



Royal College of Art
Postgraduate Art & Design

HISTORY OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART

185 Year History

Founded in response to the first industrial revolution in 1837, the Royal College of Art now stands firmly in the fourth industrial revolution, which promises breakthroughs in robotics, autonomous vehicles, nanotechnology, computing science and artificial intelligence.

Over the course of the past 185 years, the RCA has cemented its reputation as the world's leading postgraduate university of art and design. Now, in the 21st century, it is expanding its academic vision to address the challenges of the present and future. As the first art and design university in the world to champion a STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Design and Maths) vision, the RCA is bringing together art, design, creative thinking, science, engineering and technology in collaborative new ways, to provide answers to some of our biggest global questions.

Up to the 1900s

The Royal College of Art started life in 1837 as the Government School of Design, located in Somerset House in the Strand. Following the Great Exhibition of 1851, this relatively small-scale operation was radically transformed to accommodate art as well as design, leading the institution to be rechristened the National Art Training School at its new home in South Kensington. In 1896 it became the Royal College of Art.

In its early days the RCA was dominated by a distinctive version of the Arts and Crafts philosophy. However, by the early 1900s that atmosphere changed. The RCA was the birthplace of The New Sculpture movement in Britain and continued to be a major centre of influence in the new century, with students including such luminaries as Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore.

1930s and '40s

Throughout the 1930s and '40s the College's scope and reputation continued to grow. A new emphasis was placed on the teaching of product design and on the provision of highly specialised, professional instruction. Building on the success of high calibre graduates including the likes of Robin and Lucienne Day, the late 1940s onwards saw the introduction of new courses such as Graphic Design, Industrial Design and Fashion.

1950s, '60s & '70s

The 1950s and '60s saw the RCA at the centre of the explosion of Pop Art culture, a vibrant, invigorating movement that waved a final goodbye to Britain's post-war austerity. This generation of students transformed British art and design, counting Peter Blake, Pauline Boty, David Hockney and R B Kitaj among its ranks. Meanwhile, the Fashion and Textiles Department was leading its own design revolution with soon-to-be household names Ossie Clark and Zandra Rhodes studying here. Ridley and Tony Scott studied film.

The College embraced this period of dramatic social change with changes of its own – in 1962 all design and applied art courses moved to the new Darwin Building in Kensington Gore. Then, in 1967 the College was granted a Royal Charter, endowing it with university status and the power to grant its own degrees. It moved to offering Master's degrees and became a wholly postgraduate institution.

The 1960s also saw the Industrial Design course establish itself as a discipline in its own right. Under the leadership of eminent designer Sir Misha Black, some of the bold new design talent emerging at this time included product design duo, Richard Seymour and Dick Powell. Another course newcomer was Vehicle Design in 1967, early graduates of which went on to devise cars such as the Audi Quattro (Martin Smith), the Aston Martin DB7 (Ian Callum, Design Director at Jaguar for 20 years until 2019) and the Porsche 911 (Tony Hatter).

No department, it would seem, was immune to change. Applied arts such as Ceramics & Glass began to find a new, contemporary way forward in the 1970s, with artists whose works would be collected by leading applied arts and design museums such as the Victoria & Albert Museum. Students such as Elizabeth Fritsch, Jaqui Poncelet, and Alison Britton quickly established themselves as leading lights, while over in Silversmithing & Jewellery, Eric Spiller and Michael Rowe were defining a new language for metal and re-evaluating the purpose and function of the vessel.

The 1960s and '70s were also a heady time for the School of Graphic Design. Its alumni designed some of that period's most iconic images, including the film poster for A Clockwork Orange and the now-famous Rolling Stones lips logo, as well as many of the new style magazines. This was an era that also saw Industrial Design student James Dyson develop the idea for the 'Sea Truck' while studying Interiors.

1980s & '90s

It was all change during the 1980s and '90s as a comprehensive programme of cross-college reconstruction, re-equipment and expansion of departments began. Such development was reflected in the growth of Product Design with internationally renowned designers such as Jasper Morrison, Tord Boontje and Ross Lovegrove. The new facilities encouraged innovative approaches to printmaking under former student Tim Mara, while in this period Animation became a department in its own right, producing Brian Wood, author of the Cramp Twins series, and Alan Smith and Adam Foulkes (directors of Honda's 'Hate Something: Change Something' advertisement).

Sir Anthony Finkelstein, former chief scientific advisor to Government on cyber security, former dean of engineering at UCL and now Vice Chancellor of City

University completed his PhD under Bruce Archer at the RCA - demonstrating the spectrum of talent and the often-unexpected career trajectories of RCA alumni.

These decades also saw the establishment of a fully-fledged Humanities Department. History of Design was introduced in 1982, followed by Conservation (run in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum) in 1987 and Visual Arts Administration (now Curating Contemporary Art) in 1992. Graduates of these courses include Laura Davies, conservator of Sculpture at Tate Gallery, design writer and critic Rick Poynor, and Kitty Scott, now Deputy Director and Chief Curator at the National Gallery of Canada.

Throughout the 1990s, the Fashion Department produced some of today's famous names: Philip Treacy, Julien Macdonald, Christopher Bailey, Alice Temperley and Andrew Fionda. Meanwhile, over in Fine Art, a new type of art student was emerging, with Gavin Turk, Tracey Emin and Jake and Dinos Chapman, who went on to become part of the movement known across the world as the 'Young British Artists'. The College was also the star of a six-part BBC documentary in 1999 – watched by over two million people.

2000 - present

As the RCA progresses through the 21st century, RCA graduates continue to influence the culture surrounding all of us. At the forefront of contemporary art and design today are, to name but a few, graduates such as painters Jadé Fadojutimi and Chris Ofili, designer Thomas Heatherwick, architect Sir David Adjaye, fashion designers Christopher Bailey and Bianca Saunders, photographers Coco Capitán and Tom Hunter, and product designer Sam Buxton.

Innovations such as the Ford Ka and Jaguar XK8, the PS furniture range for Ikea, Concrete Canvas – a shelter that will revolutionise disaster relief – and the Eglu chicken coop, are all the work of recent alumni. The names of these products' designers may not yet be as familiar as some of the others listed here, but they, like the thousands of graduates who passed through the RCA's doors before them and the thousands more who will follow, continue to shape and enhance the way each and every one of us lives our lives.

In 2009, Paul Thompson became Vice-Chancellor of the RCA and under his tenure an ambitious programme of new academic subjects have been introduced, including: Writing, Information Experience Design; Digital Directions; Environmental Architecture; City Design; Contemporary Art Practice; Service Design; and a new tripartite partnership with Tsinghua University, Beijing, Nanyang Technological University Singapore, and the Pratt Institute, in New York City, entitled Global Innovation Design.

New degree programmes - the M.Res and the Graduate Diploma have been introduced by the Deputy Vice Chancellor Professor Naren Barfield who has also spearheaded ambitious new research projects and driven a new programme of internationalisation.

This growth in subject disciplines has been mirrored by a growth in student numbers and investment totalling some £180M in academic facilities, studios, research labs and vital infrastructure over the decade 2012-22.

In 2009 a new Painting studio opened in Battersea, following in swift succession by the creation of an entirely new, purpose built Dyson and Woo buildings in 2012 and 2015 respectively, all designed by Haworth Tompkins..

This expansion of the Battersea site provided new first-class, purpose-built studio spaces for Painting, Printmaking and Photography, as well as a home for InnovationRCA, the College's start-up business incubator.

In 2017, the RCA opened its White City site, located in the BBC Media Village, housing the Graduate Diploma in Art & Design, School of Communication programmes in Animation, Digital Direction, Information Experience Design and Visual Communication, as well as research programmes including the MRes RCA pathway in Communication Design and MPhil/PhD Communication.