



**Authentication in Art Congress
The Hague, the Netherlands
May 11-13, 2016**

Work Group Education

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“Predicting the Past”¹: A critical examination of current art history and conservation curricula.

This document is a critical analysis of the current status of art education in art history and art conservation as it relates to the concept of authenticity (as defined as “authorship”).² It has been constructed by students and professionals from different specialities and continents. The headline problems, raised by current art history students, have been observed in several art history and conservation programmes by the Work Group, who suggest potential solutions, below. These are targeted at the Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral levels.

1. Art History

“Art-historical education is often too theoretical, and students are unfamiliar with the materiality of works of art”.

Current state: Art-historical education focuses mainly on art theory and not on the actual works of art. The questions ‘what is art?’ and ‘what role does art play?’ are addressed, but the material object is rarely a primary focus of study. A consequence is that fundamental knowledge about the core of art history – namely, the object – is missing. Students rarely come into physical contact with art objects during their education. Furthermore, little is taught on the material and techniques involved with processes of making a work of art.

Solutions:

- Bachelors level: more classes aimed at building a visual database containing works of art and their artists; field trips or research assignments to museums with the aim to look at materiality of the artworks; more classes/lectures focusing on the materiality of artworks.
- Masters level: guest lectures by conservators describing the materials of art creation; supplementary studio art courses and/or historical reconstruction workshops; field trips to private or museum-based conservation studios, art handling companies.
- Masters/Doctoral level: more courses or lectures on Technical Art History; workshops on how to handle artworks; materials research; internship, secondment, or work experience in a museum, artist workshop, auction house, gallery, or another facility where direct connection with and close study of art objects can be made.
- Developing short demonstration (YouTube) videos that can be used as education resources. Make it easier for the lecturers/course coordinators to deliver content along these lines.

¹ John Hand in Uur van de Wolf, Jheronimus Bosch – geraakt door de duivel, <http://www.ntr.nl/Het-Uur-van-de-Wolf/6>

² As for all other education programmes such as material scientists

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“The concept of authenticity is missing in art-historical education”.

Current state: The concept of authenticity – and more importantly, a critical attitude towards attributions – to a certain artist or period, is rarely taught in current Art History curricula. The process of analysing attributions pertaining to works of art is rarely an issue under review. As a consequence, students are not generally given opportunities to weigh and discuss the opinions and attributions of experts.

Solutions:

- Address the concept of authenticity in class, making students aware of the problems involved with authenticity and attribution.
- Discuss the processes of attributing and authenticating works, showing the ways in which opinions fail.
- Introduce to students a critical attitude and clear analytical processes when assessing previous attributions.
- Masters/Doctoral level: A mandatory class on authenticity, covering the history of concepts and theories of authenticity, current discussions in the field, how to evaluate an attribution, and the legal side of authenticity and authentication.
- Creating courses that re-examine methodologies formerly understood as “connoisseurship”, but grounding them in contemporary art historiography.

“Art-historical education is too reliant on secondary sources”.

Current state: Art history is mainly taught from secondary sources written by critical theorists and art historians. The primary sources that form the very foundation for art history are scarcely addressed. The analysis, close reading, and guidance regarding the locating of primary sources is significantly lacking in the current curriculum.

Solutions:

- Bachelors level: more focus at the very start of the Bachelor degree on the importance of primary sources.
- Bachelor/Masters level: an extensive class on how to handle primary sources, how to analyse and read them closely, and how to find the right sources. Implement the research of primary sources in each course (if possible); offer (guest) lectures by archivists on how archives work and how to use them.
- Masters level: workshops on advanced archival research; several fieldtrips to different archives to practice the skills needed in the actual archives.

- Instruction should also be offered in the new digital research platforms offered by major museum databases, and the provenance indexes of the Getty and the Frick, for instance, as part of a student's core academic and analytical 'toolkit'. This should be undertaken as part of induction or in first year, rather than at post-graduate level.

“Art-historical education does not have a connection with the labour market”.

Current state: Art-historical education focuses primarily on academic career paths. Although this is to be expected from a university education, academics only form a marginal part of the labour market. Many students will later seek employment in museums / auction houses / galleries etc.

Solutions:

- Bachelors level: offer (guest) lectures by professionals from different parts of the art 'industry', elaborating on how they conduct their research and on how they work with art.
- Bachelors/Masters level: field trips to auction houses / galleries etc. to see the working process in real life; field trips to museums, not just to look at the art exhibited, but to observe the back office of the museum.
- Masters level: optional classes focusing on a specific part of the art market, offering the students a chance to explore parts of the art industry in which they have a particular interest.
- Masters/Doctoral level: mandatory internship or secondment outside of the academia, to familiarise themselves with a different part of the art field and gain practical experience in the field.

“Students interested in developing the skill of critically/visually assessing artworks have few opportunities to do so”.

Current state: Students are seldom provided with the opportunity to develop the skill sets required to make visual assessments of works of art. Such skills are essential tools used by several disciplines operating within academia and the art market.

Solutions:

- Art History curricula should incorporate short courses providing techniques for 'active looking' - the visual assessment of works of art, including a 'checklist' of key aspects: period, national school, medium, condition, composition, influence, iconography and reference, together with formal aspects of the internal organisation of a given piece.
- Students should be encouraged to construct a visual database, to build up the necessary memory, and as a point of reference.

- Students should be tasked with writing formal analyses of individual works of art, incorporating historical and theoretical values, but also information relating to provenance, attribution, literature and condition. This is a vital academic skill, strengthening observation. It is essential to the majority of careers in the field, yet is not part of the university education of art historians, 'cataloguing' being seen as auxiliary to academic art history.
- Formal training in these skill sets should serve to highlight that visual analysis is an activity that should not be purely subjective, but should rest on a solid foundation of observational, technical and research data.
- It should be a point of emphasis that the training of 'the eye', is a life-long enterprise, and students should be encouraged to pursue and make recourse to it beyond the confines of their primary education in the field of art history.
- To raise the profile of visual analysis, experts from across the field should be invited to demonstrate the relevance of this skill, and its communication to a range of end audiences, by means of workshops and lectures.
- Educational opportunities for advanced students could be further enhanced through the close examination of artworks in, for example, museum depots/conservation studies/auction houses and other locations where art can be studied in greater detail.
- Discussion of the role of visual analysis of works of art in litigation and other legal processes, and how evidence collected through visual assessment of artworks is conveyed and communicated in official documents, such as court testimonies.

2. Conservation/Restoration Education

“The lack of standardised examination and scientific evaluation/documentation of artworks presents significant challenges within conservation/restoration training”.

Current state: While most conservation/restoration training programmes provide at the very least a core education in the sciences and general examination techniques, they differ greatly in their scope and emphasis. This is due in part to an unequal distribution of resources and analytical instruments among the various education/training programmes. A standardised approach for the examination, documentation, and scientific analysis of artworks is essential for the conservation/restoration programmes to become better integrated into the broader community of interests.

Solutions:

- Measures should be taken to begin to incorporate standards for examination, documentation and scientific analysis of artworks into current conservation/restoration curricula.

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- While most recognised training programmes require students to enroll in scientific lab-based courses (either as a pre-requisite or during their graduate coursework), these types of classes should be uniformly implemented as outlined in the new standards described above.
- Offering a course of study addressing issues as *what* evidence is collected (capabilities of evidence produced); *how* evidence is collected (subjective element of scientific evidence, importance of following a defined scientific process, and the gathering of verifiable baseline data); and how evidence is *presented* (epistemological issues facing scientific evidence).
- New standards as outlined by experts in the conservation/restoration and conservation scientific community will determine what type of scientific coursework (e.g. instrumental analysis) will be required.

“Current conservation training does not provide sufficient emphasis of the role that scientific protocols play within the legal system”.

Current state: There is often insufficient attention given to the parameters that apply to the production and interpretation of this scientific process by conservators and conservation scientists. Outside the realm of limited academic commentary and specific institutional standards, very limited provision exists to ensure that technical evidence collected in the authentication process meets minimal evidentiary requirements (Reedy & Reedy 1992).

Solutions:

- A mandatory class on scientific protocols, teaching students the importance of a sound protocol, how to evaluate existing protocols, and how to develop their own protocol; universities, as research centres, should help develop sound protocols, possibly with the help of a group of students.
- Offer (guest) lectures by (criminal) forensic scientists and experts focussing on how they construct and apply their protocols. Incorporate the correct use and standardisation of protocols within each course (if feasible).
- See the AiA Workgroup on Technical Art History for a protocol for technical research involved with authenticity.

“Students are not taught how to identify the different status and types of evidence”.

Current state: As Martin Kemp (2014; 2015) notes, art experts are often unaware of the status of different types of evidence, and as a result, ignorant of what the evidence is actually capable of (dis)proving. He states, ‘[i]n any profession you must be aware of the status of different kinds of evidence. In art history, this isn’t taught in any way and I’ve never seen it discussed’ (Kemp 2015). Taken to its logical conclusion, this can result in inappropriate and irrelevant evidence being collected, or conversely, relevant evidence

being omitted from the authentication process.

Solutions:

- Incorporate, within each course, a class or classes on how to evaluate the data and evidence that is produced by the method taught.
- Teach students the possibilities and limitations of each used technique. Not only from a technical perspective, but also which techniques, and specifically their outcomes, can be used for which type of research.
- Offer a course or classes on how efficiently to conduct research into the authenticity of works of art, considering costs, time, reliability and comprehensiveness.
- Offer guest lectures by experts involved in authenticity research about how they gather, evaluate and apply the evidence during their research.
- Offer a course that links technical methodologies and protocols with art historiography or methods, so that they may better understand the importance of having a clear protocol, together with factors that impact processes of judgement.

“Students may be unable to convey the results of their research to non-technical experts”.

Current state: Within the field of authenticity research technical experts are sometimes unable to explain their methods and results to clients/ art historians etc. That is, the translation and explanation of technical research both to laypersons and relevant professionals has proven a skill that some technical experts do not possess. The best way to fix this issue is to incorporate it within the education of these experts.

Solutions:

- Offer a course on how to communicate the results and methods used in technical research to people without technical knowledge.
- Teach students to identify the intended audience of their research, and its level of expertise, Suggest how technical research could be better presented to each audience.
- Offer guest lectures by non-technical experts explaining their wishes and needs from technical research – for example, legal experts and art historians.
- Offer guest lectures by auction house professionals about how they present technical research to their clients.

3. General improvements for both Disciplines

“Students are seldom presented with sufficient inter-disciplinary courses”.

Current state: Art history students, and also conservation and technical art history students, are often unaware of their overlapping fields; this occurs less frequently within conservation

programmes where standard art-historical study is often a prerequisite. Within these educational disciplines there is a lack of cross-communication, which will be a key component of their professional careers in the future. Students are not taught the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, as well as the opportunities and improvements this collaboration offers.

Solutions:

- Require students of both art history and material conservation to collaborate on a case study, presenting them with an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the possibilities and questions of each discipline, as well as teaching them how to work alongside each other.
- Create the opportunity for students of each discipline to follow courses of the other specialisms (i.e. courses for art history students in material conservation and vice versa).
- Conservation is the one discipline where students have to study both the sciences and the humanities. Some of the curriculum in conservation degrees could be usefully incorporated into art programmes more broadly.
- Encouragement of closer integration between Fine Art/Studio Art Departments and History of Art Departments. This would benefit art history students as they would be able to better understand material, technological and intellectual processes governing the production of art objects, while fine art students would benefit from a better understanding of the historical development of art, and its processes of generation.

AiA Workgroup on Education 2016

