



Student Performance Q&A: 2015 AP[®] Art History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2015 free-response questions for AP[®] Art History were written by the Chief Reader, Heather Madar of Humboldt State University. 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 question asked students to select and identify two specific structures in which the architectural form was determined by both the intended function and meaning of the structure. At least one of the structures must have come from beyond the European tradition. For each structure, students had to use specific visual evidence to analyze how the architectural form was determined by both the intended function and meaning of the structure. The intent of this question was to have students demonstrate an understanding about the relationship between architectural form, function, and meaning.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult. The mean score was 3.49 out of 9 points. This is a higher mean score than in recent years for the question dealing with art beyond the European tradition, which is an encouraging trend and may reflect the gradual inclusion of works from the new curriculum into the course by teachers. (Last year's mean score on this question was 3.01; the year before, it was 2.91; and the year before that, it was 3.01.) Student choices were varied, suggesting that teachers are covering a broad range of material in this area. The content addressed in this question is basic to the study of architecture and applies to many works from around the world that are familiar to students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students picked a range of works in responding to this question. Common choices from the European tradition included numerous churches and cathedrals, including Chartes, Reims, Saint Sernin, and Notre Dame. The Parthenon, the Pantheon, and the Colosseum were also popular. From the global tradition, common choices included the Dome of the Rock, the Great Stupa at Sanchi, and the Great Pyramids at Giza. Less successful choices included most 20th-century structures, such as Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater or various skyscrapers. With these examples, students were often unable to link form and function to meaning. This is in part a reflection of the discussion of such works in the major textbooks, which tend to focus on

form, function, and construction — but not meaning. Students in some cases made generic choices, discussing “bridges,” “columns,” “the mosque,” or “the cathedral.” While students could earn a lower-level score with such choices, they produced poor responses because students were only able to talk in very general terms about the intended function and meaning of such structural “types.” In some cases, the discussion of function was too general (e.g., a discussion of the Colosseum merely as a stage for fights) or inaccurate. Students were also sometimes inaccurate in their linking of structures from beyond the European tradition to the correct religion or culture (e.g., incorrectly discussing the Great Stupa in terms of Islam).

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 who chose good examples had an easier time with this question. When students chose works where either the intended function or meaning of the work was not wholly clear (e.g., the Great Serpent Mound or Mesa Verde), they had a difficult time addressing the question well. Teachers might consider exercises that prompt students to think critically about how to select good examples for long essay questions, as students will continue to have choices on the long essay questions for the new exam. Another issue is that students in some cases seemed prepared for a different question, and wrote answers tailored to the question they were expecting rather than to the question they were actually given. In this instance, some students tried to shoehorn their responses into a “beliefs and practices” question with less than successful results. While having students take practice exams or answer practice questions on common themes are useful exercises for test preparation, they should not be seen as templates or predictors of the questions that students will need to answer on exam day. When thinking about architecture, students need to be encouraged to consider architectural meaning in a way that is akin to their consideration of meaning in works of painting or sculpture. Students should be prompted to consider why certain forms are chosen and how architecture is meaningful.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to select two works of art, one dating before 1700 C.E. and one dating after 1700 C.E., that depict the male figure. Students were then asked to use specific evidence to analyze how each work either supports or challenges attitudes toward men within its cultural context. The intent of this question was to provide students with the opportunity to analyze how cultural attitudes about gender roles are visually expressed. More specifically, students were being asked to explore how art plays a role in the construction of male identity within a given culture.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students did moderately well on this question. The mean score was 3.52 out of 9 points. This is a significantly higher score than last year’s long question on the related theme of identity, which scored 1.93 out of 9 points.

Students were able to select from a wide range of possible choices with this question, and many selected appropriate works with which they were familiar and could write about in some detail. Polykleitos’s *Doryphoros*, Michelangelo’s *David*, and David’s *Oath of the Horatii* were common choices. As with Question 1, the selection of an appropriate choice set the student onto a promising path with the answer.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In terms of common errors, students often seemed not to understand the meaning of the question, or to lack specificity in discussing cultural context. In some cases, students selected works featuring women and wrote

about feminist themes. Frequently, students selected works representing political figures and wrote responses focusing on the ways the works conveyed power and authority, conflating masculinity with generic leadership roles. Another common error was to pick two works from either before or after 1700 C.E. Responses that failed to select a work from both before and after 1700 C.E. could not earn a score above a 5.

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 was another instance where students seemed primed to answer a question other than the one asked; in this case, a question about power and authority. Students need to read the question carefully, think about what is actually being asked, and spend several minutes thinking through possible choices and weighing their suitability before writing their responses. In long answer questions, a fair degree of the success of the response depends on the initial selection of an appropriate work. In the new exam, students will continue to have the option to select works to answer the long answer questions. Making good image choices will continue to be critical. Additionally, long questions on the new exam typically have several related tasks, so students will need to ensure that their choices work well for each of the required tasks. The interrogation of masculinity, its cultural construction, and ways of representing and performing masculinity are central to contemporary discussions of gender and identity. Students should be encouraged to think about gender through a wider lens than simply “power and authority” or “depictions of women” and should be encouraged to question easy associations that take particular gender identities as natural and given.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze the characteristics of a 14th-century tiled mihrab that was once installed in the mosque of an Islamic religious school, the Madrasa Imami in Isfahan, Iran (1354–55 C.E.). The intent of this question was to prompt students to analyze how visual characteristics reflect religious beliefs and how an architectural feature can facilitate religious practices.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question surprisingly difficult. The mean score was 1.53 out of a possible 4 points. It is somewhat surprising that students did not score better on this question given that the question identified the work shown as a mihrab and prompted them to think specifically about Islamic beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, it is clear that many students were familiar with Islamic art and related beliefs and practices and that many teachers are doing a good job of covering this area effectively.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common problem was a lack of specificity and depth in the analysis of how the mihrab reflected beliefs and facilitated practices. Many responses identified one belief and one practice associated with the mihrab but did not analyze or examine them in depth. There was a noticeable lack of depth in the essays regarding how the mihrab relates to practices; often only “prayer” was cited. The lower-scoring responses were also less specific in how they addressed the characteristics of the mihrab. There were also occasional errors that demonstrated a lack of knowledge about Islamic beliefs and practices. Student responses also reflected common misperceptions about the status of figural imagery in Islam, stating that the Qu’ran explicitly prohibits all figural representation, which is inaccurate.

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 read the question carefully and to be attentive to questions with multiple tasks. This will become particularly important on the new exam in which student success will depend, in part, on an ability to address each question task. Students are scored for the thoroughness of their responses to all the parts of the question, so they should not dwell on one aspect of the question to the detriment of another part. In this case, students should have been able to analyze specific characteristics of Islamic art demonstrated in this mihrab (e.g., calligraphy, geometry, vegetal decoration) and have been able to discuss works of Islamic art both visually and contextually. It is also clear that some students have misperceptions about Islam. Effective teaching of Islamic art is an opportunity to correct some of those misperceptions.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to describe elements of Aulus Metellus that tie the Etruscan sculpture to Classical Greek sculpture as well as elements that deviate from Classical Greek sculpture. The term “Classical” refers to the Classical period of ancient Greece: 480–323 B.C.E. The intent of this question was to have students demonstrate an understanding of artistic tradition and change; in this case, the positioning of Etruscan sculpture as both adhering to and departing from the traditions of Classical Greece.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students scored almost exactly in the mid-range on this question. The mean score was 2.04 out of a possible 4 points. This work is canonical and is illustrated in all the major survey textbooks.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Responses showed a considerable degree of confusion about the differences between Classical Greek and Roman art and a tendency to conflate the styles of ancient Greek art. While students were generally able to hone in on relevant visual features in the work, they were often unable to connect them to their appropriate stylistic tradition. Features of the work, such as the drapery, stance, facial depiction, and medium, were variously attributed to both the Classical Greek tradition and to the Roman tradition. Students, in particular, seemed unaware of the use of bronze in Classical Greece, often stating incorrectly that all Greek statues were executed in marble. Students also frequently stated that a figure shown with clothing reflected Roman tradition; students were under a misperception that all Classical Greek statues were shown nude.

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?

Given the central nature of Greek and Roman art to the discipline of art history, it is somewhat surprising to see a lack of ability to differentiate the specifics of the two styles among students. The study of tradition and change within artistic traditions is a major theme of art history and it is one of the three Big Ideas in the new curriculum that will be tested on the new exam. When studying closely related traditions, such as ancient Greece and Rome, students should be prompted to consider both continuities and breaks between artistic traditions. Some students seemed to have a rather simplistic conception of Greek versus Roman style as well as a somewhat vague and general sense of the specific styles of Greek art, suggesting a need for greater nuance in the delineation of these specific traditions.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to use evidence to analyze how both the form and the content of a work of art are characteristic of a particular art-historical period; in this case, the late Gothic. The intent of this question was to give students an opportunity to apply skills of formal and contextual analysis to demonstrate their understanding of key aspects of works produced during a specific art-historical period.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult. The mean score was 1.63 out of a possible 4 points. Students did not respond as well as expected on this question, given that this object, or similar objects, is included in all the major survey textbooks. That said, most students were able to address some aspect of the work and thereby earn partial credit.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students were unable to use contextual evidence to analyze how the subject of the work was characteristic of the late Gothic period. Some responses merely repeated the question, stating that it was important, while others did not address the contextual task of the question at all and only discussed how the visual form was characteristic of the Gothic. Those students who did discuss the work in light of its context were often unable to say much beyond identifying the subject as Mary and her general importance. However, many students did successfully contextualize the work using religious, social, or political movements of the time or by addressing the work in light of its physical setting within a cathedral.

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 sure that they read the question carefully and have answered both halves of the question; in this case, by addressing both the formal qualities and the contextual relationship. Some students also seem to not have been familiar with the Late Middle Ages as a distinct phase of development, either discussing the work in light of the Gothic style as a whole, or comparing this work to what subsequently developed in the Renaissance. Historical context and its relevance to developments within art will be a point of focus of the new curriculum that will be tested on the new exam. Students will be expected to drill down into the specifics of historical context in a way that was not always required in the legacy course. For this particular question, high-scoring responses were able to speak in a fair degree of detail about the cult of the Virgin Mary in the later middle ages and how that was reflected in the statue the Virgin of Paris.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to correctly attribute a building to its specific art-historical style. Students were asked to justify the attribution by discussing characteristics of the building that are commonly associated with that art-historical style and to explain the significance of the use of that art-historical style in the United States during this period. The intent of this question was to have students apply their knowledge of both the characteristics and the significance of a style to their discussion of a presumably unknown work.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students scored almost exactly in the mid-range on this question. The mean score was 2.03 out of a possible 4 points. Students generally did well with the skill of attribution, and many were familiar with the larger political and historical context of this structure. Students did much better with this attribution question than on attribution questions in the past few years: in 2012 the mean score on the attribution question was 1.55; in 2013, the mean score was 1.08; and in 2014, the mean score was 1.86. It was encouraging to see this level of improvement.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students were generally able to place the structure within the larger classical tradition and link elements to ancient Greek and/or Roman architecture. Most were able to correctly identify the style as Neoclassical. There seemed to be some crossover between this question and the curriculum for AP United States History, with many students accurately discussing larger contextual factors in the U.S. during this period that influenced Thomas Jefferson’s architectural decisions. The major error found in this question was a misidentification of the style as Greek or Roman rather than as Neoclassical. Yet even with this misidentification, students could still earn a lower-level score if they were able to accurately address the visual characteristics of the structure.

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?

Attribution is a key art-historical skill and should be practiced in classrooms. Attribution questions will continue to be featured on the new exam, and the skill of attribution is one of the learning objectives of the new course. Students should work on attributing style as well as attributing works to specific artists, and should be able to articulate the reasons for their selection clearly and through making specific reference to the work shown. This particular attribution question revealed some lack of clarity about terminology, with some students describing the work as “Jeffersonian” or “Federalist” rather than Neoclassical. Students should be prompted to use correct art-historical terminology. Students should also be encouraged to think about the ways architectural form can carry meaning, and how architectural form, like artistic choices, is shaped by larger cultural forces.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze two contrasting interpretations of the modern urban environment painted by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Fernand Léger during the early twentieth century. The intent of the question was to prompt students to consider differing artistic presentations of the same theme; in this case, the modern city.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students scored almost exactly in the mid-range on this question. The mean score was 1.95 out of a possible 4 points. Students generally did well with the skill of visual analysis, which is a foundational skill of art history. Students were able to discuss the visual elements of the two works, often in considerable detail.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students tended to omit contextual evidence such as the movements of Die Brücke (Kirchner) and Purism (Léger) or the rapid social change, pressures on society, modern alienation, and war in the early twentieth

century. With regard to visual analysis, some students misinterpreted the negative message of Kirchner's painting, seeing the work as a positive view of city life. Students tended to be more successful with their visual analyses of Léger's painting.

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 who appeared to be familiar with relevant resources, whether the corresponding chapter in major survey textbooks or the SmartHistory episode on Kirchner's *Street, Dresden*, were well placed to respond to this question. Understanding of various art movements and the various "isms" of 20th-century art is an important aspect of the survey course, as is the interpretation of artistic decisions in light of context. These ideas should continue to be emphasized by teachers. It is important that students practice comparison questions and be prepared to address both similarities as well as differences. Responses that treated each work separately and then concluded by addressing the two works together tended to be more successful than responses that alternated back and forth between the two works throughout the responses because those discussions tended to lack clarity. Responses that never contrasted the works, even implicitly, did not fully answer the question.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students first to analyze how an artist makes a claim for art making during a particular art-historical period, and then to select and clearly identify a work created during that period that reflects the artist's ideas. To answer the question successfully, students needed to think critically about Leonardo's words from his *Notebooks* and how they relate to the role of the artist in the creative process during the High Renaissance. The intent of the question was to prompt students to analyze how statements made by an artist are visually expressed in work created during the same period.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question somewhat difficult. The mean score was 1.82 out of a possible 4 points. Students showed familiarity with the High Renaissance period but often had difficulty applying the quotation to specific works of High Renaissance art.

What were common student errors or omissions?

While students tended to try to address the quotation, they often showed a lack of understanding of the key concerns expressed by Leonardo. Responses often focused on short snippets rather than the larger themes. For example, many students dwelled on the phrase regarding "monstrosities that are frightful, buffoonish or ridiculous" and neglected to consider the larger issue of the evolving role and status of the artist in the High Renaissance. Selecting an appropriate work was also an issue. While many students were able to select works of High Renaissance art, a number of students selected works from the Early Renaissance, such as works by Botticelli or Ghiberti. If a student selected a work that was not from the High Renaissance, the highest score the response could earn was a 2. Other students chose works created during the time period of the High Renaissance, such as Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, that did not lend themselves as easily to a discussion of the core concerns expressed by Leonardo. Another common error was that students failed to address with specificity visual elements within the selected work that supported Leonardo's ideas.

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?

As the new AP Art History Exam will not include text-based questions such as this one, teachers do not need to practice text-based questions with the expectation that such questions will appear regularly on the exam. Nevertheless, primary source documents are important sources for art-historical study, and students should continue to be exposed to them. More generally, responses to this question indicate that students often have issues with reading comprehension and understanding the intent of questions. Students also seem to struggle with applying broader contextual issues to relevant works of art. This is a skill that they will continue to need for success on the new exam. A high level of contextual knowledge will be expected, and the ability to draw specific connections between context and works of art will be essential.