

The past and the future in art history



Dr Priya Maholay-Jaradi analysing Indonesian artist Raden Saleh's painting *Forest Fire* with two of her students, Ms Hor Jen Yee (left) and Ms Chen Wenting, who had taken an introductory module on art history. ST PHOTO: FELINE LIM

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NUS undergraduates taking new minor will learn to analyse and interpret works of art

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Art history is not just about the past, but also about the future.

A new wave of art professionals could be nurtured under a new minor in art history introduced by the National University of Singapore (NUS) in conjunction with the National Gallery Singapore.

Students choosing to minor in art history will learn to interpret and analyse artwork such as paintings, sculpture and visual installations in their social and historical context.

They can choose from modules spanning topics from Chinese ink painting to modern Western sculpture. Some, such as *Modern Art: A Critical Introduction*, will be taught by curators from the National Gallery starting this August.

The minor, which was launched earlier this month, will be open to NUS undergraduates currently in their second year and subsequent undergraduate cohorts. Dr Priya Maholay-Jaradi, academic convenor of the minor in art history at NUS, told *The Straits Times* that training students in art history could help them better appreciate the local artwork and architecture that are components of Singapore's national heritage.

"We're also training the future generation of art scholars, art audiences and custodians of our heritage," Dr Maholay-Jaradi added.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Perhaps more than in other places where art history is more widely studied, there actually are possibilities for students in art history to develop their careers.

DR PHOEBE SCOTT, one of the National Gallery's curators who will be teaching a module this August.



Even if students do not go on to pursue art-related careers, skills such as visual analysis that are involved in art history "allows alternative modes of thinking and learning" that could help them in other disciplines.

Twenty-eight modules can be counted towards the minor's requirements, including modules offered at Yale-NUS College and those already taught under other departments in the NUS Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS).

The modules are open to all current undergraduates even if they are minoring in another subject.

Advanced modules under the new minor will offer students internship opportunities at the National Gallery, allowing them to link their knowledge to curatorial practice.

While the modules span Eastern and Western art, classes taught by the gallery's curators will emphasise South-east Asian art while situating it in an international context.

"We wanted to show the historical development of art as a global one," Dr Maholay-Jaradi said.

Exposing students to the exchange of ideas between civilisations through studying different types of artwork prepares them to be global citizens by increasing their sensitivity to other cultures, she added.

Even before the minor was launched, an introductory module on art history was offered in January to about 90 students.

The module, which consisted of 12 lectures conducted by different professors, introduced students to art from different historical periods, from prehistoric cave art to the Italian Renaissance.

Mr Goh Yi Sin, 24, a third-year psychology student, stumbled on the module when he was browsing through the course directory.

"I didn't know pots were considered art pieces. I always saw them as utilitarian objects," he said, reflecting on what he learnt after attending a lecture on Chinese art.

Ms Chen Wenting, 21, a second-year English literature student, had no background in art history but signed up for the module anyway. "It changed my perspective on art in general," she said.

She now not only finds it easier to relate to art through a historical context, but has also learnt about the religious significance of art through a study of Islamic art.

Ms Hor Jen Yee, 20, a second-year psychology student, also felt that she had benefited from the module.

Her interest in art history started from a study of visual arts component in her O-level art course and she now volunteers with the gallery.

The module inspired her to think more critically.

"There's a need for critical thinking and analysis because of the contrast between different styles of art," she said.

Both Ms Chen and Ms Hor are interested in taking up the art history minor. They said the course could help more Singaporeans understand the relevance of art to society.

The curators hope that the new programme can help the Republic become a centre for research on art history, which would complement its existing visual arts events, such as the Singapore Biennale and the Singapore International Festival of Arts.

Dr Phoebe Scott, one of the National Gallery's curators who will be teaching a module this August, said: "It's not possible for Singapore to be a regional arts hub without strong support for research."

An art history major could be offered in future if there is sustained demand for the subject.

Dr Scott said the introduction of the minor was timely, given that there has been "quite a strong recent investment in the arts infrastructure" here.

She said: "Perhaps more than in other places where art history is more widely studied, there actually are possibilities for students in art history to develop their careers."

Correction note: In our earlier story, we said Ms Hor Jen Yee volunteers with the gallery as a docent. Ms Hor has clarified that she is a general volunteer. We are sorry for the error.

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