



Student Performance Q&A:

2002 AP[®] Art History Free-Response Questions

The following comments are provided by the Chief Reader regarding the 2002 free-response questions for AP Art History. *They are intended to assist AP readers as they develop training sessions to help teachers better prepare their students for the AP Exams.* They give an overview of each question and its performance, 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 included. Readers are encouraged to use their expertise to create strategies for teachers to improve student performance in specific areas.

Question 1

What was intended by the question?

This question required students to read an excerpt from primary source material, the writings of Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, and to use their understanding of that material in their response. Such a text-based question is new to the exam. Students were also shown a plan of a portion of the Church of Saint-Denis and an interior view of the ambulatory. Students were asked to name the new architectural style, Gothic, ushered in by Saint-Denis's construction. They were then directed to discuss the relationship between the apse and Suger's description of it.

How well did students perform?

Many students understood that the plan, the view, and the quote could be related and set in the larger context of the Gothic style in architecture. The question distinguished well between students prepared to answer it and those less able to apply their knowledge to this contextual problem. Readers were aware that this type of question, combining a quote and slides, was new to students.

What were common errors or omissions?

Students unfamiliar with the notion of architectural style and students unable to read a plan had difficulty with the question. As with most questions on this exam, students who did not read the question and failed to focus their answer on the question's requirements did demonstrably less well than those who read and answered the question.

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

Sources and documents are crucial for the study of art history. All major survey texts include copious examples of primary source material of the sort used in this question. Students who are familiar with the various kinds of primary source material valuable in the study of art history and those accustomed to analyzing such material are likely to continue to do well on questions of this sort. In terms of the exam as a whole, students who have had practice in applying their art-historical knowledge to a variety of questions will find the exam less daunting than those who

have not. The exam as it is now constituted requires students to use art-historical vocabulary and art-historical methods to respond to questions about art and its many contexts (cultural, economic, geographical, historical, political, religious, social, to name only a few). As such, the exam values critical thinking and the deployment of factual knowledge over the mere recitation of facts.

Question 2

What was intended by the question?

This is a standard question asking students to differentiate between Northern Renaissance ideals and images and Southern, or Italian, Renaissance ones.

How well did students perform?

Overall, students did well on this question.

What were common errors or omissions?

Students' ignorance of geography was evident in some answers. Again, students' failure to read and answer the question carefully was a problem in some cases. Simple description was not sufficient to produce a good answer. Analysis and contextualization are ever more important in this exam; more students need to be ready to answer such questions.

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

Teachers should advise students to read the entire question carefully, making sure they have answered all parts of the question. Students should also be trained to recognize regional stylistic differences.

Question 3

What was intended by the question?

The question was designed to have students think about ways in which royalty has been presented traditionally (the "conventions of royal portraiture") and to analyze a late-18th-century royal portrait from the point of view of adherence to and divergence from the usual.

How well did students perform?

Students did well on this question overall.

What were common errors or omissions?

The failure to read the question was a problem for some. Answers, for example, that described the image without analyzing it as a royal portrait earned lower scores. Many students seemed unfamiliar with art-historical periodization, as with historical chronology generally, and therefore had trouble placing this image (whose subject was identified for them) in its proper period.

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

A firmer grasp of historical chronology and a surer sense of art history's chronology will be important on exams to come. Training students to read a question and to answer it is always helpful to student performance. In questions of this kind that relate to historical personages, students' tendencies to create a narrative, and to engage in storytelling, rather than to shape an answer related to what has been asked, is a continuing problem.

Question 4

What was intended by the question?

The question requires students to know the religious requirements of one of the world's major religions, Islam, and to apply their understanding of these requirements to the analysis of mosque architecture.

How well did students perform?

Students who had studied the art, architecture, and beliefs of Islam were able to answer the question without difficulty. The question clearly separated those with substantive knowledge of Islamic beliefs and Islamic religious architecture from those without it.

What were common errors or omissions?

The most common problem is the lack of knowledge of world cultures, in this particular case, of Islam. *The AP Art History Course Description* clearly indicates that substantive questions about Islam may be included in the AP Art History Exam. Islamic art, though not historically a part of the European tradition, has traditionally been included in most surveys of (mostly) western art history, and should, therefore, be familiar to students. In addition, some of the best-known Islamic architecture can be found on European soil: the Mezquita, or Great Mosque, in Cordoba, Spain, being the best example with relevance for this question.

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

Broaden students' horizons at every possible juncture, and encourage them to do likewise. Ensure that art history is taught in context whenever possible, and that students learn to apply the facts (names, dates, and the like) they have assimilated in a variety of ways.

Question 5

What was intended by the question?

Students were asked to talk about historical and social themes in the work of the African-American artist Jacob Lawrence. They were then asked to do a formal analysis (a consideration of the composition, the colors, and other formal elements) of the two Lawrence works shown, and to consider how these formal elements furthered Lawrence's visual storytelling ("use... formal elements to construct narrative").

How well did students perform?

There was a clear range of responses. In the best of these, a clear, and in some cases profound, understanding of Lawrence's work was presented, with excellent linkage between the work and its subject-matter. Answers that earned lower scores revealed a lack of knowledge about 20th-century art and its contexts. Many students were able to write about the right slide's illustration of segregation; but considerably fewer students were able to identify the migration image as being 20th century and relate it to African Americans' collective move from the agrarian South to the industrial North.

What were common errors or omissions?

Readers noted a general weakness in coverage of 20th-century art and its historical contexts. In some cases, lack of knowledge of American history in this period in general, and of African-American history in this period in particular, could be seen.

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

Continue to encourage students to do formal analysis and to relate it to works' meaning, function, and the like. Encourage contextual analysis, and help students to understand that understanding the contexts of art history means knowing about, for example, beliefs, economics, geography, history, politics, and so forth.

Question 6

What was intended by the question?

Students were asked to identify the sculptor of the work shown – Rodin. They were then asked to talk about the sculpture's conception of heroism and to relate this conception to more traditional representations of heroism.

How well did students perform?

Students did well overall. Some comments noted that the slide was difficult to see.

What were common errors or omissions?

Some students failed to read the question, either not providing an artist's name, or not centering their discussion on the traditional and nontraditional sculptural representations of heroism.

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

Again, this was a question requiring students to know a given work of art and to use their specific knowledge to respond to a general, contextual question. Students who have learned to discuss many different aspects of individual works and types of work, and to relate their understanding of, for example, form, iconography, function, or patronage to a given question, will be better prepared for the exam.

Question 7

What was intended by the question?

This is a straightforward question (like Question 2) that is often asked in college courses. Students were asked to identify and to discuss specific architectural and figural aspects of this sarcophagus which connected it with classical antiquity. The question required an awareness of the work's transitional nature, positioned as this stone coffin in between the Roman era and the early Christian. Students were directed to focus their responses on the classical, rather than the Christian, elements of the work.

How well did students perform?

Students did fairly well on the question, though the consensus among readers was that they should have done better. The work should be familiar to students, and in too many cases it seemed not to be. Some comments were made about the difficulty of seeing the slide in any detail.

What were common errors or omissions?

The biggest problem was lack of familiarity with the work, followed by an apparent failure to understand the question and, therefore, to answer it properly. Many answers were lacking in specifics, which earned them lower grades.

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

Students need continual encouragement to read a question carefully before beginning an answer. Also, students must acquire the factual knowledge which will enable them to answer contextual questions about specific images, or to mount an intelligent discussion of a broader-based contextual question.

Question 8

What was intended by the question?

This was a “power and authority” question. Students were to choose two architectural works from distinct and different cultures, providing as complete an identification as possible. As is always the case with this question, one of the works chosen must come from beyond the European tradition. (Possible topics for this question have continued to be announced in advance.) Students were then directed to discuss ways in which each work conveys power and authority. Note that students were not asked to compare the images.

How well did students perform?

Students did moderately well. There were few exemplary essays.

What were common errors or omissions?

Failure to read the question was a common problem. Many students chose to write on works of sculpture rather than works of architecture. Many chose two European or European-based examples. Essays often made only the most superficial links between architecture and power and authority, suggesting a lack of knowledge about a given culture’s understanding of the concept of power and about architecture’s expressive possibilities.

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

Overall, student ability to organize and write an essay of this kind is weak. This is accompanied by limited ability to consider works in context. It was evident that analyzing architecture challenged a large number of students. Students on the exam as a whole, as shown clearly with these two long essays, need to practice writing about art, to practice answering a variety of contextual questions, to expand their awareness of architecture as an art-historical reality, and to learn more about art beyond the European tradition. A note: most students wrote about Egypt for their “beyond the European tradition” choice. While this is correct, students should be encouraged to broaden their horizons and to acquire some knowledge about and understanding of global art traditions beyond the usual.

Question 9

What was intended by the question?

The relationship of text and image is an art-historical archetype. Students were asked to choose two works of art from different periods later than 500 C.E., and to talk about how writing and picture related to one another in each. Note that students were not asked to compare the images.

How well did students perform?

This question required critical-thinking ability: first, to recall and to select two suitable images (containing both words and image and fitting the chronological specifications) and second, to construct an argument about the relationship of text and image in each. Those who made good choices had an immediate advantage, and those with solid knowledge of 20th-century art were also at an advantage. There were many fine answers, some worthy of the highest score possible.

There were also students who were stumped by the question and earned very low scores. A good many students mounted an argument of sorts, with decent choices; such answers might have been far better had students been better able to “think on their feet,” and to apply their year’s worth of study to what is, in effect, a very basic question.

What were common errors or omissions?

Students used to regurgitating information were at a considerable disadvantage in a question like this, which required careful choice and analytical thought. Lack of knowledge of 20th-century art, so rich in text-and-image combinations, hurt large numbers of students. Many students were unable to come up with even one good example, from a specific medieval manuscript to a Surrealist painting to conceptual art, and so earned very low scores.

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

That many students rose to the challenge of this question suggests that others with in-depth knowledge of the range of art history, practice in applying that knowledge, and experience in organizing and writing long essays, are similarly capable. The exam will continue to ask questions such as this that test independent thinking, rigorous analysis, and the synthesizing of art-historical knowledge.