Applying to Graduate School in Art History

A Workshop with Professor Nancy Rose Marshall

Wednesday, October 15
6-7PM PM
L170
Agenda

I. When & Why to Apply to Graduate School
II. Deciding about schools
III. Contacting schools
IV. Preparing your application
V. Making decisions

With thanks to co-presenter
Prof. Anna Andrzeejewski
I. When & Why to Apply to Graduate School
WHEN

• Consider length of time you’ve been in school (and your “burnout” level)

• If you decide to take time off before applying, stay active in the field (volunteering, reading, etc.) and prepare for languages, GRE, deficiencies, etc.

• There is no penalty for taking time off; in many cases, it is the best option
WHY

• Do not apply simply because you “have nothing else to do” or you “love art”
• You must like to do research
• You should have a focus/area of interest
• You should have an ultimate career objective that you can articulate and to an extent, stick with

• There is no financial benefit to earning a graduate degree in art history – so only apply if you are prepared to accept this
OTHER FACTORS TO CONSIDER

• Your GRE (verbal minimum of 140-160)
• Your GPA (ideally 3.0 or higher)
• Letters of Recommendation – you should be able to secure at least two from professors who know you well (preferably 3); one letter could come from someone you’ve worked with professionally (at a museum or gallery)
• Graduate school is a full time commitment – a job – and will entail some level of financial hardship. Are you prepared?
• How well you cope with deadline pressures and competitive environments
II. Deciding on Schools

Resources

http://caravaggista.com/applying-to-graduate-school-in-art-history/
http://www.collegeart.org/directories/
General Advice

• *Talk to faculty here – especially in your field of interest* (it is our job to help you find the appropriate places)

• Decide now if you want to apply to Ph.D. program or Terminal M.A. program. These are very different things, with the former usually better funded and stronger academically but assuming you will be there for the six to eight years of the degree (do not apply to a Ph.D program assuming you can just leave with an M.A.: this is discouraged by most places unless you do not pass your qualifying papers or exams).

• Institutional reputation is only one factor (and not the primary one to consider)

• Choose a school based on institutional strength (i.e. museum collections, research materials in your area, funding for graduate students) AND, especially, faculty with whom you wish to work

• *Talk with prospective advisors and especially graduate students before you decide*
III. Contacting Schools

- Vermeer, *Woman Writing a Letter*, c. 1670
How do I approach a potential advisor about applying to his or her program?

• Only approach a potential advisor if you have specific questions (a general email introducing yourself is not helpful to anyone)

• Email or written correspondence is probably best

• Do describe your interests and reasons for considering their program – briefly
Things to Say/Ask of POTENTIAL advisors

• Describe your background (2-3 sentences)
• Indicate your interest in the program and briefly explain why
• Good things to ask: 1) what their plans are for research & teaching in next 5 years (sabbatical leave, etc.); 2) funding climate (are all grad. Students funded); 3) special opportunities in your field there; 4) if they have any graduate students who would be willing to talk with you
• Questions about GRE scores, application deadlines, etc. are best directed to secretaries
• Keep in mind faculty members are exceptionally busy & may not respond, especially to long-winded and vague emails
Things to Say/Ask Graduate Students

- What are classes like here?
- How much flexibility do you have to choose classes?
- How available are professors (especially your potential advisor)?
- What is the funding situation like?
- Are there opportunities for curating or other professional activities?
- What are the libraries like?
- What is it like to live here?
- Are the graduate students a cohesive/tight knit group or is there a lot of competition?
IV. Preparing your Application
Important things to keep in mind

• You **must** adhere to deadlines
• You should follow up to make sure each school has received everything
• While it is OK to follow up with faculty about letters of recommendation, do not hound them (application deadlines may be more flexible for them)
Application components

- Statement of purpose
- Letters of Recommendation
- Writing Sample
- Application form itself
- GRE scores
- Transcripts

You are responsible for seeing that all of these elements reach the department; double check!
The Easy Parts

• Application forms are usually submitted online
• GRE scores – the GRE service sends them directly to the schools, but you have to tell them where to send them
• Transcripts – they must be ordered from the registrar for each school (for a fee); you cannot make copies (they have to be official)
Statement of Purpose

• Explains your reasons for applying to graduate school
• Articulates what you plan to study and what you ultimately intend to do
• It is acceptable to write different statements for different programs as you may wish to apply for more than one area of interest and wait to decide until you see your options: the goal is to make a plausible case for your fit with each program
• *This is in many ways the most important component of your application; you should carefully craft it, and ideally, work with a UW-Madison faculty member to shape it*
Statement – dos & don’ts

• DO NOT say you like art; instead, explain why you have chosen a career path that requires an advanced degree
• DO NOT talk about when you first saw a painting in a museum that changed your life; instead, explain your academic and professional background as it bears upon your future path
• DO NOT simply summarize what you’ve done so far; instead, discuss how your experiences have prepared you for further study
• DO NOT try to be too creative; your statement should be direct and professional (see guidelines)
Statement Elements

• Introduction – state clearly field you will study and who you want to work with

• Body – describe what you would like to study and use your past experiences to show how you have prepared yourself; include information about an intellectual/academic (research, museum or classroom) experience that influenced you

• Conclusion – summarize your major “sell” as to why you and the program are a good fit
For more on statements

- See handout
- Also see example online
Letters of Recommendation

• Ideally, secure letters from professors who know you and your work personally

• If possible, get a letter from professor in your area of interest (even if you don’t know him or her well)

• 2 of 3 must be academic; letters from museum or gallery supervisors are OK as a supplement, but do not substitute for faculty letters

• It’s a good idea to check box to waive your right to review the letters

Mary Cassatt, *The Letter*, 1891
Letters of Recommendation – How to ask for them

• Ask your reference in advance if he/she is willing to write for you (if not, you don’t want that letter anyway)
• Give recommenders *at least* 2 weeks to write the letter
• Supply them with ONE PACKET of supporting information: statement of purpose (even if only a draft), transcript/DARS, writing sample, list of schools to which you are applying, list of deadlines
• Tell them how the school prefers the letters to be submitted (most are on line)
• Do not do this piecemeal or things are likely to fall through the cracks with busy faculty
Writing Sample

• Ideally, choose something you have written in your area – but above all, it should be your best work!
• Can be (but doesn’t have to be) from a senior or honors thesis or proseminar
• It should be a research paper (with footnotes or references), 10-20 pp. max (different schools require different lengths)
• Should demonstrate several things: 1) capacity to do research in the field; 2) ability to think creatively and independently – to construct an original argument; 3) writing skills
• If you do not know what to submit, consult an advisor
V. Making Decisions

- Gustave Courbet, *The Desperate Man*, 1845
When Decisions are Made

- Usually decisions are not made until March about admission, and funding often comes later.
- Do not accept first offer; wait to see what options you have.
- April 15 is usually the deadline for your decision if funding is involved.
- Do not pester faculty or administrators about decisions; wait till at least mid-March before making any inquiries.
How Graduate Schools Decide

Above all, it is a combination of factors that is always to an extent outside of your control! It depends upon how much funding they have, who else applies, what the advisor’s “load” is, etc.

The committees change every year, and thus decisions are not consistent from year to year

Do not be discouraged if you don’t get your 1st choice or accepted at all the first go around
How You Decide

Consider:

• Funding package – are they offering scholarships, TA-ships, etc.
• How closely (and well) you will be able to work with your advisor
• What the general climate is like (talk to other graduate students)
• University resources
• Typical time to degree
• Ask UW-Madison faculty for advice!
GOOD LUCK!