AP® Art History
2004 Sample Student Responses

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9. The relationship between an artist or architect and a patron very often shapes the form and content of a work of art or architecture.

Identify two works, each from a different art historical period, and name the specific persons who commissioned them. Discuss how the specific interests and intentions of the particular patrons are revealed in each work. (30 minutes)

The Portinari Altarpiece, commissioned by the Portinari family, was painted by Hugo van der Goes during the early northern Renaissance. On this triptych, the center panel portrays the birth of Christ. Along with the usual baby, Mary, angels and wise men, members of the Portinari family have been painted in, worshipping the Christ child, as if they were actually there at that time. Additionally, on the side panels, more Portinari family members appear, with various other saints and Biblical figures. At this time in history, patrons often commissioned works of art that put them right in the middle of significant Biblical events or with saints. The prevailing notion at this time was to "buy your way into Heaven" by giving money to the church, to the poor and to an artist so he would paint you as a devout Christian, so that
everyone would know you were a believer and so you'd be able to get into Heaven. If the altarpiece was placed in the community church, it served as a fantastic way to show off your wealth and social status because everyone knew that you had to have money to hire an artist. Therefore, the patricians probably hired Vander Gog to increase their chances of making it to Heaven and possibly to show off their wealth.

The painting, "Napoleon at the Plague House at Jaffa," by David, was commissioned by Napoleon to use for his public relations. A perfect example of "art as propaganda," it shows Napoleon visiting his sick soldiers who are suffering in a temporary hospital that was once a mosque. Napoleon appears to be tall, handsome, and powerful and the lighting of the painting focuses on him, making him look like a "savior" of his men. Despite the terrible sickness, Napoleon's presence seems to say that now that he's arrived, everything will be fine and the men will be encouraged by his visit and regain their health and strength. Napoleon paid David to paint this scene so that his citizens back at home in France would think he was a great leader, but in reality, hardly anything in the painting is true. Napoleon was short, unattractive and un-inspiring. Instead of motivating his soldiers to recover, he pretended shortly after his visit that poison be put in their food so that they would all die and the military wouldn't have to bother with them. In short, David was commissioned by
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Napoleon to __________ disguise his shortcomings and mislead the French people in this painting from the Romanticism period.

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Artists need to sell artwork to make money and continue creating art – it’s a proven fact. Many artists realized this and received sponsorship from patrons requesting certain kinds of works. If the work was to be bought, it had to conform with the sponsors’ ideals. Two very different illuminated manuscripts of the past are

Illuminated manuscripts were highly decorative books so beautiful and valuable that they were considered works of art. Commissioned by individual churches or wealthy patrons, these books, such as the Ebbo Gospels, often depicted whole portions of the Bible in its Latin form. This was desired by the literate clergy, as were the illustrations for an illiterate congregation. Jeweled and detailed, these creations had to be beautiful to warrant their cost – it was so great that only the wealthy could afford them, and they had to
be locked up when not in use. These books of the Middle Ages were
sources of pride to the owners because, obviously, the creator had
followed the requests and desires of the future owner. The Scripture
was intended to aid in the study of the clergy or monks,
and for private study, while the pictures explained the stories in
easy terms. The jewels were meant to show the power and influence
of the Catholic church over religion and the general poverty-
stricken population. Churches and private owners commissioned these
books years ago—without regarding lack of printing press
(such books existed and can in some instances only be
found tied to the purchasing church. Wherever the purchase, the works
served their purpose magnificently.

Veronese's "Supper at the House of Levi" was received with a less than gracious response.

Ignoring the desires of the church patrons, Veronese constructed
a scandalous version of the last supper which church officials
already held a certain belief. Scathingly dogs on the floor, a man picking
his teeth, and the complete disorder caused by refusing to order the people
in groups of three shocked the clergy. Veronese defended himself by
saying the situation may have existed in that manner, and he had
artistic licence to "fill in the gaps." However he said, when brought
to trial he instead slightly altered his position declaring that it was
a portrait not of the last supper, but an earlier dinner with levi. The
painting was rejected, but Veronese refused to change the work, opting
for an entirely new painting instead.

Desires for certain works of art by patrons often led the stylistic
development in a certain direction. Illuminated manuscripts fulfilled

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[Handwritten text: their position of beauty, education, and status shape the position and wealth. Vermeer’s work reflects the acknowledgment of the clergy’s desire for a traditional, respectfully appropriate scene to be used both for beauty and for teaching; and some rejected. As can be seen, obedience to patron’s desires was critical for the acceptance and purchase of works, and most artists, though not all, chose to obey their desires.]