



LAURA FREEMAN

Art history paints pictures for all, not just Wills 'n' Kate

President Macron is right to say that a working knowledge of the history of art should be a part of the education of every citizen — bring on Hogarth and Turner

Laura Freeman | Wednesday January 17 2024, 9.00pm, The Times

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Liberté, égalité, fraternité et maintenant ... art history. Or, properly, *l'histoire de l'art*. According to new proposals by President Macron, a working knowledge of the history of French art should be a part of the education of every French citizen. To which I can only say: *bien sûr* and *bravo* and the same for *les rosbifs* too.

History of art is still wrongly perceived as a rarefied, even elite, subject. The posh girls' subject. The Wills 'n' Kate degree. According to the charity Art History Link-Up, fewer than eight state schools in the country offer history of art at A-level. Distressingly, this is down from 17 in 2014. And that's a crying shame.

Well, she would say that wouldn't she, being an art historian and probably posh to boot? Indeed, I would. As Macron has identified, an [understanding of a country's art](#) — and I would add architecture — should be at the heart of any national curriculum, up there with history and literature.

• [Stolen Picasso and Chagall found 14 years later in Antwerp basement](#)

What would the [July Revolution](#) be without Eugene Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*? How can you hope to understand the cult of Napoleon without Jacques-Louis David's immortal *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*? Onwards! Or even: *En marche!*

If journalism is the first draft of history, then art has it framed and varnished. Not necessarily accurate — history of art lessons will need to teach critical thinking as well as connoisseurship — but certainly atmospheric.

You can learn more about taste, fashion, style and consumer culture from Hogarth's *Marriage A-la-Mode* than from any number of academic disquisitions on the subject. No doggedly footnoted history of 19th-century transport networks could capture the sheer, steaming excitement of the train age as William Powell Frith's *The Railway Station* or JMW Turner's *Rain, Steam, and Speed* do.

You might say: the galleries are open and entry is free (at least on this side of the Channel) to any student. But art history merits teaching. Paintings — buildings too — have a language of their own. A good teacher can help you to “read” a work of art or architecture. Once you have the knack, a lifetime's rewarding looking, deciphering and delighting the eye awaits.

Art History Link-Up has worked wonders in bringing art history to pupils from all backgrounds. Since its founding in 2016, more than 400 pupils from 200 state schools have studied the subject.

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Marvellous, but *encore plus*. And so, like Delacroix's bare-breasted firebrand, will you join me in mounting the barricades, waving the cultural tricolore and calling on the government to put the study of art history in every school?

Laura Freeman is chief art critic