

Design and Material Culture 1650 to the present

One of three specialisms taught on the acclaimed RCA \ V&A History of Design Programme, 'Design and Material Culture – 1650 to the present' provides a rich historical understanding of the formation and the shape of the modern world in Europe and North America.

Even the most modest designed object has the capacity to reveal a great deal about the society which created and used it. The shape and cut of a High Victorian dress can reveal as much of the life of the woman who wore it as a painting or a photograph, just as the disappearance of material things into the virtual world tells much about the interests and attitudes of the world we live in today.

Students taking this specialism focus on a wide range of objects, from iconic products created by renowned designers, to the anonymous products of craft and industry. In defining their own research subjects in the period, students are able to develop an interest in a particular field such as the history of fashion or industrial design or can decide to develop a broad expertise in the history of design.

Ornament
Western Europe,
late 17th century



Running for over 25 years, the programme is a pioneering development in British postgraduate education bringing together two important South Kensington institutions – the Royal College of Art (RCA) and the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A).

It is the only full-time, two-year MA course available in Britain in the subject area, offering an exceptional opportunity to study the world of design and material culture at an advanced level, and benefits from the unique resources of the V&A which, along with its collections, houses the National Art Library, as well as from the highly creative environment at the RCA.

'Valentine' typewriter designed by Ettore Sottsass. Made by Olivetti, Italy, c.1969



The course combines a rich taught programme with exceptional opportunities for original research. Students are introduced to a range of approaches to the subject and develop considerable research, writing and analytical skills. All classes are presented in small-group, seminar format. The departments of the V&A provide a remarkable opportunity for object-based study. A number of site visits are undertaken in Britain and continental Europe.

The programme welcomes applications from students with an undergraduate degree in the humanities or art and design practice. The great majority of graduates of the course at MA level find employment in closely related fields or go on to further research degrees. Graduates of the course can be found as curators in museums around the world, academics teaching in universities, writers and researchers in the media and design consultants.

Elbow Armchair by Seddon & Shackleton. London, England, late 18th century



Porcelain coffee set designed by Eva Zeisel, United States, c.1953



Pair of scissors in Bauhaus style, manufactured by Pfeiling, Germany, early 20th century





Further Information

Bursary details / financial support

Students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland are eligible for the extensive student bursary scheme administered by the Royal College of Art. These bursaries provide a maintenance grant and part of the fees. Applicants from other European Union countries may apply for a 'fees-only' award. Full details are published on the RCA Website.

In addition to the bursary scheme, individual scholarships are funded by the Friends of the V&A and the Oliver Ford Trust. These are open to Home and EU applicants.

Research Degrees

The History of Design programme also supervises research degrees (MPhil and PhD). Staff research interests and areas of supervision are described on the History of Design section of the RCA Website.

Contact Details

Full details of the course structure, the staff team, graduate destinations and the course facilities can be found at www.rca.ac.uk



RCA \ V&A
History of Design

For further details contact the Course Administrator, V&A Museum, South Kensington, London SW7 2RL
T: +44 (0)20 7942 2574
E: k.royall@vam.ac.uk

or

History of Design Administrator, Royal College of Art, Kensington Gore, London SW7 2EU
T: +44 (0)20 7590 4482
E: hod@rca.ac.uk



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A full-time MA Degree
with student bursaries

Front Cover: Table lamp
by Poul Henningsen.
Denmark, 1927

Overleaf: Goose feather hat
by Philip Treacy.
England, 1995

Above: Medallion by Josiah
Wedgwood and Sons Ltd.
England, c.1796

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Museum, London
Design by Tom Wilson



Royal College of Art
Postgraduate Art and Design

V&A