



Student Performance Q&A: 2016 AP[®] Art History Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2016 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 compare Fan Kuan's *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* to a work of art of their choosing from South, East, and Southeast Asia (300 B.C.E.–1980 C.E.); West and Central Asia (500 B.C.E.–1980 C.E.); or the Pacific (700–1980 C.E.). The question listed five options from the required course content that students could choose from, or they could choose another relevant work from the specified content areas. The intent of the question was to have students demonstrate an ability to compare two works of art, in this case two works from Asia or from Asia and the Pacific, focusing on the theme of humans and their relationship to the natural world. Students had to use visual and contextual evidence to support their comparison.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult. The mean score was 3.05 out of a possible 7 points. It was encouraging to see that students knew all six of the works listed in the question and were often able to write detailed comparative essays that provided sophisticated insights about works that, in the legacy course, they often did not know, and certainly not at this level of depth.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In both this question and Question 2, students were required to answer the question by choosing a work from specified content areas (or to choose a work from the provided list, which was tailored to the specified content areas). Students did not always pay attention to this requirement when selecting their own images, and often chose works that were outside required content areas (e.g., picking Pieter Bruegel's *Hunters in the Snow* or Joseph Mallord William Turner's *Slave Ship*). Such responses could only earn a maximum of 1 point.

Many students struggled to support their comparison with specific, accurate evidence, whether visual or contextual, and often gave only general discussions of context rather than specific, culturally informed discussions of context. This question also asked students to discuss the two works in reference to a very specific quality: namely, the way the work presented or constructed a relationship between humans and the natural world. Students who did not link their discussions of the works and their evidence to that specific quality were not able to successfully accomplish the task points.

Note that in questions that require identification, students need to provide at least two of the possible four identifiers and need to be sure to provide the full information for their two identifies (e.g., the exact date, the complete materials, etc.).

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 practice writing truly comparative essays that place two works in dialogue. The wording of this question (and thus the scoring of the question) required the students to compare the two works repeatedly by assessing similarities and differences, and by using visual and contextual evidence in a comparative way. In some cases, students wrote essays that only gestured at comparison or that treated the two works as discrete objects. Such responses scored lower, as they did not engage in the act of comparison, which is a fundamental skill of art history and one of the learning objectives in the new curriculum. Teachers could help students practice structuring comparative essays and using rhetorical strategies that highlight comparison (e.g., “*In contrast to work one, work two shows humans in the natural world as . . .*” or “*Similar to work two, work one demonstrates . . .*”). Students also need to keep their comparisons focused on relevant similarities and/or differences. Responses often contained discussion of irrelevant points of comparison, and could not earn points because the comparison was not tied to the relationship in each work between humans and the natural world.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze a work of art of their choosing from Early Europe and Colonial Americas (200–1750 C.E.) in terms of the way the artist used the metaphoric, conceptual, or formal properties of light to convey spiritual meaning. The question listed Caravaggio’s *Calling of St. Matthew*, Chartres Cathedral, and Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* as options. Students also had the option of selecting any other relevant work from the specified content area to address the topic. The intent of the question was for students to explain how the artist used elements of form and content to convey spiritual meaning, and to support the explanation through both visual and contextual evidence.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students did moderately well on this question, scoring near the midpoint. The mean score was 3.36 out of a possible 7 points. This question tested a content area that seemed to be familiar to students and they were able to demonstrate significant knowledge about the various works they selected.

What were common student errors or omissions?

This long question asked students to deal in detail and in depth with one specific object. Despite this, a number of students chose two examples, perhaps in a holdover from the legacy long questions, which always required students to address two objects. When students addressed more than one object, their responses did not go into sufficient depth and they almost always scored lower as they did not fully address all the required tasks. As with Question 1, it is critical that students read the requirements of the question very carefully.

Students had difficulty discussing specific aspects of cultural context, e.g., discussing Bernini in the context of Baroque Rome and the impact of the Catholic Counter-Reformation on art as opposed to generic discussions of “pious Christians” or “the common people.” A deeper and more specific understanding of cultural context is expected in the new curriculum. Students also sometimes mistook content for context and would describe the narrative of a work without relating it to its broader context. The question asked students to focus their discussion of their chosen work on a particular issue: namely, the way the work used light to convey spiritual meaning. Students who did not make the link, for example, between context and the use of light to convey spiritual meaning were unable to fully address the tasks.

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 should be aware that the list of works provided with the question have been carefully selected to work well with the question. Although students should absolutely consider using works off the list, they need to think through their answers very carefully to ensure that their chosen works will in fact work with the question. For example, for this question, students who chose Hagia Sophia, which was not on the list, could do well in addressing the tasks. Other examples were less successful. Students should be encouraged to plan their answers out in advance, and to try to address the tasks in the order in which they are posed by the question. The questions are carefully scaffolded to lead students through a progressively more complex thought process. Students will generally be more successful if they follow the tasks in the order in which the question presents them.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to attribute a presumably unknown building (the amphitheater at Nîmes) to its correct culture by comparing it to a known work from the required course content: the Colosseum (Flavian Amphitheater) in Rome. This is a work from the Ancient Mediterranean (3500 B.C.E.–300 C.E.). The intent of the question was to have students apply their knowledge of the form and function of the Colosseum to their discussion of a presumably unknown but very similar work. Students were asked to justify their attribution by using both visual and contextual evidence.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students did well on this question, scoring above the midpoint. The mean score was 2.95 out of a possible 5 points. This question tested a content area that is usually familiar to students and asked them to discuss a major architectural monument. It was clear that a majority of students knew the monument well.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students misread the question (which clearly stated that the work shown was not part of the required course content) and assumed that the images showed the Colosseum in Rome. They then tried to compare the Colosseum to another work in the required course content. They could still earn several points having made this error if their discussion was otherwise correct, but they missed the fundamental learning objective of the question, which was to demonstrate the skill of attribution.

More generally, students discussed the form and function of the Colosseum and, by inference, the Nîmes Arena correctly, but they had a harder time discussing how the construction materials and building techniques accommodated the form and function. Responses often conflated the two tasks and issues of materials and techniques were not addressed clearly and separately.

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?

Architecture has historically been a challenging area for students, and this appears to continue to be the case with the new curriculum. Teachers should think about ways to make architecture accessible to students and to help them understand architecture-specific issues such as building techniques and construction materials. Students and teachers should also be aware that attribution may be to a culture as well as to an artist, and should be able to situate unknown works of art into their cultural context through inference by relating it to a known work from the same culture. Attribution is a key art historical skill and should be practiced in classrooms. Students should work on attributing works to particular cultures as well as to particular artists, and should be able to articulate the reasons for their selection clearly and through making specific references to the illustrated work.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze Claude Monet's *The Saint-Lazare Station* in terms of changes that occurred in modern Parisian life at the time Monet painted the work and then to explain how Monet conveyed an attitude about modern Parisian life in the painting. This is a work from Later Europe and Americas (1750–1980 C.E.). The intent of the question was to give students the opportunity to use skills of visual and contextual analysis to explain how an artist, in this case Monet, responded to his specific cultural context.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students did well on this question, scoring above the midpoint range. The mean score was 2.76 out of a possible 5 points. Students clearly knew both Monet and Impressionism, and were able to relate the work to its broader historical context on at least a general level.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The question asked students to describe two specific changes that transformed Paris around the time Monet painted this work. Students seemed to lack relevant contextual information about 19th-century Paris (e.g., Haussmannization, industrialization, urbanization, middle-class leisure) and often fell back on generalizations about trains and vague references to the Industrial Revolution. Students seemed much more primed to discuss Impressionism as a style, and often offered general comments about visual aspects of Impressionism that were not directly related to the question that was asked. Students also seemed to have difficulty in identifying an attitude presented by Monet in the work, and many erroneously assumed that Monet was critiquing pollution and climate change.

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?

Responses to this question suggested that 19th-century art needs to be better grounded in terms of broader contextual issues. Teachers need to try to address all possible learning objectives with each work. Students seemed much more comfortable with Impressionism as a style than as a movement. They knew more about Impressionism in terms of style and visual features than its historical context. Despite the understanding that many students demonstrated with visual aspects of Impressionism, they were often unable to apply what they saw to make an argument — in this case, about Monet's attitude toward the changes in Paris at the time he was painting *The Saint-Lazare Station*. Students should practice applying identifying visual and contextual evidence, and applying that evidence to support a broader claim about a work.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to compare two works from the required course content: the reliquary of Sainte-Foy in Conques, France and the reliquary figure made by the Fang peoples in Southern Cameroon. The works are from two different content areas — Early Europe and Colonial Americas (200–1750 C.E.) and Africa (1100–1980 C.E.) — but share a similar function in that both are associated with relics. The intent of the question was for students to compare the two works in terms of their formal characteristics and their functions, and to explain how the works’ materials or imagery reinforce their functions.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question difficult. The mean score was 1.98 out of a possible 5 points. The comparative format of the question plus the inclusion of a medieval work (historically, a difficult time period for students) side by side with a work from a new content area (Africa) that was likely less familiar to students, proved quite challenging.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students seemed confused by the term “formal characteristics” and did not seem to always understand what was being asked of them in terms of visual analysis. Perhaps as a result, their visual discussions were often brief and did not always address two points of visual similarity. Students also had difficulty connecting the materials or imagery to the reliquary function of each work. Although many students clearly knew both objects, others lacked information about one or the other, and provided misinformation (e.g., stating that the reliquary of St. Foy showed a king). Some students confused the Fang reliquary figure with another object from Africa. Students also had a tendency to make broad generalizations about the cultural context of these works (stating, for example, that Europeans valued gold). In discussions of the Fang reliquary figure, these generalizations in some cases became problematic assumptions, revealing a lack of cultural sensitivity and understanding.

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?

Although many students clearly knew both works and were able to discuss them both in detail, it was also clear that some students did not know one or both of these works. It is essential that teachers thoroughly cover all of the 250 works in the Image Set from the required course content and address all of the relevant learning objectives that apply to each work. As with other questions, students need to be attentive to the various tasks in the question and be sure to address each specific task. Many students went into comparison mode immediately and compared the two works without actually addressing the comparative tasks required by the question. And although cultural sensitivity is a complex issue requiring a multifaceted approach, teachers should encourage students to resist reaching for broad generalizations about cultures and to question ingrained assumptions about cultures other than their own. Being specific and precise with cultural contextualization will help students to avoid making insensitive assumptions.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to analyze Faith Ringgold’s *Dancing at the Louvre* from the series *The French Collection*, Part I; #1, in terms of its subject matter, materials, or techniques. This is a work from Global Contemporary (1980 C.E. to Present). The intent of the question was to have students demonstrate an understanding of artistic tradition and change by focusing on how Ringgold’s use of materials,

techniques, or subject matter is distinctive and to explain how the work's context (Ringgold's personal experiences and the larger social concerns of her time) shaped her use of these materials, techniques, and subject matter.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students found this question moderately difficult. The mean score was a 2.30 out of a possible 5 points. In comparison to a previous question on a work by Faith Ringgold work on the legacy exam (Free Response Question 5 from the 2010 exam) where the mean was 1.47 out of 4 points, students did perform better with respect to with Ringgold's art on this exam. They are clearly learning this work and showing a much greater understanding of contemporary art than they were able to achieve with the legacy course. This is a very encouraging development.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Most students clearly knew this work and had learned accurate information about it. Students had a tendency to be overly descriptive in their answers and sometimes did not address the various tasks within the question. There was a tendency for students to conflate Ringgold's personal history with larger societal issues, whereas the question required students to tease apart the artist's personal experience from broader social issues and explain how both shaped her artistic choices. As with other questions on the exam, students had difficulties with contextual evidence and tended to talk broadly and in generalities rather than dealing with contextual specifics. When students accurately identified, for example, relevant social issues, they often did not detail these specific circumstances, instead simply mentioning them (e.g., naming "Civil Rights Movement" rather than fully fleshing out how that the Civil Rights Movement impacted the artist).

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 would benefit from allowing their responses to be guided by the structure of the questions. The tasks of this question were constructed to scaffold student responses and to lead naturally from a fairly basic task to more conceptually sophisticated ones. Students who followed the structure of the tasks tended to write clearer responses and were more successful at addressing the various tasks of the question. Students also need to be careful to not conflate to tasks and issues, as this usually leads to the issues being under-discussed and the tasks being insufficiently addressed.

Overall, students did very well on the new exam and they and their teachers are to be commended. The students mastered new and unfamiliar content areas and their responses frequently demonstrated a new and impressive depth of knowledge.