



Student Performance Q&A: 2012 AP® Art History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2012 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 select and fully identify two specific works of art made from materials that have cultural significance. One of the examples had to come from beyond the European tradition. Students then had to analyze how the use of particular materials shapes the meaning (religious, social, and/or political) of each work within its culture. The intent of the question was to measure students' ability to analyze how the physical materials used in creating a work of art shape its meaning within a specific cultural context.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question difficult, which was surprising given the possibility of choices. The mean score was 3.01 out of a possible 9 points, which is slightly below the mean in recent years for the question dealing with art beyond the European tradition. (Last year's mean score on this question was 3.53.) That said, an encouraging aspect was that students once again scored higher on this question than on the second long essay question, indicating that teachers are giving more attention to global art. As with last year's exam, there was a wide variety of student choices from beyond the European tradition, indicating that teachers are covering a much broader range of material in this area than before. The content addressed in this question is covered in art history surveys from the outset of the course.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Persistent problems were that students did not choose appropriate works to use as examples and did not identify works with specificity. In all cases the appropriateness of the example depended on the analysis of the materials used in the work and how the materials' significance shapes the meaning of the piece within its cultural context. Students could select a work or works made from luxury materials, such as gold, ivory, bronze, or porcelain. They could also choose materials that are not precious. For example, students could choose examples by artists who use materials to comment on consumerism, using appropriated or found objects such as magazine clippings or bottle caps in their work.

Weaker responses typically struggled to connect materials to meaning. Lower scores often described the material but did not connect that description to its cultural meaning. As is often the case, answers that used analysis scored in the upper tier, whereas those that merely described scored in the lower tier. Furthermore, some weaker responses confused materials with techniques or processes: paper, for example, is a material, whereas printmaking is a process. In addition, not all students were adequately familiar with the cultural context of the examples of art from beyond the European tradition, and without that familiarity they could not accurately analyze the works' cultural meaning.

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. They were able to answer this question easily. These students' teachers are clearly teaching works of art from at least one culture beyond the European tradition in depth and with great skill. By contrast, students who fell back on poorly developed ancient Egyptian examples or who clearly had not studied a culture beyond the Western canon of art history did not fare well. Students need to study and address art beyond the European tradition in a substantial manner; they should be taught to examine various cultures in all their richness. Combining the standard chronological approach to art history with a thematic approach — considering how, for example, the choice of materials influences the making and meaning of art — would help students develop the necessary flexibility to apply what they know to broad-based contextual questions like this one.

Finally, students need to read the question carefully. Practice in reading a question, considering what tasks are involved in answering it, and sketching out possible strategies for a response (including the selection of two appropriate works) would help many students. The two long essay questions provide space in the exam booklet for outlining answers as well as time for doing so, yet too few students seemed to take advantage of this opportunity, and too many responses showed evidence of insufficient thought. Remind students that notes and outlines they make outside the essay itself are not considered in scoring the essay. That space is provided to help students map out their ideas before crafting their responses. Weaker responses often indicated that students prepared for a different long essay topic and simply tried to paste in that information to answer a very different prompt.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This 30-minute question asked students to select and fully identify two specific works of art that depict domestic space. One of the examples had to date prior to 1700 C.E., and one had to date after 1700 C.E. Students had to analyze how the depiction of domestic space in each work communicates meaning. The intent of the question was to have students demonstrate an understanding of how meaning is attributed to representations of domestic space in various historical and cultural contexts. To this end, the definition of "meaning" was intentionally open ended. It was up to students to make interpretive connections by considering different aspects of each work, such as form, function, content, and context.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question very difficult. The mean score was 2.51 out of a possible 9 points, again surprising considering the possibility of choices. Not only could students choose from a wide variety of media — including painting, drawing, printmaking, photography, sculpture, and installations — but there are numerous examples in almost every culture of works that depict domestic space. For this question students were not limited to works drawn from the European tradition; they could also select works from beyond that tradition if they were appropriate examples to answer the question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was choosing two works of art from the same time frame; specifically, students confused works created prior to 1700 C.E. with those created later. The most prominent types of these errors were those that incorrectly dated Baroque interiors after 1700 C.E. or Rococo interiors before 1700 C.E. If both examples were drawn from the same time frame, only the better analysis was scored.

Weaker responses also misinterpreted the word “domestic” and instead discussed depictions of nondomestic spaces such as churches, cafés, or civic halls. The few students who discussed actual works of architecture received no credit because the question specifically asked for “depictions,” not domestic spaces themselves.

Responses that focused only on storytelling or description of a scene received lower scores. Most worrying, perhaps, was the inability of some students to connect two appropriate depictions of domestic space to broader issues of meaning. Students should be taught not just factual details about a work but also analytical skills. For this question, they needed to be able to do more than just list, for example, the symbols in the domestic interior shown in Jan Van Eyck’s *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife*. They also needed to be able to connect those symbols with weightier issues of religion, patronage, and so forth to answer the question successfully.

Another issue was that many students seemed to have canned answers based on questions from previous exams. They tried to use those responses to answer this question, with mixed results. Specifically, discussion of the influence of Japanese prints within the context of an interior scene painted by Cassatt — the topic of a 2010 essay question — was irrelevant to this particular prompt. A comparison of Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* with Manet’s *Olympia* — which appeared on the 2011 exam — was forced. Rather than using examples from previous exams, students need to read the question carefully, identify its component parts, and address the specific question that is asked. It is a good teaching mechanism to use questions from past exams to help students prepare; however, teachers should warn students that using examples from previous exams for any new question might be problematic.

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?

To answer this question successfully, students were required to think critically about artistic intent. They had to think not only about why artists would depict domestic space but also about how that depiction communicates meaning. It was up to students to make interpretive connections by considering the form, function, content, and context of the works of art they selected. In many of the stronger essays, students outlined their approach at the top of the essay. Notes written in the blank space provided above the question are not scored, but this strategy clearly indicates that students thought carefully about their responses before they began to write. Such students typically earned higher scores. Study exercises that would help students identify good choices might prove valuable. An example might be to give students 5 minutes to think of examples to address specific topics for sample long essays and then to discuss with students why their choices might be strong or weak. Teachers should remind students that these are 30-minute questions, so they have time to think about and outline their responses prior to writing.

Students also need to be encouraged to develop skills of critical analysis and to distinguish between description and analysis. In their responses they need to consider why they are discussing specific aspects of each work, and how that discussion relates to the question as a whole. It is not enough to provide two relevant works; students need to analyze both works in keeping with the tasks set forth by the question.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This 10-minute question asked students to analyze a work of art that was identified for them: the *Ara Pacis Augustus*. Students were asked to discuss the political agenda of the work's patron, Augustus, and to analyze how that agenda is conveyed by the sculpted figures depicted in both details that were shown. The intent of the question was to prompt students to analyze how both allegorical and historical representations are used in the creation of political propaganda.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult. The mean score was 1.64 out of a possible 4 points. Students were given both the title and the patron of the work, so they had to address iconographic content correctly to earn an upper-level score.

What were common student errors or omissions?

This monument is illustrated in all the major texts, and many students knew it. However, if students could not correctly address Augustus's political agenda, it was difficult for them to analyze the sculpted figures in a manner relevant to the question. Weaker responses seemed to reflect a lack of familiarity with Augustus's political agenda, often merely describing what was shown in the two details — a procession with children, a woman with two babies — and vaguely linking this imagery to family values.

The weaker essays also did not fully analyze the propagandistic intent of the monument as expressed through its allegorical content; such responses did not articulate how the monument conveys Roman imperial ideology. They also did not realize how propaganda operates in this work. Instead of recognizing that the *Ara Pacis* emphasized peace, prosperity, and authority under Augustus's rule, they described the monument simply in populist terms. Some students missed the point entirely that the monument was intended to spread ideology and instead thought it was constructed to inform Augustus himself about how he should rule.

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 continue to emphasize the major themes in art history. This is a good example of a power and authority type of question. The background information in the scoring guidelines for this question could be used as an example to open discussion of other works of a similar nature that address the theme of power and authority. Furthermore, students need to be aware of the intended audience for each work, as the intended audience plays a role in the work's meaning.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This 10-minute question asked students to correctly attribute the painting *Rain, Steam and Speed: The Great Western Railway* to the artist Turner. Students were then asked to justify their attribution by discussing specific visual characteristics of the painting that are commonly associated with Turner's other work. The intent of the question was to have students apply their knowledge of the visual characteristics of an artist's paintings to their discussion of a presumably unknown work. (*Rain, Steam and Speed* is not illustrated in the major survey texts.)

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult. The mean score was 1.55 out of a possible 4 points, in spite of the fact that even if the students missed the identification, they could earn partial credit through a cogent discussion of stylistic characteristics that could possibly overlap with the work of another artist.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students did not identify Turner correctly. The most frequent misattributions were Monet, Whistler, and a number of Romantic artists. Impressionism was also a common misattribution, even though the question specifically asked for attribution to an artist, not to an art-historical movement or period. Incorrect attributions that were not from the 19th century were infrequent. If students did not identify an artist at all, they obviously could not justify their attribution and could not earn points. A surprising number of students described the painting at length yet provided no attribution; these students earned no credit for this 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 that if they are presented with an attribution question, they must provide an attribution to receive credit; in this case they needed to attribute the painting to a specific artist. Students could earn partial credit by implying an attribution — by stating, for example, that the artist was “the same artist who painted the *The Slave Ship*” — but if they made no attempt at attribution at all, they earned a score of zero. When possible, students should at least attempt to attribute the work to an artist whose work they can justify in terms of stylistic characteristics.

Again, teachers should remind students to read all parts of the question carefully. They should give students the opportunity to practice with unknown images across the art-historical spectrum. Students also need to learn correct terminology to describe visual characteristics of a work. In many responses for this question, the term *sfumato* was used inaccurately to describe Turner’s approach; in some cases this discussion of *sfumato* led students down the wrong path to an incorrect attribution to Leonardo da Vinci. Attribution skills are a kind of applied formal analysis, and they are basic tools of the art historian.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This 10-minute question asked students to correctly identify the art-historical period of a work that was identified for them: Francesco Borromini’s *San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane*. Students then had to analyze how the formal qualities of both the plan and the exterior of *San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane* exemplify the style of that art-historical period. The intent of the question was to give students an opportunity to identify and explain stylistic elements that relate to a specific art-historical period; in this case, the Baroque.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question surprisingly difficult, given that both the architect and the building were identified for them. Both the architectural exterior and the plan of *San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane* appear in all the major survey texts. Students who correctly identified the period as Baroque did very well, but many students earned a score of zero because they could not identify the art-historical period correctly. The mean score was 1.24 out of a possible 4 points. The low mean score indicates not only that students were unable to identify the work visually as Baroque, but also that they did not recognize either the architect or the building by name as being associated with the Baroque.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was that students misidentified the art-historical period. If students could not identify the building as Baroque, they had a difficult time analyzing how the formal qualities of both the plan and the exterior of the building exemplify the Baroque period. Some common misidentifications were Rococo, Neoclassicism, and, most commonly, Renaissance. Students who identified the work as Renaissance were unable to talk about specifically Baroque visual elements. An identification that related to a time period — such as 17th century or Counter-Reformation — rather than to an art-historical period was incorrect but could nonetheless earn partial credit through a cogent discussion of stylistic characteristics that could possibly overlap with that time period.

In discussing the exterior of the building, some students also focused on superficial analysis of the statues on the façade instead of analyzing formal qualities of the overall structure. Moreover, students had a difficult time addressing the plan. Some students were confused by the inclusion of the cloister in the plan and as a result tried to place the church within the context of Latin cross plans and, by extension, the Renaissance.

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 ensure that students spend a sufficient amount of time reviewing the material from Mannerism through the 18th century. In recent years students have not done as well on questions pertaining to these periods as they have on some of the other art-historical periods.

Students also seem to be struggling in general with identifications related to periods, cultures, and styles, as witnessed by student performance on the Baroque essay questions in 2011 and 2012, the Mannerism question in 2010, and the Celtic question in 2009. Being able to place a work within its period is an important art-historical skill, and students need to be reminded to look at the chronological framework that informs their discussion of the works. Classroom exercises that help students practice this skill would be helpful.

Students also need to become familiar with how to read architectural plans in a very basic manner. Teachers should use examples of plans that are in the major texts and explain how these are representative of the various art-historical periods. Weak essays often included many architectural terms that did not relate to this particular building or to the question at all. Students need to be familiar with basic art and architectural terminology.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

This 10-minute question asked students to compare and contrast how social class is portrayed in two illuminations from a manuscript that was identified for them: the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*. The two illuminations shown were from the calendar pages for the months of January and February. Students then had to analyze how the portrayal of social class in these illuminations relates to the meaning of the manuscript as a whole. The intent of the question was to prompt students to connect two contrasting depictions of social class to broader issues of patronage and audience during the period when the illuminations were made.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult. The mean score was 1.61 out of a possible 4 points. Most students were able to provide a basic description of social class, as all major survey texts discuss calendar

pages from the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*. These survey texts show similarly contrasting depictions of the nobility and peasantry, and even though the specific calendar pages used in some texts differ from the ones shown in the exam, most students seemed able to extrapolate from the illuminations with which they were more familiar to answer the question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

As a private devotional book for the duke, the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* was intended to please its patron, reflect his refined tastes, and affirm his privileged position within a feudal social order. Although most responses were able to describe the basic differences in the depiction of social class, weaker responses assumed that these illuminations were intended as a critique of the duke, mistaking the intended audience as the general public instead of an elite. Such responses showed an insufficient understanding of issues of patronage, audience, and art production during the time when the manuscript was created.

Students were also required to relate the depiction of social class to the meaning of the manuscript as a whole. Responses that did not address this task scored in the lower range. Weaker responses would sometimes fabricate a narrative and had little or no analysis concerning the actual intent of the manuscript as a whole. As was true for many questions on this year's exam, the difference between scores in the upper and lower tiers was often marked by students' ability to connect visual analysis to larger issues of meaning. Only if students could reach beyond basic description into a broader analysis of the works' import could they earn scores in the upper range.

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?

Again, as with many of the questions, teachers should continue to emphasize the major themes in art. This question is a good example of one that explores issues of patronage and audience; specifically, how patronage affects the production of images and how — and by whom — the images are intended to be viewed. Using a combined thematic and chronological approach could help students place works within their correct historical context. Too often students seem to interpret works based on values or intents that do not situate the work within the correct art-historical time period. Students need to be taught to contextualize works within the period they were actually created.

Furthermore, teachers should practice exercises in compare and contrast with students, as this is a critical skill in art-historical analysis. The ability to perform comparative analysis of two works is being increasingly tested on the exam, and the results from the past two years indicate that students need more practice. Such exercises should not be merely descriptive. If a work is part of a larger whole — such as a manuscript, a fresco cycle, or an architectural monument — the work should be contextualized and related to the overall piece so that students can place their comparison within this larger context and therefore connect the comparative analysis to broader issues of meaning.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

This 10-minute question dealt with the *Stele of Naram-Sin*. Students had to identify the work, discuss its intended meaning, and analyze how formal and symbolic elements are used in the *Stele of Naram-Sin* to communicate its intended meaning. The intent of the question was to measure students' ability to examine the formal and symbolic elements of a work and to show how these elements contribute to its meaning.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students performed relatively well on this question. The mean score was 1.98 out of a possible 4 points. Many teachers discuss this work within the context of a strong narrative, and it appears that students find the work memorable, even though it is often introduced at the very beginning of the survey. Students also made better use of art vocabulary on this question. Even students who could not identify the work often still recognized its use of hieratic scale and could earn partial credit through a correct discussion of that attribute.

What were common student errors or omissions?

If students identified the *Stele of Naram-Sin* correctly, they generally did well on the question. However, if students could not identify the work, they often had difficulty ascribing meaning to it and scored in the lower range. Students who could not identify the intended meaning of the stele as a commemoration of a battle or a glorification of the divine right of a ruling king had difficulty analyzing the formal and the symbolic elements of the work in a manner relevant to the question.

Many responses also contained minor errors that did not have a meaningful impact on the analysis. For example, many misidentified the culture of the work as Sumerian or Persian, but the question did not ask for that information. Many students correctly identified the culture as Akkadian and included detailed background about the work that was not required by 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 develop analytical skills so they can tie description to meaning, a central task for this question as well as for many others on the exam. Simply describing what they see is only the first step in ascribing meaning to a work of art. In this particular work, students had to analyze both formal and symbolic elements of the stele within the context of celebrating a military victory and asserting Naram-Sin's divine right to be king. Students could describe the measured rows of Akkadian soldiers in comparison with the chaotic group of Lullubi, but they then had to discuss the importance of those formal elements in terms of conveying broader messages of power and authority.

In a similar manner, it was not enough to discuss hieratic scale or the inclusion of the horned headdress in the depiction of Naram-Sin. Students then had to link these visual characteristics to Naram-Sin's claim to a divinely sanctioned victory. In other words, this question was both formal and contextual, and students had to address each component to receive full credit. The division between the upper and the lower ends of the scoring scale was often the difference between description and analysis.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

This 10-minute question asked students to analyze a work of art that was identified for them — Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* — using statements made by the artist. Specifically, students had to reference both Picasso's quotation and his mural to analyze how Picasso expressed both emotional and political content in *Guernica*. The intent of the question was to give students the opportunity to analyze how statements made by an artist are visually expressed in the work of that artist.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult. The mean score was 1.69 out of a possible 4 points. Since students were given the title and artist of the work, they should have been able to focus on the more

analytical tasks set forth by the question. All the major survey texts discuss *Guernica*, and there were many very detailed responses that clearly connected the mural's visual content to Picasso's words. The best responses often provided specific political context about the bombing of the town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War, context that was clearly connected to a visual analysis of how *Guernica* conveys the terror, chaos, and grief of that event.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Weaker responses seemed to reflect an unfamiliarity with the work. For example, many students did not seem to know that *Guernica* was a mural and did not discuss its scale. Although that information was not required to answer the question, the sheer scale of the work did help students who could reference it to explain Picasso's intention to use the work not "to decorate apartments" but rather as a means of protesting the bombing through the work's public display.

Some weaker essays also did not link the mural to an actual event; some generalized its meaning as a protest against war, broadly defined. Some other errors encountered were that Picasso lived in Spain and personally witnessed the event; that newspapers ignored the event and Picasso sought to publicize it; or that the mural was specifically done to get the United States involved in a war. Some students were sidetracked by an irrelevant and inaccurate discussion of either Synthetic or Analytic Cubism, which had no bearing on the question. Weaker essays also did not tie the mural to the quotation, which is an ongoing problem in responses to the text-based question on each year's 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?

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' survey texts. Teachers also should discourage students from simply writing down everything that they know about an artist or a work. Instead, use this exercise to hone skills of observation, relating a specific quotation to a specific image. It also helps to remind students to use quotation marks in citing the particulars of the quotation, so that the relationship between the quotation and students' analysis is clear both to the students and to the exam readers.

In this particular instance, students were given an iconic painting that was clearly identified for them; they did not have to identify the work. As a whole, the essay questions on the exam are moving away from basic identifications in favor of more emphasis on critical analysis. Students should be encouraged to develop and practice the skills needed to perform the higher-level thinking that such questions require.