



Student Performance Q&A: 2003 AP[®] Art History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2003 free-response questions for AP[®] Art History were written by the Chief Reader, Susan Bakewell of Austin College in Sherman, Texas. 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?

The question presented students with a major work from the medieval era — a Carolingian manuscript illumination — and asked them, first, to name its period (Carolingian or medieval were both acceptable responses) and then to discuss the artistic styles visible in the image. The expectation was that students would discern in the work a combination of classical elements and medieval expressionist elements and understand that this work from c. 800 exhibited classical survivals and also a new medieval energy and expression.

How well did students perform on this question?

To the readers' surprise, students seemed unfamiliar with the work, making the asked-for identification problematic. Rather than write about the mix of classical and medieval styles visible in the work, students tended to produce a formal analysis of the work, understanding "styles" in a sense very different from that meant by the question's writers.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A common difficulty was not knowing the work. Similarly, students seemed unequipped to "unpack" a medieval manuscript illumination and to recognize the different influences upon it. As always, there was the sad problem of students not having read the question carefully and therefore failing to write a satisfactory answer. It cannot be emphasized strongly enough that reading the question, noting to oneself what is being asked, taking a moment to think about how the question might best be answered, and then — and only then — beginning to write is the first step in doing well on this exam.

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 medieval period as a whole is a millennium long. Many distinct and important subperiods (e.g., Carolingian, Ottonian, Romanesque) are included within the medieval era; it is important that students be taught about these. Also, “style,” when addressed in a question like this (of which there have been, are, and will be many on the AP Art History Exam), must be discussed as an indication of *something*; style does not exist independent of historical context.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The question addressed links between Romantic landscape painting in nineteenth-century America and contemporary ideas — political, social, and philosophical. Students were also asked to identify the art historical movement with which the painting shown is associated and to discuss the painting in context. It is important to remember that works of art, whatever else one can say about them, exist in specific contexts (cultural, economic, geographical, political, religious, social — to name only a few possibilities), a reality that infuses this AP Exam.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students seemed to do reasonably well, overall, and in a significant number of cases, very well. Those students with a background in U.S. history were able to discuss the image’s connections to period thought with admirable specificity. (In years past we have noted this “crossover” effect in other questions about American art and architecture.)

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students who were not familiar with the Hudson River School and its relationship to U.S. history, literature, and philosophy (particularly transcendentalism) at this period were at a distinct disadvantage. Students who were unable to place the painting as early nineteenth-century American at all were not able to answer the question. Some students failed to discuss the requested contextual issues and therefore produced incomplete responses. Of particular note were those students who responded with a formal analysis of Thomas Cole’s *The Oxbow*. Such analyses, however elegant (and many were carefully observed and beautifully written) did not answer 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?

Reading the question in its entirety before beginning to write is always recommended; students should be encouraged to do this and to conceptualize their answers, however briefly, before putting pen to test booklet. Helping students to place works of art in all relevant contexts (cultural, economic, political, religious, and the like) will assist them in doing well on the increasingly contextualized AP Art History Exam. Formal analysis continues to be a key tool for analyzing and discussing works of art. It is, however, one among many such tools, and unless a formal analysis is specifically requested in a question on this exam, students should focus their energies on thinking and writing about what the question does ask. Further, as observed in the comments to Question 1, style itself has a context or contexts. Even a question centered on stylistic issues will likely need any discussion of style to be placed in some sort of context.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The question was intended to stimulate students to think about how geographic and cultural considerations affect domestic building styles. Students were asked to discuss two houses, each built by a wealthy merchant during the Renaissance — one house in northern Europe (France) and the other in Italy (Florence).

How well did students perform on this question?

Students tend to do somewhat less well on architectural questions overall, and that was the case here.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many failed to read the question (which, in itself, provided a fair amount of information) and therefore wrote inadequate responses. Students seemed to have difficulty recognizing either work — particularly surprising in the case of the Palazzo Rucellai by Leon Battista Alberti, which ought to be well known to all. Further, too many students were unable to apply contextual information given to them (that these were wealthy merchants' houses, both of the fifteenth century, one French and one Italian) and, from that information, to mount a discussion of stylistic and other differences. Finally, a significant number of students turned their essays into an extended value judgment, ranking the French Gothic building as superior to the Italian Renaissance structure. It is tremendously important that students avoid inserting personal comment into an essay unless it is explicitly asked for. In rare cases where students are invited to take a position, they will also be asked to support that position with solid, art historical information. Note that in Question 6, students were asked to state their opinion and then to buttress that opinion with facts about Surrealism and a specific artist's life and 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, practice in writing answers that address the same monument from a variety of points of view would be a help to students in responding to questions like this, a mix of contextual and stylistic, in future. Architecture, as a medium, needs to be taught more rigorously, so that students are at ease when asked to mix stylistic and contextual analysis of the sort this question demands.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question required students to discuss a major work of Egyptian art (included in all art history survey texts) from both formal and contextual points of view, and to connect the work's appearance (formal) with cultural considerations (function, content).

How well did students perform on this question?

Students' performances overall were surprisingly poor. Given that this work is featured in all major texts and that Egyptian art tends to be fully covered in high school courses, the result is both surprising and disturbing.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Most students knew the work was Egyptian but were not able to produce a complete identification for it. Misidentifying the image as that of a pharaoh led many to make incorrect assumptions about the work's form and content. Most essays dealt well with the work's function, as students' awareness of the work as Egyptian enabled them to discuss its funerary 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?

As always, reading the question before beginning to write is critical. Students who failed to read the question and plan their answers typically dealt with only one or two of the required tasks, and they received scores reflecting partial achievement as a result. Readers also noted that students needed a more nuanced understanding of Egyptian art. Not all Egyptian art comes from pharaonic tombs, and all figures depicted (as here) are not pharaohs.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The question asked for identification of a major monument and then required students to discuss how the monument functioned in its historical context. The Pont du Gard, the Roman aqueduct in Provence, is a work found in all art history survey texts and should have been easy to name. Students were asked to talk about the relationship between the Pont du Gard's function (as an aqueduct) and the political needs of the Roman Empire (more territory, more settlers, neither of them possible without the delivery of water to an arid region).

How well did students perform on this question?

Students either knew the monument well and were able to link its function to imperial aspirations or they managed a kind of identification paired with a weak and unsatisfactory discussion. There were many very good answers and many so-so answers.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Too many students did not read the question and therefore did not provide answers to what was asked in it. A large number of students simply restated the question. The readers' sense was that students did not use their knowledge to try to answer a question that combined identification with contextual discussion — a question that, with a little cogitation, they might have been able to respond to fairly well.

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 each question carefully, ascertain what is being asked, and then spend a moment planning their response before they start to write. Provide students with practice in writing short essays about different aspects, both contextual and formal, of a single work, and then offer them the chance to write practice essays in which they must link formal analysis with contextual analysis.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

This is the text-based question on this exam — a question that uses primary source material (sources and documents), usually in conjunction with an image. As such, the question is still somewhat new to the exam, having been asked for the first time as recently as last year. (Text-based questions formed part of the exam in its early years.) The intention is to have students deal, in a small and simple way, with how art history is made or written by having them read and interpret a document, link it to an image (if, as here, an image is provided), and connect both text and image to what they know of art history. This year, for the first time, students were asked to take and defend a point of view in this question. Their task, once they had read the snippet of text included and looked at the image, was to construct an argument using text, image, and their knowledge of a particular area of art history – in this case, Surrealism.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students did fairly well overall on this question. This was gratifying in that the type of question (text based) is only a year old and that the question was the first ever asked that offered students the possibility of choosing to argue one way or another on a particular subject.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The single greatest error students made was the failure to take a position and argue for it. Again, this suggests that too many students are not reading questions in full and thinking briefly about what a good answer might be before beginning to write. The question clearly stated that students must take a position on the issue of whether Frida Kahlo was or was not a Surrealist, referring in their argument to both Kahlo's own statement and the Kahlo painting shown as a slide. Many students hedged their bets by arguing both positions — that Kahlo was not a Surrealist and that she was a Surrealist, leaving the readers to, in effect, answer the question for the students by choosing the best response.

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?

Writing practice, including practice in outlining answers, would go a long way toward helping students gain the needed skills to answer questions of this kind.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

This is a standard art historical question, both contextual and stylistic in nature, centered on a canonical work. The question identified the work as a panel and provided both the artist's name (Lorenzo Ghiberti) and the work's date (1401–2). Students were asked to say why the work was made (its function) and to identify and discuss its Gothic elements and Renaissance components (not uncommonly found in a single work in Italian Renaissance art of this period).

How well did students perform on this question?

Students produced average answers to this question. This came as a surprise because the competition between Ghiberti and Brunelleschi for this important commission and its result (Ghiberti's triumph) should be well known to students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Too many students clearly did not know the work's function. It was a competition panel, which gained for its maker, Lorenzo Ghiberti, the commission to produce a set of doors; it was not a relief panel from those doors.

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?

We encourage teachers to consider all works they teach (and all works about which students read) in the broadest possible context: not just this year's question, asking how the work functioned, but other, related issues, such as who commissioned the work, or why was it made, and so on.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to consider a basic issue in the history of art — how the human body's appearance in works of art is stylized or abstracted for religious or cultural reasons — and to do so within a global perspective. Question 8 is one of two long essays on this exam. Rather than presenting an image for students to write about, the long essays require students to choose from memory two suitable works of art and to use these two examples to answer the question posed. In Question 8 one of these works of art must come from beyond the European tradition.

How well did students perform on this question?

This was a challenging question. Students overall did not perform particularly well on it. Students who had been exposed to global art traditions in some depth were at a distinct advantage and the scores they earned for the question reflected that advantage. Given that possible topics for this question were published in advance (as they have been for some years), this result is surprising. As with both the long questions, the choice of examples by students proved crucial. A student who, for example, chose two western examples about which to write, earned, at best, a score in the middle range. The task of relating a formal issue (stylization or abstraction of the human figure) to contextual issues (cultural and/or religious ideas) was difficult for many students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Failing to read the question was a common error. Typically this resulted in students making inappropriate or less-than-excellent choices. The readers noted some confusion about definitions of “stylization” or “abstraction” as well. Lack of substantive knowledge of the works of art chosen for discussion, either western or nonwestern, also had an impact on students' success with this 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?

The perennial adjunction to read the question and take a few moments to think before beginning to write continues to be the best advice we can offer. Students need to learn flexibility in their approach to individual works of art and art traditions, so that they are able to write about (for example) the formal and contextual issues requested of them in this question, or anything else they might be asked that is relevant. We encourage teachers to give frequent writing practices in which students tackle different aspects of a single work (from whatever art tradition); this kind of critical thinking and quick response will serve students well in whatever they undertake, not least an exam of this sort.

Question 9

What was the intent of this question?

The question asked students to consider the key role that context plays in art history by requiring them to come up with two good examples of works that have been removed from their original contexts in some way or other and then to discuss what knowledge of that lost original setting might add to a complete understanding of each work. As the question noted, most objects students see in museums have been ripped from their original contexts; in many cases valuable information about a work's appearance, function, and meaning has been lost forever. There are myriad possibilities from which students could choose their two examples. There were many ways to do well on this question, provided the choices students made were suitable.

How well did students perform on this question?

This was the question with which students had the most difficulty. Coming as it does at the end of the exam (and therefore, for some, at the end of a long day or days of AP Exam taking), students' responses perhaps reflected fatigue. The readers noted that, what seemed to them, an increasing number of students opted not even to attempt this question. Those who did write answers seemed, at times, pushed to the limits of their cognitive abilities, their powers of recall and their analytical skills severely tested. That said, the readers noted a number of simply brilliant essays and a number of essays that could be termed good.

What were common student errors or omissions?

This was not a question that students had seen before, studied for, or been prepared to write an answer for, obviously. However, with the whole of art history at their disposal, it was surprising how many students were not able to come up with two good choices or to write a convincing essay. Failing to read the question, as always, was a critical error. Errors in judgment when choosing which art historical examples to write about were particularly problematic in this question. Too many students avoided obvious choices (the Slaves, from Michelangelo's unfinished tomb for Pope Julius II) and instead invented histories for objects. There were also inventive, utterly wrong discussions of works of art (Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, for example, the original intended location of which students could not know).

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 demanded that students think for some minutes before beginning to write. The choice of examples was critical, as was the organization of the essay itself. We encourage teachers not merely to have their students write practice essays on different subjects often, but to teach their students how to

conceptualize and outline an answer for a long essay such as this. This exam, of course, required that students have at their disposal the facts of art history, but it is no longer a purely informational, or factual, exam. The ability to analyze and to argue was necessary for a good answer to this question, and students clearly need more practice in that arena.