

Expectations for the Master of Arts Thesis: Division of Art History

THE M.A. THESIS: OVERVIEW

The M.A. Thesis is the premier component of the M.A. program in Art History and provides you with the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to perform in-depth research, careful argumentation, and editorial revision of your prose style. While the length and scope of each M.A. Thesis will depend on the individual nature of each proposed topic, the general expectation for the M.A. Thesis is that it will be an article-length research paper. This paper will be written under the guidance of three art history faculty members, one of whom will be designated as your first, or primary, reader/advisor. Typically you will seek out an advisor in the appropriate field of study to serve as your first reader and consult with that person on the selection of second and third readers. You should define the paper's content, scope, and length with each of your readers and devise a schedule for internal and external deadlines to make sure that you successfully complete the M.A. Thesis within the acceptable timeframe allotted to you for the M.A. Program.

THE M.A. THESIS: REQUIREMENTS

The M.A. Thesis is normally 40-50 pages, but in some cases (if the topic warrants it) an alternative format/length will be decided upon in consultation with the student's committee chair. Your faculty advisors are the final arbiters as to appropriate length. While the form will be dictated in part by your topic and guided by your faculty advisor, a good thesis should include the following:

- A clear definition of the nature and parameters of your research project.
- An assessment of relevant scholarly publications in the field and how your research project draws on and/or contributes to that work.
- A claim or critical interpretation supported by visual and textual evidence and presented in a well-structured argument.
- An original conclusion stating your findings, the main evidence for them, and their significance.
- All citations must be documented with notes and bibliography. All citations should conform to the conventions outlined in either the *Chicago Manual of Style* or the *M.L.A. Handbook*.
- Your M.A. Thesis should include illustrations of the works of art most relevant to your project. Some projects will demand more illustration than others. Scans or photocopies are acceptable. Each image must have a figure number (e.g. Fig.1) and a brief caption identifying the title of the work, artist/maker, and date (where known), and the source of the image (e.g. the publication from which you copied it). Include references to figure numbers in your text, as appropriate.

THE M.A. THESIS: GETTING STARTED

One of the best ways to prepare you for the process of researching and writing an M.A. Thesis in Art History is to read a variety of articles and actual M.A. theses in the field. You will notice that each article and thesis has a unique characteristic that is dictated, in part, by the topic and

argument of the essay, the style of writing of the author and the particular methodological aim of the author. Good articles and theses will make each of these aspects clear to you as a reader and you should take note of particular styles of writing and argumentation that you admire for their effectiveness. You will also find certain articles and M.A. theses that may seem surprisingly weak in your opinion. These too should serve as good examples for you – what pitfalls to avoid. Ultimately the M.A. Thesis is something that you can absolutely accomplish!! You should strive for the highest quality of research and writing of which you are capable and your faculty advisors will push you to move beyond that capability to an even higher level. However, the M.A. Thesis should not be approached as the end-all of you as a scholar and as a person. Like everything else in academia, the M.A. Thesis is merely one step, albeit a big one, in a long process of learning.

FINDING A THESIS CLAIM

Once you have established the general area of your thesis topic (i.e. Renaissance Italian painting; contemporary photography; African politics and patronage), write a one-page abstract of what in particular drew you to this field of study and what you would like to focus in on for your thesis project. The sooner you can narrow down the scope of your thesis project, the better. The better M.A. theses are those that have an explicit claim (i.e. statement of what it is that the paper will accomplish and why it is relevant to the field). Some students, though not all, develop an M.A. thesis from a paper written for a course. Others choose their topics due to an outside interest. Important to consider when selecting and defining the M.A. thesis is the topic's relevance to the discipline in general and its interest for you personally. Find a topic that you find exciting to research and write about – this topic will be the focus of your research for at least a year, so find something that you believe will sustain your attention!

DETERMINE YOUR VISUAL SOURCES

One of the first things you should consider when exploring the M.A. Thesis topic is what artworks will be the focus of your investigation. You may want to write about just one work of art or perhaps a body of related artworks. Perhaps you are interested in one artist or architect or you are interested in several different artists that are related through either visual or theoretical concerns. In any case, once you have narrowed the scope of your research, one of the first exercises that you should perform is to select one or two images that you believe will be central to your M.A. Thesis. Write a two-page justification of your selection of these two images in light of your research goals and explain how these visual sources will constitute the primary evidence support your thesis claim.

FINDING YOUR METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Each art historian is drawn to a particular field and writes in a particular style because he or she wants to accomplish certain goals. You too have individual interests that dictate your choices, but you may not be aware of, or you may have not defined, what is called your methodology. Select one scholarly work that you have found to be useful as a model in its approach to an art historical subject. In two pages, describe the aims and means of this scholarly approach: What questions does it pose? How does such an approach achieve its answers? How and why is this work useful for your own M.A. Thesis?

Next, examine the various types of texts that are included in your bibliography. Write a two-page assessment of the different kinds of textual sources your project calls upon: How dependent is your analysis on primary sources? What kind of information or analysis do your secondary sources provide? How might you interpret your own goals in light of these texts?

SET UP A WRITING PLAN

With your advisors, devise a fixed schedule for the submission of writing. It is often best to work backwards from the ultimate deadline (i.e. the deadline for the final draft) and set up mini-deadlines along the way to ensure that the majority of the writing of the M.A. Thesis will already be finished well before this date. Every person has his or her own style of writing – whether it is linear (i.e. from first page to last) or non-linear (divided into thematic “chunks” or segments of the larger whole). In either case, you need to write consistently. Regularly submit five or ten pages of writing toward your first draft to your advisor on a fixed schedule and create a deadline for the submission of the first complete rough draft to your advisor well in anticipation of the final deadline. You must be prepared to revise and edit your thesis multiple times from the moment in which you hand in the first draft and the moment in which the final draft will be submitted to the university. You must allow yourself the time in order to seriously rework your drafts.

FORM A SUPPORT GROUP

You are not the only one who is writing an M.A. thesis. Seek out the other graduate students in art history or graduate students in other disciplines and form a writing workshop. Create a schedule for the submission of segments of your and their writing as well as a schedule for the discussion and critique of your and their writing. Often you will find that by forcing yourself to articulate verbally what you have attempted to argue in written form will clarify and refine your argument and lead you in new directions. Furthermore, it will allow you to participate in the academic community surrounding you. This is a necessary – and extremely pleasant – aspect of any intellectual endeavor.

IMPORTANT DEADLINES

Make sure that you comply with the College of Arts and Sciences deadlines in proposing and completing your thesis. For example, your thesis topic must be approved by your committee and submitted to the Graduate College prior to completing your MA comprehensive examinations, which must be passed successfully prior to writing your thesis.

For more information on the Graduate College’s requirements and guidelines, please see the *Thesis and Dissertation Handbook* at:
<http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/gradcol/tdhandbook/tdhdbktoc.htm>.