

INTELLECTUAL WINDSURFING AND THE HISTORY OF ART

NICK NELSON OF ARCADIA EDUCATION REFLECTS ON TWENTY YEARS SPENT ENDEAVOURING TO INSPIRE YOUNG MINDS

Nick Nelson of Arcadia Education, a company specialising in History of Art, reflects on twenty years of teaching at Cheltenham College and always endeavouring to inspire young minds.

Teaching at a major public school is a great experience. I inherited my passion for teaching from my father, a hugely committed Director of Music at Marlborough College (*my alma mater*) and other schools. At Cheltenham College, we all, collectively, strive to nurture individuality and creativity, and to teach pupils critical thinking, encouraging them to see both sides of an argument. Manners are important to us, and our collective aim is to shape the whole child and foster the chief tenets of trust, respect, fairness and forgiveness in our charges. These, I feel, are the building blocks for life, even in today's rapidly advancing and multi-cultural environment.

While History of Art remains my specialism, it is a subject that is inherently inter-disciplinary. One commentator, Mark Roskill, said: "works of art are part of the society from which they spring, and one cannot learn about one without learning about the other". I agree wholeheartedly and have devised a series of events over the years to draw together 'like-subjects': the Gothic in art, music and literature, the Elements, the Senses and the Fibonacci Series to name but a few. This 'intellectual windsurfing' allows teenagers to drift between subjects, enabling them to forge key links, and to explore shared themes. This provides more of a 360-degree encapsulation of a given theme, genre or period, encouraging what the Germans dubbed the *gesamtkunstwerk*, or total artwork experience.



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In teaching Art History, much depends upon an individual's subjectivity in the appreciation of aesthetics. It largely consists of a series of opinions and judgements, so having a 'voice' as a teenager is key – the 'teacher monologue' (aka 'chalk and talk') is no longer appropriate in today's media-spun society. Many students use iPads as their new school bag, several type notes on their MacBook Air in class, and most History of Art candidates follow galleries like the Louvre or MoMA on *Instagram* and *Twitter*. Primarily, Art History will always remain relevant and readily available as a strain of popular youth culture, as it is often the ultimate *zeitgeist*, defining the 'spirit of the age'. (Take, for example, Banksy's recent monochromatic mural of Steve Jobs, whose father was a Syrian refugee to the USA, adorning the walls of Calais' concrete jungle.)

So what are some memorable moments for this contemporary Mr. Chips? Teaching students about two Canalettos only to find a member of the class owned them at

home; taking a rather precious German princess, replete with bodyguard 'heavy', into a controversial exhibition of Mapplethorpe's homo-erotic photographs at London's National Portrait Gallery; but most of all, having to view via CCTV a student knocking a large chunk of paint off a Pollock in the Guggenheim, Venice – by accident, I hasten to add. An interesting conversation with the College's Bursar inevitably ensued!

In tutoring students in Art History, one surprising, but essential discipline is public speaking. Rhetoric is almost a prerequisite art form in the eyes of employers these days; confident presentation skills instil a sense of belief in the employee. Thus, students are encouraged to participate in national competitions, such as the ARTiculation Competition organised by Roche Court in Wiltshire.

Equally important is the exposure to vocational aspects and I've been pleased to offer students work placements at Prinknash Abbey and Sotheby's, for example. In the case of the latter, a memory worth forgetting is how a former student took the advice of "offer to do anything to be keen" a bit too far. He created an art historical disaster by unwrapping a Christo – an artist renowned for wrapping up objects, including the Reichstag in 1995 – mistaking it for a Sotheby's mail delivery!

The first-hand experience of viewing artworks in their natural environment is, of course, both key and intrinsic to studying Art History. Trips to New York,



Boston, Washington, Paris and Italy have provided great stimulus for pupils over the years; at best, culminating in a private viewing of Monet's restored Water Lily series in the Tuileries; at worst, having to take responsibility for breaking a window in Siena's Duomo with a football, during a heated fixture in the Piazza del Campo between Cheltenham and the Sienses.

More recently, I've been lecturing further afield, for the Cheltenham Decorative & Fine Art Society, Marlborough College Summer School, and at venues such as Ellenborough Park Hotel. I'm a regular on BBC Radio Gloucestershire, as the arts correspondent on Dominic Cotter's show and am keen to break into more radio work and television work, inspired by the success of my father-in-law, Nick Hewer, of *Apprentice* and *Countdown* fame.

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