

# History Department Profile

## PHILOSOPHY AND OBJECTIVES

History has a uniquely important role in supporting the school's mission, and it is the only academic area explicitly mentioned in the TESIS *Paideia*: "To a degree perhaps unmatched, TESIS has made its natural and cultural setting in Europe its classroom. This is the schools' signature. Consequently, *the* priority of TESIS' academic and travel programs is a deep and informed appreciation for European culture and history and its worldwide influences" (sec. 7, emphasis added). More generally, TESIS Lugano defines itself as the flagship institution of a "consortium of educational institutions and programs sharing a common culture rooted in classical ideas and Western civilization." In comparison with many schools operating today, TESIS is distinguished by "a profound respect for the past" (*Paideia*, introduction).

Aristotle argued in his *Poetics* that poetry offered profound and universal truths, while history could tell only what a given person did or suffered. Cicero had a much grander view of history. For him it was the *testis temporum, lux veritatis, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis* (witness of time, light of truth, life of memory, the teacher of life, and messenger of antiquity). Historians, conscious that everything in the present comes from the past, naturally tend to prefer Cicero's view to Aristotle's. The History Department aims to complement the teaching of poetry and other important subjects, and to support the mission of the school in educating integral, thoughtful, flourishing persons whose understanding of the present has been shaped by a generous and discriminating appreciation of the past.

In line with the school's emphasis on Goodness and character education, we believe that teachers should stress the "power of one," or the pivotal role of single individuals in shaping history, as distinguished from that of impersonal "forces". While recognizing that everyone is conditioned by his environment, we reject the notion that all outcomes are "determined" in advance, wholly independent of the individual's will and character. Hence in exploring with their students the various aspects of the historical record, teachers are urged to call attention to biographical details, and especially to individual acts of heroism or exceptional performances of the cardinal and theological virtues (*Paideia*, introduction) as exemplars and sources of inspiration.

The emphasis on Beauty that is characteristic of the school's identity (*Paideia*, sec. 2) is apparent in the prominence that the Department gives to Art History, requiring it as a graduation requirement for all students not in the IB Diploma program, and offering it as a standard-level option to IB students. This is unusual for a school of this size and type, but has become one of the distinguishing features of the school. This emphasis is owed largely to the founder's almost Platonic philosophy of education, which gives a transcendental value to Beauty along with Truth and Goodness. It could also be said to support indirectly the theistic thrust of the school's mission (*Paideia*, sec. 3: "to support a due reverence for God and his creation"), inasmuch as beauty in many cases seems to

point beyond itself. Or as Abbot Suger (12<sup>th</sup> cent.) put it in speaking of religious architecture: “The dull mind rises to truth through that which is material.”

There is much in history which is true, but whose beauty and goodness is by no means apparent. Despite the school’s emphasis on beauty and on the positive accomplishments of six thousand years of civilization, our devotion to Truth demands that students should not be spared a look at the harsher side of history as well. Along with the glories of the Acropolis were the miseries of the silver mines. Along with universal literacy and health care was the barbarism of the Gulags. One of the cardinal virtues TASIS tries to instill in its students is a reverence for “justice” (*Paideia*, introduction). Students will come to see that the course of history exhibits more than a small share of injustice. Although those who have hungered and thirsted for justice are to be praised (and imitated), the simple fact is that the good guys have not always won. Many, through no fault of their own, were doomed to a life that was “poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” and not infrequently ended in violence. While some may object that taking cognizance of injustices throughout history may undermine the theistic thrust of the school’s mission, we believe this is not necessarily so. History merely affirms, as the critical theorist Theodor Adorno argued, that if there is no Afterlife, then God is unjust.

The concerns of theodicy are treated briefly in our philosophy course (Theory of Knowledge). Issues of justice also play a role in our political science courses (International Relations; US Government) and in our AP and IB Economics courses. The Department is therefore multi-disciplinary, but unified to the extent that its curriculum is “content rich” and centered on European civilization, its offshoots and influences. This does not mean that other cultures are disparaged. On the contrary, we are solemnly bound by the school’s mission to foster “mutual respect” among cultures and nationalities. This is to be distinguished from mere “toleration,” and entails the civil and courteous (but honest) treatment of all, including students with beliefs and values that may not be shared by their teacher. Not believing that education is synonymous with indoctrination, we condemn in the strongest terms the ridiculing or disparagement, whether overtly or subtly, of those students whose religious, cultural, or political opinions or values may differ from our own. This is not to be understood as a capitulation to relativism, nor does it mean that certain historical subjects should be treated as taboo, but rather that all care should be taken to encourage at all times a climate of “courtesy” (*Paideia*) and true “mutual respect” (*Mission Statement*).

Finally, although issues of Goodness and Beauty are by no means ignored, the Department’s primary concern is with Truth. “All men by nature desire to know,” as Aristotle famously observed. That desire, which in the earliest grades leads one to distinguish between fairy tales and history, in later grades leads students ideally to distinguish between history and propaganda, and to be sensitive to political, cultural, religious, and anti-religious bias in both primary and secondary works. Students need not become Hegelians in order to see that “ideas have consequences” (alas, often tragic), nor elitists to predict that history will continue to be made chiefly by creative minorities. In Theory of Knowledge, we are committed to a “critical realist” stance that is incompatible with Pyrrhonism, solipsism, or a thoroughgoing relativism. On a more general level, this

emphasis on the objectively real also helps to explain why, in the traditionalist spirit of the Core Knowledge Curriculum, the Department tends to stress content over process, and knowledge acquisition over social activism. Marx's dictum about the priority of changing the world plays less of a role here than at many schools because we feel that children first need to *understand* the world – no simple task. A content-rich world with thousands of years of written history demands a content-rich curriculum based on Cicero's premise that "to be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child."