

AP[®] ART HISTORY

2007 SCORING GUIDELINES

Question 8

Note: Question 8 is based on the following quotation. There are no slides with this question.

“It is scarcely possible, even with hard work, to imitate what Michelangelo accomplished. This ceiling is a true beacon of our art, and it has brought such enlightenment to painting that it illuminated a world which for hundreds of years had been in the state of darkness.”

—Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550, 1568)

8. In the quotation above, Vasari articulates a concept of artistic progress with reference to Michelangelo. During what art-historical period did Michelangelo paint the ceiling mentioned in the quotation? How did the ceiling exemplify Vasari’s claims about Michelangelo’s accomplishments? (10 minutes)

Background:

Although Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) trained as a painter and architect, he spent much of his career working for the Grand Duke of Florence, Cosimo I de’Medici, on a variety of realized and unrealized projects throughout Tuscany, most of which extolled the virtues of Cosimo and his rule. But Vasari is best known today as the author of *Le Vite delle più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori*, which translates to the *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*. This text is a compilation of biographies of Italian artists from Cimabue to Vasari himself and is considered by many to be the first art history text. It was first printed in 1550 and revised in 1568.

In both art-historical and historiographic terms, Vasari’s *Lives* is a key text for students in introductory surveys, but it must be read with care. Vasari, who was born in the small Tuscan town of Arezzo near Florence and who dedicated his text to his patron Duke Cosimo, had obvious biases. The framework of the *Lives* is constructed to demonstrate what Vasari considered a clear artistic progress from that period of “darkness,” which to him meant the Middle Ages, to the glory of the High Renaissance under the man he called “the divine Michelangelo.” Although Vasari implies a great friendship with Michelangelo, and his own painting style owes much to Michelangelo’s innovations, the two men were not particularly close and it can be argued that Vasari sought to elevate his own status by stressing this association with Michelangelo. Furthermore, throughout his text Vasari illustrated his concept of artistic progress with a distinct and deliberate emphasis on Florentine art and artists; to him, everything that was good about the art of his time was due to Tuscan innovations. Vasari conveniently ignored most non-Tuscan artists and exaggerated Tuscan accomplishments whenever possible, enriching his text with oftentimes amusing but erroneous anecdotes in the process. Although Vasari wrote without the benefit of most of the contemporary sources and archival documents we have at our disposal today, his text is impressive, even if it cannot be taken as absolute fact. Instead, it is important to realize that Vasari constructed his own concept of artistic progress, in which Michelangelo was the absolute peak of perfection. Vasari’s text, with his characterization of the progress of Italian art, was so influential that we continue to use it today. A quick look at the chapters of almost any textbook will indicate a culmination in the art of Michelangelo, and the anachronistic term “High Renaissance,” which we use to identify this brief early sixteenth-century period when Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Raphael all flourished, reinforces this concept.

Students have two tasks:

- (1) They must identify the art-historical period of Michelangelo’s ceiling as Renaissance or High Renaissance.
- (2) They must analyze how that ceiling exemplified Vasari’s claims about artistic progress as it pertains to Michelangelo’s accomplishments.

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Question 8 (continued)

Better essays understand Vasari's biased narrative of artistic progress from the "darkness" of the Middle Ages to its culmination in the art of Michelangelo. They will use the quotation to demonstrate this narrative by relating it to particular stylistic and compositional features of the Sistine vault.

Weaker essays will provide information about the Sistine vault and/or Michelangelo but will not tie them to the quotation or the question in a relevant manner.

Points to remember:

- Students are not asked to identify the ceiling discussed in the quotation as the vault of the Sistine Chapel, but it would be difficult for a student to earn a higher score without demonstrating recognition of this.
- Text-based questions are intended to give students the opportunity to analyze primary source material and apply it to what they know about a given period, artist, or work of art. The question does not require prior knowledge of the text; in this case, the author, text, and date are identified. No slide is provided; it is up to the student to realize Vasari is discussing the Sistine Chapel ceiling and to analyze the ways in which it exemplifies his claims.
- This is a 10-minute question.

Scoring Criteria

Score Scale 0–4

- 4** Identifies the Renaissance or High Renaissance as the period in which Michelangelo painted the ceiling mentioned in the quotation. Analyzes with a high degree of specificity how this ceiling exemplifies Vasari's concept of artistic progress in relation to Michelangelo's accomplishments. There are no significant errors.
- 3** Identifies the Renaissance or High Renaissance as the period in which Michelangelo painted the ceiling mentioned in the quotation. Analyzes with a fair degree of specificity how this ceiling exemplifies Vasari's concept of artistic progress in relation to Michelangelo's accomplishments. There may be some errors.
- 2** Identifies the Renaissance or High Renaissance as the period in which Michelangelo painted the ceiling mentioned in the quotation but makes only vague references to Vasari's concept of artistic progress in relation to Michelangelo's accomplishments. Discussion is weak and may contain significant errors.

OR

Fails to identify either the Renaissance or High Renaissance but is otherwise a 3. This is the highest score someone can earn if the period is not identified or misidentified.

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Question 8 (continued)

- 1** Identifies the Renaissance or High Renaissance as the period in which Michelangelo painted the ceiling mentioned in the quotation but makes no other points of merit.

OR

Fails to identify the Renaissance or High Renaissance but is otherwise a 2.

- 0** Makes an attempt, but the response is without merit because it restates the question or contains only incorrect or irrelevant statements.

— This is a nonresponse, such as a blank paper, crossed-out words, or personal notes.

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8A1

“It is scarcely possible, even with hard work, to imitate what Michelangelo accomplished. This ceiling is a true beacon of our art, and it has brought such enlightenment to painting that it illuminated a world which for hundreds of years had been in the state of darkness.”

—Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550, 1568)

8. In the quotation above, Vasari articulates a concept of artistic progress with reference to Michelangelo.

During what art-historical period did Michelangelo paint the ceiling mentioned in the quotation? How did the ceiling exemplify Vasari's claims about Michelangelo's accomplishments? (10 minutes)

Michelangelo painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel during the High Renaissance.

The Sistine Chapel is first notable for its vast scale. It is also notable for its ~~beautiful~~ beautiful, ~~also~~ realistic portrayal of figures. Michelangelo broke completely free of ~~stiff~~ ~~stylized~~ stylized conventions for representing people that had held sway over art for many centuries. Michelangelo also broke new ground in his ~~stiff~~ skillful and accurate rendition of the musculature of his subjects, which was to be extremely influential. Michelangelo's powerful and accurate portrayal of muscular ~~and~~ figures hearkened back to ancient Greece. The ceiling also shows skill in showing emotional feeling in the figures, as in Adam's hopeful, longing expression as he waits to be touched by God. Furthermore Michelangelo rejected the rigid,

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8A₂

conventional manner of stacking figures
and instead place his figures in more
naturalistic arrangements.

END OF SHORT ESSAY QUESTIONS

**IF YOU FINISH BEFORE TIME IS CALLED,
YOU MAY CHECK YOUR WORK ON QUESTIONS 1 THROUGH 8.
DO NOT GO ON TO QUESTION 9 UNTIL YOU ARE TOLD TO DO SO.**

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Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling in the time of High Renaissance. The ceiling was a true masterpiece because of its true figures and how they are shown. The bodies are beautifully painted with such detail and perfect proportion it created many new movements. The colors are vibrant and beautiful seen in the following Manneristic movement as well. Michelangelo accomplished many things in his lifetime, including the Last Judgment which is also in the Sistine Chapel, but not done until Mannerism. The classical figures in Michelangelo's ceiling are both Greek and Roman in form, showing contrapposto and Roman robes and hair. Vasari claims Michelangelo brought out a world which had been in a state of darkness. I think he is telling how Michelangelo revived the classical in art and how he brought it back to the body and architecture.

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Michelangelo painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the classical period of the Renaissance, and his work remains ~~one of the~~ widely admired today.

Though Michelangelo envisioned himself a sculptor rather than ~~an artist~~ ^{a painter}, his painting is one of the greatest ever created. Vasari's claim that it "illuminated" the world, then, is correct, for it inspired hundreds of painters. The famous scene of God creating Adam, their hands meeting in a wondrous, awe-filled display, truly is a "beacon," recognizable as the near-zenith of artistic achievement over the centuries.

That one man was able to create such a masterpiece by hand, standing inches below his canvas, ~~is~~ seems, in the words of Vasari, "scarcely possible". ~~Such~~ Michelangelo's work is in some ways the hallmark of Renaissance art: powerful and spiritual, ~~and~~ ^{it is} at once bound to a classical past and on the cusp of an even greater future.

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2007 SCORING COMMENTARY

Question 8

Overview

This was the one text-based question on the exam. It was not accompanied by a slide. The intent was for students to read a text and, based on the information given about the text, the knowledge that they brought to the question about the author of the text (in this case, Giorgio Vasari), the content of the text (*Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*), and their knowledge of the art history of the time and place in which the text was written (Italy, 1550, 1568), to identify the art-historical period of the work mentioned in Vasari's quotation (Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling). They were also asked to analyze how the work exemplified Vasari's claims about Michelangelo's accomplishments. The 10-minute question was intended to encourage students to consider two key issues. First, they needed to be able to read the quotation provided and to ask themselves what the author had said about Michelangelo and how that might have betrayed a personal agenda on the part of the author. Second, students had to ask themselves what Vasari's quotation told them about the time and place in which his text was written, what it told them about his concept/narrative of artistic progress, and what that might mean for their understanding of art history. The purpose was to encourage students to question the concept that history is fact.

Sample: 8A

Score: 4

This essay identifies the art-historical period as High Renaissance. The student articulates Vasari's ideas about artistic progress by explaining how "Michelangelo broke completely free of stylized conventions for representing people that had held sway over art for many centuries." The essay goes on to analyze Michelangelo's accomplishments by referring to his understanding of musculature and revival of Ancient Greek traditions.

Sample: 8B

Score: 3

This essay identifies the art-historical period as High Renaissance. The student demonstrates understanding of Vasari's concept of artistic progress by referring to Michelangelo's use of Classical figures, contrapposto, and Greek and Roman forms. The essay paraphrases Vasari's assertion that art had been "in a state of darkness" prior to Michelangelo, but it falls short in analyzing Michelangelo's accomplishments.

Sample: 8C

Score: 2

This essay identifies the art-historical period as Renaissance. The student understands that Michelangelo's work refers to the Classical past but otherwise falls short in articulating the concept of artistic progress. The essay also includes irrelevant details about Michelangelo's accomplishments.