Research Degrees in Art History

Writing a Research Proposal

The Objective

As you write your proposal, you might bear in mind that the reader will be looking for a number of things:

- evidence that you have a clear question in mind;
- evidence that, over the next few years, you will have some interesting and original things to say about that question that make a new contribution to the discipline;
- evidence that you can explain your ideas clearly and concisely;
- evidence that you already know something about the topic that you propose to research - for example, that you are aware of particularly important works in the existing literature and of archival sources that you may need to explore;
- some sense of why your project is worth pursuing, and how it might enrich the discipline of Art History.

The guidance below is intended to help you to produce a proposal that will help you to answer these concerns.

Presentation

- Proposals are best presented in the form of a short essay (about 1000 words), rather than a series of bullet points, or a set of notes.
- There are no rules about typeface, double-spacing and so on. Legibility is sufficient.

Content

- The basics
  Your name and the title of your proposed thesis.
- The question
  You should state clearly and precisely the specific area of art history that you intend to explore, and the key questions raised. Bear in mind that a research thesis is not a book. A book can address a series of loosely related topics, but a thesis is more tightly focused and will most likely involve some form of archival research. Research proposals - including successful ones - are almost always over-ambitious, but the more broad-ranging a proposal is, the harder it is to see how a coherent thesis might develop from it.
- The approach
  You should give some sense of how you intend to go about exploring your question. You may be aware of important archives that you will need to visit and sources that you should look at. If so, please list them, and any plans that you have to access this material. If accepted, your project is likely to develop and mutate under the guidance of your supervisor. In many cases, the thesis that emerges after many years of research bears only a partial resemblance to the original proposal. You are not committed to everything that you say in your proposal; only to producing the thesis that develops out of it. Again, do not worry if you do not know exactly how your

thesis will develop: you can signal areas you are uncertain about, or try out a particular line that may be modified later on.

- The literature
  It is helpful to indicate some of the literature that you are going to address. This need not involve giving a full bibliography, but it is important to list the key publications in your area of interest. You should explain how they relate to your proposal: perhaps they contain an argument or position you intend to attack or defend, or ideas that you wish to explore in your thesis. If your project involves research and publications in a foreign language, we would expect some evidence of your reading ability in that language.

- The importance of your project
  Good proposals often include some explanation of why the research project is worth pursuing. Perhaps recent publications and/or archival research in the area have made a previously unresolved problem solvable; perhaps further research would help to answer some larger question/s. Whatever the issues are, it would be good to include some motivation for your project.

- What not to include
  You will need to include information about your background and qualifications in your application; and it would be helpful to include this information with any draft proposal that you might send to us for comment before you apply. But you do not need to include this information in the proposal itself. Similarly, you should not include information about any previous pieces of research you may have done, further personal information, or information about your access to libraries. All this can go elsewhere in your application.