



Student Performance Q&A: 2008 AP[®] Art History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2008 free-response questions for AP[®] Art History were written by the Chief Reader, Susan Benforado Bakewell of the University of Texas at Arlington and the Chief Reader Designate, Robert Nauman of the University of Colorado at Boulder. 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 asked students to discuss cultural attitudes about women as revealed in art, with reference to two relevant works selected from memory; at least one of the works had to come from a culture that does not subscribe to European-based art traditions. Broad-based contextual questions of this kind have been part of the AP Art History Exam since 1998. The original intent of this question was to introduce students to global art traditions. Until 2006, possible topics were announced in advance, to help teachers accustom students to writing confidently about material presumed to be new to them; in 2006, the practice of announcing topics before the exam ended.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students did not perform particularly well on this question; roughly 50 percent earned 3 points or fewer, while about 9 percent earned 7 or more points. The mean score was 3.61 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A key problem with the two long questions, of which this is one, is students' failure to choose appropriate works to use as examples. Another perennial problem is not answering the question. Readers noted that many responses showed good ideas but lacked a full discussion. (Many essays were lamentably brief.) Essays were also generally weak on content. Students who made appropriate choices often failed to connect the works they had chosen to the cultures from which

the works came. Another problem was choosing a powerful woman from art history (Hatshepsut was a frequent example) but failing to cite a depiction of her that was linked to Ancient Egyptian culture. Many students wrote at length about Hatshepsut's patronage; while knowing about patronage is praiseworthy, students often failed to connect discussions of patronage to an appropriate visual image. Students who chose an example from prehistory, such as the *Woman (or Venus) of Willendorf*, were too often unaware of how little is known for certain by scholars about prehistoric culture and its beliefs. (As noted in the *AP Art History Course Description*, prehistory is not an area of art history covered 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?

Practice with reading a question, considering what tasks might be involved when answering it, and sketching out possible strategies for a response (including the selection of appropriate works) would help many students. The two long questions provide space in the exam booklet for outlining answers and time for doing so, yet few students take advantage of this opportunity and too many essays show evidence of insufficient thought. Combining the standard chronological approach to art history with a thematic approach (considering how gender, belief systems, and the like influence the making of art) would help students develop the necessary flexibility to apply what they know to broad-based contextual questions like this one.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to identify a work stylistically and then discuss it thematically. Students were asked to identify the art-historical period of the lost Greek original sculpture and then explain how the theme of death is treated in the work and why.

How well did students perform on this question?

Although many students could identify the work as a Hellenistic sculpture, few earned a score of 4. As a result, the question was of moderate difficulty, with a mean score of 1.72 out of a possible 4 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

While students seemed to have a background in Hellenistic works and their stylistic characteristics, they often did not relate their discussion specifically to the work in question. Weaker essays also discussed the issue of pain or death in general, instead of relating the concept to the object and explaining how and why the theme is treated in such a manner in this particular 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?

Students should be reminded to read the entire question carefully and, most important, to relate their answer to the image that is shown.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This was a contextual question addressing function. Students were asked to identify the artist who painted this fresco cycle in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, Italy, and then explain how the subject and meaning of the fresco cycle relate to its location.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed poorly on this question. The mean score was .99 out of a possible 4 points, with 71 percent of the students earning a score of 0 or 1. The 2007 question on the *Bayeux Tapestry*, also a question about the historical function of medieval art rather than a purely stylistic question, scored almost this low, but not quite. Students seem unable to engage with medieval art sufficiently from a contextual standpoint.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students failed to identify the artist correctly, and many of those who correctly identified the artist did not write about the function of the works shown, as the question asked. Sadly, a significant number of students did not try to answer the question at all.

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 tells students what they see on the screen, frescoes in the Palazzo Pubblico, the seat of civic government in Siena, Italy. The question then asks students to identify who painted these frescoes and to relate the frescoes' subject and meaning to their location. This fourteenth-century fresco cycle is illustrated and discussed in most major survey texts, though not necessarily from the point of view of its function. Students would benefit from continued practice with applying their knowledge of individual works and types of works to a variety of contextual questions.

Also, for some years, the exam has shown that students are insufficiently familiar with the European Middle Ages. This is a period comprising, roughly, a thousand years of art history; it should not be unfamiliar territory for students, as several years' worth of low-performing questions about medieval art suggest it is. Teachers might expand and update their own awareness of medieval art by taking a university course (if any are available nearby) or by reading a scholarly survey of medieval art history. Deepening and enriching students' exposure to medieval art in its many contexts is strongly suggested.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This was an attribution question. Attribution involves ascribing works of art to particular artists, to art-historical periods, and, often, to places of origin. A kind of applied formal analysis, it is a basic tool of the art historian. (Note that the 2006 AP Exam included an attribution question that featured Vermeer.)

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed well on this question, with roughly 46 percent earning a score of 3 or 4. The mean score was 2.29 out of a possible 4 points. A significant number of students recognized the “unknown” painting as being by Vincent Van Gogh. Students also wrote in their essays about numerous aspects of Van Gogh’s style and subject matter observable in the painting. A striking number of students referred to other works by Van Gogh that exhibit similar stylistic (and other) characteristics. This is a traditional means of justifying an attribution; it was not required for this question, and it was gratifying to find.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was the failure to identify the painting as a Van Gogh. In some cases, students failed to read the question completely and did not support their attribution (which may have been correct) by making specific reference to elements visible in the slide.

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?

Student performance on this question suggests that many students are familiar with Van Gogh’s oeuvre and were able to attribute this particular unknown painting fairly easily. This may not be the case for other attribution questions; Van Gogh’s biography has become part of popular culture and works by him, like *Starry Night*, are known to many who have never studied art history. Practice with unknown images across the art-historical spectrum will increase the number of students versed in attribution, whether to a specific artist or to an art-historical style or period (Romanesque or Hellenistic, for example, as required by other questions on this exam).

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

Students had three tasks with this question: to identify the period during which the Palatine Chapel at Aachen was built; to relate the chapel to an architectural work from a previous period; and to explain why this feature was used by Charlemagne in the chapel.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students did poorly on this question. The mean score was 1.23 out of a possible 4 points, with about 60 percent of the students earning a score of 0 or 1.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was failing to address the “why” segment of the question (why the specific architectural element students chose was reinterpreted by Charlemagne in his chapel). Many only described the image, providing no social or political context. Another common error was choosing an incorrect example for the comparison, such as Islamic (in the case of this question, a critical error) or Greek (which then created problems in addressing the “why” aspect of 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 need to be reminded to read the entire question and break it down into its component tasks (three, for this question). They also need help reading architectural plans and elevations. A larger concern is teaching students to look at how architectural forms take on meaning. Students need to be taught to examine what message is being communicated, how it is communicated through various architectural elements or styles, and why those forms are used. In other words, they need to be taught how to go beyond merely descriptive comments to more conceptual levels of understanding.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

This was a text-based question that required students to relate a quotation by an artist (Jackson Pollock) to an image of a work by the same artist.

How well did students perform on this question?

Student responses to this question were acceptable, with about 31 percent earning a score of 0 or 1. If those who earned a score of 2 (32 percent) are included, then nearly 64 percent of the students scored in the lower half. The mean score was 2.02 out of a possible 4 points. In general, students knew the artist and seemed to understand the question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students too often simply reiterated the quotation without relating their response to the image, or they ignored the quotation altogether. Another problem was that the students’ vocabulary was not specifically art historical or directed at action painting, with students simply describing Pollock’s process as “messy.” The task here was to balance observation with referencing the quotation, and too often there was an imbalance between the two.

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 should give their students practice with text-based questions in the classroom and as take-home exercises. Various sourcebooks of quotations exist, and teachers can draw sample quotations from those and relate them to images that appear in the students' text. Teachers should encourage students not to simply write everything they know about an artist but to use this exercise to hone their skills of observation and relate a specific quotation to a specific image.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to attribute a European medieval sculpture (the *Morgan Madonna*) to its art-historical period, the Romanesque era.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students did not do well on this question. The mean score was 1.11 out of a possible 4 points; 66 percent of the students earned a score of 0 or 1. If those who earned a score of 2 (23 percent) are included, then 89 percent of the students scored in the lower half. On a positive note, those students who earned a score of 3 or 4 wrote solid essays that answered the question accurately and fully.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The major error was failing to identify the style of the sculpture as Romanesque. A wide variety of attributions appeared in the essays; some made more sense than others. Readers felt that students should have been able to look at the sculpture, note and analyze it, and come up with information that would enable them to place it in its period of Western European art—and that too many did not.

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?

Practice with unknown images and their attribution would be of great help to students. Closer attention to European medieval art and its contexts (in this case, religious belief) would improve student understanding. Based on an analysis of this year's exam and those of recent years, teachers appear to be covering the period beginning with Carolingian art and extending through the Romanesque era rapidly and in insufficient depth.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to look at a major work covered at length in all texts, Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, and to discuss the painting's importance to its patron and its artist. Students were asked to identify the artist but not the patron.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed less well than expected on this question. The mean score was 1.37 out of a possible 4 points. Good essays were very good.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error, a surprise, was students' failure to identify the artist and, by extension, the painting. Readers felt that if any work should be known to students, and well known, it is *Las Meninas*. A secondary error, also common, was a failure to go beyond mere description (or, in some cases, an extended formal analysis) to answer the question. The question required students to say how both the patron and the artist's aims were served by this painting; not enough students focused on this task.

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?

Coverage of patronage is an important aspect of art history; so, too, is the study of the artist's social status and strategies for improving it. For contextual questions like this one, students need to develop sophisticated analytical skills that enable them to relate a work to its reason for being, as this question required. They need to understand the role of patronage and the social dynamics of artists' careers. Most of all, they need to be able to say how imagery conveys this sort of information. Students must, of course, learn to do formal analysis, but formal analysis is seldom sufficient to produce good answers to contextual questions. Too many students rely on well-honed formal analyses as a default position. Unless they are able to apply formal analysis to the question that has been asked—and add to that their knowledge both of a given period and of the larger contextual issues addressed in art history—they will have trouble with contextual questions.

Question 9

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was to identify two works of art created since 1960 that demonstrate the wide variety of artistic approaches in contemporary art.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed poorly on this second of the two long questions. The mean score was 3.09 out of a possible 9 points. In general, students who responded to the question chose a wide range of examples (although there were many examples of Andy Warhol's work), but nearly 20 percent of the students earned no points. This seems to indicate that while teachers at the high school level are making an effort to cover contemporary art, many students are still not comfortable with this period of art history.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A number of students chose artists whose work is essentially unknown or does not merit attention, or they addressed examples like popular films or video games. These poorer answers, of course, reflect a lack of solid knowledge regarding contemporary art. Some students also chose artists who may have still been alive around 1960 (artists or architects such as Dali, Magritte, Picasso, Duchamp, or Wright, for example), but the subsequent discussion dealt with their earlier work and did not address the contemporary focus and intent of the question. Students sometimes failed to fully identify the works they selected or to discuss specific works (a general discussion of Pop Art without a specific identification, for example, was insufficient). Areas of weakness in general continue to include printmaking, photography, and architecture.

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 learn how to critically analyze works, going beyond mere identification and description. Encourage students to concentrate on contemporary artists and works discussed in the text and during class, emphasizing why artists chose different approaches during this period. As with the rest of the course, continue to bring in varied interpretations and insights that expand the discussion of the works mentioned in the texts, emphasizing that the specific time and place in which a work is located and discussed determines its meaning. Address *why* the study of contemporary art is relevant to an understanding of the continuity of art history, stressing that art of the past cannot be examined without also considering today's world. Students should be reminded that the canon of art itself is in a constant state of flux and determined by our contemporary problems.