

Student Performance Q&A: 2010 AP® Art History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2010 free-response questions for AP® Art History were written by the Chief Reader, Robert Nauman of the University of Colorado in Boulder. They give an overview of each free-response question and of how students performed on the question, including typical student errors. General comments regarding the skills and content that students frequently have the most problems with are included. Some suggestions for improving student performance in these areas are also provided. Teachers are encouraged to attend a College Board workshop to learn strategies for improving student performance in specific areas.

Question 1

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze how family groupings and relationships are used to communicate a variety of culturally held beliefs. It was intended to have students think about these issues as they manifest themselves within different cultural contexts, both within and beyond the European tradition. The portrayal of ancestors, siblings, couples or other types of family groupings in art has been used throughout history to communicate not only domestic intimacy and love, but also a series of complex cultural concerns that involve religion, politics and notions of moral education, among other things. Moreover, the medium and manner in which these sentiments are expressed do much to assist in the communication of these concerns and include mosaics, sculpture, book illustrations, paintings, metalwork and so on. The contexts within which these works are found are also of great significance, such as tombs, civic monuments, churches, temples and ritual performances. This question was broad in scope and there are many examples of work that fall into this category; therefore the task for students, in addition to selecting an appropriate choice of art, was to address the issues posed in the question.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this essay moderately difficult. The mean score was 3.65 out of a possible 9 points, which is consistent with the mean for the question dealing with art beyond the European tradition in recent years. Even though this year's question was more specific in its focus than those appearing in the 2008 and 2009 exams, its mean score was slightly higher. The other encouraging trend was that there was a much broader range of student choices from outside the European tradition, indicating that teachers are covering a greater range of material in this area. The question accommodated a wide variety of works, including those that directly *depicted* familial relationships and those that *represented* familial relationships (although students who wrote the strongest essays usually dealt with the former).

What were common student errors or omissions?

A problem with this long question was that students often identified the work in a generic manner (piétas, portraits, etc.) or with a nonfamiliar group (groups of religious figures, military units, etc.), even though the question required a full identification of the work. Another problem was that essays were sometimes unbalanced. Students were asked to discuss the cultural concerns the work communicates *and* to analyze the visual means used to communicate those concerns. Weaker essays often failed to address both parts of the question. Stylistic analysis alone did not satisfy the scoring guidelines for this essay, which also demanded cultural context.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Practice with reading a question thoroughly, considering what tasks might be involved when answering it, and sketching out possible strategies for a response (including the selection of appropriate works) would help many students. Exam directions advise students to take some time to think about what the question asks and to use the space above the question to outline their answers, yet few students take advantage of this opportunity, and too many essays show evidence of insufficient thought. **Remind students to read the question carefully.** Weaker essays often tended to state everything the student knew about a certain work without directly addressing what was asked in the question. In addition, weaker responses sometimes indicated that students had prepared for other topics and tried to “cut and paste” what they had practiced (even if it was inappropriate) into any essay they were given; or they learned about a limited number of works and hoped they could cover a variety of possible topics with that narrow range of information.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze how specific elements of each of the two selected works conveyed propagandistic messages to its respective audience. It was intended to make students think about how works of art promote certain religious, political and social ideologies.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this essay to be moderately difficult. The mean score was 4.06 out of a possible 9 points. This second 30-minute essay was the second free-response question on the exam for the first time this year, which seemed to benefit students. Answers were longer and more developed than in past years, when this was the last question on the exam. The essay also presented an opportunity for students to draw on knowledge from other disciplines, which helped some students earn higher scores. Moreover, because the two questions requiring longer essays appeared one after the other, instead of being separated by the short-response questions, students were able to move more freely between the 30-minute questions, which seemed to help them.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although the question itself presented students with examples of forms that propaganda might take (architecture, paintings, print media), as well as ideologies that propaganda might promote, weaker essays wrestled with the definition of the term itself and seemed unsure of what constituted propaganda. Weaker essays also tended to identify generic types (triumphal arches,

portraits, religious paintings, etc.) instead of specific examples. Students also had problems with the chronological split and with identifying a work created after 1900. Weaker essays were often descriptive without discussing propaganda, while some essays addressed the topic of propaganda in general, with students citing a large number of visual examples but not developing their choices.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Comments pertaining to Question 1 also apply to this question. Students need to read the question carefully and write a response that specifically addresses the question. Instruct students that space is provided in the exam booklet for outlining their essays before they write them, and that they should follow their outlines as they write (remind students that notes and outlines they make in the blank space provided above the question are not considered in scoring the essay).

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to discuss the ways in which the work shown is a transitional piece of Late Antiquity, demonstrating a shift from the more naturalistic Classical tradition of Greco-Roman antiquity to increasingly abstracted approaches commonly utilized in the Early Middle Ages, in this case Byzantine art. In particular, the question assessed the ability of students to recognize shifts and continuity in style and imagery to underscore the fluidity of the transition from the Classical to the medieval worlds.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult. The mean score was 2.15 out of a possible 4 points, with many scores in the 2–3 range. However, the question did well for one focusing on a work from the medieval period: usually essays that deal with this period score poorly, perhaps because the medieval world is not taught in other AP courses. Although scores clustered in the middle range, there were also many excellent essays.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students writing weaker essays tended to misunderstand the term “deviate” in the question itself and stated that Classical elements deviated from the Classical tradition. Those weaker essays may also reflect a misunderstanding of Classicism in general. Better essays tended to develop a paragraph on each half of this question, although that was not a requirement for a score of 4. Weaker essays sometimes conflated the Christian and Classical traditions or addressed everything the student knew about Byzantine art without directly addressing the specifics or intent of the question.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Comments regarding this content area have been consistent over the years. Students are still insufficiently familiar with the European Middle Ages in terms of the nuances that occurred over this extensive period of time. Students should examine notions of continuity, transition and development throughout this period. The issue of Classicism should be discussed in terms of a

stylistic continuity instead of simply as a period that ended in antiquity. Deepening and enriching students' exposure to medieval art in its many contexts is strongly suggested. Teachers should help students distinguish between a formal stylistic analysis and a conceptual analysis, while at the same time explaining how the two methodologies can be combined to create a rich essay.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to make a stylistic attribution for the painting shown and to provide specific visual evidence found within the painting to explain why the attribution was made. It was intended to make students connect the formal aspects of an artist's individual expression to a larger stylistic trend in the history of art. Students had to identify the art-historical style as Mannerism and then discuss the work's Mannerist characteristics.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question difficult. The mean score was 1.32 out of a possible 4 points. Those who correctly identified Mannerism as the art-historical style did very well, but there were many students who received a score of 0 because they could not identify the style. In the past few years, there have been questions on the exam that dealt with attribution, but those questions were about artists (e.g., Vermeer, Van Gogh). This was the first year a stylistic attribution question appeared on the exam.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Identification was the first component of the essay, and many students missed that component (although some identified the work with the Baroque, answers ranged across the spectrum of art-historical styles). Because Mannerism is sometimes taught as an extension of the Renaissance, students could have identified the work as Renaissance or High Renaissance and still earned a score as high as 3. If students knew this was a Mannerist work, they could usually identify Mannerist characteristics, such as spatial ambiguity and the artifice or contrivance associated with Mannerism. Weaker essays merely described the painting without distinguishing characteristics commonly associated with Mannerism.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Practice with unknown images across the art-historical spectrum will increase the number of students versed in attribution, whether to a specific artist or to an art-historical style or period. Be aware that just because some movements may be relatively short-lived does not mean they are unimportant (Mannerism and Neo-Classicism are good examples). Examining Mannerism can serve as a review of Renaissance work, in that it represents both a continuation of and a departure from those concerns and also foretells elements that appear during the Italian Baroque period. In other words, Mannerism reinforces the notion that art history is a continuum that stretches in many directions.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze how the artist addresses race and gender. It was intended to make students think about the context of the work and the artist's choice of materials. Students were presented with a complex combination of text and image in a nontraditional medium that has often been viewed as a craft practiced by women. The objective was for students to recognize the choice of the medium of quilt as related to women or feminism, or both. In addition, Ringgold's use of the "Aunt Jemima" stereotype gave students an opportunity to discuss the treatment of race.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question difficult. The mean score was 1.47 out of a possible 4 points, with many scores in the 2–3 range. The question had a number of variables that students addressed with varying degrees of success, in some cases drawing on knowledge from other disciplines (in discussions of the civil rights movement or the feminist movement) or their own experience.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students need to address *all* parts of a question. Weaker essays contained a lot of description but little analysis. Stronger essays made general observations and supported them with specific observations about the work.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Essays dealing with contemporary art are scoring higher than in the past. Teachers and students need to cover this content area. This particular work afforded students an excellent opportunity to examine the social construction of race and gender. Students should also examine a variety of media other than painting, sculpture and architecture. This includes not only new media, such as digital work or video art, but media such as metalwork, ceramics and photography. Looking at both the "how" of art (formalism) and the "why" of art (contextualism) is important. Students should be encouraged to draw on critical thinking skills and apply what they know about other works of art to address works that may be less well known.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to be able to identify one of the most important Islamic religious monuments and to identify what characteristics of its construction and decoration reflect Muslim religious practices and aesthetics. Of secondary importance was for students to discuss the ways in which the Dome of the Rock borrows from and differs from other historic buildings during this early time period, when Islam was attempting to develop an identifiable architectural style. Basically, this question asked students to address the Vitruvian principles of structure, function and ornament in an interrelated fashion.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult. The mean score was 1.96 out of a possible 4 points. The score was encouraging for a question that dealt with an Islamic edifice, as it indicates that this material is covered in the high school art history curriculum. In fact, more than 90 percent of students directly associated the building with Islam.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students identified the building as a mosque, although they could still receive a score of 3 if they discussed the elements in a cogent fashion. Weaker essays described Islamic traits (such as the patterned tile) without linking those elements to religious significance. Other students attempted to connect physical features of the building to an imagined context (for example, some essays mentioned that the building has four doors that relate to the four compass points and signify the global mission of Islam, or students assumed that the multiple doors allowed entry to specific groups of men or women).

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

In dealing with architecture, teachers should link description to meaning. Emphasis should be placed on why certain architectural elements are used and on how architecture takes on meaning(s) in general. Also, an understanding of the basic tenets of world religions would help students connect the architectural forms to the religious meaning(s) they convey.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students how the Mary Cassatt print from the late nineteenth century incorporates the influence of Japanese prints in both style and subject matter. It was intended to make students consider influences an artist receives across artistic traditions. In a peripheral manner, of course, this question also addressed the issue of subject matter chosen by a female artist, although students did have to contextualize the subject matter within the framework of Japanese prints.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult. The mean score was 1.77 out of a possible 4 points. Students first had to identify the art-historical movement with which Cassatt was associated. Due to the late date of this particular work (1891), credit was given for either Impressionism or Post-Impressionism. Well over 50 percent of students identified the art-historical movement correctly. Students then had to analyze how the work incorporated the influence of Japanese prints in both style and subject matter. Essays receiving higher scores addressed both issues, going beyond merely describing elements in the print to a more sophisticated analysis of the influence of Japanese prints on Cassatt's work.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students immediately recognized the subject of the print. Stronger responses then analyzed how the subject reflected Japanese influence. Weaker responses simply described all the elements that looked “Japanese” (including the vase and the woman’s hairstyle). Weaker responses also attempted to link what they saw in Cassatt’s print to Japanese culture in general, without specifically relating the work to Japanese prints. Others commented on Cassatt’s work in a generic manner but never related the discussion to this specific work.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Although most teachers undoubtedly remind students to read the question carefully, this cannot be stressed too often. Students also need to be repeatedly reminded that Exam Readers separate strong from weak responses based on the distinction between *description* and *analysis*. With image inserts now in front of them, many students will be tempted simply to describe everything they see, but they must be reminded to connect these descriptions to analyses that directly relate to the question.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze how specific elements of the selected work place this work within its stylistic period and why those elements appear in this sculpture of a national leader. It was intended to make students think about how works of art convey meaning through stylistic attributes. Students had to identify the style as Neo-Classicism and then, looking at both the work’s form and its content, discuss its Neo-Classical characteristics. For a high score, essays had to address both form (stylistic analysis) and content.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult, which was somewhat surprising, given the fact that the topic would seem to overlap with other high school courses, such as U.S. history and U.S. government and politics. The mean score was 1.68 out of a possible 4 points. Students had to first identify the stylistic period of the work; although the correct answer was Neo-Classicism, identification of the style as eighteenth-century classical revival was also acceptable. Although many students seemed eager to engage with the topic, because they could at least say something about Washington (a familiar historical figure), observations about why this style was chosen to depict him were missing from the weaker essays.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students first had to identify the stylistic period of the work. Although a large number correctly fulfilled this task, there was a wide range of misidentifications, including Surrealism, Expressionism, Hellenism and Baroque. The most common error in weaker essays was the presentation of a descriptive narrative that did not specifically address the question. The third part of the question, which asked why Neo-Classical elements were used in this depiction (the contextual aspect of the question), separated high scores from low ones. Weaker essays often

simply described the work or subject matter without relating it to its period or to the choice of style, or students made generalized comments regarding patriotism, heroes, etc., without specific references to the work.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Again (as stated in the discussion of Question 4), be aware that just because some movements may be relatively short-lived does not mean they are unimportant. Discussions of Neo-Classicism provide an opportunity to examine the continuation and persistence of classical ideals. Students should not try to “game” the exam by attempting to guess which themes will be addressed in the questions but should concentrate on learning how works functioned and conveyed meaning to their audiences. Again, students need to read the question carefully and be sure that they answer all its parts. Teachers might spend a few days before the exam presenting a variety of questions from past exams, so that students become skilled at recognizing the component parts of a question.

Question 9

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to choose an Expressionist painting that relates to Kandinsky’s quote and analyze how the chosen work reflected Expressionist ideas. There was no image accompanying this question. It was intended to give students an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of a major twentieth-century style and, in a wider context, a major artistic sensibility. Students needed to read the text and think abstractly about how it related to the art movements and theories of its specific time. This question offered students an opportunity to make an argument to support their choice and thesis.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult. The mean score was 1.74 out of a possible 4 points. Students were given latitude on the identification of the work they selected, as long as they could provide a good description of the work. Although students were allowed a wide range of choices in developing this essay, they had to relate their choice to both the Kandinsky quotation and their selected painting. The best essays understood the nuances of the quotation and did not simply state that “color is expressive.”

What were common student errors or omissions?

Weaker essays discussed a body of work by an Expressionist painter instead of focusing on a specific painting. Students had to refer to both the quotation and their selected work, and weaker responses were less effectual in weaving these two aspects into a cogent essay. Stronger essays often discussed the issues implicit in nonrepresentational painting and then moved to an examination of contextual issues.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Give students practice with text-based questions in the classroom and as take-home exercises. Various sourcebooks of quotations exist, and teachers can draw sample quotations from those (or from the primary texts themselves) and relate them to images in the students' text. Students should also be reminded that in essays of this nature, selecting an appropriate example is key.

Encourage students not to simply write everything they know about an artist but to use this exercise to hone their skills of observation, relating a specific quotation to a specific image. It also helps to remind students to use quotation marks in citing the specifics of the quotation, so that the relationship between the quotation and their examples is clear (both to students and to Exam Readers).