

Course sample

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Level HE6 – 60 CATS

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Document control number: p3ad210909

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Times are given here as a guideline: you may want to spend a lot more.

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Introduction

'There is really no such thing as Art. There are only artists.'

These are the first two sentences in the Introduction to Gombrich's **The Story of Art**. Gombrich goes on to qualify his statement. There is no harm in calling the things that artists make 'art' (with a small a), he says, so long as we recognise that art means different things in different times and different places.

In his introduction Gombrich makes a number of key points about art.

- There are no wrong reasons for liking a work of art but there are wrong reasons for disliking it.
- Most people like to see in pictures what they like to see in reality.
- The beauty of a picture doesn't lie in the beauty of its subject matter.
- Tastes and standards of beauty and expression vary.
- Just as we find it enjoyable to enter Walt Disney's enchanted world and accept Mickey Mouse – though he is unlike a real mouse – so we have to be able to enter the world of 'modern art' without prejudice.
- If we find fault with the accuracy of a picture we have to ask ourselves two things. Did the artist have a reason for changing the appearance of something? Are we sure we are right and the painter is wrong?
- Preconceived ideas of how things should be are the major obstacle to appreciating great works of art.
- Artists are on a voyage of discovery seeing the world afresh.

If you follow contemporary artists on this voyage of discovery then even a glance out of your own window may become a thrilling adventure. Each time you look you see something new. The scene doesn't stay the same – and nor do you.

This observation by Gombrich is useful. He says that people who are not used to drinking tea may find that all blends taste the same but that taste can be developed. The experience and knowledge of an expert, who has tried many kinds of tea, will enable them to be able to distinguish the type and blend they prefer and increase their enjoyment. So it is with art.

Looking at paintings is like looking at the changing view outside your window. Go to your nearest gallery and try this for yourself. Make a point of looking at the same picture on successive visits. You're likely to find that the picture never seems exactly the same. The picture, we have to assume, doesn't itself change radically from one day to another – but you do, and so you see it differently.

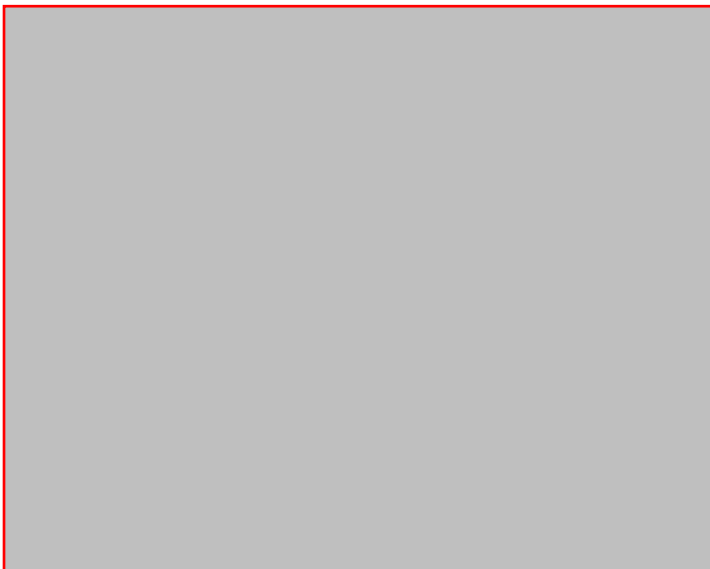
Looking at paintings can also change the way we see the world. If you were to visit Provence



Montagne Sainte-Victoire Paul Cezanne (1839-1906)

you might remark that the landscape looks exactly like Cézanne's paintings. "If you took a photograph and compared it with a Cézanne painting from the same spot the two would look very different but it's hard to prevent yourself from seeing through Cézanne's eyes."

The way we see our own paintings also changes. Have you ever found that a painting you're working on looks quite different in the morning from the way you remembered leaving it the night before?



It can be argued that the history of Western art is one of artists trying to depict reality. The Impressionists, for example, thought they were painting what they saw with scientific accuracy. "A contemporary painter like Frank Auerbach would say that in his paintings he was expressing his involvement with his subject".

Mornington Crescent, Winter Frank Auerbach (Contemporary Artist)

Painting what you see at first seems perfectly reasonable. You imagine that if you look hard and develop a fluency in painting similar to being able to write quickly, all will be well. Unfortunately, as you will have discovered, it isn't as simple as that. The trouble lies with the simple phrase 'what you see'. You constantly see the same objects and scenes differently and, to complicate things still further, you don't see them only through your own eyes but also through the eyes of artists you admire.

At this stage in your artistic development, a way of describing your aim as a painter could be to say that you're trying to recreate your own visual experience while knowing the task to be impossible. It doesn't matter that you can't achieve the impossible. If you get as close as you can to expressing what you see, you can extend – albeit only slightly – the way we see the world. We know that the Impressionists didn't, as they thought, paint with scientific accuracy but that doesn't detract from the importance of their pictures. When we look at them we recognise a new way of looking at life that was, in its time, a revelation.

Because art is something which is constantly changing, the teaching of art is a subject of constant debate. Many lecturers in major art colleges would say that it can't be taught, that art college simply provides a supportive environment in which students can learn – often from each other. They might go on to say that students are encouraged to be innovative and that it's axiomatic that once they have an idea they will discover the means of expressing it.

Students at art college will not have the equivalent of your course books with a programme of work set out for them to do. They will generally have only the occasional word from their tutors and yet their work usually develops – with a slightly different 'house style' in each college. This style often reflects a particular tutor's influence – even if the tutor doesn't feel that they are offering much in the way of direct guidance.

Students working together for years, every day, learn a great deal from each other and from the occasional comment from tutors. Their tutors, by reference to particular artists and their approval of particular approaches to painting, create a climate which strongly influences the students. Though they would probably deny it, tutors (often inadvertently) provide the guidelines within which students shape their work.

Sometimes this informal approach to studio teaching is underpinned by a selective and more formal art history programme, not usually taught by studio tutors. This may consist of a brief art history survey course (a rapid skim over the history of art from cave painting to the present) followed by a more detailed presentation of art of the twentieth century.

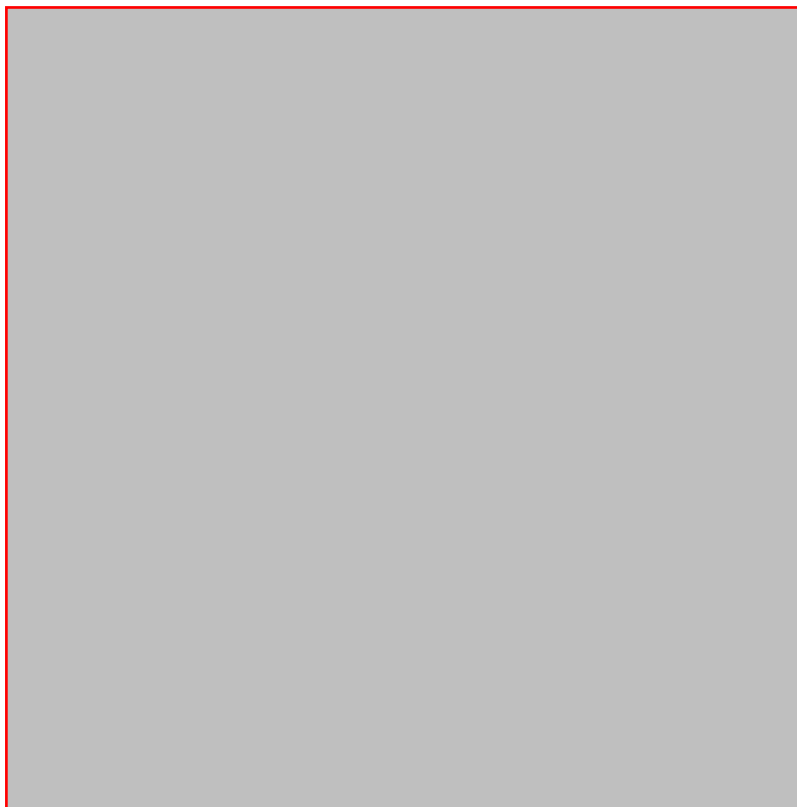
In some colleges, the history of art is presented in such a way that students are left with little doubt that art, for them, should start no earlier than 1980 and that, above all, true art is

concerned with individuality. And some students who start as painters become convinced that painting itself is dead and create alternative works – often with a political or social message.

Student exhibitions are normally held in most art colleges in June and are open to the public. They are often fascinating and provide interesting comment on the art of the present. How closely student work should be linked to current art practice is another subject for debate. Some art educators believe that, if not a body of knowledge, there is a body of experience which all art students should have. Others think that, from the first, the art student should be required to act as a soldier-artist and be pushed to the front line of art to advance it – or perish in the attempt.

Of course, this is far from a complete picture of art education at the beginning of the twenty-first century. There are colleges with interests in a broader approach to painting and there is a degree of pluralism in the teaching of painting which reflects the diversity evident in many areas of contemporary life, but it is not unfair to say that no-one is really sure how painting, or art and design in general, should now be taught.

This hasn't always been the case. If you'd been studying at the end of the nineteenth century you would have been given very clear instructions about how to paint, not what you saw, but

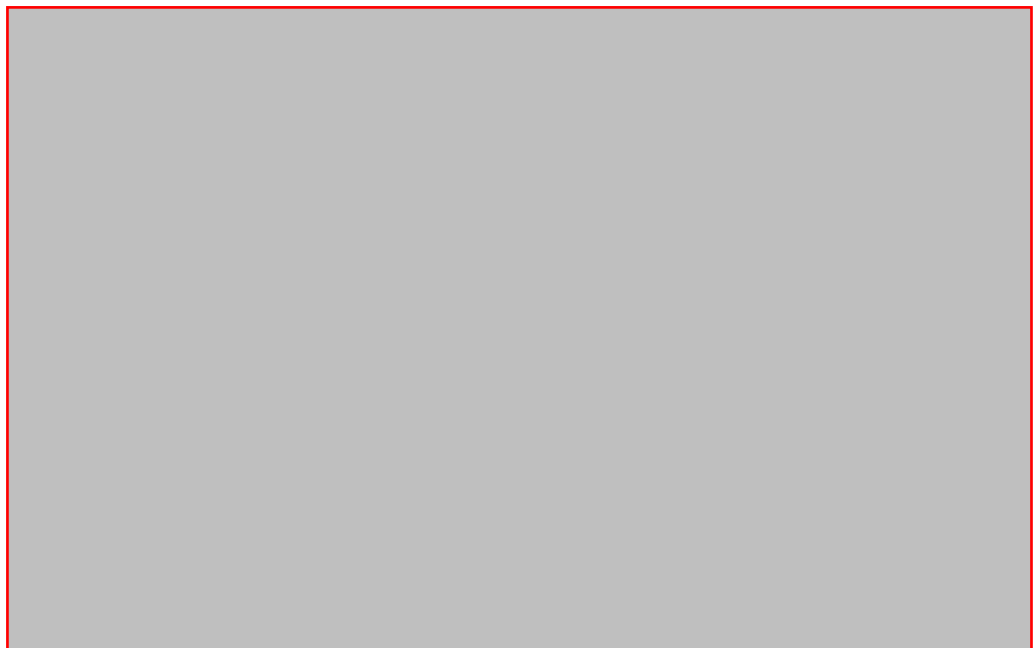


Study for Francesca da Rimini Jean Auguste Ingres (1780-1867)

what you should see – the classical ideal. The influence of this form of teaching persisted right up to the late fifties. Life class students weren't asked to draw the model as they saw it but to produce an idealised and harmonious representation.

Students acquired their understanding of classical beauty largely through drawing (and painting) the pure white plaster casts of classical Greek figures which abounded in most art colleges – usually in special studios called cast rooms. From the cast room, students moved on to the life room. Here they gave the model the same stylised forms as the casts, using line and tone just as Ingres (1780–1867) might have done. The emphasis was on 'pure form' with no reference to colour. The darkness of a model's hair, for example, would not be indicated in the drawing.

The famous Bauhaus school of architecture, design and craftsmanship, was founded in Germany in 1919. It was closed by the Nazis and re-formed in Chicago in 1937. The Bauhaus had an enormous influence on art education after the war but this influence took time to reach Britain. Here, the belief that experimental abstract art was the necessary foundation for all art and design was taken up by a group of artist-teachers which included Victor Pasmore, and introduced to art education as 'Basic Design'. A book *Basic Design (The Dynamics of Visual Form)* by Maurice de Sausmarez (the author was one of the artists in Pasmore's circle) demonstrates the main features of what was taught. This Bauhaus-inspired approach to art teaching, which began in Britain in the late fifties and was at its most powerful in the sixties, strongly influenced the form of art teaching practised in the late twentieth century. Does it now, or have there been more recent influences?



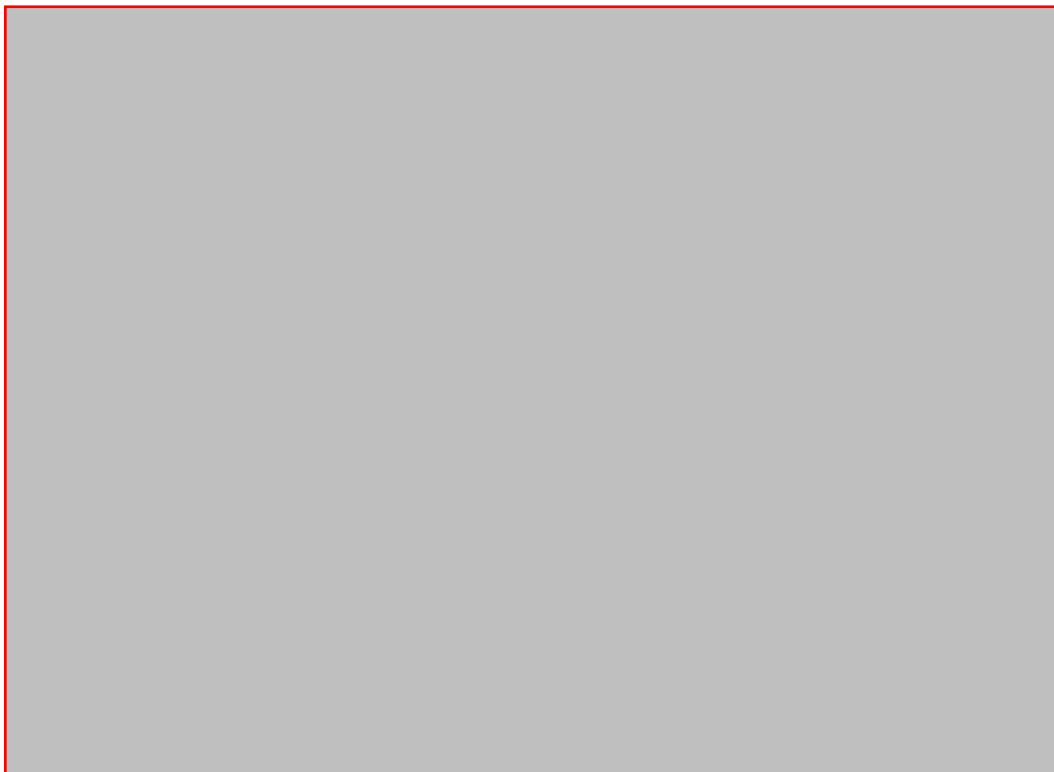
The Trawlers Lyonel Feininger (1871-1956)

The distance learning art student

Learning to paint by distance learning methods, as on this course, cannot operate in the same way as if you were attending full-time study at an art college. There is no real equivalent, in home-based study, to the throwaway remark made by a tutor as they pass by your easel.

On the other hand, working to a large extent on your own encourages self-confidence and self-reliance. A high proportion of art college graduates never paint a picture once they've left college. And having less contact with your tutor usually means that you don't acquire a 'house style'. One of the most interesting features of the work of students studying largely on their own is the many different ways in which they work and respond to the projects set.

This course book will not provide you with ready-made solutions to the problems of painting but it does give you essential technical and theoretical information and make you aware of the major artistic events of the twentieth and twenty first centuries (and before) which have largely shaped the way art is today. The aim is to encourage you to have confidence in your own judgment, to recognise your vision as unique and ask you gradually to take more control of what you paint and your approach to painting.



Auguste Renoir in his Studio Paul Dornac (1859-1941)