

Art Education in Britain

Over the past century art education in Europe (both free and applied arts) has seen tremendous changes in both content and organization. In earlier days you could learn the profession of a painter, sculptor, printer, bookbinder, potter ... as an apprentice to a "Master". Under the influence of the Bauhaus, the early 20th century master-disciple pattern changed. Walter Gropius (1883-1969) had revolutionary ideas about crafts and arts education. He stated that for developing artistic ideas and design intellectual skills were required and therefore art education needed to be organized in higher education.

Small craft workshops disappeared after the industrial revolution. The production of both ceramic domestic ware as well as sculptural ceramics became mechanized and was produced in factories where parts of the production were distributed among different groups of workers. Nobody mastered the entire production process anymore. Learning a craft, or a part of it, happened in the factory.

When Bernard Leach returned from Japan in 1920, he had a romantic idea about restoring the production of handcrafted ceramics and learning the craft. He established his studio in St Ives (South West England), alongside well known artists as Barbara Hepworth, Paul Nash, Naum Gabo, etc. In 1946 he published "The Potter's Book", a reference book which had a major impact on the Western ceramic world. In this book he describes a synthesis of Eastern and Western philosophy on utilitarian ceramics and glorifies the "mystical qualities" of clay and handcrafted ceramics. It was a kind of antithesis of the modernist design ideas that were preached by the Bauhaus. The Leach consensus that was establishing a dominance in the UK, was fundamentally disturbed by a small influx of refugees from Nazi persecution in Europe; in particular Lucie Rie, Hans Cooper and Ruth Duckworth.

The current English art education is a consequence of these two philosophies: on one hand the refined expressive, urban thoughts of the Bauhaus and, on the other hand, the feeling and the passion for the material of clay in itself which was praised by Leach and his followers.

Influenced by Bauhaus, Bernard Leach and the influential German immigrants, more and more ceramics departments emerged at various universities across England. Design, knowledge and control of material was getting a lot of attention but also tradition and cultural heritage. Ceramic departments of various colleges and universities experienced an incredible increase of students.

Ceramic Departments

As the 20th century progressed concept, content and free expression became more important. Because of the introduction of the digital age, more and more students rather made a choice for graphic and digital design. Several ceramics departments which had flourished for several decades were forced to close their doors due to a decrease of students. Some departments still continue to attract sufficient students in their ceramics department such as the Royal College of Arts, Central St Martins and Cardiff in Wales. These are also the only university institutions in the UK where there is an exclusive ceramics program. There are some 20 other universities across the UK where you can study ceramics as applied art but in all these universities you'll be required to combine at least two art disciplines.

My personal experience

Due to various circumstances, I felt I was "stuck" in my own artistic work; I was looking for a new challenge. Some of my English colleagues and friends encouraged me to go back to some kind of training or education. They told me about the opportunities in England to achieve a "Master of Fine Arts and Applied Arts." Because it seemed to me quite difficult to start studying in England in combination with my job as a teacher in an art academy in Belgium, I started looking for education closer to home in Belgium and the Netherlands. The response was quite daunting. In Belgium and the Netherlands a part-time education system for a "mature student", which is so common in England, seems to be considered as "not done" and therefore certainly not encouraged. That's why I finally ended up in England, at the University of Wolverhampton, a small city near Birmingham (second largest city in the UK). This university has a well-developed ceramic and glass department with renowned teachers: Gwen Heeney and David Jones, both members of the IAC (International Academy of ceramists). Both have a worldwide international reputation by exhibiting worldwide and giving lectures and workshops, publishing articles in international ceramic magazines. Moreover, there are two technical assistants permanently available to give support and technical advice to the students.

The intake interviews went smoothly and I was enthusiastically welcomed. Since I could not attend the classes and lectures on a regular base, the system of "long distance learning" was proposed. Since I could download the PowerPoint presentations of the lectures from the University website, I was aware of the content of the lessons. I could do the practical work in my own studio in Belgium. Weekly or every fortnight, I sent photos of my work to my mentor, David Jones. Through Skype, Whatsapp, email or by phone, I got feedback on my experiments. He encouraged me tremendously to push boundaries and to do a lot of research work, both theoretical and practical, and to place my work in the contemporary context of other artists.

I emailed the draft of my thesis to my teachers and suggestions, comments and advice were returned to me. The periods that I could be present in Wolverhampton, I attended a number of lectures, had consultations with my mentor and got the chance to meet other students and exchange information. I noticed that at least half of the students were "mature students", 40 years or even older. What was regarded in Belgium as "absurd", was in England ordinary. Many people on early retirement, started a new program. Even several over-60's attended a ceramic and glass course or other disciplines.

In Wolverhampton University ceramics and glass are joined in one department so that both studios are neighboring each other. Many students combine these two disciplines. Wolverhampton students are greatly encouraged to work in an interdisciplinary way and therefore you have also access to the all the other art departments like photography, woodwork, graphic design and graphic printmaking, textiles ...

All together I experienced my education at Wolverhampton University as a tremendous enriching accomplishment that I would definitely recommend to anyone who is looking for guidance and new inspiration.

Patty Wouters

Photo 1: Wolverhampton School of Art. The Department of Applied and Fine Arts of the University is a 7-storey building full of creativity. All studios are equipped with a lot of equipment and materials which students can use for experimenting.

Photo 2: In the ceramics department are 12 wheels available for the students.

Photo 3: Students can use 10 ceramic kilns, both electric and gas kilns, large ones and small test kilns.

Photo 4: Two technicians are constantly available for the students and give them technical advice + keep an eye on the security in the studios.

Photo 5: Each student has an individual workspace which he/she can organize in a personal suitable way.

Photo 6: A number of students creating an experimental group work.

Photo 7: Upon graduation all the works of the master students are exhibited at Wolverhampton Art Gallery.

Photo 8: Emma Rodgers is an Alumni of Wolverhampton University, School of Arts. Her work is permanently exhibited in the ceramics department.

Photo 9: The graduation is a formal and very traditional event.