



Student Performance Q&A: 2009 AP® Art History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2009 free-response questions for AP® Art History were written by the Chief Reader, Robert Nauman of the University of Colorado in 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?

This 30-minute question asked students to discuss, in a critical and analytical manner, two examples of sacred space from different cultures, at least one of which was from a culture beyond the European tradition. The intent is to introduce students to global art traditions and to have them critically address material in a way they may not have considered prior to the exam, developing an essay that goes beyond mere description. Since 2006, topics for the question that includes art from beyond the European tradition have not been announced in advance. This year's question asked students to fully identify works selected from memory and to discuss how the spaces accommodated *both* religious beliefs *and* practices within the culture. Examples of religious beliefs could be Islamic, Buddhist, Christian, etc., while examples of religious practices might be pilgrimage, the Eucharist, animal and/or human sacrifices, etc.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students did not perform particularly well on this question. The mean score was 3.61 out of a possible 9 points, the same mean score that the question on art beyond the European tradition received in 2008. Considering that the topic, sacred space, was on the list of topics that used to be announced in advance, this low mean score was somewhat disappointing. Although responses drew from a wide array of cultures outside the European tradition, citing Islamic and Asian examples in particular, many students still used Egyptian examples (especially the pyramids) in a very superficial manner.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A recurrent problem with this first of the two long essay questions on the exam is students' continued lack of familiarity with cultures beyond the European tradition. Student reliance on a superficial acquaintance with Egyptian culture to satisfy the requirements of this question continues to result in low scores on this portion of the exam. Two equally persistent problems are students' failure to choose appropriate works to use as examples and their failure to identify those works with specificity. In the same sense that they needed to go beyond an identification of *church* if a specific Gothic cathedral was referenced when answering this question, students needed to go further in their identifications than simply using terms like *stupa* or *mosque*. Another problem was not answering both parts of the question. Some students merely described architectural components of the spaces without relating the descriptions to religious beliefs and practices. Others made generic statements—for example, describing St. Peter's as a sacred space for Roman Catholics—but they did not specifically discuss *why* this was true or *how* the space actually functioned in terms of religious beliefs and practices.

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 best responses came from students who were interested and engaged in actively examining other cultures. These students were able to answer this question easily. Their teachers are clearly teaching one culture beyond their own in depth and with great skill. Students who tried to “pass” the question by falling back on poorly developed examples from ancient Egypt or who clearly had not studied a culture beyond the traditional canon of art history did not fare well. While a number of essays dealt with the pyramids, for example, only a few placed them within a larger context. Students need to be studying and addressing art beyond the European tradition in a substantial manner, and they should be taught to examine various cultures in all their richness.

Reading the question carefully, considering what tasks are involved in answering it, and sketching out possible strategies for a response (including the selection of appropriate works) would have helped many students perform better. The two long essay questions provided space in the exam booklet for outlining answers and time for doing so, yet few students took advantage of this opportunity, and too many essays showed evidence of insufficient thought. Teachers should remind students that the notes and outlines they make outside of the essay itself are not considered by the Exam Readers when scoring the response.

Weaker responses on this question indicated that students may have prepared for a different long essay topic and simply tried to cut-and-paste that information into this essay. Combining the standard chronological approach to art history with a thematic approach—considering how, for example, 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. Students should also be trained to read the question carefully before beginning their response.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This 5-minute question asked students to identify the culture that produced the manuscript page shown and to place the work within a cultural framework. The intent of the question was for students to recall the cultural context of an Irish monastic setting and to discuss the interlaced pattern on the page within the context of Celtic art and Christianity. While many students realized they were looking at a medieval manuscript, simply identifying the culture as “medieval” was not sufficient. They were expected to demonstrate a deeper knowledge of this work, expanding the essay beyond description or formal analysis to a discussion that revealed an understanding of the cultural context, within the parameters of a 5-minute answer.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question very difficult. The mean score was 0.95 out of a possible 4 points. In 2008 the mean score for the question dealing with medieval art was 0.99, and in 2007 it was 1.13. Last year 67 percent of the students earned scores of 0 or 1 on this question; this year 70 percent earned scores of 0 or 1. Obviously, this is a period that students continue to find difficult. The scoring guidelines for this question gave students latitude with the cultural identification; students could receive credit for identifications of Insular, Celtic, Hiberno-Saxon, or Irish (the identification of English was not acceptable). Of the essays that correctly identified the culture, most identified the work as Hiberno-Saxon, while a significant number of students also knew it came from the *Book of Kells*.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A large number of students identified the culture as Islamic or Byzantine. Many students could have developed their essays better if they had acknowledged the work as a product of a Christian or monastic community. Relatively few students discussed the work as a fusion between an earlier Celtic tradition and a Mediterranean Christian world. A major problem in the weaker responses continued to be one of generally misunderstanding medieval work, believing all of it was created to educate illiterate peasants. This idea may be linked to Protestant Reformation dogma, wherein religious art was viewed as instructional, in contrast to its being imbued with a mystical, transformative presence. In any case, within the context of medieval works, including stained glass, this perception is seriously flawed. A large percentage of essays merely described the 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?

Comments regarding this content area and students’ poor performance on questions about medieval art have been consistent over the years. Students remain insufficiently familiar with the European Middle Ages. Unfortunately, this period is not taught in the AP European History course, which begins with the Renaissance. The absence of medieval coverage in AP European History may contribute to students’ lack of familiarity with the period if their participation in AP European History overlaps with their participation in AP Art History. Students should be aware that this is a period that comprises, roughly, 1,000 years of art history, so it should not be unfamiliar territory.

Deepening and enriching students' exposure to medieval art in its many contexts is strongly suggested. Teachers may want to think about how they can make this period more interesting or accessible to students, either through classroom activities and/or with visits to nearby historicist architectural sites that use a medieval vocabulary of architectural forms. Teachers should also help students distinguish between a formal stylistic analysis and a conceptual analysis, while at the same time explaining how the two methodologies can be combined to create a rich essay.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This 10-minute question dealt with the history of photography, asking students to identify the photographer (Muybridge) and to discuss how his work expanded traditional modes of representation and influenced painting. Students were expected to understand the importance of the work in expanding human perception, by allowing people to see things not previously detectable to the human eye. They then had to discuss the consequences of this perceptual change as it applied to painting (in some of the work of Degas, Duchamp, or the Futurists, for example). The question required students to analyze the impact of one medium (photography) on another (painting).

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question somewhat difficult. The mean score was 1.68 out of a possible 4 points. Many students did not correctly identify the photographer as Muybridge. However, the fact that those who missed the identification often named another nineteenth-century photographer seemed to indicate that nineteenth-century photography is being covered in many classrooms.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Identifying the photographer was the first component of the question, and many students failed to do so. Many students did, however, realize that this photograph was used to offer scientific evidence or proof, and they were able to use that knowledge to answer the second component of the question. But when they were asked to discuss the work's impact on painting (a key issue when discussing this photograph), students had problems, especially if they had chosen a poor example. Essays that cited Warhol, for example, often simply compared grids of images in a purely formal manner.

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 encourage their students to examine different arts media, including photography, and to analyze how those media function and differ. The standard art history survey texts that deal with nineteenth-century photography do not have many images, so it is important to consult a variety of texts when discussing this medium. In general, indications from student answers to the multiple-choice and free-response questions on the exam seemed to indicate that photography is an area that receives minimal coverage. Teachers with a weak background in this area may want to consult supplementary texts that focus on critical issues in photography so that they can present it to their students in a richer manner and not simply as an extension of painting movements.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

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.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed very poorly on this question. The mean score was 1.32 out of a possible 4 points, in spite of the fact that even if students missed the identification they could earn points through a cogent discussion of earthworks.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students failed to identify the artist correctly (Smithson may have been a difficult name for them to remember). Weaker essays relied on clichés, such as “save the earth” or “the beauty of nature,” if students did not know any specifics about the earthwork artists; discussion in those cases was often general and imprecise.

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 discussion of earthworks is usually fascinating to students and can be used as a pedagogical tool on many levels—for example, as an extension of American landscape art and traditions, as a summary and critique of modernism, as an introduction to postmodern work, and so on. Discussion of earthworks encourages students to concentrate on contemporary artists and works, to understand that the location of a site-specific work is important to its meaning, and to think about how contemporary artists respond to or challenge the traditional art marketplace. It still seems that contemporary art is being taught only peripherally in some classrooms. While this may be due in part to the sheer amount of material that has to be covered in an art history survey course, cursory treatment of this material ultimately lowers students’ scores, since questions that deal with contemporary art will continue to appear on the AP Art History Exam. Teachers should 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.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This 5-minute question identified the artist of the painting *Cornelia Presenting Her Children as Her Treasures* as Angelica Kauffmann. Students were asked to identify the stylistic period of the work (Neo-Classicism) and to discuss elements of the work (its form and/or content) that place it within

that period. This response could have been developed as a stylistic (formal) analysis, an analysis of the content, or a combination of both.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question difficult. The mean score was 1.53 out of a possible 4 points. This was disappointing, considering the latitude the scoring guidelines gave for the responses; the essay could have been based on a stylistic (formal) analysis or on a contextual analysis. Many essays did mention the painting's archaeological or Enlightenment context, or they discussed the political ideology implicit in it.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students missed the identification of the stylistic period. The most frequently given wrong response was Renaissance, with some weaker responses stating that Neo-Classicism looked back to the Renaissance for inspiration. But most essays placed the artwork within some type of classical framework. Other weak essays were merely descriptive.

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?

Neo-Classicism is a period that is often difficult for teachers; in a broader sense, the entire eighteenth century is frequently a problematic period to teach. Discussion of Neo-Classicism needs to go beyond David, and a key component should be how Neo-Classical works convey ideological meaning. Although this was an essay that could have been developed either with visual analysis or contextual information, it is important to discuss with students the difference in approaches and the limitations of formal analysis. In general, practice with unknown images and discussion of their stylistic characteristics is also helpful for students.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

This 10-minute question dealt with two examples of Gothic sculpture: jamb figures from the Royal Portal on the west facade of Chartres, and the figures of Ekkehard and Uta from Naumburg Cathedral. Students were told that the works were made in the same period. They had to identify the period as Gothic and explain stylistic developments in sculpture during the period, using both works as examples. The question was intended to test general knowledge of Gothic sculpture. Essentially this was a style question, but it required using stylistic analysis as a basis for a broader discussion of formal and conceptual developments. Most of the major art history survey texts contain discussions of both these works.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult. The mean score was 1.75 out of a possible 4 points. Students could have developed their essay either as a direct comparison and contrast between the two works presented, or they could have framed it in terms of two discrete developments within two facets of the Gothic period (French and German). Most students chose the former option. Although essentially a stylistic question, many students still seemed unable to

engage with a question dealing with medieval art, which has consistently been a weak area for students in past years.

What were common student errors or omissions?

One common student error was the identification of the period itself; some students identified the sculptures as Romanesque instead of Gothic. While students could have situated these sculptures in relationship to earlier Romanesque works, the identification of the period had to be Gothic. Although this question focused on stylistic development, students had to use that information as a platform for developing a more substantial discussion of the 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?

Stylistic analysis is a more traditional approach to art history, but it is still a necessary skill to have. Students should realize it is one tool they can use to decipher meaning, that style itself can be a bearer of meaning. The medieval period is often problematic for students, especially if they lack knowledge of the complexities of the period. When that happens, they rely on generalities without making meaningful or specific references to the works themselves. Students should realize that there is really no “medieval” culture, and teachers should make them aware of both the complexities of the period and its vast span as they study issues of content and development.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

This 10-minute question dealt with the Colosseum. Students had to identify the building and to discuss its innovative elements, both in terms of the design and the construction. This question forced students to analyze an architectural work not just in terms of its construction (the use of concrete, for example) but also in terms of its design (its shape, its functional ability to seat large crowds quickly, the use of the awning, etc.).

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed very well on this question. The mean score was 2.23 out of a possible 4 points. Since many teachers use a discussion of the Colosseum as a way to interest their students in Roman art and architecture, nearly all students correctly identified the building. In addition, many identified it as the Flavian Amphitheater. Students seemed eager to engage with the topic, although some did not address the question specifically and instead veered into more narrative discussions of the events (real or imagined) that took place there.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common student error was to focus on the events held in the Colosseum (gladiatorial, for example) and the mechanical devices used (devices that were not necessarily Roman innovations). A wide range of responses could have been used to answer this question, since “innovations” could have been discussed within the context of Roman architecture in general.

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 generally do not do well on architecture questions, but the Colosseum is an iconic work, and it seems it is being taught in depth. Students need to be familiar not only with construction techniques but also with design elements and how architectural forms take on meaning. In other words, they need to be taught how to go beyond merely descriptive comments to more conceptual levels of understanding in architectural discussions.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

This was a 10-minute, text-based question that required students to relate a quotation from Courbet to a specific art-historical movement (Realism). They also had to discuss a work of their choice from that movement (there was no image accompanying this question) and to analyze how their example reflected Courbet's approach to the making of art. Students needed to read the text and think abstractly about how it related to the art movements and theories of its specific time.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult. The mean score was 1.67 out of a possible 4 points. The scoring guidelines gave students latitude on the identification of the work they selected, as long as they could identify its artist and provide a good description of the work. Although students were allowed a wide range of choices when developing their essay, they had to relate their choice to the Realist movement and make reference to both the Courbet quotation and their selected work. The best essays understood the aims of Realism as a movement and discussed the movement in the broader sense instead of simply describing elements of their selected work that were realistic in some sense.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although most students identified the period correctly, some failed to identify it as Realism. The most common error concerning period identification was to link the quotation to Impressionism. While students could develop their essays in terms of an Impressionist example (if the Impressionist work they selected was appropriate), the artistic movement associated with the quotation had to be identified as Realism. Weak essays correctly identified the movement as Realism but reflected little awareness of why artists adopted this approach as a means to convey social or political meaning. Students also had to refer to both the quotation and their selected work. Weaker responses were less effectual in weaving these two aspects together into a cogent essay. Others selected works that predated Realism—by, for example, artists such as Goya, Gericault, or Turner—and subsequently discussed them in a much different context than that of the Realist movement.

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, relating a specific quotation to a specific image. It also helps to remind students to use quotation marks when citing the specifics of the quotation; doing so will ensure that the relationship between the quotation and the examples is clear to both the students and the Exam Readers.

Question 9

What was the intent of this question?

This was a 30-minute question dealing with self-portraiture. Students were asked to identify two self-portraits, each from a different art-historical period, and to discuss how those images convey information about the artist and his or her period. This essay required students to draw on knowledge of both the individual artist and the contextual setting in which the artist lived and to relate that information to specific self-portraits. They had to examine both the personal and social contexts of the works.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this essay to be somewhat difficult. The mean score was 3.90 out of a possible 9 points. Considering that the essay topic was very clearly stated in the question and relates to a very specific and important development that informs much of the art created since the Renaissance (that is, the concept of the artist), student performance on this question was disappointing. Moreover, all the major art history survey texts have abundant examples of self-portraiture.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Weaker responses failed to identify the artist and/or works with a high degree of specificity, or they confused portraits with self-portraits. Other weak responses generically identified a body of work (Van Gogh's portraits, for example), which did not specifically fulfill the requirements of the essay, or they cited a work that peripherally related to the artist's biography but was not a self-portrait. These responses received only partial credit. The scoring guidelines for evaluating these essays were generous, allowing for stylistic discussion, but weak essays did not link that stylistic discussion to either the artist or the era. The scoring guidelines were also generous in the leeway they gave for defining different art-historical periods, since the crux of the discussion was to link the example to a specific culture and era. Therefore, a good essay could have discussed a Dutch Baroque work and a Spanish Baroque work, or an Italian Renaissance work and a Northern Renaissance work. The examples, however, had to go beyond mere biographical information (the fact that Van Gogh cut off his ear, for example) and discuss the artist and era with specificity.

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?

Flexibility is key to the teaching of this material. Teachers should have students consider the larger continuum of art history and compare examples of various genres (history painting, landscapes, still lifes, portraiture, etc.) from different eras and cultures. Students should realize that general description or formal analysis, while a starting point for art-historical discussions, does not substitute for contextual discussion. Teachers should also be aware that art history texts are constantly updated to reflect the most recent scholarship, so consulting the latest editions of texts is crucial. Anecdotal information may mislead students, especially if it is incorrect or exaggerated; this is also true for movies that fictionalize or romanticize artists' lives. Teachers should give students practice in preparing for this essay, and for the exam in general, by having them specifically identify artists and works and then develop their essays. Again, teachers should remind students that space is provided in the exam booklet for outlining their response before they begin to write, and they need to follow their outline as they write their essay.