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This is the **Accepted Version** of a paper published in the journal *The International Journal of Arts Education*:

Glade-Wright, Robyn, and Sorin, Reesa (2017) *Opportunity to learn to see the world from a new angle: the impact of international art study tours on creative arts students' learning*. *The International Journal of Arts Education*, 12 (2). pp. 19-29.

<https://doi.org/10.18848/2326-9944/CGP/v12i02/19-29>

# **Opportunity to Learn to See the World from a New Angle: The Impact of International Art Study Tours on Creative Arts Students' Learning**

## **Abstract**

*Over the past four years, Creative Arts students in an Australian University have had the opportunity to participate in an International Art Study Tour. During the tour, the undergraduate students study Photography and European History and Culture at a University in Germany, attend major international art biennales and view exhibitions in cities in Europe and/or United States. Following the tour, students undertake a Creative Arts subject with assessment tasks that involve reflection of the study abroad experience. This paper investigates students' perceptions of the impact of the International Art Study Tour on their learning. Literature regarding participation in study abroad suggests benefits for student learning including educational merit, increased confidence and a greater awareness of global citizenship. Participants in this study reported the benefits highlighted in the literature, and in addition, this study finds that a greater commitment to a career in the arts resulted from participation in the study tour. This finding may be useful for the design of Creative Arts degrees, particularly, in countries that are long distances from the major cities of Europe and North America; where costs and travelling time prohibit many students from viewing a range of art.*

*Key Words: art, study abroad, commitment, career, confidence, educational merit, global citizenship*

## **Prologue: Author 1**

*Three decades ago, during my undergraduate creative arts degree, I travelled to Asia and Europe visiting art galleries and museums. While in Cologne, I attended an exhibition by the renowned American abstract painter Jackson Pollock held in a large, renovated church. The exhibition generated a rare experience of wonder that is memorable to this day. This experience was revelatory and important in two ways. Firstly, it confirmed my commitment to the arts and my awareness that art is capable of generating profoundly moving experiences. Secondly, it caused me to question much of what I thought I knew and the attitudes I had developed in my Australian homeland. Just prior to my visit to the Pollock exhibition, the Australia the Government's support for the purchase of a Jackson Pollack painting 'Blue Poles,' for \$1.3 million created considerable controversy and media attention. Against this backdrop of controversy and negativity in Australian, my experience of the Pollock exhibition was very positive. This markedly different view enabled me to realize that some commonly held views in Australia might differ to those of people in other regions of the world. My appreciation and commitment to the arts*

*along with my willingness to consider ideas from multiple perspectives where irrevocable changed by international travel.*

**Prologue:** Author 2

*I became acquainted with Van Gogh, Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Dali, Picasso, Bernini, Botticelli, da Vinci, amongst others, in the comfort of the seat closest to the door of my university Art History lecture theatre. Interesting - a lot to memorize, but not much connection to my life beyond the lecture theatre. A few years later, I found myself at the Van Gogh gallery in Amsterdam, the Louvre in Paris, and the Uffizi gallery in Rome, face to face with works of art that had previously only been slides or photographs in a book. What a difference it made to my perception, appreciation and interest in art and art making - which have become lifelong passion.*

**Introduction**

Study abroad tours have become a focus for universities across the globe, as they have been shown to have educational merits, promote students' confidence and increase respect for others, cultural awareness, and global citizenship (Stoner, Tarrant, Perry, Stoner, Wearing and Lyons 2014; Schattle and Williams 2008; Forsey, Broomhall and Davis 2012). Study abroad can provide opportunities for situated and experiential learning (Tarrant, Rubin and Stoner 2013); providing a path for transformative learning, where "lived experiences provide a context for making meaning in the world" (Trilokekar and Kukar 2011, 1141).

This research was conducted in a regional university in northern Australia and examined Creative Arts students' perceptions of the International Art Study Tour. The study tours have been held yearly for the past four years. Creative Art students studying in locations such as Australia and New Zealand are not able to view the range of quality art that is available in cities and countries in Europe and North America; countries that host major international art events and house celebrated collections of art. Long traveling times and high travel costs prohibit

many Australian and New Zealand students from visiting art events and galleries in Europe and North America.

The outcomes of this study were consistent with those reported in the literature: educational merit, increased confidence and global citizenship. An additional finding from this research is the heightened commitment to a career in the arts reported by students, following an International Art Study Tour. This finding may be helpful in relation to the design of undergraduate Creative Arts degrees in countries located at a long distance from major cities in Europe and North America.

### **Literature Review**

As research is limited in the field of Creative Arts study tours, this literature review begins by describing the nature of study abroad tours in a range of disciplines. It then describes learning that can occur during gallery visits. This is followed by a discussion of learning theories, including social constructivism, situated, experiential, and transformative learning; all of which can occur during study abroad tours. Finally, the benefits of study abroad tours are outlined. These include: confidence building, education merit and the development of global citizenship.

### **Study Abroad Tours**

University study abroad tours involve overseas travel where students visit and study in one or more countries beyond their homeland. While on the tour, students may be immersed in a new culture in which to learn, where language, currency, transport, buildings, landscape, climate, length of daylight, and institutional cultures differ from their country of origin (Doerr 2014). The length of study abroad tours can range for several weeks to a full year. Students who participate in short-term study abroad tours develop intellectual traits that have more in common with students who have spent longer periods of time abroad than with those who have not travelled (McKeown 2009). Therefore, short-term study abroad tours such as the International Art Study Tour, can provide meaningful educational experiences.

## **Social Constructivism and Study Abroad**

Participation in study abroad requires students to interact in new social and cultural environments in and beyond the classroom. Drawing on Vygotsky's Social Constructivist theory, Woo and Reeves, note that "cognitive functions originate in social interactions and that learning is not simply the assimilation and accommodation of new knowledge; it is the process by which learners are integrated into a knowledge community" (2007, 18). Educational exercises are reported to have more impact when they involve social interaction (Slavich and Zimbardo 2012). On the International Art Study Tour students interact with shop owners, hotel staff, gallery tour guides, and lecturers and students in educational environments that differ from their country of origin (Doerr 2014). Study abroad tours, then, with their strong social component within a community of learners, are rich sites for social interaction and reflection and offer opportunities for 'situated learning' (Lave and Wenger 1991).

## **Situated Learning**

Situated Learning implies learning in a 'real world' context that often involves an apprentice-style partnership with experts, where learning occurs through observation rather than formal teaching (Lave and Wenger 1991). "Situated learning occurs when a student experiences and applies learning in a specific environment or setting that has its own social, physical and cultural contexts" (Dawley and Dede 2014, 723). Gallery visits during the International Art Study Tour are rich and situated venues for learning.

During visits to international art events and galleries students view exhibitions by celebrated artists and experience works of art first-hand, rather than learning about the work through images in textbooks. Further, students learn about these works within their community of learners and with the scaffolding of their lecturer and gallery guides (D'Alda, Jones and Wright 2015). Visits to art galleries, "involves not only the visitor and his personal agenda, but also the larger social context in which the visit is occurring" (*ibid.* 8). Students choose what, where, and when to learn during gallery visits and this form of

student motivated and direct learning can create long-term memories of the artifacts, the gallery, and the city (Falk and Dierking 2000).

Experiential learning can occur within situated learning contexts during the International Art Study Tour. Experiential learning may take place in a classroom, however, it largely takes place outside of the classroom in situations which enable students to reflect upon the differences and similarities of their and others' environments and cultures (Loflin 2007). International educational institutions along with seeing the sights in new countries provide rich opportunities for experiential learning.

Experiential learning occurs when students engage in action-orientated processes of discovery (Slavich and Zimbardo 2012). Action-oriented, experiential learning activities that encourage reflection, critical analysis and synthesis during study abroad tours (McKeown 2009) are helpful as they “enable students to move beyond knowledge learning to application and integration, toward a real, ‘unbuffered’ world” (Tarrant, Rubin and Stoner 2013, 6). Experiential learning is a “pedagogy that is constructed through vocational practices; thus it is both socially constructed and contested” (Usher 2009, 175). What is contested is exposing students to an established field of work where practices may be outmoded and fail to reflect current technologies and/or ideologies (*ibid.*).

An example of experiential learning in a situated learning context is when students are given the assignment of creating a themed set of photographs. This task begins with a discussion of the fact that visitors to a new environment can see things with ‘fresh eyes’. This is followed by the task itself: going into a gallery or to a city street and capturing photographic images. During group discussions, guided by the lecturer, students share their photographs and gain feedback regarding their creative work. Students also reflect on their work in relation to the images they have viewed during gallery visits. In this way, reflection of their work and learning is both socially constructed and contested (Usher 2009). These processes can lead to transformative learning.

## **Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning describes learning that affects change in the perspective of the learner (Mezirow 1997). Transformative learning involves “using prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience, in order to guide action” (Mezirow 1996, 162). Deep, structural shifts in thoughts, feelings and actions mean that the “individual undergoing change becomes conscious of him or herself as situated within larger political, economic, socio cultural and spiritual forces” (Coghlan and Gooch 2011, 716). When new worldviews are assimilated, transformative learning has taken place (*ibid.*).

Culturally different environments experienced during study abroad can be a catalyst for change because of their ability to create cognitive dissonance and disorientation (Doerr 2014). Students may see overseas destinations as exotic, as their frames of reference are constructed against their current understanding of what is ‘normal’ (Palmer, 2015). The exotic then becomes the catalyst for transformation. As Palmer (2015) notes, “when abroad, the normative experience of students is often subverted in ways that lay bare the assumptions behind such views and make possible another world in which to live” (63).

Study abroad tours “challenge one’s assumptions, not only about the external world around us, but also the inner world of one’s identity” (Laubscher 1994, 84). Disorienting experiences of study abroad can lead students to re-examine their existing perspectives; push them to confront personal limitations; and develop coping mechanisms to contend with failure (Stone 2014; Chang, Cheng-Hui, Chen, Yu-Fu and Yu-Hsi 2012). This challenge to a student’s identity may lead to more risk-taking behavior and an opportunity to experience a new, or different identity (Trilokekar and Kukar 2011).

## **Benefits of Study Abroad Tours**

Several key themes emerged from the literature relating to the benefits of study abroad tours, including: confidence building, educational merit, and global citizenship.

### **Confidence Building**

Study abroad tours can expand students' outlooks and makes them more independent, confident adaptable and "better able to cope with the demands of adult life" (Forsey *et al.* 2012, 130; Tucker and Weaver 2010). The challenging and at times disorienting, experiences of study abroad tours can promote personal growth lead and increased confidence (Nunan 2006). Study abroad tours may lead to: increase students' knowledge of diversity; improve their ability to work with others; improve flexibility and openness and enhance employability (Jones, Rowan-Kenyon, Ireland and Niehaus 2012). During study abroad, social learning tasks, such as regular discussion groups to talk about experiences, may further assist students to develop a habit of reflective thinking and facilitate confidence building (Hutchison and Rea 2011).

### **Educational merit**

In addition to confidence building, the educational merit of study abroad is discussed in the literature included: academic progress and intellectual development (Foronda and Belknap 2012); an increase in international, functional knowledge; and a deeper understanding of global interdependence (Sutton and Rubin 2004; Chieffo and Griffiths 2004). Study abroad tours can contribute to improvements in personal skills and increase students' interest in further study (Nunan 2006). Students who study abroad exhibit an increased interest in learning about international affairs and report greater interest in working or studying in a different country than students who do not participate in study abroad tours (Forsey *et al.* 2012).

### **Global Citizenship**

The call for greater cultural awareness in tertiary institutions has been almost universal (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen and Hubbard 2006). Amongst the values associated with overseas study is the development of global awareness



and citizenship. Global citizenship involves awareness of situations beyond one's own community and is commonly accepted to include behaviors associated with social responsibility; issues of environmentalism; social justice; and civic engagement (Tarrant *et al.* 2013). The term, 'global awareness', describes a self-reflective ability to appreciate and understand the self in the world and in the context of world issues (Winn 2006). Increased cultural sensitivity, along with heightened appreciation and tolerance for other cultures, were outcomes noted by students who participated in study abroad tours (Anderson *et al.* 2006).

Study abroad tours can expand students' outlook and generate an international perspective, therefore preparing students for future engagement with people from other countries (Forsey *et al.* 2012). Experiential education involving action-orientated experiences is reported to prepare students to become responsible global citizens (Tarrant *et al.* 2013). Therefore, short-term study abroad, where experiential learning is undertaken and supported by reflection, critical analysis and synthesis, may foster greater cultural awareness and global citizenship.

In summary, the literature regarding study aboard tours identifies the benefits of confidence building, educational merit and global citizenship. These benefits were assessed in relation to student reports of learning, following an International Art Study Tour. The research question was, "What is the impact of the International Art Study Tour on Creative Arts students' learning?"

## **Methodology**

This research emerges from a Qualitative Paradigm as the "domain of qualitative inquiry offers some of the richest and most rewarding explorations available in contemporary social science" (Gergen and Gergen 2000, 1025). Qualitative research is described as an inductive process, originating from descriptive analysis and resulting in holistic interpretation (Wiersma and Jurs 2005). Qualitative research is framed by the notion that the "physical and social environment has a great bearing on human behavior" (*ibid.* 14). This research aspired to provide a detailed and accurate picture of the impact of the physical

and social environment of the International Art Study Tour on student learning. The study did not attempt to measure actual learning outcomes; rather, it aimed to describe students' perceived learning outcomes and experiences (Chieffo and Griffiths 2004). It did so using an anonymous, online survey and focus group meetings.

### **Participants**

At the time of data collection, the International Art Study Tour had run four times. In total, 37 tertiary Creative Arts students had undertaken this tour between 2011 and 2014. The age range of these students was 20 to 55, and there were 34 females and three males. All students were enrolled in an undergraduate Bachelor of Creative Arts course, in their second or third (and final) year of study. In Australia, students who have completed one year of undergraduate study are eligible for a loan to study abroad. This loan enabled students, from a range of economic backgrounds, to participate in the tour and for three quarters of the students, the International Art Study Tour was their first overseas experience.

Following university ethics approval, all 37 students were invited to participate in an online survey through an email that included a project information sheet and instructions for informed consent. Following the anonymous online surveys, participants were invited to a focus group meeting to elaborate their views. Of the 37 students, nine completed the survey. While a limitation is that this is a relatively small sample size, both the surveys and focus group meetings were comprised of open-ended questions, and this enabled the researchers to gather rich data. The results provide a glimpse into the impact of International Art Study Tours on student learning; however further research with larger numbers of participants would be beneficial (Tucker and Weaver 2013).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Within the Qualitative paradigm, the methods chosen for data collection were surveys and a focus group meeting. Open-ended questions for the surveys

were constructed to elicit in-depth responses from participants (Wiersma and Jurs 2005).

In Qualitative research, data analysis involves reduction and categorization, description, and synthesis (Chieffo and Griffiths 2004). In this research, two forms of coding were used to analyse and reduce data: previously constructed categories, based on an extensive literature review; and emergent coding, where themes emerged from the data itself (*ibid.*). The coding process allowed the researchers to be open to impacts of the International Art Study Tour beyond those stated in the literature and as they emerged from the data.

### **Findings**

With positive comments from all students who completed the survey, findings from this research illuminate a number of educational and social benefits. Comments about their emotional reaction to the experiences of the International Art Study Tour included: “fun,” “great,” “fantastic,” “incredible,” “worthwhile” or that they were “privileged”. Students overall considered the tour to be an educational experience that expanded world views, with one commenting, “It has broadened my horizons” and another stating that: “it was well worth the money and time.” Only one student mentioned something less than positive about the tour, and this was an organizational issue relating to transport arrangements with in a city.

The highlights of the International Art Study Tour were reported as either places (New York; Wurzburg, Germany; and Paris); people (the lecturer at the university in Wurzburg); or events. The events that were noted were study at the University in Wurzburg (described as ‘insightful tuition’); the range of galleries visited (including the Venice Biennale); and free time to explore the culture of the cities.

Along with highlights, students mentioned a few things they would change about the tour. There were several comments about the allocation of time. For example, three students wanted less time in New York, whereas one student

wanted more time in New York. Many wanted more time overall to explore the cities during the tour.

Throughout the survey, several questions asked students about what they had learned from the International Art Study Tour. The answers are presented below in relation to: confidence building, educational merit and global citizenship; themes identified in the literature review. In addition, findings related to the consolidation of a commitment to a career in the arts are reported below.

### Confidence Building

An increase in self-confidence is one of the benefits reported in this study. One student reported that study in an international university and gallery visits had expanded her confidence and arts knowledge, commenting: "I'm inspired to try new things and be more confident in my own arts practice". Some students mentioned that they had learned quite a bit about themselves and others, including tolerance of others, noting, "I'm rather blinkered in my relationships." A number of students reported increased self-awareness: "[I have developed] new ways of seeing."

Improved communication skills were noted by a student who wrote that, because of the study tour, "I can handle difficult situations." Another student reported that, regarding life's events, they had learned that "things are rarely how we expect them to be."

Not all self-awareness was positive. One student reported feelings of home sickness and noted, "I was surprised at the overwhelming feeling of home sickness and I realized how much I loved my family and how fortunate we are in Australia." Another student described a negative aspect of their life, but saw changes in the future: "Things that have been holding me back and making my life difficult don't have as big a hold on me as I thought they did."

Yet another student wrote that, they had actually made changes to their life following the study tour: "The study tour gave me the courage to broaden my

horizons and move to a bigger city, where I now work in a wonderful gallery. It also allowed for a deeper understanding of events and trends in the contemporary art world on a global scale.”

### Educational Merit

Following the International Art Study Tour, a number of educational merits were reported, including learning about the diverse nature of arts and how artists express ideas. Students mentioned understanding more about the history of art and broader perspectives regarding contemporary arts practice. The value of art to society was mentioned and there was recognition of the depth of consideration by artists in the works students viewed on the tour.

Students noted that they had developed a broader appreciation about art and how artists communicate. Several student reported their appreciation for art was expanded, with the comments including: “Many of my opinions about what art I admire underwent some adjustment”; “[I] accept many different types of visual art” and “[I have a] new understanding of how artists work.” One student commented that they had learned that “different artists express their views, thoughts and beliefs differently”, while another mentioned that the tour helped with “comprehension/ appreciation about contemporary art.” A comment by one student was, “I saw a lot of works that were clearly considered to a much deeper level than the one I’ve been working on.”

Some students’ understanding of the history of art through was enriched. The self-transformative nature of the arts was noted by a student who wrote, “art is a continuation of what has come before,” while another student reported that the tour had: “cemented my perception of the art history timeline.” A further student reported the benefit of “see[ing] art from around the world from various time periods.” The educational merit of the tour was indicated by a student who noted that they had developed a “better understand[ing of] the artists we’ve been discussing [prior to the tour]” and “It allowed for a deeper understanding of current events and trends in the contemporary art world on a global scale.”

Specific arts learning included an understanding the size and tactile nature of works of art. One student noted, "I understand the size of some art. When you see it in a book, it is not the same."

The value of art to society was mentioned by one student, who wrote, "I gained a new appreciation for the arts and their value to society. The artist can speak through their art, expose injustices, express emotions and tell stories about human existence. They can give a voice to the unheard." All survey participants reported increased learning about the arts.

### Global Citizenship

The development of global citizenship and an ability to see the world from an expanded viewpoint was reported in the literature and confirmed in the study. One student wrote, "The trip changed my perception of how I view certain cultures/people in certain countries and made me realize how big the world is versus how small my views can be." Other comments included: "I was able to put things into a lot more perspective"; "[I have developed] greater understanding of geographical and historical inspiration for art work"; "[I have learned] how art affects me and my peers in an international context"; "the tour was fun, educational and broaden my horizons" and "It gave me the opportunity to learn and to see the world from a new angle."

Another reported that not only did she learn about world issues, she now understood the power of art to communicate these issues. She said,

"I didn't realize about the power of art to communicate. I learned about earthquakes and political issues. I now know about the world and world issues through the art that I saw. I now want to use art to communicate."

For this student, her "world became larger," and by going overseas she realized she could do "anything you want to."

### Commitment to a Career in the Arts

This research found that five of the nine survey participants reported a greater commitment to a career in the arts. A student reiterated “how a degree in Creative Arts can lead to many different career paths as long as you have the drive and courage to take the opportunities” while another wrote “there are no boundaries to art...just get it out there” and “I am more sure of my arts practice now.”

A commitment to a career in the arts is elaborated through a focus group comment:

Without question, [the study tour] changed everything. Originally I thought I needed to commit to a discipline, such as photography or painting. The study abroad tour showed that artists such as Mark Quinn could work in many disciplines. This was a shock and I realized you were allowed to do this.

The student then made the comment that she now understood, “talent is cheap” and it is the meaning of the work of art that holds importance in the arts. She had also become aware of an ‘international standard’ in the arts that had not been apparent to her in Australia. She felt that she could now be more experimental and playful with her work; yet at the same time this made her work more serious.

Of the students who reported that the tour had confirmed their choice of a career in the arts, one said, “I learned that anything is possible if you have enough commitment and passion to make it happen.” Another noted, “If you imagine where you would like to be and what you would like to do and then make goals and work towards them, you can achieve amazing things.”

## **Discussion**

The International Arts Study Tour afforded opportunities for learning and experiencing cultural practices that differed to the students’ homeland. However, at times experiences such as homesickness and time and cultural differences were disorientating, causing students to take stock and reflect on their lives.

During the tour, learning was situated in galleries and universities where students viewed a wide range of art, and engaged with expert gallery guides. In

the universities visited, students gained tuition from the lecturer, viewed student work that was hanging in their gallery and interacted with other students. In a few short weeks, they reported developing a wider appreciation of art than they had developed during semester long subjects presented prior to the tour.

The scale and experience of seeing works of art 'first hand' was noted, with students expressing how different it was to learning about art from textbooks. This finding is pertinent for Creative Arts students studying in countries such as Australia, located at a distance from major cities of the world, where costs and travel time limit students viewing of international art.

Students were engaged in experiential learning tasks in the galleries and cities they visited. They created two sets of photographs for an assignment task that was presented and assessed by a lecturer from a European university. Successful completion of this task helped students to gain confidence and expand their world-views, as they were now able to study in universities at home and abroad.

Students were required to write a daily, reflective journal with ideas for future creative work. This journal helped to direct their attention to the new environment and may have contributed to personal growth and confidence (Hutchison and Rea 2011). Further reflection of the tour was generated following the tour through an assessment task where students created a new body of art and indicated how the tour experience had influenced the work.

The opportunity to view international works of art enabled students to see how artists express ideas; the diversity of materials; and process artists can use. Gallery visits enabled students to draw comparisons between their works of art and those in major galleries and international art events.

The educational merit of the International Study Tour was indicated by the student comment that the art viewed on the tour was considered to a much deeper level than the one on which they had been working. While prior to the tour, students were encouraged to think more deeply about their art, an outcome



of the tour was that students were able to deeply understand and appreciate this message. This suggests that the situated and experiential learning opportunities encountered during the International Arts Study Tour accelerate learning.

Educational merit was a key finding of this research. Responses point to learning about the history of art, appreciation of contemporary art, the value of art to society, and the potential of art to communicate and inform people about issues and ideas. The literature review indicated that students who have studied abroad are more likely to undertake further study and this was confirmed in this study through extensive feedback and a number of students enrolling in a further Honours degree.

The experience of the International Arts Study Tour was a catalyst for global awareness as new world-views were encountered and assimilated. The level of international participation in art and the capacity to learn about world issues through the arts expanded students' global awareness.

The importance of the arts industry internationally was recognized by students and this might have contributed to a heightened commitment to the arts. Students expressed stronger knowledge of the field of art, a greater affinity to the field and a sense of permission to participate in the field of art following the learning on the Study Tour. These factors supported the development of a greater commitment to a career in the arts.

## **Conclusion**

Findings from this small research study support previous findings, that educational merit, confidence building and global citizenship are impacts of study abroad. The study further found that students on the Study Tour developed a stronger commitment to a career in the arts.

Educational merits of the International Arts Study Tour include a deeper appreciation of art and arts practices. An appreciation of the depth of ideas in major works of art encouraged students to practice at a deeper level and to be motivated to work in more experimental ways. Students recognized that people

can learn about the world through the arts and this helped them to understand the value of art to society. The value of seeing works of art 'first hand' points to the merit of study abroad for Creative Arts students studying in locations that are long distances from major cities in Europe and North America.

The opportunity to visit new cultures and to study in an international university enabled students to recognize that they could handle difficult situations with a benefit of increased confidence. Increased global awareness and the ability to appreciate their homeland was a further area of learning.

The educational merit of the International Art Study Tour along with the development of global awareness and increased confidence coalesced to generate a stronger commitment to a career in the arts. The Study Tour provided students with opportunities to "learn to see the world from a new angle."

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