Course Content

The course will aim to answer this question and raise many more. For example, ‘What is colour?’ After a brief look back at the prehistoric colours of cave art and those of Egyptian and Roman painting, you will learn about the range of pigments made from natural sources which Renaissance artists had at their disposal together with the various techniques they used. Oil painting, for example, is a very different technique to fresco or watercolour, and the way a picture looks can very much depend upon the medium used.

We will also look at how artists’ colours developed, from those ground in a mortar by studio assistants from Renaissance times and earlier, to the invention (in 1841) of the collapsible metal tubes of prepared paints that we know today which allowed artists, such as the Impressionists, to work outdoors.

Artists use colour in myriad ways to convey their individual purpose. The English artist, John Constable, sought to depict nature as naturally as he could. He once said that the sky was the ‘key note’ in a painting and made several studies solely of clouds; “I have done a good deal of skying (making sketches in colour of skies,) for I am determined to conquer all difficulties.” Seventy years later, and in complete contrast, the Norwegian artist, Edvard Munch, referring to his painting, ‘The Scream’ commented “The sun went down – the clouds were stained red, as if with blood. Painting the clouds like real blood. The colours screamed.”

You will learn how colours can change appearance or even disappear over time. You will also examine some of the techniques artists have used during visits to the Ashmolean Museum and the National Gallery in London. You will also be encouraged to visit the Picture Gallery at Christ Church in Oxford.

Intended Learning Outcomes

On completing the course, students should:

- be able to recognise the style and technique of particular artists of the period represented in the Ashmolean Museum and the National Gallery
- be able to make a formal analysis of a painting
- interpret iconography