



Arts head: Christopher Le Brun, president, Royal Academy of Arts

The academy president on its unique position and his worries that arts education and the profession of art are diverging

Interview by Matthew Caines

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Hi Christopher, can you tell us a little more about the Royal Academy of Arts and your role there as president?

The Royal Academy of Arts is effectively the last of the great academies that at one time existed throughout Europe. Our very robust and adaptable constitution, which incidentally predates the American constitution by some years, may well have been informed by contributions by Edmund Burke and Samuel Johnson.

The academy consists of painters, sculptors, architects and print-makers, and today comprises probably the strongest groups ever in the history of the academy.

The academy is an independent and privately-funded institution - how does that position benefit how the academy is run?

Among the big five - the Royal Academy, British Museum, National Gallery, V&A and Tate - we are the only ones that are independent and privately funded. The drawback is that we devote so much time and energy into securing our day-to-day finances and future, but the advantage is that we are free from the bureaucracy that necessarily accompanies public funding.

We are proud of our independence, which gives artists and architects a voice. It's also true that we attract support from those who wish that sort of independence to survive. However, I realise that this model depends very much on our being in Mayfair, in London, and will probably be unsustainable beyond the capital.

One of the founding principles of the Royal Academy in 1768 was simply "to promote the arts of design" - does that principle still remain?

Yes, the principle remains although the meaning and echoes behind the word "disegno" are fainter now. It still links all our disciplines. We have just elected Thomas Heatherwick and Ron Arad as academicians so our categories retain their flexibility today.

You studied painting at the Slade and Chelsea schools of art in the 70s and have since taught and lectured - what are the biggest changes you have seen to the way art is taught?

One of the biggest changes has been the expansion of student numbers; I was one of only 12 in my first year at the Slade. That first year was effectively a foundation year as I went straight to form school. The Slade tradition in drawing was still intact and a line could still be discerned back through Coldstream to Legros and Degas. Drawing from observation was a completely normal part of an artist's training - now that it may be elective, it is possible to graduate without that experience at all.

It's a subject perhaps too big for this one interview but I found it increasingly difficult to teach in any depth in my subject without a background consensus, no matter how broad, on the canon. The replacing of art history with cultural studies has tended to promote what one might call the prestige of the word, over the skills and sensibilities a young painter or sculptor might bring with them to art school.

Before becoming president, you were the chief coordinator of the academy's annual Summer Exhibition - how do you go about making a truly great exhibition?

I can't think of any formula other than to have a great curator and encourage their personal vision beyond what they might even hope for. In the case of Anish Kapoor, David Hockney and Bronze, with David Ekserdjian, we gave them freedom to make as imaginative an exhibition as they could have dreamed of.

Do you agree with Susan Jones that artists find themselves at the "bottom of the cultural food chain"?

Absolutely not! I am not aware of the argument but my innate romanticism, which despite myself I am unable to entirely suppress, would put the inventive capacity of artists as one of its greatest assets. It seems to me that only invention can truly produce. Everything else is just shuffling material.

What state do you think art education is in at the moment?

I do feel strongly about art education. Effectively I was unable to continue as a teacher because at one time I was forced to choose between my studio or teaching full time. This was because part time visits, which had been such a feature of art school life, were slowly replaced by full and permanent contracts. This had several effects, one was to reduce the exposure for students to fresh thinking, another was to reduce opportunities for artists to support themselves in the early years while continuing to paint. And lastly, it removed from the front line the most commercially successful professional artists.

I am concerned that the worlds of art education and the profession of art are in parallel and possibly diverging development, which is clearly not in the interests of students.

As to whether arts and creative courses are being devalued, I prefer to say that we are now experiencing an astonishing harvest of great artists and architects, so one needs to think: what are the circumstances that led to this flowering of the arts?

Christopher Le Brun is president of the Royal Academy of Arts - follow the academy on Twitter @royalacademy

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