



Student Performance Q&A:

2004 AP[®] Art History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2004 free-response questions for AP[®] Art History were written by the Chief Reader, Susan 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?

The intent of this question was to gauge students' ability to understand and interpret primary source material paired with a related image. Both the quotation and the image were by impressionist artist Mary Cassatt, as indicated in the text of the question. Impressionism is a movement that all major survey texts cover extensively, and Cassatt is an artist whose work should be well known to students. Although students were not expected to recognize the quotation, they were expected to be familiar with the impressionist movement, its artists, and its aims, and to be able to discuss all of these intelligently. This is the third year that a text-based question has been asked on the exam.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 1.5 out of a possible four points, which suggests that students found the question difficult.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students had trouble naming the movement referred to in Cassatt's quotation and seen in the slide of her work—impressionism. Too many failed to answer the question fully, either omitting to name another work by an artist in Cassatt's group (the impressionists) or failing to discuss Cassatt's claim (found in the quote) about the movement's purpose. A surprising number of students mis- or over-interpreted the question and then answered a question of their own posing, rather than the question asked in the exam booklet.

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?

Impressionism is a major movement in art history; students need to be taught about its origins, goals, methods, and makers. Understanding and interpreting documents are important tools of the art historian; the survey texts all contain generous examples. The exam now includes a text-based question as part of the essay portion of the exam and has for the last three years. Typically, the inclusion of primary source material on the exam is new to students, and clearly they need to be prepared to apply what they know about a given period, movement, or artist to a quotation. Practice in reading and analyzing the primary source material included in most survey texts would be helpful to students.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to recognize the importance of a Germanic/north European, pagan, nonclassical work (the Sutton Hoo purse lid) for the development of early medieval Christian art in Europe (represented by a cross page from the *Lindisfarne Gospels*). The works share a similar place of origin (northern Europe) and a similar style (Hiberno-Saxon, Celtic, and animal interlace, to use a few of the possible and acceptable terms). The works, unidentified in the exam booklet, should be familiar to those who have read their textbooks. Students were asked to identify the culture or style of the manuscript page.

How well did students perform on this question?

This question was difficult, and students in the lower range were not able to answer it. The mean score was 1.5 out of a possible four points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A disturbing number of students could not correctly identify the culture or style of the manuscript page. Many students wrote extensive descriptions of what they saw on the screen without in any way engaging the art-historical relationship between the two works.

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?

Overall, students seemed to have, at best, a superficial acquaintance with the time period, though it is a key moment in European art history. The object shown—or in the case of the manuscripts, others very much like it—should have been known to students. Manuscripts of this kind are in the survey texts, as is the Sutton Hoo treasure from which the purse lid came. Students should not have found themselves ignorant of this important time period either.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question required students to recognize regional variation in Gothic style.

How well did students perform on this question?

With a mean score of 1.9 out of a possible four points, the question ranked toward the middle of the difficulty range.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students easily identified as Gothic the period of the two unnamed buildings that were shown and were able to describe how the buildings differed. Far fewer students were able to account for the differences, which were attributable to regional variation in building style and practice (one French example and one English example). Some students thought chronology accounted for the differences they observed, which was incorrect; some wrote about different architecture features, which was not enough for a good answer.

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?

Understanding how regional variation affected the appearance of Gothic buildings is as important as knowing about technological developments in the period. Periodization needs to be taught as more than architectural innovation.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This contextual question asked students to look at two “unknown” works, identified only as being by the same artist and dating to the 1760s, and to connect them with the Enlightenment and its ideas.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 1.8 out of a possible four points, which suggests that students found the question quite difficult. Good students did well. Students with a background in history (world, European, American) brought “crossover” knowledge of context to their answers and to good effect.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students who were unfamiliar with the intellectual, philosophical, and social contexts of eighteenth-century European art were at a loss. Some simply failed to answer the question. Rather than apply their knowledge of the period to what they saw on the screen, they merely described what they saw, discussing lighting, Caravaggism, and the like, for example. While this was a legitimate line to take in analyzing the images shown, it was not relevant to the question that had been asked.

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 exam consistently features contextual questions and has for some time. Those who did well on this question were able to take their cue from the chronological information (i.e., the 1760s) the question provided and to link the paintings’ subject matter (i.e., a scientific experiment and a demonstration of the movement of celestial bodies) to Enlightenment concerns. Students should

come to the exam prepared to apply their art-historical knowledge in a variety of ways, including, as here, to a consideration of the ideas underlying the art production of a given period.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This straightforward, contextualized, art-historical comparison question asked students to write about changes in the appearance and function of Roman portraits over time. It included two well-known works: a comparatively early work (the head of a Roman patrician from the Republican period) and the colossal head of Constantine (produced late in the imperial era). The patrician portrait was identified as coming from the beginning of the Roman portrait tradition. Students were directed to identify the Constantine head and to explain how each work's appearance was connected to its period and function.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 2.0 out of a possible four points, which indicates that students did moderately well on it.

What were common errors or omissions?

Although most students knew both images, failure to identify correctly the portrait of Constantine was a common error. Inability to discuss correctly aspects of the works' functions and time periods, as seen in their appearances, was noted in a number of responses.

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 know how works of art (in this case, sculpted portraits) functioned in the context of their times. They also need to be able to write factually and intelligently about whatever a question asks (in this case, the relationship between two well-known images and their original functions).

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

This was a standard and straightforward question on a Renaissance image. Students were directed to name the period of the unidentified image (a Mantegna fresco) and to explain which aspects of the painting exemplified artistic concerns of that period. Expected answers included the following Renaissance artistic concerns: linear perspective, references to the classical past, idealized figures, and proportions.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this to be a difficult question; its mean score was 1.5 out of a possible four points.

What were common errors or omissions?

A surprising number of students misidentified the period as Roman or Romanesque, rather than Renaissance. More surprisingly, a significant number of students seemed to ignore the adjective

“artistic” in the task phrase “artistic concerns,” writing instead about such concerns of the age as the Crusades, violence, war, and poverty. While not incorrect in themselves, these concerns did not answer the question that had been asked.

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 be intimately familiar with art-historical periodization and be able to use their knowledge of chronology and style to identify works that are unknown to them. (This, in a very basic form, is a key tool of the art historian, of course: connoisseurship.) It is imperative that students read the question carefully and answer that question and not a question of their own choosing. This was a simple question, and many more students should have been answered it well.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

This contextual question paired two slides, which possibly were known to students but were not identified in the exam booklet except as coming from the same century. The question aimed to elicit from students the understanding that they were looking at two different, roughly contemporaneous, European approaches to church ornament designed to support differing systems of belief (an elaborate, ornamented, seventeenth-century, Roman Catholic church in Italy and a spare, unornamented, Dutch Protestant church in a view made at about the same time).

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 1.7 out of a possible four points, which indicates that students found the question quite difficult. The total mean score for the slide-based questions (Questions 1 through 7) was 12.0 out of a possible 28 points.

What were common errors or omissions?

A large number of students were apparently not able to engage with the visual impact of the Protestant Reformation or the Catholic Counter-Reformation. They were apparently not able to assign these two interiors to the two competing belief systems of post-Renaissance Europe.

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 have been able to identify the religious split at the heart of this question and to write intelligently about the two interiors from that realization.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

This question, now in its seventh year, asks students to engage with an art-historical topic announced in advance; responses must draw at least one of the two required examples from art beyond the European tradition. This year the question asked students to consider the cultural significance of approaches to figural representation. For a good answer, students had to address

both form and content in their response, and do so with reference to specific aspects of the cultures about which they wrote.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.7 out of a possible nine points, which indicates that students were reasonably well prepared for this question. Student performance on this question is improving.

What were common errors or omissions?

Too many responses lacked specificity, discussing, for example, “The Buddha” as though there were only a single image in the world, rather than identifying and describing a specific figure. It was noted that a distressing number of students chose one of their examples from prehistoric art in Europe, a “culture” that was removed some years ago from the Course Description’s “College Course Coverage” outline (a listing of percentages of time that should be devoted to the various art-historical eras).

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 who do best on this question write capably and correctly about the art of a culture, country, or era in Africa, indigenous America, Asia, or Oceania and engage fully with a particular culture and its art. Essays about the ancient Near East or about Egypt tend to be less knowledgeable, less developed, and, overall less impressive; it may be that students taking this approach write about these two areas as a kind of fallback and have not been prepared to answer the question in the spirit in which it was written. As with Question 9, this long essay requires a good deal from students. Practice in recalling relevant information for and then organizing and writing extended essays in answer to complex questions allows students to perform better on exam day.

Question 9

What was the intent of this question?

This 30-minute essay question, as usual, centered upon a major contextual issue, in this case, and for the first time, patronage. The question required students to discuss two specific examples of how a particular patron’s wishes (often to communicate a message of some kind) were represented visually in a clearly identified work of art or architecture by a particular artist.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 3.5 out of a possible nine points, putting it at the difficult end of the spectrum for students. The best answers showed a clear grasp of the importance of patronage to the history of art; well-prepared students wrote about patronage with a high degree of specificity. Answers at the other end of the scoring spectrum were dismal; a number of students made no attempt to answer the question. Overall, students answered the question imperfectly or incompletely. The total mean score for both 30-minute essay questions (Questions 8 and 9) was 8.2 out of a possible 18 points.

What were common errors or omissions?

A failure to read the question posed and to answer it was, as is so often the case, a problem for many students. Incorrect or inappropriate examples were noted frequently; obviously, a good answer depends upon good choices of works about which to write. Too many students were ill prepared to write about the contextual issue of patronage in light of what they knew about art history.

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 topic for Question 9, unlike that of Question 8, is not announced in advance. The current Course Description, however, gives examples (see “The Course” on page 6) of significant contextual issues (patronage is among them), which may constitute the focus of this question; this is by no means a complete list of the possibilities, of course. Survey texts contain extensive discussion of contextual issues. Students should come to the exam prepared to apply their knowledge of art history to any one of a number of contextual issues. Finally, this long essay question, like Question 8, requires students to read the question carefully, conceptualize an intelligent and factual response, search their memory for appropriate examples to support that response, and then write an organized and focused answer. In-class practice in thinking about and responding to questions of this kind will allow students to produce better essays.