

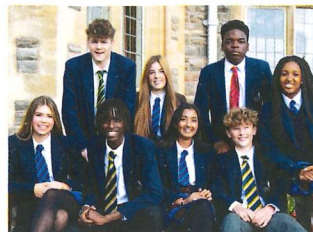
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Inspiring pupils to study STEM subjects



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The big picture

An inspirational teacher has launched a charity enabling young people from diverse backgrounds to study art history. **Emma Lee-Potter** reports



AHLU art history students at The National Gallery

Image: AHLU, Ed Hands

Art history teachers up and down the country were devastated when the exam board AQA announced it was dropping the subject at A level in 2016 – an act described by the historian Simon Schama as “a big dull axe wielded by cultural pygmies”. However, months later, Pearson, another exam board, stepped in and has offered history of art A level since 2017. A total of 632 students took the qualification in 2022.

But while a number of independent schools across the country offer art history A level, fewer than eight state schools run it, even though government figures show that the creative industries contributed £109 billion to the UK economy in 2021.

Rose Aidin, a former art history teacher at several London schools (including James Allen’s Girls’ School and The Camden School for Girls) is determined to widen access and make the subject available to youngsters at

state schools. Seven years ago she launched Art History Link-Up (AHLU), a charity that enables young people from diverse backgrounds to study and be inspired by art history.

AHLU now teaches A level art history to 80 students a year. Up until the pandemic they attended Saturday sessions at the Wallace Collection and The National Gallery

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in London but since 2022 the sessions have been held at The Courtauld Institute of Art. Those living outside London attend the classes remotely.

“We’ve got all these extraordinary collections in the UK, collections which are

really important in the art history A level syllabus, but students rarely got to see them with their teachers and peers,” says Ms Aidin, who is AHLU’s chief executive.

“Many state schools can’t run art history A level because there aren’t enough students so I thought: ‘Why not bring the students to the galleries rather than the other way around?’”

More than 400 pupils from 200 state schools across the UK have studied with AHLU since 2016. The majority are from under-represented backgrounds and at least half live outside London, including some from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The courses are free of charge and give students the chance to study breathtaking works of art in the nation’s finest galleries. The students themselves describe the opportunity as “life-changing”. “We get to learn about a painting and two minutes later we go to see it,” says one.

Many students also opt to take an EPQ (extended project qualification) and are mentored individually by volunteers like Dr Joseph Spence, master of Dulwich College, Dr Judith Jammers, head of history of art at Highgate School, and Dr Penny Wickson, head of history of art at St Mary's Calne in Wiltshire. Their EPQ projects are hugely impressive, ranging from asking: "Is it justifiable to destroy your own art?" to comparing the work of Andy Warhol and Gustave Courbet.

Students can also attend weekly homework clubs, receive expert advice on careers and university and college applications, and gain access to work experience.

"We believe that art history has the potential to transform students' lives and that they, in turn, have the potential to transform our visual culture"

"AHLU gives state-supported students the opportunity to study art history, an opportunity that they wouldn't have otherwise," says Ms Aidin. "It's so transformational for our students – and it's also transformational for the sector. By enabling access, we believe that art history has the potential to transform students' lives and that they, in turn, have the potential to transform our visual culture."

In 2020, all seven of AHLU's students who applied to Oxbridge were offered places, including two for art history at the University of Cambridge. Other alumni are studying

An introduction to art history at Dulwich Picture Gallery



Image: AHLU, Ed Hands

art history at Russell Group universities across the UK and some are embarking on careers in the arts – the next generation of curators, conservators and gallery directors.

Distinguished academics and art historians who have taught the students are impressed by their drive and enthusiasm.

"They are extraordinary," says Ms Aidin. "I've taught in very good schools but I have never seen students like this. Some of them have significant challenges but they burn so brightly. Craig Clunas, professor emeritus of the history of art at the University of Oxford, visits to teach classes on Asian art and says

they are the best students he has ever taught because they are fearless and ask all the questions that we avoid asking."

As a charity, AHLU depends on the generosity of its funders, which include the Rothschild Foundation, Christie's, The Band Trust, the Garfield Weston Foundation, the Law Family Charitable Foundation, Inigo and Boisdale. It recently piloted a six-week Saturday programme for 13 to 15-year olds and hopes to work closely with museums and galleries in the future to train teachers to deliver a similar course in schools throughout the UK.

TEN WORKS OF ART YOU MUST SEE...

Ludo Amory, student operations officer for Art History Link-Up, lists ten paintings that teenagers should see

The Raphael Cartoons

by Raphael and workshop (1483–1520)
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

These seven massive canvases take up an entire room of the V&A and are considered a treasure of the Italian Renaissance.

The Ambassadors

by Hans Holbein the Younger (1533)
The National Gallery, London

This painting is filled with secrets, hidden crucifixes, skulls that can only be seen from certain angles and a host of other clever details.

The Laughing Cavalier

by Frans Hals (1624)
The Wallace Collection, London

Something about the wry smile of this cavalier makes you feel like you know him, a moment of connection between centuries.

The ceiling of Banqueting House

by Peter Paul Rubens (1630–1636)
Banqueting House, London

The magnificent ceiling of Banqueting House is the only surviving in-situ ceiling painting by the Flemish artist.

John Ruskin

by John Everett Millais (1853–54)
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

As anyone who has seen the film *Effie Gray* will know, this painting of one of the most important thinkers of his age, John Ruskin, led to scandal and the dissolution of his marriage.

The Last of England

by Ford Madox Brown (1855)
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham

A very emotional painting showing a couple's last glimpse of England on their way to start a new life in Australia, painted when Brown himself was thinking of emigrating.

Christ of Saint John of the Cross

by Salvador Dali (1951)
Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow

This extraordinary painting, which came to Dali in a dream, shows Jesus crucified from the perspective of someone hovering directly above him, making it unlike any other painting of the crucifixion in history.

Rebuilding the Empire Cinema, Leicester Square

by Frank Auerbach (1962)
The Courtauld Gallery, London

A digital image of this work cannot possibly convey its turgid materiality. The layers of dripping paint are so visceral that you can almost smell the turpentine.

No Woman, No Cry

by Chris Ofili (1998)
Tate Britain, London

The closer you stare at this painting the more emotional it becomes, from the small photos of a son hidden in his grieving mother's tears to the carefully embroidered writing in the background reading "RIP Stephen Lawrence 1974–1993".

Unmoored from her Reflection

by Cecily Brown (2021)
The Courtauld Gallery, London

Commissioned for The Courtauld Gallery, this work is deliberately reminiscent of many of its neighbours, pulling stylistic pointers from as far afield as Peter Paul Rubens and Oskar Kokoschka to create a striking new visual language.