

AP[®] ART HISTORY

2010 SCORING GUIDELINES

Question 8

Left: Jean-Antoine Houdon, *George Washington*, 1788–1792

Right: Blank

8. This sculpture of George Washington was made by Jean-Antoine Houdon at the end of the eighteenth century.

Identify the stylistic period of the work. Discuss the elements of the sculpture that place it within this stylistic period. Explain why these elements are used in this depiction of George Washington. (10 minutes)

Background:

This question asks students to do three things: identify the stylistic period of a work; analyze how elements of the work place it within that stylistic period; and explain why elements of that style were used to represent a national leader. The question requires students to think about the relationship between style and meaning in art.

In 1784 the French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828) was commissioned to make a full-length marble statue of George Washington; Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were among those urging the choice of Houdon. The statue was meant to present a living hero whose patriotism and leadership recalled Roman Republican civic virtue. In addition to receiving academic training in Paris, Houdon was a Prix de Rome winner; his mastery of technique, including anatomy, coexisted with direct experience of Roman portrait traditions. Beginning in 1768 in Paris, Houdon began to produce sculpture in the prevailing academic mode — a realistic, Enlightenment-inflected, Classical style. This style, spurred in part by the discovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum earlier in the eighteenth century, is known today as Neo-Classicism. When the commission was awarded, Houdon insisted on studying Washington from life; he sailed with Franklin from Le Havre in the summer of 1785, arriving at Washington's home, Mount Vernon, in October. The completed marble, finished in Paris in 1792, was a realistic image of a famous American. Its appearance and iconography emphasized the new republic's aesthetic and political debts to antiquity. Houdon exhibited a small plaster model of the statue at the Salon of 1793. In 1796 the work was installed in the Virginia State Capitol at Richmond.

The statue shows Washington as commander-in-chief of the Revolutionary Army, wearing — allegedly at his request — contemporary dress. He holds a cane in his right hand, while his left hand rests on a *fasces*, a bundle of rods bound with an axe face that symbolized Roman authority. In Houdon's statue, the 13 rods allude to the 13 original states. Washington's sword is attached to the *fasces* and behind him one sees a plowshare, symbolic of agriculture and peace. Washington wears the badge of the Society of the Cincinnati; the Society, a fraternal order founded in 1783 by members of the Continental Army, associated itself with the fifth-century B.C.E. Roman soldier Cincinnatus, revered for having relinquished his military dictatorship to return to his farm. The militaristic accoutrements exemplifying Washington's heroic battlefield exploits are balanced by elements establishing his love for the land and his status as a peace-loving civilian leader in a new republic. (Houdon also made overtly Classical busts of Washington.)

Neo-Classical stylistic elements also reinforce the political meaning of the sculpture. The use of the exceptionally permanent material of marble, reliance on external support (the plowshare and the columnar *fasces*), the cloak draped over the *fasces*, and Washington's contrapposto all recall antique sculpture. The figure's serene expression derives from sculpted images of classical athletes, while its verism relates it to Roman portraiture. Overall, the work radiates the high moral purpose of a Roman senatorial portrait, translated to the time of its creation by the choice of contemporary dress and often associated with civic

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Question 8 (continued)

virtue. Houdon's choice of contemporary dress was, at the time, a subject of debate — whether a portrait should be timeless by not being clad in current dress or be dressed in current fashion to situate it within its historical context.

Students have three tasks:

- (1) They must correctly identify the stylistic period.
- (2) They must discuss the elements that place the sculpture in the period.
- (3) They must explain why those elements were chosen for this representation of George Washington.

Better responses will identify the style correctly, discuss elements of the sculpture that place it within its stylistic period, and analyze why those elements were chosen for this representation of George Washington.

Weaker responses will describe the sculpture and/or the subject matter without relating it to its period or to the choice of style.

Points to remember:

- The style is Neo-Classicism. Identifications of the style as eighteenth-century classical revival are also acceptable.
- Baroque, Rococo or Romanticism are **not** acceptable identifications.
- Academic style, Grand Manner, Enlightenment or Classicism by themselves are not acceptable identifications. However, they may be used in discussion of the work's overall identity.
- Students **must** discuss the purpose of Neo-Classical elements seen in the work, in the context of classically inspired national ideals.
- The question identifies Houdon as the artist and identifies the subject as George Washington. Students are not asked to identify the artist or title of the work.
- This is a 10-minute question.

Scoring Criteria

Score Scale 0–4

4 Correctly identifies the stylistic period. Discusses with a high degree of specificity how elements of this sculpture are characteristic of Neo-Classicism and Enlightenment political ideals. Explains why these elements are used in a depiction of Washington. Discussion is full, detailed and without significant errors.

3 Correctly identifies the stylistic period. Discusses how elements of this sculpture relate to its period. Explains why these elements are used in a depiction of Washington. Discussion is less specific, unbalanced and may contain errors.

OR

Fails to identify the stylistic period correctly but is otherwise a 4.

Note: The highest score an essay can earn if it does not correctly identify the stylistic period is a 3.

2 Correctly identifies the stylistic period. Describes the sculpture without relating it to its period or its purpose. Discussion is weak and may contain significant errors or omissions.

OR

Fails to identify the stylistic period correctly but is otherwise a 3.

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Question 8 (continued)

- 1** Identifies the stylistic period correctly but there is no discussion of merit.
OR
Fails to identify the stylistic period correctly but is otherwise a 2.
- 0** Makes an attempt, but the response is without merit because it restates the question or makes only incorrect or irrelevant statements.
- This is a nonresponse, such as a blank paper, crossed-out words or personal notes.

8. This sculpture of George Washington was made by Jean-Antoine Houdon at the end of the eighteenth century.

Identify the stylistic period of the work. Discuss the elements of the sculpture that place it within this stylistic period. Explain why these elements are used in this depiction of George Washington. (10 minutes)

The stylistic period of this sculpture is Neoclassical. The elements that place it in that period is the use of contrapposto, the depiction of Washington as a noble and powerful figure (emphasized by musculature) and the material: carved marble. These elements were used because America wanted to establish itself as a democratic republic, and were most influenced by the ideals of the Greeks and Romans. Seeking to emulate ~~them~~ their greatness and weave it into the cultural and artistic identity of America, artists worked in the neo-classical style (meaning new-classic). American artists felt they were carrying on the traditions of these classical cultures. Also, Washington was a military leader and hero of the young nation, so it would be fitting to portray him as an 'Augustus Caesar' type of historical figure for future generations.

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This would be a neoclassical piece. The whole composition is ~~is~~ very classical looking. George Washington is standing ~~is~~ in contrapposto like that of most Greek and Roman statues. He is leaning on a bundle of barrels that act as a support. That is like how ~~Roman~~ stone Roman copies of Greek freestanding sculptures would need an extra something like a tree stump or something to support the heavy stone as opposed to the original Greek bronze. So I think Houdon was playing with that classic Roman idea here. Houdon would have wanted to display George Washington in the classical light almost as propaganda. ~~By~~ displaying him this way he is putting him next to the famous Roman leaders with whom everyone is familiar and putting G.W. on that level of ~~greatness~~ greatness.

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This sculpture of George Washington was created in the Neoclassical period. Neoclassical works came after the Romantic period. It became more of a serious subject. George Washington stands alone with a sword next to the pillar. The position of the sword shows how it is at a time of peace. George Washington stands tall and confident in a relaxed manner. The position resembles the sculpture of Discipulus, by the contrapposto. The weight shift of the legs are equally based by the position of the arms. The right leg is holding the weight as his left arm rests upon the pillar/podium, while the left leg is relaxed and the right arm is holding down on his cane.

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2010 SCORING COMMENTARY

Question 8

Overview

This question asked students to analyze how specific elements of the selected work place this work within its stylistic period and why those elements appear in this sculpture of a national leader. It was intended to make students think about how works of art convey meaning through stylistic attributes. Students had to identify the style as Neo-Classicism and then, looking at both the work's form and its content, discuss its Neo-Classical characteristics. For a high score, essays had to address both form (stylistic analysis) and content.

Sample: 8A

Score: 4

The stylistic period of the sculpture is correctly identified as Neo-Classical. The essay enumerates elements of the sculpture that place it in its period: "the use of contraposto [*sic*], the depiction of Washington as a noble and powerful figure ... and the material: carved marble." The student explains that "[t]hese elements were used because America wanted to establish itself as a democratic republic, and were most influenced by the ideals of the greeks [*sic*] and romans [*sic*]." Reasons for the choice of style are clearly laid out: "Seeking to emulate their greatness and weave it into the cultural and artistic identity of America, artists worked in the neo-classical style (meaning new-classic). American artists felt they were carrying on the traditions of those classical cultures." The essay concludes, "Washington was a military leader and hero of the young nation, so it would be fitting to portray him as an 'Augustus Cesar' [*sic*] type of historical figure for future generations." This essay received a score of 4.

Sample: 8B

Score: 3

The essay correctly identifies the stylistic period as Neo-Classical, noting that the "whole composition [*sic*] is very classical looking." A Neo-Classical element mentioned is "contrapposto like that of most Greek and Roman statues." The essay discusses the statue's support in the context of classical practice: "like how stone Roman copies of Greek freestanding sculptures would need an extra something like a tree stump or something to support the heavy stone as opposed to the original Greek bronze." The student then observes, "So I think Houdon was playing with that classic Roman idea here." The essay addresses the choice of Neo-Classicism for the statue in relation to its intended purpose: "Houdon would have wanted to display George Washington in the classical light almost as propaganda. By displaying him this way he is putting him next to the famous Roman leaders with whom everyone is familiar and putting G.W. [*sic*] on that level of greatness." This essay received a score of 3.

Sample: 8C

Score: 2

The essay correctly identifies the stylistic period as Neo-Classical, but the comment that Neo-Classicism follows Romanticism is incorrect. There is a great deal of description, which includes one valid Neo-Classical element: "The position resembles the sculpture of Discopoliis [*sic*], by the contrapposto." The remainder of the essay consists of a description of the weight shift. It received a score of 2.