot positions (male) of an abstract, contemporary waltz dance diagram oppose the primitive informality of a life-size, imprinted foot. The linear directness of the dance diagram also plays against the symmetrical, centrifugal structure of a clock diagram providing air travel options from a given point. Centered between the diagrams is Rauschenberg's recurring grid-like maze (echoing the similar configuration of *22 The Lily White*). Rauschenberg linked the detailed images by a minute but concrete number sequence: the word "First," the numerals one through six in the dance diagram, leading to the seven and eight in the clock diagram and the figure eight (repeated eight times) in the maze. Beyond the eccentric rhythms implicit in traversing the number system (a kind of visual dance), the painting reverberates with allusive dichotomies: love versus career, the interplay of male and female forms, nature and abstraction, and formal against informal configuration.¹¹

The Hopps catalogue reproduction was where I began my investigation into the eight (by my initial count) collaged texts and images of the painting. It was only legible enough to get one Googable text fragment from the largest element: "A DIAGRAM Exhibiting the difference of time between the places shown and Washington," but it was enough. This turns out to be a plate from the 1863 edition of Alvin Jewett (A. J.) Johnson's *Johnson's New Illustrated (Steel Plate) Family Atlas* (fig. 2), a popular book of maps published between 1861 and 1887.¹² In early 2015, I found an identical plate for sale from a rare book and map dealer in Brooklyn. The clock faces were hand tinted in concentric rings of pink, yellow, and mint green, the first clue of the original colors of the work.

The waltz diagram seemed like the obvious, easy, next piece. Arthur Murray had revolutionized the dance instruction industry in the 1910s and 1920s with his foot placement diagrams. Arthur Murray also published dozens of albums, books, and mail order courses to accompany his radio and TV programs.

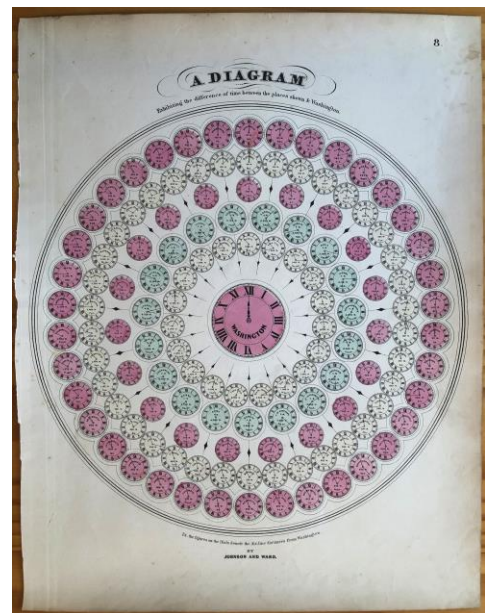


Fig. 2. "A Diagram Exhibiting the Difference of Time Between the Places Shown and Washington," plate 8 from the 1863 edition of *Johnson's New Illustrated (Steel Plate) Family Atlas*, with vintage hand tinting

I started buying up vintage Arthur Murray materials on eBay and AbeBooks, but an exact match proved elusive.

In the summer of 2015, I found Rauschenberg’s Monet. Hopps had identified it as from Monet’s Étretat series (1883–86), a group of six paintings of large, arched seaside cliffs in Normandy. This painting turns out to be in The Metropolitan Museum, where its title now reflects the specific arch depicted, *The Manneporte near Étretat* (1886; fig. 3).¹³ Although Rauschenberg would later incorporate postcards into his Combines, the perforated edges here looked like a sticker. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Miniatures* series, a monthly subscription set of twenty-four stickers published by the Book-of-the-Month Club beginning in 1949, brought “the art treasures of the world directly into the homes of cultivated people everywhere.” In Series R, Monet’s painting sits alongside such treasures as an Egyptian stone head, a Syrian silver lamp, and Johannes Vermeer’s *A Girl Asleep*.



Fig. 3. Top: Claude Monet, *The Manneporte near Étretat* (1886) reproduced on a sticker sheet from The Metropolitan Museum of Art Miniatures, Series R. Bottom: Twenty-five franc stamp depicting the cloister of l’abbaye de Saint Wandrille, used for mailing a letter abroad from France

Weil does not recall the details of the long-lost painting,¹⁴ but in her oral history she described her parents as “lively-minded, creative people,”¹⁵ who encouraged her and her younger siblings’ art studies, ideal customers for The Met.

The other main elements—the stamps, the maze, and the cutout text that gave the work its title—remained mysteries, no easier to trace than the free-floating sevens. Then in 2016, the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation announced a new, generous image use policy for the artist’s work,¹⁶ and they released a high-resolution scan of Siskind’s photograph. It was detailed enough to start searching for the stamps.

An arch emerged, then another, with faint numbers in the corner: 25F. What Hopps saw as two stamps was one stamp, and it was French. Issued in 1949 and in use until 1952 for sending letters abroad,¹⁷ the twenty-five franc stamp (fig. 3) depicts the cloister and ruins of the Abbey of Saint Wandrille, a Benedictine monastery near Rouen. The concentric circles around the corner of the stamp complete a cancellation mark, indicating the stamp was used. I bought a few on eBay; they are a deep blue on white.

The foundation’s high-resolution image also showed that the labyrinth, which I had assumed was a separate sheet, collaged half on the *Johnson’s Atlas* plate and half painted over, was instead drawn right on the *Atlas*. The silvery painted rectangle appeared to extend underneath the edge of the *Atlas* sheet. The grid-like maze where Hopps counted eight figure eights turns out to be an unfinished game of dots and squares played between an initial “B” (Bob?) and a number “8.” (B was winning, five to three.) Whether the game was played on the old print before it was affixed to the painting or after is unclear, but this drawing passage now feels less related to the geometric ziggurats and cryptic numbers of *The Lily White* than Hopps considered it to be.



Fig. 4. Cover of *True Confessions*, March 1951

The remaining problem was “My problem . . . should love come first?” The precise text never turned up anything on Google that was not Rauschenberg-related. Its source lay in the vast, unindexed darkness, perhaps in an advertisement, or a defunct magazine or newspaper. I searched microfilm copies of *Time* and *LIFE*, and of New York City newspapers for 1950 to 1951. I made several unfruitful visits to the Library of Congress, to review microfilm copies of leading women’s magazines, such as *Good Housekeeping* and *Redbook*. For my painting project, at least, I contemplated producing the collage element on its own, as a graphic, but it felt like cheating. About a year ago, I added eBay to my periodic Googling, and then last spring, five years after I began my search, I got a hit.

A vintage magazine seller included the phrase, “Should love come first?” in the description of the March 1951 issue of *True Confessions* magazine (fig. 4). There was no image. I went ahead and bought the magazine, and there it was, the title of a feature article written, it said, by an unnamed young woman with a problem (fig. 5).

True Confessions was a sometimes controversial magazine that offered frank advice about relationships and sex to young, married women. Doctors and other experts are cited as

frequently as readers themselves; women were encouraged to send the magazine their stories, their questions, and their responses. This was this young woman's problem: she got engaged very young to a veteran who left her behind while he went off to school. He then suddenly married someone else. After a year of heartbreak, the woman's ex returned to woo her. His wife had just died giving birth to their daughter. Should she take him back and raise his child with him? Should the woman let her original love for him override his betrayal, the complications of the baby, and the disapproval of her parents and friends? This was the magazine article Rauschenberg cut up for the painting he made while taking studio classes with his pregnant wife and his boyfriend.



Fig. 5. Spread for "This is my problem . . . should love come first?" *True Confessions*, March 1951, 37–38

In 1997, Leo Steinberg described what was readily apparent: that close consideration of Rauschenberg's source materials would lead to "many secrets [being] exploded, mostly with respect to the artist's sexual orientation."¹⁸ That now seems to hold true for even some of the earliest of Rauschenberg's works. It also draws attention to Rauschenberg's relationship with Twombly, which has long been overshadowed by his later partnership with Jasper Johns.

Apart from any biographical interpretations, the date of the *True Confessions* fragment also clarifies the timing for the completion of *Should Love Come First?* Hopps appeared to be right: *Should Love Come First?* was not one of the paintings Clyfford Still saw on his 1950 studio visit, at least not in its finished, collaged state. This version could not have been finished before the spring of 1951.

Identifying these elements also brings Rauschenberg's early quotidian process into focus. He would probably have to go out rummaging to find a catchy but obsolete time zone diagram from a ninety-year-old atlas. But everything else—a stamp, a museum sticker, a

magazine, a dance diagram—are things that would be lying around the house, especially the Upper West Side house of two newlywed artists who met in France and were expecting a baby. *Should Love Come First?* turns out to contain elements of the world right around the artist during a triumphant, tumultuous, ambitious, and conflicted point in his life.

Over the summer I made another, concerted effort to find the dance diagram. A promising special Arthur Miller insert in a 1951 issue of *Woman's Home Companion* magazine was listed in the catalogues of three public collections, which generous librarians searched to no avail.¹⁹ For now, it is still unknown where Rauschenberg obtained his dance diagram (or those sevens). Perhaps he picked up a dance flyer from the studio he walked past every day on his way to the Art Students League.²⁰

But there are rewards for sustained looking at an early work, especially one in which the gap between art and life, as Rauschenberg would later put it, feels so thin. One realization after focusing so long on the collage elements of *Should Love Come First?* is that I have ignored the paint. It turns out love did not come first: painting did. All of the collaged elements appear to sit on top of paint, in multiple layers and unknown colors, with dark, drawn lines peeking out all over. Is there another painting underneath *Should Love Come First?* If there is, did Betty Parsons and Clyfford Still see it? If it does, perhaps it still exists in some form, under a later, similarly significant work.

As for the archive and the digitization of everything, they remain a challenge. It does not feel like an accident that it was Rauschenberg's foundation, that of an artist known for intense reuse and reworking of existing images, that instituted an expansive and enlightened policy of fair use for images of the artist's own work. Without the publication of high-resolution digital images by the Rauschenberg Foundation, the sources for *Should Love Come First?* would likely have remained a mystery.

Notes

I wish to acknowledge the gracious and informative assistance of the Gina Guy, Francine Snyder, and David White of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, whose expansive image use policy was instrumental to this research. I am also grateful to the reviewers and editors at this journal for their time and insights.

¹ *Should Love Come First?* (c. 1951; no longer extant) was painted over in 1953 as *Untitled (Small Black Painting)*, in the collection of the Kunstmuseum Basel, catalogued by the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation as RRF 51.001, <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/should-love-come-first>.

² Leo Steinberg, *Encounters with Rauschenberg: (A Lavishly Illustrated Lecture)* (Houston: The Menil Collection, 2000), 53.

³ Yve-Alain Bois, "Eye to the Ground," *Artforum* 44, no. 7 (March 2006): 245–48.

⁴ Weil and Rauschenberg met in 1948 in Paris, where Weil, who was eighteen and had just graduated from high school, and Rauschenberg, who was twenty-three and on the GI Bill, were studying art and visiting museums. They returned to the United States in the fall, and both began attending Black Mountain College, spending the summer of 1949 together at Weil's parents' house in Connecticut. Weil says her mother was opposed to her marrying Rauschenberg because he was gay. Susan Weil, "Reminiscences of

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- Susan Weil," Rauschenberg Oral History Project, Columbia Center for Oral History, Columbia University, 2014 (New York: Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, July 2015), Interview Session 1, 6–12.
- ⁵ Walter Hopps speculated that *Should Love Come First?* "probably was not" among the paintings Still and Parsons chose during their fall 1950 studio visit: "Its images and collage nature would have been antithetical to Still's conception of painting." Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* (Houston: Houston Fine Art Press, 1991), 32.
- ⁶ *Abstraction in Photography*, May 1–July 4, 1951, Museum of Modern Art, New York, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2413>.
- ⁷ Roni Feinstein wrote first about the show in detail in 1985. Roni Feinstein, "The Unknown Early Robert Rauschenberg: The Betty Parsons Exhibition of 1951," *Arts Magazine* 59, no. 5 (January 1985): 126–31.
- ⁸ Christopher, born in June 1951, became a photographer and is currently president of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.
- ⁹ Hopps, *Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, pls. 18, 54, 100, and 173.
- ¹⁰ Hopps, *Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, 55.
- ¹¹ Hopps, *Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, 31–32. ²² *The Lily White* was executed in 1950, collection of Nancy Ganz Wright, catalogued as RRF 50.001.
- ¹² The page number (8) for this plate, the border style, and the presence of Benjamin P. Ward's name in the lower caption helped identify Rauschenberg's page as coming from the *Atlas* 1863 edition, published in New York. The firm had moved to New York from Richmond, Virginia, in 1861, after the beginning of the Civil War. Coincidentally, their office was at 113 Front Street, a block from where Rauschenberg would find a studio after returning from Rome in 1953.
- ¹³ Claude Monet, *The Manneporte near Étretat* (1886; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), <https://metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437119>.
- ¹⁴ Weil to the author, August 21, 2015.
- ¹⁵ She also told of helping raise her adopted brother and sister, who were around six and eight years old, respectively, when The Metropolitan Museum's miniatures came out. Weil, "Reminiscences," 1–4.
- ¹⁶ "Fair Use Policy," Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, published February 26, 2016, <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/foundation/fair-use>.
- ¹⁷ "Timbre de 1949, l'abbaye Saint-Wandrille," accessed August 8, 2015, http://www.phil-ouest.com/Timbre.php?Nom_timbre=St_Wandrille_1949.
- ¹⁸ Steinberg, *Encounters*, 2000, 53.
- ¹⁹ Professor Richard Powers, an expert in social dance history at Stanford University; the Jerome Robbins Dance Collection at the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center; and the University of Minnesota.
- ²⁰ It is possible he obtained it from an Arthur Murray Dance Studio. By 1951, there were hundreds of franchised Arthur Murray Dance Studios across the country, including one at 1845 Broadway at Columbus Circle, which is also the location of the closest subway station to the Art Students League.