

A Broad Palette: Pre-AP Skills and Strategies for the Art Historian

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A rigorous and well-conceived art history course provides a singular opportunity within the high school curriculum to bring together a wide variety of learning experiences. Students discover ways to weave together knowledge and skills acquired from several disciplines—history, English, studio art, among others—as they intersect within the field of art history. No other course requires such a diverse range of disciplinary studies and learning fundamentals. An art history course demands good writing skills, critical thinking, an awareness of other cultures, and the ability to wrestle with both written and visual primary sources. Plus, when it is taught well, art history opens up students to a deeper awareness of the world around them and the joy of serendipitous discovery and connection. Yet it is not a course found in most high school curricula. There is not a simple ladder or vertical alignment of classes that feeds into such a course. Instead, it requires a school culture that supports, across the board, what the philosopher Maxine Greene and others call “aesthetic education.” This educational philosophy puts forth the position that every student benefits from being an intellectually active, highly aware, informed perceiver of all they experience in the world. Rather than training passive receivers of knowledge and experience, the aim is to develop students who know how to take control and generate creative solutions for every problem.

The AP Art History program serves as one model for such a course. The strength of the program is found in both its clarity of design and in assessments that allow for and encourage a range of responses. It is a curriculum that demands both mastery of certain specialized skills (art history methods and application of its terminology) and a broader inventiveness. This program serves to recognize intellectually sophisticated, imaginative arguments grounded in multiple fields of studies. Rather than recognizing only certain right answers, the examination and curriculum encourages the development of well-formulated arguments drawing upon a breadth of information and learning skills.

How much do students need to know to take the AP Art History Examination?

As Grant Wiggins states in *Understanding by Design*, there are many benefits to starting a course or a curriculum with a precise awareness of where you want to be in the end. Similarly, it seems appropriate to begin a vertical alignment toward teaching art history

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by first selecting a question from a recent AP Art History Examination and outlining the skills needed to fully and correctly respond. This does not, of course, mean that every student studying relevant skills in ninth or tenth grade will some day take the AP Art History Exam—but in this way, teachers see precisely what the expectations are when preparing for the examination and, more importantly, what skills are involved. Below is an example of a slide-based question from the 2003 AP Art History Examination. Students saw one of Frida Kahlo’s self-portraits as they responded to the question:

The following statement is a quotation from a letter by Frida Kahlo in 1952.

Some critics have tried to classify me as a Surrealist, but I do not consider myself to be a Surrealist . . . Really, I do not know myself whether my paintings are Surrealist or not, but I do know that they are the frankest expression of myself . . . I detest Surrealism. To me it seems to be a decadent manifestation of bourgeois art, a deviation from the true art that people hope for from the artist . . . I wish to be worthy with my painting, of the people to whom I belong and to the ideas that strengthen me . . . I want my work to be a contribution to the struggle of the people for peace and liberty.

Do you agree or disagree with Kahlo’s assertion that she is not a Surrealist? Defend your position by discussing specific elements from both the work shown and the quotation. (10 minutes)

Certain specific and specialized information and skills that a student is most likely to acquire through an AP Art History course are needed for success on such a question. Let’s get some of this out of the way first before moving to the broader palette of skills and strategies from other disciplines that can serve as a foundation for success on the exam.

Students could have approached this question from a variety of different art historical methods. These include analyzing the social context, discussing the iconography, considering the artist’s biography, drawing upon feminist critique, and analyzing the formal elements. Any or all of these were appropriate, depending upon the position chosen.

The rubrics for the assessment were written so as to reward both points of view, provided either one was defended with a compelling argument based on specific aspects of the work.

First, students needed to know several specific things about surrealism. These included its style or forms, its ideas or content, and the historical context of the movement. Second, students needed to know basic facts about Frida Kahlo's art. These included the style of paintings, their content, and relevant personal aspects. The students who earned higher scores brought to their essays knowledge of twentieth-century Mexican history, Kahlo's interest in pre-Columbian art, and the personal ways she combined both that heritage and western European influences.

How do students get to this level?

There are several general ideas to consider when deciding how to build programs to prepare students for the AP Art History Examination. Since the curriculum of the course promotes problem solving rather than memorizing long lists of information, *the more liberal the education, the better*. Here are a few specific areas to consider.

First, build a community of teachers and students who value the interconnectedness of ideas and discovering the importance of seeing how academic fields overlap and inform one another. Teachers could support projects that join different areas together. Whenever possible, demonstrate how art and math or art and science have frequently worked together to produce buildings, manuscripts, or photographs. This not only shows how research benefits from multiple viewpoints and fields of study but also reinforces the fact that the humanities and the sciences are not at odds with one another.

Second, the AP Art History Examination requires from the student good writing skills. This means not only the ability to write well grammatically but also the ability to formulate a writing position or idea (learning that it is not acceptable to make a thesis a rewrite of the question). The ability to develop and convincingly defend an argument based on facts rather than storytelling and the ability to develop a writing voice with a rich vocabulary are also important facets of student writing.

Third, since the AP Art History Examination is largely contextual in nature, it requires from the student a solid background in history. This means understanding how to read and interpret primary source materials and how to interrogate objects (material culture). In addition, it means that teachers should help students understand how art is not an illustration of history but part of the historical process. Ultimately, the student should have opportunities to analyze research problems that require the linkage of images and texts. The most immediate example might be analyzing print media that students choose, exploring how words and pictures work together. Finally, while it is

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important to understand major historical themes, a basic chronology of history cannot be ignored. Though not a large part of the AP Art History Examination, the ability to sequence works and place them within a chronology is necessary.

Fourth, diversity and multiculturalism should be integrated into the curriculum, not taught as an addendum. Not only are diverse cultures given a value in this way, but artificial labels and boundaries fall. In the case of this Kahlo question, students were asked to wrestle with issues of regional diversity, racial diversity, class diversity, and gender diversity. Neither Kahlo nor her art fits comfortably within labels, nor for that matter do many artists—which was the point of the question. Critical thinking skills are sharpened, making students question assumptions and values they may hold without scrutiny.

Although it is not a prerequisite for the course, all students benefit from experiences in studio art courses. In the case of AP Art History, this is most evident when a question concerns a discussion of media and processes. Since knowledge comes from both study and experience, students are better prepared to discuss painting, printmaking, photography, or ceramics if they have worked with these media.

No fixed road map does or should exist for an AP Art History program. The philosophy of the course has been to write essay questions that are flexible enough to allow for different teaching and learning styles, regional diversity of interests, and an opportunity for young thinkers interested in many fields of study to bring them all together in visual expressions. The hope has been that students experience learning in both its creative and mastery of skills dimensions.