



Understanding Art 1: Western Art Course sample

This is a sample of OCA course materials. If you would like to request a Guide to Courses or enrol on a course, please contact the OCA administration team:

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Understanding Art 1: Western Art

Written by Joseph Darracott



Cover picture: *Still Life with Beer Mug*, 1921. Fernand Léger, oil on canvas, 91 x 60cm. The Tate Gallery, London © DACS 1991

Back picture: *The Return from Egypt III*, 1993. Michael Kenny, mixed media on paper, 112 x 1153cm. After Poussin's *Flight into Egypt*. A work done during residency at Dulwich Picture Gallery, and an example of a creative variant mentioned in Assignment 4 – Part One.

Joseph Darracott, author of this and second level art history courses for OCA, died in March 1998, aged 64.

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Sample from Understanding Art 1: Western Art

How this course is organised

Any art history course obviously has to provide a collection of illustrative material for students to consider and this course is no different, using both the videos of the television programmes and the book *A World History of Art*. In addition, any good teacher in a local college would alert students to other opportunities to see works of art in nearby galleries and other buildings. We clearly can't do this, as our students live not just all over the British Isles but overseas as well. What we hope we can do instead is get you into the habit of using intensively what local resources there are, reading widely outside the course materials and making a point of using any journeys you may have to make for holidays or business to see something new. Obviously if you can visit large cities there will be plenty of exciting things to see, but there are no end of pleasures for the trained eye almost anywhere and some treats such as sculpture parks, fine churches and large houses are as likely to be found in the country as the city.

After providing you with a wide range of materials and suggestions for visits we could simply have asked you to write a series of essays on various aspects of art history, ignoring what artistic skills you may already have. Instead we have tried, wherever possible, to involve you in practical activities that do indeed include some writing but a lot more besides to help focus your attention on individual works of art. We shall be interested to hear from you what you think about this approach, and indeed suggestions for additional activities if you wish to make them.

This course is not a conventional book on art history; it is a 'guide book', firstly to help you use fully both the videos and selected chapters of *A World History of Art*, and secondly to expand your interests in and enjoyment of art as widely as possible.

The first half takes you through the history of Western art chronologically; about half of *A World History of Art* is allocated for reading. The second half

takes a more analytic approach, discussing major themes of art; your textbook will continue to be useful. It is desirable to work on the first half in the order in which they come, but you may find that elements from the second half could be dealt with in a different order if your visiting programme (see below) cannot fit exactly into the order of the course. But make sure that the Assignments for your tutor are submitted in the right order.

As you set out on your journey, the course can look like a huge mountain to climb, but do not despair. There is a lot of work to do, but the best way of tackling it could be to think of the five Assignments as five separate plateaux to be reached.

Reading and viewing

There is *Suggested additional reading* at the beginning of each section. Fuller bibliographic details of books mentioned there are given in the booklist later in *You and your course*. We hope that you will be able to locate and read (or even browse through) some of the books recommended - perhaps ten or so during the course itself - but remember that you can read further, using the book suggestions, after the end of the course if you are pressed for time, or books are not immediately available.

After the reading recommendations, each section is divided into three Units. We hope that you might be able to complete each unit in about a week (six or seven hours' work), although there is no compulsion to do so. We shall have more to say about time later. But you do not have to wait until you have completed all the activities in any one unit before you go on to the next if there is something such as a visit or getting a particular book from the library which is holding you up.

Each unit begins with *To view* and *To read*; these list programmes from the video and chapters from *A World History of Art*. Each programme lasts just under half an hour. There then follows a brief discussion of what you will view and read. Do read the discussion both before and after viewing the programmes and reading chapters of *A World History of Art*. Our aim is to help you develop the habit of intensive and purposeful looking.

Visiting

In some units there is a heading *To visit*. You are asked to make ten visits during the course. We suggest that you skim through this course book during the first week of study; one of the practical things that you can do during this time is to start to plan your visits. To help you we have summarised the visits in the Calendar at the end of this introduction.

One visit has to be made as specified in Unit 12, because it links up with Assignment 2. All the other visits are more flexible and there is always an alternative plan when a visit proves impossible for you to fit in. But try and make the visit at some time during the course, and if need be do a little juggling of the order of the units in order to take advantage of visits. Most important of all, seize any opportunity, at whatever stage in the course, to make the more demanding visits. If you live in an isolated area and go to London, say, just once a year, don't pass up a visit to a cast gallery, for example, because you have not yet reached that stage in your course!

Annotation

Every unit has a paragraph *To annotate*. You will see that you need a picture for each of the annotation exercises. The very best plan is for you to visit local galleries to find appropriate works. You can make notes in the gallery if you like and take home postcards. At home you can then start the annotation, writing round the postcard or sketch; your next visit to the gallery should include looking again at the work you choose.

If you live far from a gallery, or the gallery can't provide what you need, don't worry. Two alternative suggestions are listed in each unit. The first suggestion is that you use a postcard you already have, or that you buy one, perhaps the suggestion (these choices are from national collections, where postcards are almost always available). The second suggestion is that you use illustrations from *A World History of Art*, either by photocopy or tracing.

The course stresses careful looking, so your preference will be to see an original work against which you can measure a reproduction. However good

a postcard may be, it cannot capture the presence of the original, and not just in inaccuracies of colour reproduction. But you are unlikely to be able to see an appropriate original work each week, so the suggested cards will help you to keep a rhythm going through the course. And all the suggested cards are naturally relevant to your studying; you might decide to order the cards anyway as part of your visual resources.

How to start the annotation

Take an A4 sheet of paper; write at the top the information given on the back of the card or in the caption to the picture; stick down your card, above centre; draw a line across the bottom of the sheet.

Notes around the card:

- appreciative comments, highlighting why you chose the card
- comments about the card itself, for example the accuracy of the colours, whether only part of the picture is shown, or what view of a sculpture is seen
- observations about the elements used in the painting / sculpture / building, such as:
 - lines - thick, thin etc
 - tones - dark, light, grey etc
 - textures - coarse, smooth etc
 - colours - bright, dull etc
 - space - deep, shallow etc
 - shapes - square, round etc
- observations about how these elements are organised within the painting / sculpture / building:
 - to what extent is each element necessary?
 - how is the sense of unity maintained?
 - how is variety in this unity achieved?
 - do some elements dominate?
 - are there main stresses, eg dominant shapes or colours?
 - is there a main rhythm or repetitive element?

- observations about marks (painters sometimes describe all activities of drawing and painting as 'making marks')
- observations about technique
- observations about materials, which make crucial differences in art, but more especially sculpture and architecture
- notes about information communicated by the artist - subject, narrative, people or places represented, period detail, mood
- notes about the success of the image, its representational skill, whether it tells its story well (if a narrative), or how its presence impresses you.



An example of a tonal study

Sketches around the card:

- analytical notes, that is things you can describe visually: linear, tonal, compositional, geometric, technical.

Sample annotation

Van Gogh - The Night Café 1888
70 x 89 cm

any reason for this time?

women?

huddled figure 'sleeping hooligan'

Vivid green

orange lights

strong red walls

feet missing and no shadow!

strong green but not virulent

Shadow almost darkest tone apart from dark background + mirror

strong perspective base to composition - influence of floor

Note the shape 'echoes'

door

man

mirror

Necessary but dangerous refuge for less successful artists like myself - no wife, no homeland'

in: Yale University Art Gallery

See artist's letter

Quote: Everywhere there is a clash and contrast of the most alien reds and greens in the figures of the little sleeping hooligans, in the empty, dreary room, in violet and blue ... I have tried to express the terrible passions of men by means of red and green. (letter 518)

See artist's biography

Symbolic significances? (Melissa McQuillan)

'Wenck of Creation' (Gombrich) - 'Mental Cripple' (Levey)

One of the few pictures which van G. gave a name to - believed it important.

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