

Student Performance Q&A: 2005 AP® Art History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2005 free-response questions for AP® Art History were written by the Chief Reader, Susan Benforado Bakewell of the University of Texas at Arlington. 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 identify the stylistic period of the work as Romanesque. It also asked them to relate the iconography of the sculptural decoration of the tympanum, a vivid and very graphic representation of the Last Judgment presided over by Christ, to its placement over the primary entrance of the pilgrimage church of Autun. Students were directed to the fact that these sculptures were a visual representation of already very familiar scriptural passages, and that visitors were asked to make a conscious choice to walk under the side of the portal on which they viewed either the saved souls or the damned souls. The act of walking under the portal and being judged is central to the relationship between how the work communicated and its placement.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.67 out of a possible 4 points. Many students found the question difficult. The best students did well, but some students performed very poorly. Apparently they are not yet learning the medieval era with the requisite amount of depth and sophistication, a problem Readers observed last year with responses to a similar question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

As in past years, Readers noted students' failure to answer the question that had been asked. The question is a standard one in college teaching, and the images that were shown are featured in all of the major textbooks. Students should have been able to answer the question far better than they did.

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?

As Readers observed last year, the thousand years of medieval art in the West is a general content area that needs more attention. The pattern of errors Readers have found in assessing questions of this kind, including responses to this question, indicate that teachers are not covering the material fully, and students are failing to read and respond to the question that was posed. Teachers should ensure that they teach any period of art history fully, following the Art History Development Committee's recommendation to use more than one textbook in their presentations. They should also drill their students in responding to questions and complying with the requirements of those questions.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to name the event depicted in Picasso's *Guernica*—the bombing of the town of Guernica by fascist forces during the Spanish Civil War. The question, which identified the painting, then asked students to discuss how Picasso used various visual means to communicate his message—that is, his outrage at the slaughter of innocents in the bombing. Students were encouraged to connect their knowledge of a specific historical event (subject) with the specific visual devices (form) Picasso used to communicate his anger and outrage (meaning). The intent was to draw out how Picasso's style may have been determined by the need to communicate meaning with a certain passion and power.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 2.16 out of a possible 4 points. This score suggests that students found the question moderately easy, perhaps because *Guernica* often appears as an illustration in history textbooks in addition to being a central work in art history.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Readers did not note any salient recurrent errors, but some students had only vague ideas about the relative dates of the Spanish Civil War and World War II. Some made very generalized comments about the Industrial Revolution, as if to suggest a direct link between it and Picasso's imagery.

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?

Students should realize they need a chronological framework for their observations when answering a contextual question of this kind. Only the lack of precise historical references might be noted as a pattern likely to cause problems on similar exam questions in the future. All textbooks include timelines, often illustrated and cross-referenced. Encourage students to make frequent use of these, as well as to integrate their art history learning with that of other, related courses like world history.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to identify the art historical period as rococo and to discuss how these particular paintings by Boucher and Fragonard exemplified the subject matter and style of rococo and how each expressed the tastes and interests of the culture in which it was produced. Students were expected to consider how the erotic fantasy of the *fête galante* and the stylistic characteristics of rococo, as seen in these paintings, revealed an artistic retreat from the palatial taste of Versailles to the more intimate setting of the private, upper-class residences (salon culture) of the later rococo. The question also asked students to explain changes in subject and style in terms of changes in patronage and taste.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.89 out of a possible 4 points, suggesting that the question was moderately difficult but not extremely hard. Most students performed relatively well.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students should have been familiar not just with the period but also with the artists, who were identified in the question. Therefore, they should have easily been able to answer a question asking them to link paintings to cultural concerns. Too many students, however, were unfamiliar with the rococo era. In addition, a good many were clearly unable to deal with the question's content.

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?

Students must know art historical periods well and be able to link discrete images to the concerns (cultural, social, political, etc.) of a particular era. As responses to this question showed, students' lack of familiarity with periodization is a serious problem. As noted in the commentary for questions 1 and 2, the solution lies in better teaching and learning.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question was intended to elicit an explanation of the theoretical reliance, reuse, and transformation of the ancient past as an idea that was at the very heart of early Renaissance architecture, especially in the hands of Alberti, one of its most significant early proponents and writers. Students needed to be able to identify as Renaissance the period of the Alberti building shown in the slide (the architect's name was given). They were then to discuss how and why Alberti drew specific architectural vocabulary from the ancient model (the Arch of Constantine, shown but not identified), and explain why fifteenth-century Italians wished to revive the visual and philosophical bases of Classical architecture as an identification with, and symbol of, modern Italian and Christian victory over imperial Rome, pagan religions, and even death.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.58 out of a possible 4 points, suggesting that many students found the question difficult. This does tend to be the case with architecture questions generally. Students in the lower range of scores were very confused by this question. Many were unable to identify Alberti.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Readers were astonished by the number of students who were unable to identify as Renaissance a building by Alberti, a major theorist and practitioner of the *quattrocento* whose name was provided in 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?

Students continued to have trouble with periodization and, in this case, understanding the relationship between one era (Roman) and another (Renaissance). The lack of even basic knowledge seems to be a recurrent issue. Better teaching and better learning are imperative.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The *Stele of Hammurabi* is a standard monument that should be familiar to most students. This question required a simple identification of the work of art and its subject, but it then asked students to analyze how the subject of the work (divinely granted legal authority) was conveyed, preferably visually as well as in content. The intent was to encourage students to draw connections between the needs of the patron (Hammurabi), the function, the visual form, and the intended audience response to this work of art.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.72 out of a possible 4 points. This suggests that, though the monument was well known to most students, many did not have the critical skills they needed to analyze it effectively. The best students, however, performed extremely well.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Failing to answer the question that had been asked was a common problem. Many students could identify Hammurabi's stele and knew its function, but they did not explain how the relief sculpture conveyed its message.

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?

Answering the whole question is key. Students need to take more practice exams and be reminded to read the entire question, identify all of its tasks, and respond directly to each task in their essays.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to identify the art historical period of Hellenistic art by visual observation. The work of art may have been unknown to many students. The intent was to ensure that students could identify Hellenistic art from the visual characteristics that are evident in the *Old Market Woman* sculpture, not simply list them in abstract, and that they could differentiate these characteristics from the preceding period, Classical Greek art, by recalling the visual characteristics of that art historical period. This was essentially a question of visual comparisons, but it was complicated because students were asked to identify Classical art and recall its characteristics.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.26 out of a possible 4 points, suggesting that this was a relatively easy question, probably because it called primarily for visual analysis.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors were failing to read the question, which was comparative, and neglecting to answer it properly. Students often displayed ignorance of periodization (two periods of ancient Greek art, Classical and Hellenistic).

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?

Students need to learn each period of art fully and be able to relate periods, or a period within a period, to others. To do well, they must answer completely the question that has been asked.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to gauge how well students could identify an art historical movement (Romanticism) from a painting by Delacroix that was likely unknown to them, recognize the major tenets of Romanticism as they are revealed in the painting, read and relate the text of the given quotation to Romanticism, and relate the specifics of the text to the work of art that was shown. Students needed to have a full understanding of Romanticism to excel at this question, since they were asked to connect ideas about the visual image to ideas communicated through the contemporary written word.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.64 out of a possible 4 points, suggesting that students continue to struggle with the text-based question. Students found the question difficult, though not by comparison to a similar text-based question on the 2004 exam.

The mean score for the slide-based essay section (questions 1–7) was 12.92 out of a possible 28 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common errors included not being able to name the period of the painting (identified by its title and artist and further linked to a time and place by a dated excerpt of critical text) and not dealing, as required, with both the text and the image.

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?

The text-based question, now in its fourth year, remains difficult for students, and they clearly need more intensive teaching accompanied by more practice. All major survey textbooks contain primary source materials, and these should be integrated into the teaching of each period. Students' inability to deal with primary documents is a recurrent problem.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

This 30-minute essay question asked students to engage in a significant way with at least one work of art beyond the European tradition. Students had to identify two works of art (one from beyond the European tradition) that convey a narrative and discuss the means by which each work accomplishes that task. The question did not ask for a full and lengthy analysis of each story or its cultural significance. It did ask students to connect how and why the artists communicate various aspects of their narratives to viewers through visual forms. This was the last year in which the art historical topic of the question was one of two topics announced in advance.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.77 out of a possible 9 points. This compares to last year's mean score of 4.68, indicating that students were reasonably well prepared for this question; their performance improves very slightly every year, and they perform better when they have been advised ahead of time of possible topics.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Despite the possible topic (narrative in art) being announced in advance, common errors included a lack of familiarity with the concept of narrative and an inability to apply the concept to specific images from distinct cultures.

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 many teachers now routinely include art from beyond the European tradition in their syllabi, some students still are not being exposed to global art traditions.

Question 9

What was the intent of this question?

The second 30-minute essay question centered upon a major contextual issue. Students were asked to identify two works of art (one from before 1800 C.E.) that challenged established traditions and to examine how and why each work constituted a significant challenge to the accepted conventions of its time. Students had to discuss how the works both represented a challenge and were significant in that challenge. They also had to suggest why each artist wished to challenge accepted conventions. Good choices resulted in good arguments, while good arguments were not enough to redeem poor choices.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.25 out of a possible 9 points, suggesting that this question was of average difficulty. The best answers were excellent. The worst ones were very bad; a number of students made no attempt to answer the question. More than any other question on the exam, this essay question asks students to think independently. Thus, it tends to reveal the differences between those students who have been taught critical-thinking skills and those who are more passive thinkers.

The mean score for both 30-minute essay questions (8 and 9) was 9.02 out of 18 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Failing to read the question and plan an appropriate response, with appropriate examples, before beginning to write was a common error. As always, good examples were critical to a good response, and too many students made bad choices in this respect. Somewhat surprisingly, a number of students wrote what appeared to be responses they had prepared in advance for a different question (e.g., the “power and authority” question on a previously administered exam). The exam’s two long essay questions require forethought and planning. Too few students gave their answers either. Furthermore, a significant number of students came to the exam unprepared to write at length about 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?

Teachers must continue to give students plenty of experience writing art historical essays that require the application of knowledge to a particular question.