

Dear New Art Historian(s).

Hello and welcome to Pembroke (and massive congratulations for getting in!!). I'm Cora Chalaby, a second year reading history of art and am your Subject Representative, which means I'm here to answer any questions you may have and offer a hand throughout the year. It's only me reading History of Art in 2<sup>nd</sup> year but in 3<sup>rd</sup> year there is Alice, Scarlett and Liam who are all super friendly and none of us can wait to welcome you into the Pembroke History of Art Family! The purpose of this letter is just to tell you a bit about History of Art at Pembroke and fill you in on any course related things you may be wondering about.



As I'm sure you know History of Art is one of the smallest subjects at Cambridge, which is one of the things that I love the most about the course. Automatically you get to know a whole group of people from other colleges who have a really strong shared interest with you - it's joked about in Cambridge that Art Historians always travel in a pack and can be identified at anytime by our "subject uniform" of polo-necks. In addition, you'll forge a strong relationship with Dr Blakesley (Polly), who will be your Director of Studies and is incredibly supportive. As Director of Studies Polly will be responsible for your academic life at Pembroke and she is extremely supportive. You'll meet with her at least twice a term - or more if you need her help with anything which she is in general very willing to give - and she organizes your supervisions. Unlike other larger subjects you're most likely to have your supervisions both with students from and at other colleges.

Pembroke is a pretty ideal college in which to study History of Art. The department (and Hot Numbers a coffee shop opposite, arguably the best in Cambridge) is no more than a seven-minute walk away, and it only two minutes to get to the Fitzwilliam Museum, where you'll have around a third of your teaching. In addition for the 'Objects' Paper you'll be taught in small seminar groups in different colleges, churches or museums every week, Pembroke is one of the most central colleges so there is no excuse not to miss many of these. From experience, the classes in the Fitz often had the most useful information in for weekly essays and were often the last the deadline! At Pembroke we are extremely lucky to have the Rosenthal Art library, meaning our collection is particularly well stocked with art history books and it was very rare there was a book on my weekly reading list that wasn't there. When that is the case, you also have access to the University Library, Faculty Library and our librarian, Pat Aske is always happy to order in books for which aren't already on the shelves: particularly helpful when your writing your Part I dissertation!

The structure of the course is fairly simple and every week you'll have around eight hours contact time (this is about the average for arts subjects but significantly less than the scientists so don't rub it in too much). I think the department are reorganizing the papers this year but either way you'll study the *Meaning of Architecture/Meaning of Art*, *Making of Art* and *Objects*. The latter is intended as a survey course and you have two seminars for it per week, while for the other papers you'll have two-three

lectures, a reading seminar and a one supervision that you write your weekly essay for (2,000-2,500 words). You sit exams in each of papers, for *Making* and *Meaning* these are divided into one essay paper each, where you have a choice and write three essays the titles of these will be similar to your supervision essays, and a visual analysis exam where you get six pairs of images and are asked to write comparative essays - the main thing to think about here is why the images are put together. For *Objects*, it's one exam where you have a choice of questions and the paper is a mixture of a visual and an essay paper. Although every lecture may not be explicitly relevant to the title of your weekly essay and its not the end of the world if you miss one everything mentioned could come up in the exam and missing supervisions or the reading-seminar is a big no-no. If you are ill try to email Polly or your supervisor in advance.

The reading seminar is particularly important as the set texts comprise the main ideas they will want to see in your weekly essays and especially in the exams (both essay and visual papers). Quite often I found these texts pretty hard to grapple with and it's worthwhile spending time on, but its nothing to worry about if you don't understand every word (I don't think any one does!). I would really recommend making thorough notes in the *Objects* classes and if possible getting into the habit of typing these up every week as it will put you in a good position for exam term. Another thing I would strongly recommend doing (and wish I had realised the value of earlier on) is every week getting into the habit of downloading and labelling every image slide that comes up in your lectures **and** the classes at the Fitz, for *Making* and *Meaning*, and as often as possible getting into the habit of turning these into flash cards with the artist/architecture, date, location, material and a couple of key facts about these on. In the visual analysis papers any slide can come up and you will need to be able to identify and attribute these. I made all the flash cards in exam term and it was extremely time consuming which perhaps could have been better used elsewhere!

Broadly speaking in *Meaning of Architecture* you'll study architecture from its origins to around 1700 learning terminology and inferred meaning of architectural elements, structures and contexts. In *Meaning of Art* the emphasis is on the relationship between text and image- biblical and classical- in creating meaning within painting and the study of sacred and secular symbolism. Meanwhile in *Making* you explore a range of techniques and the issues surrounding them from the 1200s – 20<sup>th</sup> century. In your first year you'll also write a short dissertation, up to five thousand words on any object/architecture of your choice in Cambridge, that you hand in just after Easter. I remember being quite daunted by this but it is actually really good fun and if you start your reading early and consistently it doesn't feel like much work at all. My dissertation got a strong first and I will create a Google Drive with that and all my weekly essays from last year which may be helpful to you.

You might at first find the essay titles pretty vague and extremely broad or very specific but don't panic, the titles intentionally chosen to give everyone the flexibility to approach the topic their own way. Go to the reading list and try to get a good selection, although by no means is the list exhaustive (JSTOR and Library Search+ will soon become your best friends) and read only the relevant chapters from each text. Unlike A-Level there is no fixed structure and you have allot of freedom. The key thing is to have an strong argument and where possible question the question, and in every essay use works of art as examples to focus your argument and as evidence

for debate through closely analysing them. What I've come to realise is that they're after argument so much more than content. In my earlier essays I made the mistake of whacking in loads of examples and facts in a way that was almost showing them how much physical work I had done rather than time spent thinking things through - which is what they actually want to see. Everyone's writing gets so much better as the year goes on so don't be disparaged if you find it hard at first. In terms of time spent on the essay, I usually spent three days reading, around two planning and writing and would edit on the day of hand in. It is possible to turn them around faster but this is allotting more stressful (starting early is definitely better, I promise).

Whether you've done History of Art or not before is not something to worry about! I had but around 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of my course hadn't and everyone is in the same boat. Doing reading over the summer is entirely optional - it can be helpful but you'll do enough of that in term and better to spend the time giving your mind a rest and seeing exhibitions! If you do feel keen pick a couple of titles from the reading list that interest you most and just give them a go. What would probably be helpful is investing in: Penguin *Dictionary's of Art/Architecture*, *Gods and Hero's* and *Saints in Art* from the Getty Publications *Guide to Imagery Series*, Hall's *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, and Ralph Mayer's *Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques*, and having a flick through these but by no means try to read them cover to cover, they are just very helpful tools to have!

I remember being extremely excited but also very nervous and overwhelmed in the run up to, and if I'm franking most of my first term, at Cambridge but honestly you have chosen the best subject and undoubtedly the best college. Both Pembroke and the History of Art Department have a really strong sense of community and you'll feel at home in both before you know it. My first year was amazing and I'd happily do it again (more than a bit jealous of you!). Please do feel free to contact me if you have any further questions (either by email: [ctc42@cam.ac.uk](mailto:ctc42@cam.ac.uk), or Facebook: Corinne Chalaby). Relax; enjoy the rest of your summer and stock up on sleep!

Am looking forward to meeting you,  
History of Art Love,  
Cora