Our world is increasingly visual, and the ability to make sense of images is a valued skill in contemporary culture. Students of Art History and Visual Culture explore the creation, form, and reception of images and objects both historically and in the contemporary moment. This interdisciplinary programme combines both the established academic discipline of art history with the newer field of visual culture. While art history has traditionally focused upon the study of artworks, visual culture explores the processes of seeing and broadly engages with all that is visual. Addressing both high art and popular culture, our programme assists students in raising their visual literacy and developing a historical understanding of images and artworks.

“...The variety of enriching experiences I had as an Art History student equipped me with the right skills to follow my dream of working within the museum and art gallery sector.”

Charlotte Stace
BA(Hons) Art History & Theory, Dip Lang (French) Gallery Manager & Registrar, greengrassi, London

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Why study Art History and Visual Culture?

The Art History and Visual Culture programme at the University of Otago is unique in its diversity and breadth. Enjoy the opportunity to develop your visual literacy and analytical skills by pursuing courses across the Humanities that study high art, popular culture, and their intersection as a feature of contemporary life. You will have hands-on access to exceptional collections at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, the Hocken Collections, Toitū Otago Settlers Museum, and the Otago Museum. Our courses often make use of these collections for both teaching and assignments.

Background required

Students are not expected to have previously studied Art History and/or Visual Culture. All you need is to be curious about the visual world.

Flexible course of study

As a multi-disciplinary programme, Art History and Visual Culture provides great flexibility for students to explore their intellectual interests and hone future career skills. While core papers are offered within the programme, the major also includes a rich array of offerings in related subjects, such as Classics, Film and Media Studies, Gender Studies, History, Languages and Cultures, Music, Religion, and Theatre Studies. Because of its flexibility it is a desirable second major and would complement other degrees such as Law and Commerce.

As you progress through your degree, you will have the opportunity to study diverse aspects of art and visual culture in more detail by taking papers on topics such as Medieval and Renaissance art, the history of photography, film history, gender and the media, the culture of the European city, totalitarian art and propaganda, religion and the internet, digital literature, digital culture, modern and contemporary art, and much more.

First year papers

ARTV 102 Interpreting Artworks

"Interpreting Artworks" is focused on the close analysis of individual artworks and monuments spanning from the 12th century to the present day. The course consists of weekly modules structured around the interpretation of one particular work, with emphasis given to the examination of key concepts and issues rather than styles or periods. We draw on a range of artworks, including the holdings of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. By the end of the course, students will be equipped with the fundamental skills for understanding, decoding and critically evaluating art in its many forms and contexts.

ARTV 103 Art: Here and Now

Featuring weekly fieldtrips, "Art: Here and Now" introduces students to the study of both historical and contemporary art through the examination of the art, architecture and cultural heritage available for first-hand study in Dunedin, a city with a vibrant arts scene and rich with cultural institutions. We examine art here and now, not art "there" (overseas, most likely in Europe) and in the past. Simultaneously, this paper links the local to the global by exploring the broad array of cultures represented in Dunedin’s cultural institutions, considering how aspects of contemporary local culture reflect globalisation. Meeting with a broad array of art professionals in Dunedin, students are also introduced to possible career paths in the arts.

Postgraduate study

Students who do well in their degree are encouraged to enter the Art History and Visual Culture honours programme. This is a one-year degree providing advanced training in the subject and offering students the opportunity to conduct their own independent research project. An honours degree makes you more employable in the workforce, but it is also an excellent entrance qualification for a higher degree such as Master of Arts (MA) or a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

Sophie Gilmore believes that studying art history is very important.

“We live in a very visual world. Films and images are all around us, so I think learning to understand an image is one of the most important skills you can have. Art history (and visual culture) really helps you gain that kind of knowledge. Employers value what they call visual literacy, and you’ll definitely get that from art history (and visual culture).”

Not only is it important to study art history, it’s lots of fun as well.

“I loved it, I had such a good time. The department is wonderful, it’s quite small so you get this engagement with all of your lecturers, which is really important.”

There are no prerequisites for studying art history. All you will need is an interest in art. The first-year paper ‘Interpreting Artworks’ is made to engage you in art, to introduce you to the kind of concepts that are going to help you to interpret art.

One of the main reasons Sophie came to Otago to study art history was the variety of topics and artistic traditions on offer. “I knew I wanted to study art history and I was really drawn to the wide range of topics they have at Otago. The film papers were really appealing, as were topics like Renaissance Art (which is not something you can do easily elsewhere) and Japanese Art.”

The flexibility in the Bachelor of Arts degree meant that Sophie was “able to do what I was interested in, which is really important”.

Sophie’s exploration of cinema led her to study a Master of Arts in art history, where she looked at the relationship between cinema, digital technology and other art forms.

Sophie’s passion for her subject has taken her to Harvard University on a PhD scholarship.

We have a flourishing postgraduate programme in which students complete MA and PhD degrees. Many of our students receive scholarships that cover their tuition and expenses. The range of staff research interests and expertise means that the scope of topics for thesis research is wide.

Career opportunities

The skills acquired in this subject make our graduates attractive to employers in the art world, in the cultural heritage sphere, and in such vital sectors as government, publishing, and the media. Many of our graduates pursue careers in GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums). Some go on to specialise in areas such as collections management, conservation, curatorial work, and university lecturing. Others, especially those who have pursued combined degrees in such fields as commerce, computer science or law, have found positions in the business sector, marketing, and design.

Students interested in working as conservators should consider a Bachelor of Arts and Science (BASC) degree, which provides the necessary academic background in both arts and sciences for further postgraduate training in conservation.

For questions about Art History and Visual Culture otago.ac.nz/historyarthistory

PROFILE

Sophie Gilmore

BA (Hons) Art History, Master of Arts, Art History

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