

# CAREER VIEW

## ART HISTORY

We live in a world of images. Art History offers a way of engaging with that world through the study of art and visual culture. Works of art communicate the ideas, beliefs, preoccupations and values of the societies in which they are created. They express all the themes that define human culture, such as politics, love, religion, greed, power, lust, fashion, social class, technology and death. But because the language of these material objects and images is visual – whether they are aboriginal rock paintings of Australia or the works of contemporary artists using digital media – we need to develop particular skills in order to interpret them. Art History teaches these skills, which can be applied in many other situations, such as advertising, design, film, conservation, politics, public relations and marketing, to understand and communicate the meaning of visual information.

### WHY STUDY ART HISTORY?

Over time we have come to value art for a variety of reasons: its unique connection to the milieu and time in which it was made and as evidence of the creative abilities of its makers, and for what it can reveal about the differences between people and cultures. Works of art are material objects and visual images. As their 'language' is visual, particular skills are needed in order to interpret them. This ability to extract meaning from a visual environment is a learned skill and one that can be applied to many areas of employment. The study of Art History teaches you how to conduct research, how to interpret what you see and read, how to write a cogent argument, and how to think and speak on your feet. Many jobs demand skill in the observation and interpretation of visual data, in particular the ability to make connections and draw disparate elements together to make a coherent whole.

The study of Art History develops and extends an individual's natural ability to construct and communicate meaning from almost any visual environment. Architects, insurance assessors and film editors, for example, are likely to have this skill in common. Some jobs are about engaging people's imaginations, communicating ideas and eliciting emotions by means of carefully arranged visual cues. For example, people who work in advertising agencies, theatre and all areas of design need to understand how to manipulate visual information for maximum psychological effect.



### WHERE DO ART HISTORY GRADUATES WORK?

Art History graduates work in a wide range of careers. The global art economy is worth about \$60 billion per year and the study of Art History gives you an entrée into that economy. But graduates in Art

*Topical coverage of career related issues brought to you by Victoria University Careers and Employment.*

*Areas covered include how degrees and courses relate to employment opportunities, to life/work planning, graduate destination information and current issues or material relevant to the employment scene. Your comments and suggestions always welcomed.*

History don't only work in the art world. Recent surveys show the employment destinations of Art History graduates include, but are not limited to: an events co-ordinator for a museum; a curator of public programmes for an art gallery; a conservation assistant for the National Library; a co-ordinator for a creative arts organisation; a cultural affairs information officer in central government; an administration assistant in a drama school; a sales manager for a fine arts retailer; a visual merchandiser; a commercial artist; a jeweller's assistant; an art gallery administrator; an art gallery/museum director; and several gallery assistants. Other graduates have gone on to study journalism or law, train as teachers and librarians; work in business, or to simply enjoy lives enriched by their exposure to Art History. A conjoint degree in Art History and another discipline such as law, commerce or software engineering can lead down some lucrative and fascinating pathways.

**Government ministries and departments** employ graduates with a wide range of degrees. Transferable skills gained through degree studies, such as critical thinking, research, communication and interpersonal skills, the ability to meet deadlines and organise workflow, are sought after. The **Ministry of Culture and Heritage** would recruit Art History graduates in entry-level roles such as assistant policy adviser in the art or heritage teams or in corporate services (Human Resources, Legal, Communications, Finance teams). Administrative roles are useful for gaining work experience and to get a foot on the employment ladder. The Ministry requires a clear record of research capability and a broad base of historical knowledge. Art History is also useful for roles at **Archives NZ**; however a postgraduate Diploma in Information Management, or a library or archives management qualification may also be necessary. **Creative New Zealand** is a small organisation where an Art History degree may be useful, along with generic administration skills, in roles such as arts adviser. Corporate service roles in the business, communications, and international teams do not require an art background.

**The New Zealand Historic Places Trust** prefers a Master's degree in archaeology or anthropology. Architecture and planning degrees are also desirable, as is a diploma or Master's degree in Museum Studies. Art History students would need to consider additional subject areas.

**The National Library and Alexander Turnbull Library** hold a vast collection, which includes drawings, prints and photographs. The libraries also hold exhibitions which can draw on knowledge of



Fiona Pardington, Hei tiki kai tahu 30184.1 from the series Mauria mai, tono ano, 2001, silver gelatin photograph. Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection

Art History and design skills. There are education and curatorial roles. Graduates will often start at an entry-level library assistant position for which an undergraduate degree is acceptable. After taking a qualification in library or museum studies it is possible to progress to an assistant curator or curator's position.

**Publicly owned national and regional galleries and museums** such as Auckland City Gallery, Wellington City Gallery, Robert McDougall Art Gallery in Christchurch and The Dunedin Public Art Gallery as well as Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Auckland, Canterbury and Otago Museums employ Art History graduates; however some museums may require additional qualifications.

**Art Galleries and Museums:** according to surveys of graduate employment destinations, one third of all Art History graduates found work in an art gallery or museum. A typical entry-level job is that of gallery assistant, host or assistant curator. Gallery assistants or hosts help members of the public with general information enquiries and help monitor the basic security of an exhibition. They can be involved in setting up and dismantling exhibitions and collections and contribute to the research that is associated with each acquisition or exhibition. Increasingly this involves using the Internet to access other collections and databases.

Assistant curators are also involved in research, help maintain and display collections, and assist with exhibitions. Although job tasks and titles vary from organisation to organisation, in general curators are both keepers (guardians) of artefacts and artworks, as well as people who conceptualise and develop ideas about how exhibitions and collections can be

displayed most effectively. They also write catalogues, essays and other exhibition publications. Research tasks for an exhibition can include – finding out how similar exhibitions have been displayed overseas; checking databases for information; selecting the works; planning and organising packing, transport and touring details which are appropriate for the works; and gathering information for catalogues and publicity material. Being able to read another language is a valuable skill for researching art works, as many documents and archive records that relate to the provenance of a work are in a language other than English. Gallery educators develop and deliver programmes for schools and other groups.

**Smaller and regional art galleries** may have only one or two paid positions. Job titles vary: they may be curator; exhibitions manager; or education officer. There is less specialisation and staff are expected to carry out multiple tasks, including – monitoring the exhibition space; installing the exhibition; organising publicity and marketing information; managing the permanent collection, including temperature and humidity control; overseeing general maintenance and cleaning; and managing and training volunteer staff.

Art galleries and museums draw on a pool of volunteers for many day-to-day tasks. Voluntary experience is becoming increasingly necessary to be competitive for paid positions. Other skills and experience which can add value to a degree include: computer skills, including desktop publishing; photographic skills; manual skills, as there is a lot of physical work involved; experience or qualifications in design, education, fine arts, museum studies or arts administration. A Master's degree is valued for the level of independent thinking and research skills its holders possess. Technologies include x-raying for the purposes of authentication and to better understand the artist's technique and intention, and digitising collections onto computer databases.

**Private galleries, art dealers:** Gallery assistants in commercial dealer galleries perform much the same function as those in public art galleries, with the addition of being able to advise buyers on current prices for different artists, including their investment potential, and perhaps suggest other artists in the buyer's price range.

**Fine Art auctioneers:** A background in Art History is useful but a considerable amount of learning takes place on the job, particularly in terms of the market value of different artists. Larger auction houses may employ porters to move art works around. This

can be a way of learning on the job and might act as a stepping-stone for other positions more directly connected to valuing and appraisal.

**Advertising agencies:** Art directors in advertising agencies work to a concept. Their job is to visually communicate important information about a product or service on a wide range of media, and in a way that appeals to a target audience. Often the visual cues are very subtle, almost subliminal, and work by association with other images. Art History graduates understand the interplay of different images and their combined role in producing an overall psychological effect and social message.

**Digital media:** Digital media workers such as video game animators/designers can find jobs in games companies, particularly smaller companies that are designing for the mobile gaming market. Other industries include film and television studios, digital effects companies that create commercials, TV shows and music videos; also educational media, the arts, marketing communications, publishing companies – any area in which the visual messaging of digital communication is paramount.

**Education:** Secondary school teachers generally require a second teaching subject in their degree and need to do teacher training. While New Zealand is a small market, there is a huge tertiary sector worldwide. University lecturers typically need a PhD and a record of published research to be competitive in the academic job market. Teaching qualification requirements at other tertiary institutions and training organisations may vary.

**Journalism:** Writing about art can offer different opportunities. Knowledge of historical art is generally relevant to the discussion of contemporary works. Numerous publications, from newspapers and magazines to local authority newsletters, contain articles about art, artists and exhibitions and may accept submissions on a freelance basis. Some professional journalists and writers specialise in art-related topics. A journalism qualification is necessary for full-time work with a newspaper.

**Framers, Conservators and Restorers:** When artworks are framed, the mount and frame must be sympathetic to the age and style of the work. Art History graduates are recognised as having a broad knowledge of styles, colours and techniques appropriate for particular time periods. The conservation of art works is an area of specialised expertise that requires additional training. At the time of writing, courses in conservation are available at universities in Australia, Canada, the UK

and the United States. No courses in conservation are as yet available in New Zealand.

**Theatre, Film, Television, Advertising and Publishing (design):** These industries make use of visual imagery to entertain, persuade and inform. Although people working in these areas typically have a wide range of practical experience as well as other qualifications which they bring to their work, Art History graduates will readily understand the messages that different images and symbols contain, and what sort of psychological impact they might be expected to have.

Historical accuracy is essential in creating authentic settings for theatre, film, video and television productions. All productions are set in a particular time period, the mood of which is created by many details that must be congruent and correct. Art History graduates, who are trained to 'read' the period, style and technique of an artwork, may apply that knowledge to this larger scale.

Designers of sets and costumes are always designing for a script. Their job is to take a written concept and translate into a three-dimensional environment, which supports the performers in the roles that they are playing. An educated visual imagination and research skills are essential for this work. As Aotearoa New Zealand themes are explored more intensively, knowledge of Māori art and colonial art may be relevant.

**Publishers** of magazines also employ art directors and designers whose work involves developing and maintaining the visual style of the magazine. Knowing how pictures 'work,' understanding, for example, how cropping a photograph will give a different composition and therefore a different 'feel' to the image, is a skill Art History graduates will have acquired through their studies. *Book cover* design is a sophisticated art that must somehow express the essence of an entire written work. Every element in the design, from the font size of the letters to the

colour tones of the artwork, must be sympathetic to the theme of the book and its genre. Art History is taught in a wide range of historical, cultural and aesthetic contexts, providing graduates with a rich visual vocabulary that could be applied to this sort of work. Book cover designers, and book illustrators, often have additional skills in drawing or photography and may work in a self-employed capacity.

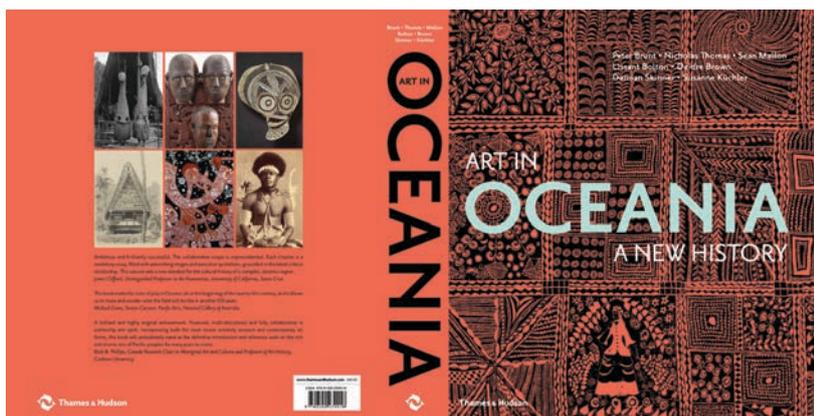
## WHAT SKILLS DO ART HISTORY GRADUATES HAVE?

Many of the skills that Art History graduates develop relate to aspects of visual discrimination and the intellectual processes that accompany this. These include the ability to:

- evaluate aesthetic quality
- attribute meaning to visual information
- focus on specific conditions while maintaining awareness of a broader context
- make connections between different elements in a visual display
- construct a hypothesis from visual evidence
- read emotional content contained in visual information
- analyse visual effects in an objective way
- separate technique from overall visual effect
- see patterns and structures embedded in other visual data
- understand the symbolic impact of images - what 'works' visually

This kind of visual intelligence is essential in many different job areas. For example, all areas of *design*, from fashion design to industrial design, require a mix of functional efficiency, aesthetic appeal and emotional 'rightness,' to be effective. These qualities usually need to be communicated simultaneously and often on several levels of complexity, something that demands a highly developed aesthetic sensibility and a trained visual mind.

Abilities that students develop through the study of Art History are useful in many different professions. Observation skills and the ability to separate relevant and irrelevant information are critical in interpreting the behaviour of individuals and groups, in the context of, for example, *medical* and *psychological diagnosis*, *organisational management*, *journalism*, *teaching* and *law enforcement*.



## GRADUATE PROFILES

Art History graduates can also demonstrate a range of *transferable skills* including:

- research and information gathering skills
- skill in critical analysis and the ability to construct an argument, particularly in writing
- verbal and written communication skills
- experience in presenting ideas and information to groups
- confidence in exploring different points of view
- decision-making and problem-solving skills
- time management and organisational skills
- factual historical knowledge
- some instinct for seeing behind the obvious
- attention to detail

### JOBS THAT RELATE TO ART HISTORY

Listed below is a range of jobs that Art History graduates have gone into. Note that some of these jobs will require additional qualifications and/or experience.

#### *Education and Conservation*

Administrator; acquisitions manager; appraiser; archaeologist; archivist; art curator; art historian; art librarian; art researcher; assistant curator; assistant policy adviser; collections manager; conservator; education co-ordinator; fund raising administrator; funds development manager; gallery assistant; gallery education officer; policy adviser; programme/activities co-ordinator; restorer; school teacher; university lecturer

#### *Design*

Architect; fashion designer; graphic designer; industrial designer; interior designer; landscape designer; textile designer; website designer

#### *Media and Performing Arts*

Art critic/reviewer; art journalist/editor; artistic director; advertising agency production assistant; broadcaster; costume designer; film director/producer; film editor; interactive marketer; journalist; location manager; media planner; musical instrument maker/repairer; properties manager; scriptwriter; set designer; stage and film art director; stage and film lighting designer

#### *Business and Professional*

Art advisor; art valuer; auctioneer; catalogues manager; display artist; event manager; fine arts manager; framer; insurance broker; interactive marketer

#### *Arts and Crafts*

Animator; artist; illustrator; jeweller; photographer; screen printer; signmaker

#### *Dr Rebecca Rice*

*Curator Historical New Zealand  
Art Museum of New Zealand  
Te Papa Tongarewa*



After a brief stint as a physiotherapist, I returned to academic studies at Victoria in my mid-twenties, thinking I would pursue a career in music. However, one art history course taken for 'interest' soon changed all that. The course, taught by a group of inspired teachers, opened my eyes to a breadth of artistic production, considered in the light of the threads that connect cultures across time and space.

This is something I love about art history, the fact that it is a discipline in its own right, one that requires you to reach across boundaries, to learn more about history, philosophy, religion, politics, for example, in order that you might be better equipped to deal with the art itself. In this way, art history expands your mind. It hones both your research skills, as well as your powers of critical thinking.

In my postgraduate studies, I chose to focus on New Zealand's art history. I realised that doing so provided me with a means to better understand our own culture and its history. It also meant that the objects of my study were tangible. I could look at them first-hand, I could access the archives (those lovely pages of often indecipherable text with their particular smell) and feel like I was making an original contribution to the art history of this place.

During this time I began tutoring and lecturing, and was appointed Collection Manager for the Adam Art Gallery, looking after the VUW art collection as well as assisting in the preparation and installation of exhibitions for the University's Gallery. Together, my research and these roles equipped me to apply for the position of Curator Historical New Zealand Art at Te Papa. It was invaluable having the practical, hands-on experience that working with a collection offered along with the intellectual rigour required of a PhD in Art History.

Art History is an area of study that enables you to be involved with what's happening in the art world in your particular moment. The more you look and think, the more you learn. My best advice would be to get involved. Go to galleries and museums, volunteer at them, get a part-time job in one if you can. Talk about what you see, argue about it, write about it. Look, and look some more.

**Matthew Plummer**

*Customer Relationship  
Coordinator  
Learning and Research Technology  
Team  
Victoria University of Wellington*



At high school I was fortunate enough to have an excellent art history teacher, James Hassall, who really piqued my interest in the subject. When I arrived at Victoria I was similarly invigorated by the approach taken by the art history programme, so it developed from there. I enjoyed the camaraderie and healthy debates in tutorials, and also the way art history provided a way into history via the art and artifacts of different periods and cultures. Through my studies I developed an ability to think creatively and critically, and to look for connections between specific details and broad themes. Thinking about how ideas of history and art overlap, but also rub against each other in interesting ways, encouraged me to think laterally and to be comfortable with ambiguity, which is an essential skill in today's world. Studying art history also resulted in me honing my ability to construct persuasive arguments and interesting narratives.

I moved from post-graduate study to teaching in the programme and being responsible for administering its digital assets and visual resources. This combination of face-to-face engagement and technical knowledge led to an interest in digital pedagogy and supporting academics in the use of new technologies. This was instrumental in my making the move to a strategic role in Victoria's Information Technology Services directorate. Studying art history fostered transferable skills, which now enable me to converse with a wide range of academics, from scientists to law professors, engineers to architects. This is a skill which is invaluable in my current position. It's important to have a passion for art and to approach art history in an engaged, critical and creative manner. It's a great subject, which will foster skills that are useful in all walks of life. In short, it's a fascinating, challenging and rewarding discipline to pursue.

**Emily Weston-Taylor**

*Office Manager  
City Gallery Wellington*



I had never planned to go to university; instead, I was training to become a contemporary dancer. However, after an injury I had to re-evaluate my plan and what I wanted to do. I went backpacking as many people do and when my money ran out, I returned to Wellington to study at Victoria University. I decided to major in Art History after I realised that during my OE I spent the majority of my time in galleries and museums around Europe and the UK.

I loved studying Art History at VUW. The lecturers were all very helpful and welcoming, and the small class sizes meant I built friendships with fellow students and I am still in contact with a few today. Studying Art History for me was fascinating, as I came from a background of very little knowledge in that area and the courses I took gave me a great foundation in the subject. I loved the interesting little nuggets we were given by lecturers that opened up ways of looking at different types of art.

My degree developed my writing and analytical skills. We were encouraged to think critically and argue an opinion. I also studied Classics and Religious Studies, which complemented an Art History major nicely.

In my final year I volunteered at the Adam Art Gallery and then once I finished I was lucky to become an intern at the Alexander Turnbull Library. I think these volunteer positions and my degree are what helped me be the successful applicant for the position of Gallery Administrator/PA to Director at City Gallery Wellington. I have worked at City Gallery for almost two years and my current role is Office Manager. My role is incredibly varied and I get to work with the different departments in the gallery.

I highly recommend getting out and volunteering at institutions to get some of the required experience under your belt during study so that you've got a foot in the door once you are on the job hunt. Volunteering can also give you an idea of what roles there are within an arts' organisation and what direction you may want to go down.

### **Morgan Ashworth**

*Learning Facilitator  
National Library of New Zealand*



When I was thinking of going to university I wasn't sure whether to do a practical art degree or a degree in the arts and humanities. I have always enjoyed writing and the critical analysis of art so I ended up doing a double major in Art History and English. Through these subjects you can get a really sound understanding of history from a slightly unconventional perspective.

When I left university my first job was about making art more accessible to people. A lot of people dismiss art, particularly contemporary art, as being snobby and pretentious, and a big waste of money. My role involved helping people to understand what the art might be saying.

I have worked at the National Library for five years – two and half years as a Learning Facilitator in an educational role. People don't realise that the National Library has the largest art collection in the country. That includes rare books, manuscripts, photographs as well as paintings and prints. I started working with the library collections when I was a student – managing interloans, opening mail – in entry-level positions that gave me valuable experience. That initial work gave me a good understanding of the National Library and the collections, which came in handy as a Learning Facilitator. I teach groups of students from early primary through to senior secondary school and have also been involved in researching and curating exhibitions.

My degree has given me really useful research and critical thinking skills, as well as making a huge difference to how I view art. Even if I don't know who the artist is or where it's from I can decode it based on what I have learned, which makes visiting a gallery so much more meaningful.

The biggest thing I took away from my time at university was the importance of taking every opportunity you can to learn and gain experience. Throughout my degree I volunteered at the Adam Art Gallery, which led to a practical understanding of the culture and heritage sector I wouldn't have got otherwise. It led to paid work and heaps of connections, which are always useful no matter what your area of study.

### **Emma Ng**

*Curator/Manager  
Enjoy Public Art Gallery*



I chose to study at Victoria because the Bachelor of Design Innovation's new Culture+Context major gave me the flexibility to study Art History as a minor.

After finishing my Bachelor of Design Innovation, I spent a year solely in the Art History faculty, completing a Bachelor of Arts (Honours). This was a really enjoyable year - I relished the opportunity to improve my research skills and delve further into the discipline's methodology. The papers on offer allowed for a very well rounded year, and I particularly appreciated the breadth of knowledge and approaches to the discipline among the department's teaching staff. Other skills I developed include critical thinking, capacity for group discussions, and the preparation and delivery of presentations.

After graduating, I worked as a guide at the Auckland Art Gallery over the summer, before taking up the Blumhardt Curatorial Internship at the Dowse Art Museum - a nine-month curatorial training position. From there I moved to Enjoy, where I now oversee a varied programme of contemporary art projects.

My current position sees me doing an incredibly diverse range of tasks: meeting with artists, researching and developing exhibitions, installing exhibitions, carrying out administrative tasks, and building the capacity of the gallery as an organisation. Working in the arts is continually challenging, and now that I'm no longer within the safe space of the university I really appreciate the time study allows for rigorous research, and how valuable receiving regular feedback is!

Volunteering at the Adam Art Gallery and working a variety of part-time jobs while at university were a great complement to my (flexible and open-ended) Art History studies. There are so many different people who make art institutions tick, it's worth remaining open-minded about what you'd like to do, even after you finish university.

## ART HISTORY AT VICTORIA

The Art History programme at Victoria provides historical, social, cultural, political and aesthetic frameworks for understanding visual art and culture from the fifteenth century until now. The programme has specialists in historical and contemporary New Zealand and Pacific art, European art, art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and history of photography.

In Art History we teach a full range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses covering the history of art from pre-history to the present, with special strengths in European, American New Zealand and Pacific art history. Undergraduate courses towards a major in Art History consist, at first year, of critical overviews of the history of art and an introduction to the theory and practice of art history, and assume no prior study of art history. Second-year courses survey a variety of periods and areas, and at third year you will study particular issues in depth. Art History relates to a range of other disciplines, and many students complete a double major for their Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree.

Students seeking to advance to graduate levels begin with a one-year Honours degree (BA Hons), which extends their knowledge and understanding of the theoretical and applied study of art history. Some Honours courses are focused on particular resources available in Wellington, such as collections at Te Papa and the National Library. Honours students also get to write a thesis on a topic of their own choosing. Students may then proceed to Master's and PhD levels, where a written thesis of greater length is required. A thesis is the product of original research, which may be undertaken full- or part-time.



Victoria also offers a Graduate Diploma of Arts for graduates. This can allow those without prior knowledge of art history to undertake a tailored course of study that includes undergraduate courses in Art History along with complementary courses in other disciplines.

Victoria's Art History programme teaches you to think critically, research independently and write effectively. You will experience first-hand the power of art, and realise its importance as a way for humans to give meaning to their world.

Art History is enriched by the extensive experience of staff as curators, writers and critical commentators who play active roles in the wider cultural sphere, and benefits from strong links with the arts infrastructure of Wellington, New Zealand's cultural capital.

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