

***Why Are There No Great Women Artists
(in the new Advanced Art syllabus)?***

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Abstract

This paper critically evaluates the appropriateness of the History of art component of the new 2008-2010 Matriculation and Secondary examination (MATSEC) Advanced and Intermediate Art syllabi. The syllabi propose a traditional 'canon' of eighty works of art for students to study, including some of the most well-known painters and sculptors in the history of Western art. However, it simultaneously excludes several groups: in particular, women, non-Western and living artists. Modern and contemporary Maltese art are also omitted, while the artistic media represented in the list are very restricted. The paper argues that these exclusions are deceptive precisely because their omission from the list is 'hidden' behind a veil of inclusiveness (the list covers a very long period: from Palaeolithic cave-paintings to the twentieth century). Hence, students are led to think that this survey is the 'story of art', when it actually offers a very partial account of artistic expression. The concluding propositions offer directions that future re-evaluations of the MATSEC Art syllabi might take.

Introduction

The title of this paper is clearly derived from one of the most widely-read essays in feminist art history, Linda Nochlin's "Why are there no great women artists?" Nochlin's seminal essay set out to study why "there *are* no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne, Picasso or Matisse" (Nochlin, 1998, p. 316), and drew attention to historical injustices in the artistic education of women that contributed to gender inequities in art history and the creation of the myth of 'genius' in the arts. Beyond a measure of irony that must be read into such a question today, its repetition in this context is guided by two motives: firstly, the issues raised by Nochlin about female artists in art history and the social and institutional implications of her analysis, and secondly, the troubling fact that – despite its continuing relevance – Nochlin's essay is relatively 'old', having been published in *ArtNews* in 1971. The fact that feminist scholarship in art history such as Nochlin's (and that of many others) has been around for well over thirty years and is still ignored in some quarters is worrying, and unfortunately, as we shall see in the course of this essay, this neglect is exacerbated by other omissions in some educational contexts.

Actually, the focus of this essay – the new MATSEC syllabi for Advanced and Intermediate Art examinations in Malta – presents us with a number of related, problematic issues that demonstrate that a traditional approach to Western art history that excludes women artists often excludes other categories too. The fact that these exclusions are not being discussed here in the context of established cultural or economic sectors related to the marketing or exhibition of works of art (like galleries) but in the context of educational practices and assessment methods adds weight to our discussion, and confirms Nochlin's thesis that the "fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces but in our institutions and our education" (Nochlin, 1998, p. 316). However, it becomes clear that the circle of exclusions is potentially vicious when we bear in mind that these assessment methods that endorse a person's competence in art and history of art may lead to degrees at the University of Malta (which governs the MATSEC Examinations Board), and that these degrees may qualify that person to occupy posts in other cultural and economic sectors like those mentioned earlier: galleries and heritage sites, for instance. For this reason, in spite of the declared focus of this essay, the implications of our discussion are more wide-ranging than the immediate boundaries of an examination syllabus. It is hoped that this discussion – which is already taking place 'too late', like so many, little 'revolutions' in Maltese art – will contribute to an objective evaluation of the new Art syllabi in the near future and possibly help to launch a review of the structure and aims of these examinations.

Overview of MATSEC Intermediate and Advanced Art syllabi

The new MATSEC Intermediate and Advanced Art examinations come into effect in 2008 (see appendix for details of Advanced syllabus). Practical sections of the Advanced examination consist of a Project (composition from a theme), work from observation assessing the candidate's ability to interpret both the human figure and a still-life with man-made and natural forms, and a portfolio of coursework with finished pieces and research material related to a variety of themes and media. In the Intermediate examination, the practical component consists of a Project (composition

from a theme or design), work from observation (either a still-life or a figure study), and a portfolio of coursework.

The History of Art component in the Advanced examination is composed of two sections. The syllabus covering the first section presents a list of eighty works of art to study, while the second section covers five periods in the history of art: Prehistoric to Late Antiquity, Medieval, Renaissance and Mannerism, Baroque and Enlightenment, and Modern and Contemporary (no specific details about these periods are given in the syllabus). This second section is very similar to the history of art component in the MATSEC Advanced Art examination in previous years, while the first section is a new addition to the 2008-2010 syllabus. In the Intermediate examination, the history of art component consists only of one section, with the same list of eighty works as the Advanced syllabus. The introduction of this new section into the Art syllabi is intended to give candidates a more overall view of artistic developments throughout different centuries (previously, students focused their studies on specific periods). However, this new section raises new issues and problems that were not present previously, and our discussion from now onwards will revolve around this list of eighty works and the questions it provokes.

Reproducing a time-honoured canon

A list of eighty works in a world history of art is a grain of sand in a desert. That quantity is still negligible if one considers the work of a single historical period like the Baroque, or a genre in a specific culture (say, Chinese landscape painting during the Ming dynasty). Even some individual, prolific artists produced quantities of work that exceed that amount by hundreds, even thousands, of finished pieces. Georgia O’Keeffe, for instance, produced more than 2000 works in her lifetime (see Buhler Lynes, 1999), while a single series of woodblock prints by Hiroshige, namely *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, actually totalled 118!

However, a seventeen-year old preparing to sit for the Advanced MATSEC art examination will face the prospect of studying eighty works in depth with some trepidation, especially if he or she reads in the syllabus that his or her discussion of three of these works needs to be “knowledgeable of art-historical and biographical data” and “should be backed by evidence of wide reading”. One could argue that the very idea of having to cover eighty works together with the different periods in Section II in two years is too demanding for an examination called ‘Art’ (rather than ‘Art and History of Art’), but this is not the point that I wish to raise here. The more essential point is that a list of eighty works that begins with Altamira’s cave-paintings (15,000-10,000 BC) and comes to an end in the second half of the twentieth century appears comprehensive enough to present itself to seventeen-year old students as a canonical, ‘complete’ list. This is confirmed by the fact that the majority of the included works were clearly picked out of E.H. Gombrich’s (1950) ever-popular *The Story of Art*, which has been used at post-secondary level in Malta for around two decades and is still prescribed as a main text in the Intermediate Art syllabus. Leafing through *The Story of Art*, one can follow the eminent author’s study of ‘world art’ – though in fact only a minor part of its text and images deals with non-Western art or recent artistic production (Collins, 1989; Elkins, 2005) – and trace the source and illustration of many works in the MATSEC list (including a strangely titled ‘Page from the Lindisfarne Gospel’). It is not difficult to imagine that students preparing

themselves for such an examination will interpret the MATSEC list as an inventory of 'great works' or even 'best works', given that the works of art are presented in chronological order as a sequential narrative and constantly refer the students back to Gombrich's authoritative text. Almost every century in the last two and a half millennia is exemplified by one or more works, though a surge occurs in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with thirty works (37.5%) chosen to represent this period. Consequently, while the list in the syllabus presents itself as a representative map (the works are said to have been "pre-selected...throughout the story of art"), it actually implies a hierarchy, or rather, a group of hierarchies as will be shown below. The MATSEC list is deceptively innocent (it was picked out of Gombrich's classic book), but in reality it is intentionally selective and reproductive of a traditional canon of art history, privileging the Renaissance and Baroque periods in Western art.

One could argue that the survival of the canon for such a long time (some of its central tenets can be traced back to Giorgio Vasari in the sixteenth century) must mean that it does possess at least a measure of legitimacy. It has persisted in the teaching of art in schools and colleges, and in the presentation and reproduction of artistic evolutions in television programmes and art museums. Undoubtedly, the linearity of the canon is more convenient for those, like teachers, who must tell the story of art to others; as an article in *The New Criterion* (a magazine that describes itself on its website as "a staunch defender of the values of high culture, an articulate scourge of artistic mediocrity and intellectual mendacity wherever they are found: in the universities, the art world, the media, the concert halls, the theater, and elsewhere") suggests,

...the linear sequence also has its virtues, not least of which is the literary merit of generating narrative propulsion. And it has the great intellectual merit of depicting each successive artist in vigorous and intelligent competition with his contemporaries and immediate predecessors – which approximately describes the nature of the art world through much of western history. (Lewis, 2002, p. 17)

Talk of 'masterpieces' and 'geniuses' competing for the most prestigious ranks in the world of art does not endure only at a popular level, but is defended in various ways by several art historians, art critics and others in academic circles, as *The New Criterion* (co-edited by conservative art critics Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball) attests. In the 1970s, Gombrich stood up for the canon against the 'relativism' of new perspectives on art history, arguing that there is no "sin of elitism" involved in his "faith in the objective validity of the canon", a canon which he defined as the provider of "points of reference, standards of excellence which we cannot level down". For Gombrich, renouncing these standards of excellence would imply an inability to distinguish between artistic "peaks" and "shifting dunes", a distinction that provides us with "the yardstick of our civilisation" (Gombrich, 1979, p. 150). The view that the abolishment of this yardstick of selectivity ultimately leads to the suicide of academic disciplines like art history and literary studies was reiterated by others in the following decades, most notably by Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994) and more recently by Roger Kimball in *The Rape of the Masters: How Political Correctness Sabotages Art* (2004). Both Bloom and Kimball argue that aesthetic criteria, not political or gender-based motivations, must be applied to the study of works of literature and art, and that the arts need to be rescued from

“political correctness” (Kimball) and theorists of “the School of Resentment” (Bloom). Following the onset of postmodernism in art and literary theory in the 1980s, the alarm bells went off in the educational field too, leading some writers to criticise the new shift toward ideological critiques and the politicisation of the arts for their alleged anti-aesthetic stance and emphasis on a detached, rather than sensuous, appreciation of art (Abbs, 1987; Holt, 1995). This analysis was paralleled by a concern for a minimal cultural literacy, voiced principally by educator and literary critic E.D. Hirsch, who even founded a Core Knowledge Foundation in the States. Hirsch has proposed lists of facts and bits of information that “every American needs to know” (1987), and advocated a theory of education that blames the recent emphasis on skills in education (particularly critical thinking skills) at the expense of a core body of knowledge and proper acculturation for the failures of children in American schools. According to Hirsch, emphasising the content of learning rather than the natural abilities of children helps to narrow educational achievement gaps and hence contributes to social justice.

It is also clear that this recurrent concern for the survival of orthodox canons of art, literature and core curricula is triggered by the ‘threat’ of a more general acceptance of new perspectives on art, literary studies, identity and educational theory since the 1970s. Gender or feminist studies like those by Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock and Frances Borzello, cultural studies, analyses of the non-European Other like Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979), as well as work by theorists of the Frankfurt School have now left their indelible mark not only on the history of art (much to the dismay of writers like Kimball) but also on artistic practices in Fine Art departments and galleries, aesthetics, curriculum studies, contemporary theories of art education, classroom methodologies, and assessment practices at different levels. From a sociological perspective, work like Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) has challenged the universality of Hume’s “delicate taste” or the Kantian notion of pure, disinterested judgement, and highlighted the central role that social class and education play in a person’s ability to “decode” works of art and appreciate “legitimate” (i.e. dominant or canonical) culture (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]). Influenced by the work of Bourdieu, anthropologists like Alfred Gell (1998) have criticised the aestheticism evident in orthodox studies of art that privilege Western notions of aesthetic influences over the social dimensions of artistic production. Hence, the developmental reasoning that characterises so many surveys of art history is not based on universal principles but on tenets that can be traced to the Renaissance and particularly the Enlightenment periods. As a matter of fact,

...the idea of aesthetic experience is alien to most (but not all) non-Western cultures, a view that has led to an emphasis on the embeddedness of art within broader cultural values and meanings that outstrip purely aesthetic appearance. Hence, judgements that initially *appear* to approximate the aesthetic concerns of the Western observer are, in fact, deeply imbricated in wider social, political and religious values. (Rampley, 2005, p. 526)

In the UK, this emphasis on the wider values implicit in artistic production gave rise in the 1990s to ‘critical and contextual studies’, which now play an established role in the holistic development of secondary art education, exposing students to social, cultural, environmental, aesthetic and other motivations that provide them “with an alternative to the orthodoxy of copying or pastiching canonic exemplars” (Addison, 2000, p. 229). At the same time, in the US and international fora, ‘visual

culture' is increasingly competing for attention with its demand that we include in students' education a much wider assortment of 'visual' material than we would have traditionally thought was admissible in an art class (see Freedman, 2003; Duncum, 2006).

In contrast, the MATSEC Advanced syllabus makes a couple of isolated references to context ("appreciating works of art within their particular context" – omitted in the Intermediate syllabus) and reinforces the more orthodox aspects of art history that emphasise the students' identification of works of art and the artist's intentions, i.e. "general stylistic context, ...basic information on its author (when known), ...the iconography and general formal and technical characteristics". The selected works in the list guide us through this stylistic evolution, presenting us with the classic narrative of Western art history, with its origins in Greek and Roman art and development in the art of the Christian West. In fact, if there is any allusion in this list to the cultural or social values that works of art embody, this is the unstated but nonetheless marked presence of Christian iconography in twenty-nine of the eighty works, along with some Old Testament figures in three other works (together, these make up 40% of the works that students need to study). While a number of the remaining works (like Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, Raphael's *The School of Athens*, Bologna's *Mercury*, Reni's *Aurora*, and Rubens' *Allegory on the Blessings of Peace*) balance out this statistic somewhat by transporting us back to mythical, allegorical and philosophical personages predating Christianity, the eight works enlisted from Maltese collections are predominantly Christian, the only real exception being the Roman *Emperor Claudius* (even Giuseppe Cali's *The Death of Dragut* makes a hardly disguised reference to the ultimate victory of Christianity – represented by the Knights of St John – over those who belong to other faiths – represented by the dying Dragut and his Turkish warriors). This Eurocentric, Christian sense of evolution has Hegelian undertones; as Nicholas Addison writes,

...for Hegel, Western and Christian forms are more fully developed than any other culture or religion because they are nearer to the 'Divine Ideal'. This tradition posits art as a cultural phenomenon representing a people's collective or social spirit and thus their position on an evolutionary scale towards ultimate perfection, a notion which Hegel's most ardent student, Marx, was to apply to a theory of economics. These theoretical positions still manifest themselves in education... (Addison, 2000, p. 272)

On the whole, the MATSEC list functions as many other surveys would (like H.W. Janson's *History of Art* (1986), another recommended text in the Intermediate syllabus, for instance): it offers a selective group of works that can be formally compared to each other and judged in relation to criteria like naturalism and perspective. Stylistic continuities and breaks are implied and enable students to 'label' works as belonging to specific periods and styles; students can compare, for instance, the rendering of linear perspective in Raphael's *The School of Athens* to that in the earlier *Holy Trinity* by Masaccio, or can understand that Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* is a twentieth-century reply to paintings like these two Renaissance works. What students will not grasp from the list alone is that Picasso's work at the time of painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* in Paris owes more to African sculpture than to Renaissance painting. But, then again, African sculpture does not form part of the Western canon.

Teaching exclusions

Challenging the canon is not so much a case of ‘dethroning’ important artists like Michelangelo or Caravaggio but coming to terms with a series of exclusions. Now, it is self-evident that any selection is exclusionary to a certain extent and also that any examination syllabus is by necessity selective. No syllabus can possibly represent everything or everyone; like the unbounded art of cartography in Borges’ short story “On Exactitude in Science”, a map that desires perfect duplication ends up becoming uselessly vast, covering the whole land it initially intended to survey (Borges, 1999). But, perhaps this is precisely the central problem in the MATSEC syllabus; as we have seen, its inclusion of works from so many centuries and millennia conveys the impression that it represents a ‘whole’ story and hence may mislead students to think that what they are studying is indeed a fair representation of the most significant art produced since the dawn of humanity.

If we compare this syllabus to another MATSEC syllabus, the Advanced French syllabus for 2008-2010, we find that the latter presents itself unambiguously as a selective account. In this case, only six works of literature are prescribed for study, five of which are twentieth-century works and one of which is actually by Algerian author Mohammed Dib (*Au Café*, 1957). In contrast, while the scope of the Art syllabus may appear to be much more ambitious, its ‘representative’ survey of eighty works in the Art syllabus does not name a single female, non-Western or living artist, or even a work produced during the last forty-five years (the last work is listed as *Marilyn Monroe*, Andy Warhol, 1962 – the entry is also rather misleading because Warhol produced over twenty silkscreen paintings of Marilyn following her death that year!). The nationalities of the listed artists are overwhelmingly European, with twenty-five of the works by Italian artists, and a handful of other artists who are also associated with Italian artistic currents (like Melchiorre Cafà, Giuseppe Calì, and Antonio Sciortino). As one ponders the various exclusions in this list, it is difficult to avoid a judgement coloured by the kind of ‘political correctness’ that critics like Kimball (2004) dislike: in short, that this is yet another list of ‘dead, white, male’ artists.

When this absence of religious, cultural or gender differences occurs in curricula or examinations, it tends to reproduce what Griselda Pollock has called “fictions of sameness”, i.e. the idea that human nature can be represented by a singular ‘civilization’ or set of cultural traditions. In her criticism of Richard Wollheim’s emphasis on artistic intention in *Painting as an Art* (1987), Pollock denounces

... an uncritical acceptance of masculinity, whiteness and Europeaness when the most urgent struggles of our time involve throwing off their burden. Under the imperialising claims which western notions of humanity have cloaked, the humanity of many of the world’s peoples, genders and religions have been denied with varying degrees of violence. Race, gender and class are the theoretical terms by which the very basis of Wollheim’s and Western Art History’s assurances are being challenged worldwide. The question now is who is looking at what, at whom with what effects in terms of power. (Pollock in Atkinson, 2002, p. 39)

Hence, decisions that have a bearing on collections in museums, or on what students study and how a specific field is presented to them are political decisions. Generally, artefacts that are exhibited in museum settings, allied to official texts that

'explain' displays to visitors, present us with a "rhetoric of persuasion" (Bal, 1996, p. 7) that lays claim to the 'truth' behind the objects on display and encourages us to perceive them as objects with a very specific cultural status. Similarly, works of art that are presented for learning in educational settings are perceived as objects of quality, i.e. objects that set themselves apart from others. The possibility that this perception is based on what many people would consider to be objectively true (in the sense that many would agree that all or most of the works in the MATSEC list are indeed objects of high or even exceptional quality) does not eliminate or lessen the cultural violence that Pollock refers to. Actually, their greatness and relative 'sameness' sustain the implied distinctions and exclusions that the myths of orthodox art history (European, male, dead) and the popular cult of the artist (the mad genius typified by painters like Van Gogh and Dalí) have kept alive for centuries. The list suggests that artistic greatness is geographically, racially and gender-specific, and also that it generally follows an established pattern of development. Thus, in keeping with the MATSEC syllabus, the formal narrative of modernism leads from Impressionism and Post-Impressionism to the spatial research of Picasso and beginnings of abstraction in painting and sculpture (Kandinsky, Mondrian, Moore), and climaxes in what Clement Greenberg saw as the ultimate act of abstraction: the separation of painting from literature in the work of Jackson Pollock. The exceptions to this notion of progress-to-abstraction (Dalí, Warhol) introduce a hint of opposition into this narrative in the MATSEC list but, then again, their inclusion is not unpredictable. Why include Salvador Dalí and not Meret Oppenheim? Why Andy Warhol and not Kara Walker? Is it because Oppenheim's uncharacteristic discontinuities are not easily assimilated within the norms of a type of art-writing and narrative that privileges 'logical' evolutions and classifications (see Baur *et al.*, 2007)? Is it because work like Walker's deals with 'dangerous' themes like gender, race and slavery and is produced in a 'minor' medium like cut-paper silhouette? Or is it because the MATSEC syllabus is still replicating the kind of unjust educational system that Linda Nochlin described almost four decades ago, a system that has not permitted women artists to attain 'greatness'?

These exclusions form a 'hidden curriculum' because they are never stated explicitly, yet in conjunction with the listed artists, they inevitably function as a model or sub-text to follow even in Section II of the History of Art component in the Advanced syllabus. Ideas about artistic quality are embedded in the examination syllabus even when they are absent; these ideas are not only absorbed by students but also by teachers, and may be especially resilient in the strategies that teachers use to help their students obtain good grades. Research shows that assessment is "the element of educational practice which most powerfully determines the hidden curriculum" (Sambell & McDowell, 1998, p. 392); official assessment methods influence teachers' teaching methods and also teach students how to internalise a culture's dos and don'ts.

Students may not be knowledgeable about the exclusions we are examining here, but they typically try to read the mindset of examiners; they interpret expectations, priorities, little details that may help them to gain marks and generally avoid to state views that might lower their grades. In doing so, they consciously or unconsciously learn to reproduce these priorities and it may take them a while, if ever, to realise that these prevailing ideologies can be challenged. In connection with this drawback in examinations, Griselda Pollock gives an account of a 'dream' she had of returning to

college and being faced with an examination question about Matisse: she imagines an essay characterised by a feminist interpretation of the social hierarchy established between the male artist and the female, working class model. Referring to herself in the third person, Pollock reflects about her imaginary examiners and their expectations:

She wondered what marks that essay would get as an answer to the question set? It said nothing about the themes, styles and creative innovations which are the mainstay of the canonised stories of art. It produced no critical language of appreciation and appropriation. Yet it tried to expose the structural problematics of women's relation to the defining practices of the modernist paradigm. It was trying to articulate the effects of the underlying ideologies of art-making in the twentieth century. (Pollock, 1994, p. 23)

Indeed, does the discussion of historical and structural “problematics” earn good grades? A syllabus that would appear to neglect the “theoretical terms” (race, gender and class) that, according to Pollock and many other writers and researchers in the field, have been questioning the self-aggrandisement of Western art history, can hardly be perceived by students as a site for “problematics” of that sort.

Forgetting the present

In addition to Pollock's theoretical terms, we also need to consider the fourth dimension of historical time. As we have seen, the MATSEC list wraps up the story of art in 1962, leaving out a series of new developments that have interrogated ‘postmodern’ ideas related to conceptual art, site-specificity and digital media, and are still affecting current artistic practices. In fact, as far as media are concerned, the list is clearly biased in favour of painting over sculpture, particularly in the last three centuries (three sculptures out of a total of twenty-four works during this period). Photography, collage and photomontage, the use of the found object, video, installation, even drawing (arguably the basis of all traditional and new media) – all these are omitted from the list. Apart from closing the door precisely on those theoretical positions (feminism, postmodernism, and so on) that feature heavily in so much research in the humanities in recent decades, the exclusion of contemporary art and experimental media effectively sends out a message that contradicts a stated aim in the Advanced syllabus (“to stimulate creativity”) and an assessment objective in the Intermediate syllabus (that candidates will be assessed on “their general knowledge of Western Art from Prehistory to the Contemporary”). How can an examination stimulate or concern itself with the creativity of young people when it simultaneously distances itself from their times? By ignoring all artistic currents in almost half a century, the MATSEC list indirectly expresses the élitist idea that great art belongs to the past and, by implication, suggests that younger candidates' own experiences are not important or culturally valuable.

This problem is further aggravated by the fact that the most recent piece by a Maltese artist in the list is Sciortino's *Christ the King*, produced almost a century ago in 1918, well before the country achieved its political independence and artists started to think of themselves as ‘modern’ artists. Does this imply that Maltese art after Sciortino is historically insignificant? Are living artists automatically excluded from this list? The existence of this exclusion of all recent art in an Advanced examination in Malta is particularly detrimental because it reinforces conservative attitudes

prevalent in the country and does nothing to support the local history of modern art, with its slow, difficult birth, and Maltese contemporary art, already unsupported by inexistent cultural, political and economic structures. One might hope that teachers preparing students for their Advanced level examination would occasionally digress into unmapped areas in spite of these official exclusions, but, given the extensiveness of the list, it is more likely that they will not be able to find the time to do this. In these circumstances, it is very possible that a student opting to study the History of Art or Art Education at the University of Malta will have learnt the skills to discuss the “formal and technical characteristics” of Cali’s *The Death of Dragut* (1867) but will be unable to name a single, living, Maltese artist.

Propositions

In Malta, students entering post-secondary education would normally have had a rather modest exposure to the history of art. For this reason, one could make a case in favour of a survey-like examination, because this structure has the advantage of introducing students to a more overall picture of artistic developments than was previously the case in the Advanced and Intermediate syllabi. The list familiarizes students with a collection of important works that, according to some educators, form a core curriculum of Western art. Moreover, the list’s narrative qualities and the illustration of most of its works in a highly readable survey like *The Story of Art* simplify the teaching process and make the works easily accessible. However, as we have seen, a price must be paid for this simplification of the story of art and the teaching process – a price that absorbs a number of exclusions and exposes students to the possibility of learning a biased account of artistic production. One of these exclusions in particular (no art after 1962) produces an internal contradiction in the syllabus, because it appears to restrict artistic quality to the past and simultaneously requires students to be creative in the present.

We can now consider some possible ways forward; above all, we need to ask ourselves a number of questions that seem to have been deferred in the process of making the new 2008-2010 syllabi. Questions like: Should we continue to think in terms of a representative set of works of art? Does the learning of the history of art necessitate the passing on of a chronological sequence of continuities, a logical, progressive chain of actions and reactions? Can we gather these works and others in different kinds of arrangements? Do we still need to stress a connoisseurial approach? If so, can this approach be enriched by others? Most importantly, for whom should this form of assessment be relevant? Is the examination cultivating future art historians or historically-informed artists? Where are we locating assessment criteria like ‘depth’ or ‘expertise’ – in knowledge-based areas, critical issues, or in the relationship between art practice and the history of these practices? None of these questions are ‘new’; they deal with matters that have concerned people in the various fields (from art history to media studies and art education) for several decades. Here, we are merely recontextualising these questions. With these questions in mind, I shall now sketch two broad propositions for discussion, hoping that future considerations of the syllabi will take these issues into account. These are not concrete substitutes for the new Art syllabi, but simply indications of what kind of direction future discussion in the field may take.

1. A more plural syllabus

Bearing in mind the several exclusions in the MATSEC list, a more plural syllabus needs to be considered, one that gives students the opportunity to learn about different ways of imagining life and the world. We need to avoid authoritative lists that teach students “that culture is uncontested terrain, that there are no cracks in the system” (Goodman, 1996, p. 19). This is not simply a matter of including a few ‘excluded’ artists as a token gesture of fairness. In fact, including artists who belong to excluded groups in the syllabus does not only balance things out; it is an occasion for discussion about the contested terrains of artistic practices and their history. Instead of presenting the canon as a map of artistic quality whose validity is taken for granted, the very idea of quality needs to be examined. This is not to say that students will not encounter real works and should focus instead solely on ideologies and power relations, nor am I suggesting that students replace the enjoyment of art with some iconoclastic form of militancy. Developing a critical voice does not eliminate the possibility of genuine appreciation.

However, we need to widen our definition of appreciation and ‘knowledge’ too: not only knowledge of biographical data (general knowledge), but also some knowledge of representational conventions and exclusions in history. Perhaps we cannot expect students to become historiographers, but students need to be informed about the premises underlying the discipline. As Robert Ferguson has argued, there “is a social and political dimension to the teaching of art and design which has been denied or evaded for too long” (1995: 53): is MATSEC denying these dimensions too? Research by art educators like Paul Dash has shown how African Diaspora identities and Caribbean cultures are under-represented in Britain (Dash, 2005, 2006). Similarly, the MATSEC list neglects the contributions of other cultures, but, worse than that, it performs a kind of self-denial by ignoring the contributions of several important, Maltese artists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. By steering clear of all modern and contemporary Maltese art, how does MATSEC plan to help Maltese students relate artistic expression to cultural identity? Who will be the students’ role models in the practical components of the examination? Sciortino? Cali? It is true that there exists a tendency in different international contexts to omit contemporary art in particular from secondary level art education (to the extent that ‘school art’ sometimes appears divorced from the actual world of art); contemporary art is perceived by some teachers to be difficult, “full of monsters” (Burgess, 2003). At the same time, research about the significance of contemporary art in education has increased, with institutions like Tate Modern and Goldsmiths College in London collaborating to study how the use of contemporary art in schools can be facilitated, because it is clear that “contemporary artists...frequently explore socio-cultural issues and media that are relevant to students’ lives” (Page et al., 2006, p. 148). Consequently, there is no reason to exclude the possibility that “teaching now with the living” can also help to deepen classroom discussions at post-secondary level.

2. Relating the history of art to the making of art

The second proposition is more radical than the first, but we cannot avoid tackling it until the issue of who these examinations are targeting is fully clarified. MATSEC should consider carefully the real focus of these examinations. The title of both the Intermediate and the Advanced level examinations is simply ‘Art’, and at both levels, practical work is awarded far more marks than the history of art (300 out of a total of 400 marks are at Intermediate level and 250 out of 350 marks at Advanced level).

Maybe, MATSEC needs to accept the full implications of this fact and make the history of art component more relevant to art students, i.e. relevant to students who make art as well as appreciate and study the art of others. In this respect, the history of art component could start to play a role that resembles that played by Critical and Contextual Studies in the UK, which emphasises an investigation of the environmental, historical and other sources that influence the motivations of those who *make* art.

While this approach has been criticised by some for transforming critical studies into a servant discipline, it is also a fact that “there is no area of life-experience that does not, through the medium of ideas, beliefs and values, inform the visual arts” (Tallack, 2004, p. 118). Instead of a prescriptive survey, MATSEC may consider thematic ideas and broader areas for discussion that avoid canonical hierarchies and encourage teachers and students alike to be both creative and critical. These broad categories can be linked to recommended works to study, but will also allow students to make their own choices and connections between works of art and personal, social and cultural values, or issues like conflict, nature, and belief systems. This would also permit cross-cultural debates and interesting comparisons between works of different periods that do not refer merely to questions of style and influence, but would help to make the discovery of meaning in art more socially-oriented and also more personal. We would need to study new models of assessment that discourage both straightforward, didactic methods of teaching art history and essentialist approaches to works of art. The latter problem – that specific works are ‘about’ something like nature, human suffering, and so on – is one of the major risks involved in syllabi that revolve around ideas and values rather than lists because essentialism condenses a work’s ‘meaning’, streamlining it for easy consumption. But essentialism is not unavoidable; rather, this development could be seen as an opportunity to look at works of art from different perspectives: not only as aesthetic or political objects, but both (and more).

Eventually, a development like this could also permit MATSEC to consider relating the history of art components more closely to the practical components, forming an integrated assessment scheme which awards higher grades to those who can make connections between their own artistic preferences, culture, experiences and those of others. This integrated performance would be evident not only in students’ written work but also in research portfolios. In this way, the history of art and artistic practices will form a continuum, not sit side by side as two entirely distinct entities that are studied separately. Of course, this debate could lead in another direction: MATSEC could consider introducing a separate History of Art examination at Advanced and/or Intermediate levels. But that possibility lies beyond the purpose of the present paper.

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Appendix: Paper II in the Advanced Art Syllabus 2008-2010**General description of Art Syllabus:***Syllabus:*

Project (3 weeks) + Paper I (6 hrs) + Paper II (3 hours) + Coursework

Aims

The Aims of the syllabus are:

1. to stimulate creativity and insights into the artistic process
2. to develop visual awareness through investigation and analysis
3. to improve expressive qualities and communicative abilities through experimentation and technical proficiency
4. to cultivate aesthetic and critical judgement
5. to develop a critical approach to the evaluation of works of art within their historical context

Assessment Objectives

Candidates will be assessed on their ability

1. to interpret and respond to artistic stimuli
2. to research, develop and express ideas and form
3. to use different artistic media skillfully and sensitively
4. to discuss knowledgeably and critically the History of Art

Subject Content

Subject Content is determined by the Aims and Assessment Objectives of the syllabus. This is achieved by:

1. research, rigorous exploration and extended development of particular themes and ideas
2. experimentation, sensitivity and proficiency in the use of media
3. investigative, confident and well structured approach to the recording of observations
4. critical knowledge of history of art and an appropriate use of artistic terminology

Paper II - History of Art Time: 3 hours

Candidates are expected to have a broad knowledge of history of art from Prehistoric to Modern and Contemporary. They must show a proper understanding of different styles and an in-depth analysis of particular periods. Candidates should be knowledgeable of art-historical and biographical data and should show competence in appreciating works of art within their particular context. This should be backed by evidence of wide reading. A proper use of artistic terminology is a must.

The paper is divided into TWO sections, SECTION I AND SECTION II

Section I covers the knowledge of basic essentials of a pre-selected list of eighty works throughout the story of art (see the list hereunder). Five works will be presented in this section, including one from Malta. Candidates must discuss three of these works. Candidates should place the work in its general stylistic context, discuss basic

information on its author (when known), discuss the iconography and general formal and technical characteristics.

1. *Sleeping Lady*, from Hal-Saflieni, c.3300-3000 BC, National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta, MALTA
2. *Bison*, c. 15,000-10,00 BC, Altamira, Spain
3. *Seated Scribe*, from Saqqara, c. 2400 BC, Paris, Louvre.
4. *Pharaoh Tutankhamen and his Wife*, c 1350 BC, Cairo Museum
5. *Statues of two youths*, Polymedes of Argos, c. 580 BC, Delphi Museum
6. *Bronze Warrior of Riace*, c.450BC, Reggio Calabria.
7. *Discus Thrower (Discobolus)*, Roman marble after Greek bronze, Myron, 450 BC
8. *Hermes with young Dionysus*, Praxiteles, c. 350 BC, Olympia Museum
9. *Nike of Samothrace*, Pythokritos of Rhodes (?), c. 190BC, Paris, Louvre
10. *Laocoon and his Sons*, Hagesandros, Athenodorus and Polydoros of Rhodes, c. 25 BC, Vatican Museum
11. *Emperor Claudius*, c. 50AD, The Domus Romana, Rabat, MALTA
12. *Reliefs from the Trajan Column*, Dedicated AD 114, Rome
13. *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, c. AD 356, Crypt of St Peter's, Rome
14. *The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes*, c. AD 520, Basilica S. Appolinare Nuovo, Ravenna
15. *Page of the Lindisfarne Gospel*, c. 700, British Library, London
16. *Crucifix of Archbishop Gero*, c. 975-1000, Cologne
17. *Bronze doors of Hildesheim*, 1015, Hildesheim Cathedral
18. *Bayeux Tapestry*, c. 1080, Bayeux
19. *Last Judgement*, Giselbertus, c.1130-35, Autun Cathedral
20. *Christ as Ruler of the Universe*, c. 1190, Cathedral of Monreale, Sicily
21. *Melchisedek, Abraham, and Moses*, c. 1194, Chartres Cathedral
22. *Ekkehart and Uta*, c. 1260, Naumburg Cathedral
23. *Baptistery*, Nicola Pisano, 1260, Pisa Cathedral
24. *The Mourning of Christ*, Giotto, c. 1306, Cappella dell' Arena Padua
25. *Maesta*, Duccio, c.1308, Opera del Duomo, Siena
26. *The Annunciation*, Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi, 1333, Uffizi, Florence
27. *The Wilton Diptych*, c. 1400, National Gallery, London
28. *Très Riches Heures*, Paul and Jean de Limbourg, c. 1410, Musée Condé, Chantilly
29. *The St Paul Retable*, Circle of Luis Borassa, c.1400, Cathedral Museum, Mdina, MALTA
30. *The Holy Trinity*, Masaccio, c. 1427, Sta Maria Novella
31. *St George*, Donatello, c. 1416, Museo del Bargello, Florence
32. *The Betrothal of the Arnolfini*, Jan Van Eyck, 1434, National Gallery, London
33. *The Battle of San Romano*, Paolo Uccello, c. 1440, National Gallery, London
34. *Birth of Venus*, Sandro Botticelli, c. 1485, Uffizi, Florence
35. *The Last Supper*, Leonardo da Vinci, 1498, Sta Maria delle Grazie, Milan
36. *David*, Michelangelo, 1501-04, Galleria dell' Accademia, Florence
37. *The Sistine Chapel ceiling*, Michelangelo, 1509-12, Sistine Chapel, Vatican
38. *The School of Athens*, Raphael, 1510-11, Vatican Stanze, Vatican
39. *The Tempest*, Giorgione, c. 1508, Accademia, Venice
40. *Madonna with Saints and members of the Pesaro Family*, Titian, 1519-1528, Sta Maria dei Frari, Venice
41. *The Crucifixion*, "Grunewald", c. 1515, Colmar

42. *Adam and Eve*, (engraving) Durer, 1504
43. *The Madonna with the long neck*, Parmigianino, 1532, Palazzo Pitti, Florence
44. *The Crucifix*, Polidoro da Caravaggio, c. 1530, St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, MALTA
45. *Mercury*, Giovanni Bologna, 1567, Museo del Bargello, Florence
46. *The Opening of the Fifth Seal*, El Greco, c.1610, Metropolitan Museum, New York
47. *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*, Caravaggio, 1608, Oratory of St John, Valletta, MALTA
48. *Aurora*, Guido Reni, 1613, Palazzo Rospigliosi, Rome
49. *Allegory on the Blessings of Peace*, Rubens, 1630, National Gallery, London
50. *The Night Watch*, Rembrandt, 1642, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
51. *"Et in Arcadio Ego"*, Poussin, 1655, Louvre, Paris
52. *Las Meninas*, Velazquez, 1656, Prado, Madrid
53. *The Vision of St Theresa*, Bernini, 1644-47, Sta Maria della Vittoria, Rome
54. *The Charity of St Thomas of Villanova*, Melchiorre Cafà, c.1663, National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, MALTA
55. *Life of St John the Baptist*, ceiling decoration, Mattia Preti, St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, MALTA
56. *The Worship of the Holy Name of Jesus*, Giovanni Battista Gaulli, 1670-1683, Il Gesù, Rome
57. *Fete in a Park*, Watteau, 1718, Wallace Collection, London
58. *Cleopatra's Banquet*, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, 1750, Palazzo Labia, Venice
59. *Marat*, David, 1793, Royal Museum, Brussels
60. *Bather*, Ingres, 1808, Louvre, Paris
61. *The Giant*, (etching) Goya, 1820
62. *The Haywain*, Constable, 1821, National Gallery, London
63. *Steamer in a Snowstorm*, Turner, 1842, Tate Gallery, London
64. *The Death of Dragut*, Giuseppe Calì, 1867, National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, MALTA
65. *The Balcony*, Manet, 1869, Musée d'Orsay, Paris
66. *The Gare St. Lazare in Paris*, Monet, 1877, Musée d'Orsay, Paris
67. *The Gates of Hell*, Rodin, 1880-1917, Musée Rodin, Paris
68. *Mountains in Provence*, Cezanne, 1886, National Gallery, London
69. *The Artist's Room in Arles*, Van Gogh, 1889, Musée d'Orsay, Paris
70. *Two Tahitian Women*, Gauguin, 1897, Courtauld Institute, London
71. *The Scream*, Edvard Munch, 1893, National Gallery, Oslo
72. *Sketch for Composition IV*, Kandinsky, 1910, Tate Gallery, London
73. *"La Desserte"*, Matisse, 1908, Hermitage, St Petersburg
74. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)*, Picasso, 1907, MOMA, New York
75. *Composition with red, black, blue, yellow and grey*, Mondrian, 1920, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
76. *Christ the King*, Antonio Sciortino, 1918, The Mall, Floriana, MALTA
77. *Recumbent Figure*, Henry Moore, 1938, Tate Gallery, London
78. *Apparition of a Face and Fruit-dish on a beach*, Salvador Dali, 1938, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford
79. *No 14*, Jackson Pollock, 1948, PC, Westport, USA
80. *Marilyn Monroe*, Andy Warhol, 1962

Section II covers different periods in the history of art. Four questions will be set on each section.

Candidates must answer two questions from two different sections. The sections are as follows:

- (a) Prehistoric to Late Antiquity (up to the time of Justinian)
- (b) Medieval
- (c) Renaissance and Mannerism
- (d) Baroque and Enlightenment
- (e) Modern and Contemporary