

# Career View

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## Art History

Works of art are products of the imagination. They communicate the ideas, beliefs, preoccupations and values of the societies in which they are created. Essentially, they contain all the themes that define human culture, such as politics, love, religion, greed, power, lust, fashion, social class, technology and death. Over time we have come to value art for a variety of reasons - its unique connection to the milieu and time in which it was made, as evidence of the creative abilities of its makers, and for what it can reveal about the differences between people and cultures. Works of art are material objects and visual images. Their 'language' is visual, and therefore we need to develop particular skills in order to interpret them. Although the exercise of such skills is the object of art history, its lessons can be applied to many other situations in which the coded meaning of visual information must be understood or communicated.

This ability to extract meaning from a visual environment is a learned skill and one that can be applied to many job areas. Many jobs demand skill in the observation and interpretation of visual data, particularly the ability to make connections and draw disparate elements together to make a coherent whole. Architects, insurance assessors and film editors, for example, are likely to have this skill in common. Some jobs are about engaging people's imaginations, communicating ideas and eliciting emotions by means of carefully arranged visual cues. For example, people who work in advertising agencies, theatre and all areas of design need to understand how to manipulate visual information for maximum psychological effect. The study of Art History develops and extends an individual's natural ability to construct and communicate meaning from almost any visual environment.

### Where do Art History Graduates Work?

Art History graduates work in a wide range of careers. Recent surveys show the employment destinations of Art History graduates include, but are not limited to - an events co-ordinator for a museum; a curator of public programmes for an art gallery; a conservation assistant for the National Library; a co-ordinator for a creative arts organisation; a cultural affairs information officer in central government; an administration assistant in a drama school; a sales manager for a fine arts retailer; a visual merchandiser; a commercial artist; a jeweller's assistant; an art gallery administrator; an art gallery/museum director; and several gallery assistants.

### Art Galleries and Museums

- According to the latest (2001) survey of graduate employment destinations, one third of all Art History graduates found work in an art gallery or museum.

*Topical coverage of career related issues brought to you by Victoria University Career Development and Employment.*

*Areas covered include how degrees and courses relate to employment opportunities, to life/work planning, graduate destination information and current issues or material relevant to the employment scene.*

*Your comments and suggestions always welcomed.*

- A typical entry-level job is that of gallery assistant, host or assistant curator. Gallery assistants or hosts help members of the public with general information enquiries and help monitor the basic security of an exhibition. They can be involved in setting up and dismantling exhibitions and collections and contribute to the research that is associated with each acquisition or exhibition. Increasingly this involves using the Internet to access other collections and databases. Assistant curators are also involved in research, help maintain and display collections, and assist with exhibitions.
- Although job tasks and titles vary from organisation to organisation, in general curators are both keepers (guardians) of artefacts and artworks, as well as people who conceptualise and develop ideas about how exhibitions and collections can be displayed most effectively. They also write catalogues, essays and other exhibition publications.
- Being able to read another language is a valuable skill for researching art works, as many documents and archive records that relate to the provenance of a work are in a language other than English.
- Research tasks for an exhibition can include - finding out how similar exhibitions have been displayed overseas; checking databases for information; selecting the works; planning and organising packing, transport and touring details which are appropriate for the works; and gathering information for catalogues and publicity material.
- Smaller and regional art galleries may have only one or two paid positions. Job titles vary, they may be curator; exhibitions manager; or education officer. There is less specialisation and staff are expected to carry out multiple tasks including - monitoring the exhibition space; installing the exhibition; organising publicity and marketing information; managing the permanent collection, including temperature and humidity control; overseeing general maintenance and cleaning; and managing and training volunteer staff.
- Art galleries and museums draw on a pool of volunteers for many day-to-day tasks.

Voluntary experience is becoming increasingly necessary to be competitive for paid positions.

- Other skills and experience which can add value to a degree include: computer skills, including desktop publishing; photographic skills; manual skills, as there is a lot of physical work involved; experience or qualifications in design, education, fine arts, museum studies or arts administration. A Masters degree is valued for the level of independent thinking and research skills its holders possess.
- Technologies include x-raying for the purposes of authentication and to better understand the artist's technique and intention, and digitising collections onto computer databases.
- Gallery assistants in commercial dealer galleries perform much the same function as those in public art galleries with the addition of being able to advise buyers on current prices for different artists, including their investment potential, and perhaps suggest other artists in the buyer's price range.

### **Government Organisations**

- The Ministry of Culture and Heritage and Archives NZ, prefer a History major, so Art History students would be wise to consider a double major. In addition, Archives NZ prefer a postgraduate Diploma in Information Management, or a library or archives management qualification. The Ministry of Culture and Heritage require a clear record of research capability, usually at least a Masters degree, and a broad base of historical knowledge.
- The New Zealand Historic Places Trust also emphasises a Masters degree with a preference for archaeology or anthropology. Architecture and Planning degrees are also desirable, as is a diploma or Masters degree in Museum Studies. Art History students would need to consider additional subject areas.
- The Alexander Turnbull Library holds a vast collection, which includes drawings, prints and photographs. The library also holds exhibitions, which can draw on knowledge of Art History and design skills. All entry level positions are called library assistants, and an undergraduate degree is acceptable. After

taking a qualification in library or museum studies it is possible to progress to an assistant curator or curator's position.

### **Educational Institutions**

- Secondary school teachers generally require a second teaching subject in their degree and need to complete a year's teacher training.
- University lecturers typically need a PhD and a record of published research to be competitive in that job market.
- Teaching qualifications at other tertiary institutions and training organisations may vary.

### **Framers, Conservators and Restorers**

- When artworks are framed, the mount and frame must be sympathetic to the age and style of the work. Art History graduates are recognised as having a broad knowledge of styles, colours and techniques appropriate for particular time periods.
- The conservation and restoration of art works is an area of specialised expertise. At the time of writing, courses in conservation are available at universities in Australia, the UK and the United States. No courses in conservation are as yet available in New Zealand.

### **Fine Art Auctioneers**

- A background in Art History is useful but a considerable amount of learning takes place on the job, particularly in terms of the market value of different artists.
- Larger auction houses may employ porters to move artworks around. This can be a way of learning on the job and might act as a stepping stone for other positions more directly connected to valuing and appraisal.

### **Theatre, Film, Television, Advertising and Publishing**

- These industries make use of visual imagery to entertain, persuade and inform. Although people working in these areas typically have a wide range of practical experience which they bring to their work, Art History graduates will readily understand the

messages that different images and symbols contain, and what sort of psychological impact they might be expected to have.

- Historical accuracy is essential in creating an authentic setting for theatre, film, video and television productions. All productions are set in a particular time period, the mood of which is created by many details that must be congruent and correct. Art History graduates, who are trained to 'read' the period, style and technique of an artwork, may apply that knowledge to this larger scale.
- Designers of sets and costumes are always designing for a script. Their job is to take a written concept and translate into a three-dimensional environment which supports the performers in the roles that they are playing. An educated visual imagination and research skills are essential for this work. As Aotearoa New Zealand themes are explored more intensively, knowledge of Maori art and colonial art may be relevant.
- Art directors in advertising agencies also work to a concept. Their job is to visually communicate important information about a product or service on a wide range of media, and in a way that appeals to a target audience. Often the visual cues are very subtle, almost subliminal, and work by association with other images. Art History graduates understand the interplay of different images and their combined role in producing an overall psychological effect and social message.
- Publishers of magazines also employ art directors and designers whose work involves developing and maintaining the visual style of the magazine. Knowing how pictures 'work,' understanding, for example, how cropping a photograph will give a different composition and therefore a different 'feel' to the image, is a skill Art History graduates will have acquired through their studies.
- Book cover design is a sophisticated art that must somehow express the essence of an entire written work. Every element in the design, from the font size of the letters to the colour tones of the artwork, must be sympathetic to the theme of the book and its genre. Art History is taught in a wide range

of historical, cultural and aesthetic contexts, providing graduates with a rich visual vocabulary that could be applied to this sort of work. Book cover designers, and book illustrators, often have additional skills in drawing or photography and may work in a self-employed capacity.

- Writing about art can offer different opportunities. Knowledge of historical art is generally relevant to the discussion of contemporary works. Numerous publications from newspapers and magazines to local authority newsletters contain articles about art, artists and exhibitions and may accept submissions on a freelance basis. Some professional journalists and writers specialise in art-related topics.

### **What Skills do Art History Graduates Have?**

Many of the skills that Art History graduates will have developed relate to aspects of visual discrimination and the intellectual processes that accompany this. These include the ability to:

- evaluate aesthetic quality
- attribute meaning to visual information
- focus on specific conditions while maintaining awareness of a broader context
- make connections between different elements in a visual display
- construct a hypothesis from visual evidence
- read emotional content contained in visual information
- analyse visual effects in an objective way
- separate technique from overall visual effect
- see patterns and structures embedded in other visual data
- understand the symbolic impact of images - what 'works' visually

This kind of visual intelligence is essential in many different job areas including, for example:

- All areas of design, from fashion design to industrial design, require a mix of functional efficiency, aesthetic appeal and emotional 'rightness,' to be effective. That these

qualities usually need be communicated simultaneously, and often on several levels of complexity, demands a highly developed aesthetic sensibility and a trained visual mind.

- Alternatively, observation skills and the ability to separate relevant and irrelevant information are critical in interpreting the behaviour of individuals and groups, in the context of, for example, medical and psychological diagnosis, organisational management, journalism, teaching and law enforcement.

Art History graduates can also demonstrate a range of transferable skills including:

- research and information gathering skills
- skill in critical analysis and the ability to construct an argument, particularly in writing
- confidence in exploring different points of view
- decision-making and problem-solving skills
- factual historical knowledge
- some instinct for seeing behind the obvious
- experience in presenting ideas and information to groups
- attention to detail

### **Jobs that Relate to Art History**

#### **Design**

Graphic designer  
Fashion designer  
Textile designer  
Landscape designer  
Website designer  
Interior designer  
Industrial designer

#### **Media and the Performing Arts**

Art critic/reviewer  
Set designer  
Stage and film art director  
Location manager  
Journalist  
Properties manager  
Film director/producer

Artistic director  
 Advertising agency production assistant  
 Stage and film lighting designer  
 Media planner  
 Interactive marketer  
 Costume designer  
 Scriptwriter  
 Broadcaster  
 Musical instrument maker/repairer  
 Film editor

### **Education and Conservation**

Art historian  
 Gallery assistant  
 Art researcher  
 Collections manager  
 Education co-ordinator  
 Programme/Activities co-ordinator  
 Archivist  
 Archaeologist  
 School teacher  
 Art curator  
 Assistant curator  
 University lecturer  
 Registrar  
 Funds development manager  
 Appraiser  
 Acquisitions manager  
 Conservator  
 Restorer

### **Business and Professional**

Event manager  
 Auctioneer  
 Display artist  
 Interactive marketer  
 Catalogues manager  
 Insurance broker  
 Architect  
 Fine Arts manager  
 Art Valuer  
 Framer

### **Art and Crafts**

Artist  
 Signmaker  
 Animator  
 Illustrator

Screen printer  
 Jeweller  
 Photographer

## **Graduate Profiles**

### **Charlotte Davy**

*Collection Manager  
 Visual Arts, Museum of  
 New Zealand Te Papa  
 Tongarewa*



I started studying Art History at Victoria University, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts (Art History major)

degree, and couldn't quite believe the knowledge and resources I had access to. It was a very vibrant learning environment for me.

After finishing my degree I was hankering to explore my own creativity and started to study design, graduating with an Advanced Diploma in Fashion Design and Technology. During this time I worked part-time as a host at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa where I badgered the painting conservator to give me some work helping prepare the art collection for the move to the waterfront building.

As a collection manager my work is extremely varied and stimulating. My work includes assessing the suitability of artworks for exhibition, loan or for acquisition into the collection; designing storage and packing systems for artworks; providing access to the art collection for researchers; overseeing the transit and installation of fragile artworks; working as part of a team to develop exhibitions; and developing information systems and databases of information about the collection.

I travel in New Zealand frequently and overseas occasionally, overseeing the packing and freight of artworks. I work with a wide variety of people such as artists, collectors, art dealers, staff from



various museums and galleries, customs agents, freight agents and art handlers. My degree in Art History has been invaluable in my work. It gave me broad knowledge of different artists and their work as well as being the basis for the research skills that I use most days.

If you feel passionate about art and aren't afraid of hard work then a career in the arts will work for you. The satisfaction of going to work everyday in a highly creative and dynamic environment is extremely worthwhile.

### **Megan Bull**

*Events Co-ordinator  
City Gallery Wellington*

For my BA, I did a double major in Art History and English Literature. Besides increasing my specific knowledge on a diverse range of fantastic subjects, I also learned important generic skills which I still use every day. Studying for my BA developed my written and oral communication, my critical thinking and my time management, and these skills were developed even further when I did Honours in Art History.



I particularly enjoyed learning about exciting contemporary New Zealand artists. I also enjoyed a practical Honours paper where we had the privilege of working with original prints (in my case prints by Rembrandt) from the collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

Over the summer of 2000, I had a job at the New Zealand Portrait Gallery working as the Project Co-ordinator for their inaugural biennial national portrait competition. While finishing my Honours research paper, I also managed a local gift shop. The experience gained from both these positions is relevant for my current job.

I started at City Gallery Wellington in 2001. I

work as part of the marketing team and my responsibilities include managing the Front of House staff, co-ordinating functions that we have at the Gallery – anything from board meetings to cocktail parties – and also co-ordinating the Friends group for the Gallery.

I strongly recommend studying what you enjoy and taking practical work experience opportunities when they present themselves - volunteer work is a good way to gain experience. I cannot overstate how much my Art History degrees have benefited me for where I currently am in my career. My current position means not only that I have the opportunity to use and develop my generic skills, but that I can do so in an environment where I am surrounded by art and the discussions which frame it.

### **Alex Evans**

*Research Assistant  
Wellington City Archives*

My first two years at university were spent at Architecture School, where the papers I enjoyed most included several architectural history papers and as a consequence I switched degrees from a Bachelor of Architecture to a Bachelor of Arts.



Not only did I learn about art and artists, but also political movements, social issues and different cultures. Group discussions were a highlight, as was the flexibility with which we could put across our own findings when doing presentations. One of my final projects was making a video documentary on Old Saint Paul's which allowed me to meld my interest in architecture with my love for the moving image. The Art History department also stood out in my mind as a place where opinion could be shared equally and easily between student and lecturer/tutor, and I felt as much a "colleague" as I did a student.

The most important skill I learned as a result of my Art History studies was developing confidence in my own theories and opinions. In my last year of Art History I found it increasingly important to make use of non-traditional sources of information. Using the Internet was a great way of accessing unpublished material, which sometimes exposed unforeseen avenues of thought. So I would say Art History has helped me to extend my abilities in research by assimilating new technologies.

In my current position I am providing material to other people who are conducting their own investigations. Providing clients with what they need requires me to be confident that I am selecting appropriate material, which is where my research skills come in. Building up a knowledge of local art and architecture through taking Art History has also made my job a lot easier.

I would not hesitate to recommend an Art History degree. I think anybody works a lot harder and gains a better quality result when they enjoy their degree, as I did.

### **Hanna Scott**

*Director, Artspace, Auckland*

Studying Art History and Philosophy from my first year at university was a way of combining two ways of thinking about the world: the visual way and the analytical way, and I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts with First Class Honours in Art History and Philosophy.

The Art History Department demanded a high standard of written communication, which became really important in later work as I have been required to write in many different contexts from reports to publicity material. I also gained research skills that I now use a lot - Art History encouraged me to think outside the square and



to dig below the surface for meaning.

Art History is a flexible discipline that can lead to many things, as it fosters an interdisciplinary approach and incorporates other cultural movements. The knowledge of Art History and visual culture that I gained at Victoria University still informs a lot of my thinking and research.

The Department also provided opportunities to meet visiting visual art professionals and academics, both from New Zealand and offshore, and it was through one of these encounters that I met one of my future employers.

After graduating I worked part time for a commercial art dealer and I wrote art criticism for a local newspaper. I also did more corporate work for an architectural studio and for a "big six" accounting firm. Both these experiences were useful for the artistic contacts as well as the commercial acumen I developed. I then was offered a junior position at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery where I worked hard for three years, taking on more responsibility and more management activities. At the same time I worked hard to develop relationships within the industry.

The relationships that I established with both staff and students at Victoria University continue to be an important part of my intellectual and professional life. Now I am Director of Artspace, Auckland, running one of the most interesting and challenging art institutions in the country.

### **Penelope Campbell**

*Postgraduate Student - MA in Art History*

I decided to study Art History, a subject that I'd enjoyed at school, after several years of working in the fashion design industry. I worked hard, achieved good grades and decided to do an Honours degree,



which was really rewarding. Numerous seminars and the informal teaching style taught me how to articulate my ideas verbally, not just on paper, and also how to think on my feet. We also gained excellent curatorial experience through organising an exhibition of prints at the Adam Art Gallery.

Although at times it was difficult working twelve to twenty hours a week, plus full-time in the holidays, it helped me to compare the value of academic study with my former working life. I

realised more and more that it was worth persevering with Art History.

After receiving two scholarships last year I've been able to focus solely on my thesis. I've conducted research at institutions such as Te Papa, the Alexander Turnbull Library, and the National Library of Australia, where I have met many people who have made their careers in art. It is encouraging that Art History is an international qualification and I'm considering working overseas when I finish my thesis.

### *Art History at Victoria*

In Art History we teach a full range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses covering the history of art from pre-history to the present, with special strengths in European art from the 18th century and New Zealand and Pacific art history. Undergraduate courses towards a major in art history consist, at level 1, of critical overviews of the history of art before and after 1800 and an introduction to the theory and practice of art history, and assume no prior study of art history. Level 2 courses survey a variety of periods and areas, and at level 3 you will study particular issues in depth. Art History relates to a range of other disciplines, and many students complete a double major for their BA degree.

Students seeking to advance to graduate levels

begin with a one-year Honours degree (BA Hons) which extends their knowledge and understanding of the theoretical and applied study of art history. Some Honours courses are focused on particular resources available in Wellington, such as collections at Te Papa and the National Library. Students may then proceed to Masters and PhD levels where a written thesis is required. A thesis is the product of original research, which may be undertaken full- or part-time.

Victoria also offers a Graduate Diploma of Arts for graduates. This can allow those without prior knowledge of art history to undertake a tailored course of study that may include both undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Art History with complementary courses in other disciplines.

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