



Student Performance Q&A: 2011 AP® Art History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2011 free-response questions for AP® Art History were written by the Chief Reader, Robert Nauman of the University of Colorado at 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 30-minute essay question asked students to choose and fully identify two representations of deities or holy personages and to discuss them in relation to both the religious beliefs and practices of their respective cultures. One of the examples had to be drawn from beyond the European tradition. Students were expected to understand that a deity is a supernatural immortal being who is considered sacred and that a holy personage is someone who is considered divine or sacred and sometimes capable of miraculous actions. For the body of the essay, students had to contextualize the works they chose by using specific visual evidence from each example to analyze each work in relation to both the religious beliefs and the religious practices within its culture.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult. The mean score was 3.53 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. An encouraging aspect of this year's exam was that students scored higher on this question than on the second long essay question, indicating that teachers are giving more attention to global art. As with last year's exam, there was a broad range of student choices from outside the European tradition, indicating that teachers are covering a much broader range of material in this area than before. The content addressed in this question is one that is covered in art surveys from the outset of the course.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Weaker essays often addressed the belief portion of the question in a much more thorough fashion than the second half of the question, which dealt with practices. When discussing religious beliefs,

students included such issues as symbols, beliefs and iconography but had difficulty discussing how these objects functioned in various religious practices. Another problem was that student choices were sometimes identified generically (a Buddhist Buddha, for example) or were poor choices in that the student could discuss only superficially how the work functioned in religious practices. Stronger essays referred to specific visual evidence, as required. Weaker essays only hinted at visual aspects. Interestingly, students often performed more poorly on the European examples that they chose.

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?

On these long essays, students need to know that their choice of examples is key to writing a good essay. Students who chose, for example, an altarpiece or a tympanum often performed better than those who chose a pietà, because the latter had difficulty discussing the portion of the essay dealing with religious practice. In many of the stronger essays, students also outlined their approach at the top of the essay before beginning to write (even though notes written in the blank space provided above the question are not scored). This indicates that students who think through their essays prior to beginning to write score higher. Study exercises that would help students identify good essay choices might prove valuable. An example might be to give students 5 minutes to think of examples to address specific topics for sample long essays, and then discuss with students why their choices might be strong or weak. Remind students that these are 30-minute essays, and that they have time to think about and outline their essays prior to writing.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This 30-minute essay question asked students to choose two works of art in outdoor public spaces, one prior to 1850 C.E. and one after 1850 C.E., and to discuss how each work conveyed meaning to its intended audience. The question required students to think about how these outdoor works conveyed meaning to their specific audiences within the context of their cultures' specific social, political and/or religious milieu.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question difficult, which was surprising given the wide array of choices. The mean score was 3.26 out of a possible 9 points. For the earlier period there were many possible choices, ranging from the Parthenon to the Column of Trajan to the Florence Baptistery doors. Later examples included work that ranged from the Eiffel Tower to the sculptures of Claes Oldenburg, the work of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, and Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students seem to have had canned answers based on previous exams and then tried to use those responses to answer the question. Instead, students need to read the question carefully, identify its component parts, and specifically address the question in their essays. Although a good teaching mechanism is to look at past exams and to use questions from those exams to help students prepare, teachers should warn students that using those particular examples for any new

question they are given may be problematic. For example, *Spiral Jetty*, which appeared on the 2009 AP Art History Exam, was a common answer to this question, and some students had difficulty writing an essay using *Spiral Jetty* within a changed question context. Similarly, students who chose the Colosseum, which also appeared on the 2009 exam, had difficulty addressing how the work conveyed meaning to its intended audience. Also, some works were selected (such as the Augustus of Prima Porta or the equestrian Roman Marcus Aurelius) for which we do not know the original function, thereby making these choices difficult to support. Some students identified indoor works or paintings that portrayed outdoor scenes, which were inappropriate examples. Weaker essays were often unbalanced, focusing more on one work than the other. They were also more descriptive than analytical. Some essays failed to identify two works within the specified time frames (one work had to date from before 1850 and one after 1850), choosing two works within the same time frame. In this case, the weaker example was not scored. By contrast, students who chose good examples typically wrote better essays.

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, the choice of examples is key to better scores. Students need to read the question carefully, identify its component parts, and then choose examples that fulfill the requirements of the question. Remind students that space is provided for outlining their answers prior to writing their essays, and then encourage them to follow their outlines as they write the essays. Provide students with several opportunities to practice making choices for potential essay questions. Discuss what makes a choice strong or weak for a particular question. Furthermore, help students become aware that how the intended audience views a work is part of the work's context. The context of outdoor public works is, of course, different from that of private works.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This 5-minute essay question asked students to discuss where Egyptian funerary scrolls were placed and how they functioned. The image was identified for students as an ancient Egyptian papyrus scroll. The question did not ask students to give a specific date for the scroll, identify the scene shown, or discuss the narrative depicted.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question fairly difficult. The mean score was 1.81 out of a possible 4 points, with many scores in the 2–3 range. Although essay scores tended to cluster toward the middle range, there were many excellent essays as well.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some of the weaker responses spoke about the work's content or iconography, or Egyptian art in general, but never specifically addressed the question, which dealt with function. Weaker essays also confused the location and purpose of the scrolls. Assuming that the scrolls were placed in temples or palaces led to confusion about how the scrolls functioned. Many students weakened their responses by providing multiple locations, demonstrating uncertainty about their answers.

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?

Encourage students to read the question carefully, and teach them to demonstrate an understanding of the contextual issues that inform the object. It is not enough simply to list facts about the object. Students have to answer the specific question that is asked. For questions requiring a factual response, students should not offer more than one answer (in this case, for example, by stating that the scrolls could be found in tombs, palaces or temples). These are considered incorrect responses because they do not provide one clear and correct answer.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This 10-minute essay question asked students to analyze Manet’s use of appropriation within the context of both social and artistic critique. It required students to analyze how and why Manet used Titian’s work to critique traditional styles of painting and also to comment on modern society. This comparison is a standard example of this type of artistic approach, one that has repercussions throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question fairly difficult. The mean score was 1.75 out of a possible 4 points. Students generally knew what the term “appropriation” meant, but weaker essays could not make the cross-period comparison that was necessary to answer the question successfully.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Weaker essays simply identified the components parts of Manet’s painting — they provided a visual description — without linking those elements to Titian’s work or to the question in general. The question dealt with two images and two component parts: social and artistic critique. Students needed not only to use both images to answer the question, but to realize that their discussion had to focus on Manet’s work and did not require a contextual analysis of Titian’s painting. In some cases weaker essays were sidetracked by discussions of Olympia’s servant and attempted to place the work within the context of the U.S. Civil War as a critique by an American painter. Weaker essays were also unbalanced, focusing on either the social or the artistic critique that Manet was making, but not fully addressing both.

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?

This type of cross-period comparison is a common tool of art historians, and this is a classic example of such a comparison. In this case the use of appropriation has very specific contextual associations. Students should be aware that artists often draw on past imagery not only for inspiration but also as a form of social or artistic critique. Engaging students with these works serves as a review of the past appropriated works while reinforcing issues of artistic intent and how past works might be appropriated to convey a more modern sensibility.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This 10-minute essay question asked students to identify the period of the ceiling shown and to discuss the historical context when the ceiling was decorated. The question did not specifically ask for the art-historical period or style, so Baroque, Italian Baroque, Counter-Reformation or Catholic Reformation were all correct identifications of the period.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question surprisingly difficult, given that the image appears in all the major survey texts. The mean score was 1.21 out of a possible 4 points. Although texts discuss the work in part as an illusionistic ceiling, the overall context is understood to be the Counter-Reformation.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A large percentage of students identified the period of the ceiling correctly. This work appears in all the major texts, so Baroque was by far the most common identification. The most common incorrect identification was Renaissance. Students who attributed the work to the Renaissance usually had little to say about its historical context and were unable to talk about specifically Baroque visual elements. Moreover, although this was not an attribution question, some students treated it as such and provided only visual analysis of the piece when the question asked for a discussion of the historical context. Many students who scored in the lower range simply listed Baroque characteristics without contextualizing the ceiling within the historical context of the Counter-Reformation. Without that context, essays could not receive the higher scores.

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?

Be sure students spend a sufficient amount of time reviewing the material from Mannerism through the 18th century. In past years students have not done as well on questions pertaining to these periods as they have on some of the other periods. Look not only at period styles but also at social, political and religious contexts of the periods. Practice different approaches with the material so students are prepared to answer questions in a variety of ways.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

This 5-minute essay question asked students to analyze two examples of Postmodern architecture and discuss how architectural elements in each building differ from Modernist architecture. The question was essentially a stylistic analysis of 20th-century architecture.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question difficult. The mean score was 1.57 out of a possible 4 points. For a question that dealt with contemporary architecture, however, it scored relatively well, and many students wrote very good essays.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students had to articulate in specific terms how the Postmodern elements of the two buildings differ from Modernist architecture. The strongest choice for this comparison was International Style Modernism. Weaker essays indicated a limited sense of Modernist architecture and were vague or merely descriptive.

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?

There are two issues at stake here. This work covers both the contemporary field and architecture. If teachers are unfamiliar with this area, a general architectural survey would be helpful. Architecture cannot simply be aligned with other stylistic movements in painting or sculpture, so special attention needs to be devoted to this area of study. At the same time, responses to essay questions that deal with contemporary art and architecture are much stronger than in the past.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

This 10-minute essay question asked students to attribute the work shown to a specific art-historical period, Romanesque. Students were asked to justify their attribution by connecting specific characteristics of the work (formal, iconographic, contextual) to broader tendencies of that art-historical period.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question fairly difficult. The mean score was 1.81 out of a possible 4 points. Students who identified the art-historical period as Romanesque generally did well.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Weaker essays misidentified the art-historical period as Byzantine, Early Christian or Gothic or gave other inaccurate responses. Many students connected the drapery folds to Classical or Hellenistic drapery and followed this line of thinking without carefully considering the rest of the visual evidence. Many students identifying the work as Early Christian or Byzantine appear to have done so because they associated the treatment of the figure and drapery with the ivory relief of the Archangel Michael (which appeared on the 2010 exam). Other weak essays had problems with correct terminology, although many essays employed terminology correctly and referred to specific architectural elements in the work. Although many students misidentified the scene depicted as the Last Judgment instead of the Ascension, that misidentification in itself did not lower the score if students could write about the context of works such as the one shown. Stronger essays often

explained why these works were strategically placed where they were in order to communicate to specific audiences, including pilgrims.

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?

This question, dealing with the Medieval period, scored higher than other recent essay questions that have addressed this period. Still, students need to be able to differentiate between stylistic periods within this broad span that encompasses over one thousand years. Students also need to be familiar with basic art and architectural terminology. Encourage students to support their statements with specific evidence using clearly defined terminology. Simply stating that a work is Romanesque because it “looks Romanesque” (or describing the arch as “a Romanesque arch”) does not sufficiently defend the use of terminology. Students also need to analyze how works such as these function. In this case, Romanesque portals functioned not only for pilgrims but in a more general sense to demarcate the threshold between profane and sacred realms. In this sense, these portals are more literal than the metaphorical use of stained glass in Gothic cathedrals. In general, being able to identify stylistic characteristics is an important art-historical skill. Give students the opportunity to practice with unknown images across the art-historical spectrum, whether to attribute a work to a specific artist or to an art-historical period.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

This 10-minute essay question asked students to identify Marcel Duchamp as the artist who submitted a urinal to an exhibition, and to discuss how Duchamp used the work to challenge conventional ways of thinking about art and artists. Students had to connect Duchamp’s submission to larger contextual issues such as the role of the artist, what constitutes art, and how a work’s value is assigned and by whom.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question difficult. The mean score was 1.61 out of a possible 4 points. Most students identified the artist correctly, but the larger issue was being able to articulate the conceptual issues that were involved with the exhibition of this piece.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Weaker essays were overly general, with comments such as “Anything can be art,” “Everything could be art,” “Anyone could be an artist,” and “You don’t have to be talented to be an artist.” Students also tended toward formal analyses, which were difficult to support, given this question. Stronger essays were more successful at articulating artistic intent, discussing in detail how Duchamp challenged conventional thinking about art and artists. Such essays often discussed readymades, the perspective of the audience, the relevance of the idea or concept, and the intent of the artist (using words such as recontextualization, irony, parody, and provocation).

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?

This is a pivotal work of art in terms of the challenge it proposed to art and artists. It provides students with an opportunity to discuss and defend (or attack) a variety of positions, and it can also be discussed in terms of its relevance to later contemporary work.

Question 9

What was the intent of this question?

This 10-minute essay question asked students to identify Polykleitos as the author of the treatise the *Canon*, which was quoted. It further asked students to select and identify a work of art that reflects the ideas expressed in the quotation and then to analyze how the selected work reflects those ideas. Students needed to read the text and think abstractly about how it related to the aesthetics of its specific period.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question difficult. The mean score was 1.60 out of a possible 4 points. Approximately 10 percent of students did not answer the question at all, indicating that students may not be pacing themselves appropriately through the exam and may be running out of time prior to answering the final question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Weaker essays did not correctly identify Polykleitos as the sculptor who authored the *Canon*. Students could score in the upper range if they selected another Greek sculptor from the Classical or Late Classical period, but students who chose an artist from a period other than Classical Greece scored in the lower range. Weaker essays addressed the issue in generalities or did not refer to both the quotation and the selected work. They commonly confused beauty with sensuality and vaguely discussed generic Venuses or works by Botticelli. Students who discussed works such as Michelangelo's *David* had a more difficult time demonstrating that they were appropriate 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?

Again, the choice of example was key to gaining a high score on this question. Students who understood the ramifications of Polykleitos's aesthetic approach within the context of Classical Greece did well, while students who tried to use other works were at a disadvantage. Give students practice with text-based questions in the classroom and as take-home exercises. Various sourcebooks of quotations (or primary texts themselves) exist, and teachers can draw sample quotations from such sources and relate them to images that appear in the students' texts. It would also help 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 the students and to the exam readers. Finally, practice timed writing in the classroom. Students can now pace themselves

in the essay section of the exam, but they are at a disadvantage if they do not reach the final question.