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Makeup Schools (revised December 2004)

Please see my personal list of school choices at the end of this article.

You want to be a makeup artist, is school the place to start? Some think so. Can it be a waste of money? Some think so. Here is a closer look at makeup schools, how they operate, questions to ask and things to look for.

I have personally spoken with over 70 recent graduates of makeup schools around the world (students who have graduated in the past 2 years) and I am going to share my results with you in a diplomatic way, and without naming names (I still have a few years left in this industry) so you will still need to do some research on your own. The schools appear to be passionate about teaching and though I did not visit or interview all of the schools, I did interview students from all of the large schools. I have spoken with a lot of administrators as well and believe that most are sincere in their wish to help new artists and only a few deserve a public lashing. There is another reason that it would not be fair to give out specific comments about specific schools, THEY CHANGE. I chose to interview people that graduated in the last 2 years because I realize that schools evolve with new teachers, new administrators and schools are run by people, people who can make mistakes and then correct them (we hope). Someone reading this 2 years from now will be looking at research done 3 years prior. That is why it is important for you the reader to understand what information you need, how to get it and to impress on you how important it is that you do your own research. Here is what my research taught me.

Ignore your first impression

Let's start with the first impression. Upon my arrival at a few of the schools I visited I was disappointed in the school building and surrounding area. I now know that you cannot judge a school by the building or location it is in. When I drove up to some of the schools my first reaction was "This is it? This is all of it? This is where people come from all over the world to learn makeup from the masters? This could be a 7-11 next week!" Be prepared to be unimpressed with some of the schools' grounds, but don't let it stop you - go inside! And remember in California and New York rents are high, the appearance of the school and the location had nothing to do with student satisfaction!

Ignore what they say about each other

The interior of each school is as different as the way each school is run and the personalities behind the people running them. In my conversations with the people running these schools, one theme was prominent. They are very competitive with each other! I suppose that makes sense, being a trait of most successful artists. They each think they are the best, with no doubt about it, if you only visit one school you will walk away convinced that the others are terribly flawed. You must visit more than one school when you are making this decision. My best advice to you is to stay clear of any school that speaks poorly of another school or artist in any way, common sense tell you that low character probably permeates the school. How to spot an administration with character? An honest administrator will tell you that this is a very tough

field; there are hundreds of artists and only a few jobs. You most likely will work free for a few years, you won't make a dime until you have a great portfolio and or reel, you will work your butt off to get this and then you will be out on the street competing with hundreds of artists in your area that have done the same thing. The world would be a better place if everyone were this honest, but unfortunately the goal for most is to part you and your money. Your future is not on their minds.

Being accredited does not mean it is a better school

I asked each school about accreditation. I was surprised at the answer I first got, until I got the same answer from many of the schools. Why are you not accredited? The answer usually sounded something like this... "Because if you are accredited you must take people in your school that don't really want to be there." When a school becomes accredited (by the state of California for one) grants and loans are available for a lot of different people, people that may be on public aid that need to go to a school as required by law. They may choose a makeup school to fill this requirement with no intention of really ever doing anything with the knowledge. These people can bring morale down, not pay attention, be disruptive etc. Being accredited takes control away from the school and gives it to the state. Taking students on public aid of some kind is not what the schools have a problem with; it's not having a choice to pick and chose who is suitable for the school.

It does matter that the school is licensed (but very little)

Being licensed can be important; you must be licensed to operate in the State of California and many other states. What if you attend a school that is not licensed? You risk losing your tuition if the state closes the school. This is always a possibility though rare and so you should check to make sure the school is licensed. Be aware that there are schools operating without a license. They gamble that you will never check and they are usually right, you probably won't.

Talk to past students

After visiting 5 schools I decided that visiting more schools would do nothing more for me or the reader. What the students have to say after graduating is much more important then any other research you can do on this subject. In many cases what I heard from students was very different than what I heard from the school administration. Below I am listing the major problems that students tell me they are encountering.

Talking to past students is the biggest eye opener, and if this does not convince you to do your homework nothing will!

Over 75% of the respondents from two of the major L.A. schools said they would NOT recommend their school to others, and it was NOT worth the money.

Talk to past graduates

One major LA school had only one respondent out of 30 who replied that they were dissatisfied and would not recommend the school to others. WOW, what a difference in satisfaction rates. How is this for an eye opener...the school that I would have chosen after visiting all of them and speaking with the staff was the one with the worst student feedback. If you are not interviewing past students you run a big risk of being dissatisfied with the school you choose.

Here is the good news

Many students had wonderful things to say about their schools and I am going to share the comments later.

More good news: If you're in the State of California and you are dissatisfied you can probably get a refund for the classes you have not yet attended. Other states have consumer laws as well; you need to check the laws in your particular state. Stay away from any school that does not offer a refund of your remaining classes if you are dissatisfied. If they cannot insure your satisfaction they shouldn't get your business.

Let's say you are on day 4 of a month long course and decide that this school is not right for you. If you are bold enough, and you should be, you can request a refund of your tuition in writing and you will get it, all except of course what you used (4 days worth). The following is taken from the Makeup Designory catalog:

The Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education reform act of 1998, State of California states the following: In the event a student withdraws prior to the completion of his/her course, a refund shall be made to the student of his or her unused tuition and lab fees. The refund policy for students who have completed 60% or less of the course of instruction shall be a pro rata refund. Except for the registration fee the refund shall be the amount the student has paid for the instruction multiplied by a fraction, the numerator of which is the number of hours of instruction which the student has not received but for which the student has paid and the denominator of which is the total number of hours of instruction for which the student has paid.

Bottom line, if you are not happy with your education, hand a written notice of your intent to withdraw to the administration and you should be refunded most of what is left of your tuition, at least in California. You will probably lose your registration fees and money you have paid for supplies.

To avoid this unfortunate scene I am giving you things to look for in advance. The following are the most common complaints I heard when interviewing students that graduated from makeup schools around the country. I am rating them in order, number 1 being the complaint I heard most often and so on.

#1 Complaint Out dated teaching methods

The teacher is a career teacher and has been out of the field too long. You can be the best teacher in the world, but if you cannot give updated information from on the job experience, the graduates I talked to do not favor you as a teacher. There are people teaching that have not worked a real job in the industry in years. They may not admit it but it is apparent after spending a bit of time with them. On the other hand, are you going to get a Kevyn Aucoin or a Rick Baker to come in and teach for standard teachers rates? Probably not, not on a regular basis anyway, so what is a school to do? The student would have to pay 10 times the tuition to get teachers like Rick Baker on a daily basis and who can afford to pay that kind of tuition? A lot of the schools have guest artists that come in and they are very good at what they do; they are still working but take a short time off to teach. I think this is a great way to get up to date teachers, but are they good teachers because they are good artists? Not always. These are a few more reasons why you must talk to past graduates of the schools you are considering.

Do NOT rely on testimonials you see on school websites or in their schools, these are easily made up. Do not pay attention to any portfolio in the school that is not on a public access website, these photos can be taken from any magazine and placed in a portfolio, and I know for a fact there are portfolios in these schools that are not of work done by anyone in the school. I also know of one school that has stolen photos on their website, mostly ALL of them stolen. People that will do this are out to steal from you as well, so buyers beware!!!

#2 Complaint

Instruction moved to fast

This was a common complaint and not one that can be fixed easily. If you want the instruction to slow to half the speed with more hands –on, you will have to be at the school twice as long and pay twice as much. In the end the schools know you probably don't want to do that so they do cram the lessons in. It is up to you to study and practice on your own. Don't expect to leave any school with all the hands on experience you will need - it is unrealistic to expect that to happen. A few of the schools did offer refresher courses for free or at a low cost, so that you can go back and take classes over for which you feel you need more practice. I don't think most people do it but it is something that could be of great value to you as makeup styles change and methods change. A lifetime of continued learning for free seems to me to be a great benefit. If this is important to you, be sure you get the policy in writing; there is some confusion surrounding this policy. Some of the schools only let you come back for a few hours, some let you come back for full classes. Check with the school and get their policy in writing.

#3 Complaint

I was promised portfolio photos and got amateur looking photos that I could never use in a book.

When a school offers professional looking photos to start your book, you need to ask about price. Schools can set the price at any amount they like for photos. If you are paying \$25.00 per photo, that is adding \$100.00 to your school costs and that's fine if you really want them in your book and understand up front what this will cost you. Who will the models be? Other students probably won't make good models for your portfolio. Ask to see the photographer's work. I found a few of the photographers being used were new trying to get a break, and their work was not good enough to go in an artist's portfolio. This is an area that I found a lot of dissatisfaction. Many of the students I talked to felt they were led to believe that the photographers used were professional and very good. When photos came back they were not professional looking at all. I did personally get to see the work that a few of the artists had done at school, and it was not good photography by any standards. I have no problem with using amateur models and photographers but some of the schools inform the students that they will have a beginning portfolio when they leave. In reality, they have photos but not photos they want to put in their portfolio. I have never seen a photo taken at a makeup school that would be usable in my opinion.

#4 Complaint

Cancelled classes

At some of the schools there is a good chance that classes will be cancelled if the enrollment isn't large enough, or if the teacher gets a good job offer. In most cases the school will offer the class at a later date so you can make it up, but a few students found this to be very bothersome. Check with the school you are considering for the school policy on this issue. If you are coming from out of town, and staying in a hotel, this could be a major issue for you.

#5 Complaint

The subject matter was too basic

“The beauty course was too basic.” My survey showed that of the respondents who had already had some experience as artists, 75% felt the beauty courses were too basic and they considered it a waste of their money. There are schools that require you start at the very beginning and relearn the basics. I talked to Tobi Britton about this and her answer made sense to me. She said that many artists have been doing basic makeup with their own self taught methods for years and do not even realize that there is a better method and perhaps they do need to get back to basics and start over. That seems to be a valid point but if you are good and you know it, and you don’t want to start with the very basics, you may want to chose a school that will allow you to skip the basics and go right into the advanced classes. In my experience most people that are self taught have learned a few bad habits that need to be broken, starting at the beginning is probably best for most people.

#6 Complaint

The courses were geared towards film and TV; the school was lacking good instruction in print makeup.

There are a few schools that cater to the future print artist, but in my info-gathering search of the schools it appears that a majority of the big name schools are preparing the future artist for film work. They offer print classes, but it may not be their major focus. Find out who teaches the print class. If you want to be a print artist; make sure you learn from a print artist and not someone who has been doing film for the last 10 years. Ask to see the teacher’s portfolio; it should be a public portfolio (on the internet preferably) not one hidden away. Find out what jobs this teacher has done in the past year. Has the teacher been stuck in the classroom for the past 2 years without working in the real world? This field changes quickly, like fashion, makeup changes with the season. I would only accept a teacher that is out there working in the real world at least part of the time. NEVER expect a TV/Film teacher to be good enough with print makeup to teach it, they are very different fields of makeup and TV makeup people do not normally make good print artists. Artists can be very good at both but a good print artist makes VERY good money and I have never seen one teaching for a living.

Now lets look at some of the positive things students had to say about the schools they attended. I asked what the student took away from the school, how they benefited from attending school. I have listed here the common benefits mentioned:

- 1) I learned basic beauty makeup very well
- 2) I learned corrective makeup
- 3) I learned sanitation very well
- 4) I learned blending and contouring
- 5) I learned the different makeup techniques for film and print
- 6) I learned color theory
- 7) I learned all about skin and skin care
- 8) I learned a lot about theater makeup
- 9) I learned period makeup

After all the research I have done here is my personal advice

- 1) Decide what kind of artist you want to be before you decide on a school. Do you want to do print? TV? Film? Work in a lab? Work at the makeup counter? Do bridal makeup? Make sure you know what it is you want to do so you will know what to look for in a school.
- 2) Interview past students of the schools you are considering. Do not take a list from the school; find students on your own; the Internet is a good place to start. Pay ZERO attention to testimonials; they are a lot of the time not from real students. One marketing ploy that I see used often is making up testimonials that do not exist; this can be a nasty business.
- 3) Completely ignore the location of the school, it made no difference to anyone I spoke with.
- 4) Get over what the school looks like on the outside, pay attention to who is teaching on the inside. Make sure the teacher you have been promised has a kick ass portfolio on a public website, or in the public domain. NEVER assume a portfolio someone shows you is really their work....even on the web I see people using stolen photos as their own. SHAMELESS AND SAD, and they do it to take your money.
- 5) Ignore the list of teachers you might end up with and get specific names of who will be teaching the class you will be taking, then check on each teacher's credentials. Is this person someone you admire? Have you seen recent work they have done, what's their reputation in the business? Is the work they show you made public on the Internet or hidden away at the school? Can the school send a substitute (the old bait and switch is alive and well in the makeup school business) get a written guarantee there will be no teacher substitutions or you may be stuck with a recent graduate as a teacher.
- 6) Don't let photos you will get from the school for your portfolio influence your decision on a school; in reality they probably won't help you.
- 7) An accredited school does not make it a better school
- 8) Some schools will kick you out for poor attendance. Be serious or don't do it.
- 9) Attending school will not give you a better chance at getting a job, in fact I have worked with many wonderful artists over the years and I really know only know a couple that have had any formal training. The reality is that once you are out in the real world, very few people care that you went to school and in fact most clients will never even ask. What you learn in school should come in handy on the job, and if it makes you a better artist, your chances of keeping the jobs you get are better, but do not expect it to help you in your job search.
- 10) If you cannot afford school, don't despair. There are other ways to get into this business. Find a few successful artists and be an apprentice. Work free for the experience, this is a great way of really getting to know this art and people in the industry at the same time. Do weddings and proms and every face you can get a hold of, practice, practice, practice. There are many photography studios that will allow you to work without a lot of experience doing makeup and hair on their high school seniors photos. Find a good artist in your area and pay them to show you the basics and spend some one on one time with you. It doesn't hurt to ask.

- 11) Taking out a loan for school is a bad idea. No matter what people tell you, you will work free a few years and will be forced to work another type of job to pay back your loan. Working another job will make you unavailable to assist and build your portfolio.
- 12) Beware of schools that use deceptive tactics to get students. This reflects the character of the administration and I would safely assume the entire program is riddled with dishonesty. For instance, if you look at an “independent” school review found on the web that seems to have only reviewed just one school, and you can’t seem to find who wrote the review or who owns the website, the review should be considered suspect and treated as an advertisement disguised as a real honest independent review. My advice would be to RUN from any school that would employ these kinds of deceptive tactics.

Revision December 2004, I wrote this article back in 2000, things haven’t changed much. However, for those who believe structured training is the way to go, I have decided to list my personal school picks for the upcoming year 2005.

Tobi Britton’s Makeup Bootcamp, NYC <http://www.tobibritton.com/>
Suzanne Patterson’s workshops, DC and Virginia Areas <http://www.creativeartistryfx.com/>
The Powder Group workshops, NYC and all over the USA www.thepowdergroup.com
Makeup Designory (MUD), Los Angeles, CA www.makeupschool.com
Joe Blasco, Los Angeles, CA and Florida www.joebiasco.com
Studio Makeup Academy, Los Angeles, CA <http://www.studiomakeupacademy.com/>
Empire Academy, Costa Mesa, CA <http://www.makeupempire.com/>