
Image readers

Study fine art and gain a unique window on the world, says Judith Mottram

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Gain a window on the world

Fine art degree courses focus on the ideas, making and discussion of art, and its function as a creative contribution to visual culture.

Students speculate on and challenge the nature and purpose of art through their own studio work as well as through tutorials, seminars and written work. The creative disciplines offered by courses include drawing, painting, sculpture and print-making along with newer media and technologies such as digital, lens and time-based media.

About 4,000 students each year register to study fine art at degree level in the UK, (about 1.25% of all university entrants). Most courses are in the new universities, but there are some in various "old" universities, higher education colleges and a few specialist art and design institutions. Applications through Ucas can be made in the autumn ("route A") and in the spring ("route B") before students need to take up a place. Many applicants enrol on a foundation course after leaving school to give them time, support and facilities to develop a portfolio before applying in the spring.

The focus of fine art study is not on vocational training for a specific career, although courses do have a strong emphasis on learning through doing. It may not be realistic to add 4,000 artists each year to the number of artists in the UK! As with many other university subjects, fine art equips students for a wide range of occupations besides that of artist. While becoming an artist may be a very exciting prospect, there are opportunities to use the skills and knowledge acquired through fine art study in publishing, marketing, management, research and other arenas.

Contemporary culture and society are often described as in "the knowledge age" or "the age of creativity". What do these perspectives imply for the study of fine art?

We know much about our world, but innovation and knowledge proceeds at a relentless pace. Computational power has grown massively since the first computer - the Turing machine. But we still wrestle with seemingly trivial questions: is this or that object or event art, and what does it mean?

Art matters to us, but why? Thinking about "knowledge" and "creativity" helps answer this question. Art is understood to be the application of skill or expert knowledge to produce works of creative imagination. So the study of art presumably gives us skills and knowledge that can be put to creative use. That is quite a tall order for a degree course, but it does connect to what contemporary biologists have identified as part of "what it is to be human".

In one sense, a fine art course is the study of, or initiation into, an extreme example of human activity. Just as the medic understands the illnesses of the body, and the sociologist understands how humans interact, the art student comes to understand the production and interpretation of acts of creative imagination largely unfettered by concern with utility.

Art contributes to what we see in our world, providing new opportunities for understanding vision and communication by visual means.

The power of communication by words is widely understood and a fairly straightforward connection can be made between the study of English and the skills required for work in those professions where the currency of communication is verbal. However, images are increasingly prevalent as a means of communication within western society. The ability to "read" this material with intelligence is becoming more important and fine art graduates score highly here.

This big picture justification for studying the fine arts is not immediately apparent when considering what subject to study at degree level. The issues for applicants may be more focused on what A-levels are relevant, their special talents, or what sort of job they want in the long run. Flair or talent can be useful, but they are not absolute pre-requisites. While romantic conceptions view the artist as blessed with special abilities, contemporary descriptions regard creativity as a widespread human attribute, not a gift.

It may be relevant to consider more closely the vocational aspect of study in the fine arts. While "vocational" can be preparation for a trade or occupation, in fine art it is more appropriate to think of it as a "calling", or a total commitment to an activity that fascinates both maker and audience.

Research on the attitudes of students from across art and design disciplines has confirmed that graduates have a very strong emotional engagement with their subject. Fine art also provides great scope for individual development and exploration. As the nature of art practice today touches on so many fields, the curious mind can find ample scope for developing highly personalised routes of study that explore anything from electron microscope imaging to horror movies. On a more practical level, graduates from fine art courses are known to find employment in a wide range of related and some unrelated professions. A significant proportion join the teaching profession at all levels. Some move into museum and gallery work and others become involved in community-based arts outreach activities. Others have been very successful as performers in the music business, television producers, and model makers for the film industry.

While teaching staff on individual courses tend to know what their former students are doing, there is little conclusive national data on the prospects for fine art graduates. It is known that over 20% of graduates do Masters degrees, and that establishing a career often takes longer for fine art graduates than those from other courses.

Some graduates become artists, but most will not make a living solely from this. Interestingly, those who have studied the subject tend to refer to themselves as artists, even when employed primarily in related professions. The "Destinations and Reflections" survey of the careers of art, craft and design graduates indicated that most graduates do stay within the arts sector, with only 20% becoming involved in work unrelated to art and design. The survey also noted that the particular strengths of graduates from art and design courses are seen to be their critical, creative and imaginative abilities.

The creative industries of advertising, publishing, film, television, software, and the art market are seen as a growth area of the national economy. This gives great scope for fine art graduates to put their skills and attributes to work in these commercial and industrial sectors.

A significant issue for fine art courses is the role of practical skills. Making, or learning through doing, plays a large part in most undergraduate programmes. There are many skills and processes used within fine art practice today, ranging from oil glazes to "photoshop" layers or clay modelling to rapid prototyping. There are also many theoretical perspectives from which to consider such activities. While it may be viable to contextualise digital images with theories of simulation, it gets interesting framing stone carving with feminism.

The focus on making is increasingly linked to the importance of haptic knowledge (knowing by or through touch), but the range of practical skills offered is changing. Not all fine art courses can offer everything within their curricula, and the challenge for

prospective students is to match not only the data from league tables, but also just what it is about making or thinking about art that intrigues them, with what an individual course has to offer.

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