How do we interpret the narrative imagery of an Ancient Near Eastern sculptural relief? Why did the Spanish artist Salvador Dali paint pictures in a dreamlike Surrealist manner? These are examples of the types of questions art historians ask and try to answer by studying the visual arts of both the distant and more recent past. They seek to understand the cultural values expressed in a work of art, and to show how the latter fits into a larger context or tradition to which individual artists belong. To do this, art historians read literary texts and learn about the local customs, beliefs and history of a given society, as well as its techniques of craftsmanship. The result is that a painting, statue, building, or piece of jewelry comes to life and gives us a fresh insight into mankind’s ever-changing experience and ways of seeing the world.

The goal of the art history program at Purdue is to give students a broad training in this discipline, through some 20 different courses offered at regular intervals, including classes in western and in non-western art, originating outside the European and North American mainstream. The courses cover all major periods in the western sphere from ancient to modern, in addition to Asian, Islamic, and Latin American art. Students are taught to think critically and do research, learn theoretical aspects of this field, and express themselves effectively in written and oral form, the objectives of a course in art history methods. We also offer a course in art museum practices.

Currently, there are around 40 majors and 50 minors enrolled in our program.