

Building a Foundation for an Enhanced Artistic Vision from a Distance

Donald W. Mitchell

An artist's perspective is a key that unlocks the door into a new world of understanding for viewers. Yet where does such a novel perspective come from?

While natural objects often inform artists, few powerful artistic perspectives emerge solely from viewing nature. In fact, until the 19th century most serious artists viewed painting or sculpturing from nature with skepticism.

Spending time with artists has helped many to formulate new perspectives. For the wealthy, it has always been possible to buy lessons from the leading artists of the day who didn't earn enough from making art to support themselves. Some art students traveled to Europe to gain that exposure. Without the need to earn a living, wealthy artists could indulge in whatever creative work inspired them until something useful developed.

For the not-so-wealthy, schools often provided the basics through studying art produced by others and developing fundamental skills like drawing live models. From the Renaissance on, male artists often supported themselves by serving as assistants to established male artists. In the 19th century, women began painting in large numbers, and many earned a living by copying masterpieces in museums like the Louvre in Paris.

Those pathways worked well for those who were wealthy or knew they wanted to be artists at a young age. What could the others do?

Choices were limited. You had to earn a living and carve out a little time to do what young artists had already accomplished by the time they were 22 or so. Without a background in art, you couldn't hope to earn a living teaching it.

This was a classic Catch-22 problem (when you need what you don't have to get what you need) for aspiring adult artists with limited backgrounds until online education expanded the art world. With a computer you could travel the world from your bedroom, see the great masterpieces reproduced, and hear the works discussed by countless art historians.

College art lectures had long featured showing lots of slides in dark rooms while an art historian commented. The view on a computer screen was often better than from the back of a crowded, overheated classroom. You can also “visit” major art historians online without attending their lectures in person providing much flexibility for those with limited time for travel and study.

What does the future hold for artists who want to further inform their perspectives? Online education provides an unparalleled additional opportunity.

Let’s consider the case of Ms. Raeda Ashour to appreciate how large the changes are. Ms. Ashour is a native of Saudi Arabia. While growing up, she didn’t yet feel a calling towards creating art. Instead, she felt attracted to literature and the chance to learn English during her studies in Egypt. As a college student at the American University in Cairo, she deepened her understanding of Middle East culture through reading Arabic literature.

In the process of her Middle East studies, she gained some exposure to Arabic art. She discovered that she loved to paint and took up this activity as a hobby. She also visited galleries and began reading about art.

After graduating from college, she could not obtain a work permit in Egypt and had to bide her time until she gained exposure to book publishing through some friends. Eventually, she founded a publishing company with two partners and especially enjoyed designing book covers. Her artistic hobby also expanded to making collages that friends admired.

After seven years, the publishing business started losing money and was closed. Ms. Ashour was unsure what career to follow next.

Soon thereafter, she married a Lebanese photographer who encouraged her to spend more time working on her art. Ms. Ashour held a solo exhibition in Cairo that was well received.

When the couple moved to Saudi Arabia, she continued to focus on her art and soon built a following as one of Saudi Arabia’s leading artists. In the next twelve years, she added a base of collectors through six solo shows and twenty group exhibitions.

In 2005, Ms. Ashour found that she wanted to expand her artistic vision and improve her perspective. By adding a solid art education, she hoped to gain new insights she could apply to her work. She also realized that a master's degree could also help her gain either a university teaching job or consulting assignments with companies. The wildly fluctuating income of a freelance artist can be stabilized through such activities. In addition, she wanted to write about the potential for art to play a larger and more helpful role in Saudi society.

How might she gain those educational perspectives while living and painting in Saudi Arabia? The possibilities of an online education to serve her needs soon attracted her keen eye.

After considering many online degree programs in art, she selected Rushmore University as her school. Why?

Here were some of her reasons:

1. The possibility of designing a custom major.
2. She could start classes immediately.
3. She could earn credits for her previous life experience.
4. She could study as much as she wanted and accelerate her graduation date.
5. Since many of the university's students had published their work, it gave her confidence that her master's degree writing might also be published one day.
6. There were no exams.
7. The tuition fees were affordable for an artist.

After she graduated in 2007 with an M.A. in Arts Education, I asked Ms. Ashour to share some thoughts with me about her distance learning experiences. Overall, she described this way of learning as a very rewarding step in expanding her artistic vision. She felt that she accomplished several things including:

1. Enhancing her knowledge about art and art education to help improve her career as an artist.
2. Regaining her research and writing skills.
3. Improving her credibility in the artistic community.

In addition, she gained confidence about publishing her papers and seeking teaching jobs at the university level. She intends to continue her education through either specialized studies or possibly earning a doctorate.

How is her art career doing? A recent e-mail shared the good news that she is busy preparing work for two important solo shows in 2008.

What career boosts are you seeking?

How are you going to improve your vision and perspective to enhance your career?

What role can distance learning through the Internet play?

Copyright 2008 Donald W. Mitchell, All Rights Reserved

Donald W. Mitchell is a professor at Rushmore University. For more information about ways to engage in fruitful lifelong learning at Rushmore to increase your effectiveness, visit

<http://www.rushmore.edu> .