

AP® ART HISTORY

2009 SCORING GUIDELINES

Question 4

Left slide: Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970
Right slide: Blank

4. An aerial view of a monumental earthwork is shown.

Identify the artist. What artistic concerns motivate the creation of earthworks such as the one shown?
(10 minutes)

Background:

“A great pleasure arose from seeing all those incoherent structures. This site gave evidence of a succession of man-made systems mired in abandoned hopes.”

—Robert Smithson on viewing the site for *Spiral Jetty* for the first time¹

The Environmental Art movement grew out of a period in which ecological issues were emerging in the United States. Politically, in 1969 both the United States National Environment Act was passed and the Environmental Protection Agency created. Artists were creating site-specific artworks, or earthworks, using natural or organic materials as their media. Their works, both architectural and sculptural, were often constructed in forgotten, ignored, or marginalized landscapes. These often-remote sites attracted visitors seeking to interact with earthworks.

Robert Smithson (American, 1938–1973) was one of the first artists to develop and create earthworks. He was influenced by Minimalist artists Donald Judd and Carl Andre, as well as by fellow environmental artists Michael Heizer and Nancy Holt (Smithson’s wife). Three years after creating the *Spiral Jetty*, Smithson died in a plane crash while surveying sites for his work *Amarillo Ramp* in Texas.

When Smithson visited the Great Salt Lake in Utah in 1970, he was attracted to the region’s stark desert landscape. He observed remnants of oil-drilling equipment that littered the site and was reminded of prehistoric fossils and the enduring power of the earth. For Smithson the salinity of the water aligned it with the primordial seas—the earth’s prebiotic oceans, where the building blocks of life were formed. In addition, he liked the reddish hue of the water, which is caused by a rare type of algae that thrives in saline. He secured a 20-year lease on 10 acres of land and began to work.

Smithson was interested in the power of the spiral form both in nature and art long before he arrived at the shores of the Great Salt Lake. Present in forms large and small, spiritual and organic, the spiral is associated with growth, change, and rebirth. When Smithson first stood on the shore, gazing out onto the lake, he was overwhelmed by the spirals around him:

“A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement. The site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the *Spiral Jetty*.”²

Smithson began to shape the *Jetty* using two dump trucks, a tractor, and a large front loader. The completed *Spiral Jetty* is a 1,500-foot coil made of black basalt and earth taken from the site; at the time it was created, it extended 400 feet into the Great Salt Lake. It is approximately 15 feet wide and slowly curves to the left. Pilgrims who brave the rugged dirt roads to see the work can traverse it by foot to its center and ponder the continually transforming relationships between humans and landscape.

1. Robert Smithson, essay on the *Spiral Jetty*, 1972. Quoted in John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape*, 3rd ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1998), 22.

2. Ibid.

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Question 4 (continued)

Smithson was interested in entropy, the slow, steady deterioration of a system. He understood that climate changes and the ensuing rise and fall of the lake's water levels would have an effect on the *Spiral Jetty*, but even so, he ordered that after its completion no maintenance be done. His work thus addresses the dialogue between creative and destructive forces over time.

After several seasons of heavy rain in Utah, the *Spiral Jetty* was completely submerged. When it reemerged, the *Jetty's* black basalt boulders were covered in salt crystals, creating a snow-white form in the red-tinged waters of the lake. After several years of drought, the salt crystals dissolved, and the lake receded. In 2009, the *Spiral Jetty* was again a coil of black basalt boulders, although its relationship to the lake had changed. The entire *Jetty* had become landlocked in pale pink sands, the shoreline a full 30 yards from its edges. As yearly climate conditions impact the area around the Great Salt Lake, the *Spiral Jetty* and its relationship to its site will continue to change, making it a monument to instability.

Film is an important media for the documentation and preservation of earthworks. In 1970, Smithson created a film that captures the poetry and mystery of the *Spiral Jetty*.

Students may address the following:

Earthworks:

- Are site-specific.
- Are often constructed using natural materials.
- Reflect concerns over environmental issues.
- Are outdoors and challenge traditional ideas about what art is made of, how it is viewed, and how it is or is not preserved.

Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*:

- Is not permanent—continues to be altered by fluctuations in climate over time.
- Calls attention to a marginalized or ignored part of the landscape of the Great Salt Lake.
- Encourages a dialogue about humans and nature, life and death, construction and destruction.

Students have two tasks:

- (1) Identify Smithson as the artist.
- (2) Analyze the artistic concerns that motivate the creation of earthworks such as this one.

Better responses will focus on the *Spiral Jetty* within the context of its location at the Great Salt Lake and connect it to artistic concerns that motivate the creation of earthworks.

Weaker responses often rely on clichés about the beauty of nature or saving the earth, failing to address artistic concerns that motivate the creation of earthworks.

Points to remember

- Students are not asked to identify the title of the work, but many will use the title to help explain the work.
- Students may earn partial credit if they discuss another earthwork artist.

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Question 4 (continued)

Scoring Criteria

Score Scale 0–4

- 4** Identifies Smithson as the artist. Analyzes with specificity the artistic concerns underlying the creation of earthworks such as the one shown.
- 3** Identifies Smithson as the artist. Analyzes the artistic concerns underlying the creation of earthworks such as the one shown but with less specificity. May contain minor errors.
OR
Does not identify Smithson but is otherwise a 4.
- 2** Identifies Smithson as the artist. Attempts to analyze the artistic concerns underlying the creation of earthworks such as the one shown, but the discussion lacks specificity or is merely descriptive. May contain significant errors.
OR
Does not identify Smithson but is otherwise a 3.
- 1** Identifies Smithson as the artist but contains no other discussion of merit.
OR
Does not identify Smithson but is otherwise a 2.
- 0** Makes an attempt, but the response is without merit because it fails to identify the artist and makes only incorrect or irrelevant statements.
- This is a nonresponse, such as a blank paper, crossed-out words, or personal notes.

4. An aerial view of a monumental earthwork is shown.

Identify the artist. What artistic concerns motivate the creation of earthworks such as the one shown?
(10 minutes)

This work is by Smithson. The motivation for earthworks such as this was the concern for the environment during the 1960s and 1970s. Smithson and other earth artists wanted to bring attention to these remote locations because they ~~are~~ ^{were} disappearing. This work was also meant to be seen by the masses outside of ~~the~~ atmosphere of the museum. The arts during this time were esoteric and they isolated the masses from seeing the art that the elite engaged in. ~~They~~ Smithson and ~~others~~ ^{and others} wanted to bring art outside of its original viewing and into the environment, such as Christo by covering central park with cloth. This ~~is~~ ^{motivation} work has a dual ~~purpose~~ of bringing art to the masses and show the concern for the environment. The Spiral Jetty was due to the motivation of Smithson to accomplish this. They also

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wanted to show the beauty ^{4A2} of
the natural world. This also shows
the questioning of the harm being
done to the Environment during the
1960's and 1970's.

GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE.

4. An aerial view of a monumental earthwork is shown.

Identify the artist. What artistic concerns motivate the creation of earthworks such as the one shown?
(10 minutes)

The work shown on the left is Spiral Jetty by Robert Smithson. This ~~art~~ earthwork was produced by utilizing objects found in the Great Salt Lake area such as crystals, salt, and dirt.

Smithson drove by the site of Spiral Jetty and saw many abandoned ~~objects~~ construction objects and then felt motivated to create a site ~~art~~ artwork that incorporated nature and its surroundings, and other artistic concerns such as the destruction of nature by humans and its decadence as an indirect result of our actions towards nature.

~~By~~ By incorporating nature in the artwork itself, it could become a motivation to others about nature and its importance to us, and the direct and indirect impact we could create.

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4. An aerial view of a monumental earthwork is shown.

Identify the artist. What artistic concerns motivate the creation of earthworks such as the one shown?
(10 minutes)

4C

The artist of this work is Robert Smithson, it is known as "Spiral Jetty" and is located in Great Salt Lake, Utah. The artist was concerned in changing the way people view the landscape. He ~~incorporated~~ arranged different materials such as rock and sand to create ~~a~~ the shape of a large spiral. The goal of attracting people to look at the environment motivated Smithson to create ~~the~~ ^{this} work. It uses unity and rhythm to create a swirling movement, characteristic of the environment. Earthworks similar to the one shown share the common goal of ~~creating a~~ making people in awe of their environment and causing them to focus their attention on it. They often use certain art elements and principles to dramatize the landscape.

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AP® ART HISTORY
2009 SCORING COMMENTARY

Question 4

Overview

This 10-minute question asked students to identify Robert Smithson as the artist responsible for the *Spiral Jetty* and to discuss the artistic concerns that motivated the creation of earthworks such as these. The works could have been discussed both in terms of their relationship to the landscape and as a reaction to the traditional art marketplace. Responses might also have addressed the importance of photography and film as proxies for the work. This question required students to analyze a specific approach to contemporary art.

Sample: 4A
Score: 4

Smithson is correctly identified as the artist. The essay connects the work to the environmental concerns of the 1960s and 1970s and points out that “Smithson and other earth artists wanted to bring attention to . . . remote locations.” The student addresses the nontraditional aspect of the work, saying it is “meant to be seen by the masses outside of [the] atmosphere of the museum. . . . Smithson and others wanted to bring art . . . into the environment,” and illustrates this point with a reference to Christo’s *Gates*. The essay concludes with a reference to environmental concerns central to earthworks. The essay earned a score of 4.

Sample: 4B
Score: 3

Smithson is correctly identified as the artist. The essay names the Great Salt Lake as the site and identifies “crystals, salt, and dirt,” as the materials that compose the work. The student understands the importance of the site, stating that the artist “saw many abandoned construction objects [an imprecise but important reference to the debris found at the site] and then felt motivated to creat [*sic*] a site artwork that incorporated nature and its surroundings.” Finally, the essay attempts to discuss how the consciousness of nature is important to earth artists. The essay is short but has the specificity that was needed to earn a score of 3.

Sample: 4C
Score: 2

Smithson is correctly identified as the artist, and the Great Salt Lake is identified as the site. The essay notes that Smithson was motivated by the chance to change “the way people view the landscape” and “to focus their attention on it.” The student attempts to address media, but that discussion is limited. Overall, the essay’s discussion of artistic concerns is general or irrelevant but was sufficient to earn a score of 2.