

Structuring the AP Art History Course

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While AP Art History may be taught within the art department in many schools, social studies teachers are equally capable of teaching the course well. They have the historical background to discuss the reasons for changes in art styles. A teacher's preparation is similar to teaching a course stressing political history, whereas this course stresses art history. A statement by the College Board solidly reinforces this idea:

Most students have been well trained in visual analysis but not all make the connections to context (why and how works of art were made) required on the exam. The course must teach students to understand works of art through contextual analysis and within their historical framework by examining issues such as politics, religion, patronage, gender, function, and ethnicity.¹

Determining Course Content and Materials

Upon reviewing the exam's structure, teachers and students realize that a formidable task awaits them. Students are expected to be familiar with art works from the Ancient World to the present,² whether they are in the form of statues, paintings, architecture, or photography. Therefore, as in any course, decisions need to be made about what to include and what to omit. It is unrealistic to rely upon specific questions from previous exams when structuring the course. At the same time, close study of previous exams will help in terms of which time periods seem to reoccur regularly on the exam.

In order for students to adequately recognize key works of art, major artists, and different styles or schools of art, regular visual practice must occur. The text chosen must offer numerous photographs of art works as well as analytical descriptions of them. Texts most often used are Laurie Schneider Adams's *Art Across Time*, Hugh Honour and John F. Fleming's *The Visual Arts: A History*, Fred S. Kleiner's *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, and Marilyn Stokstad and Michael W. Cothren's *Art History*.³ Teachers must obtain CD-ROMs or



Figure 1: *The Rain* by Marc Chagall (top)

Figure 2: *The Birthday* by Marc Chagall (bottom)

DVDs that offer the necessary visual examples.

The key then becomes repetition. If students are only exposed to one or two paintings by Marc Chagall (figures 1 & 2), they might recognize those specific paintings on an exam but not a different Chagall painting. However, if six or seven

Chagall paintings are presented, then students can begin to make comparisons and note commonalities. This is how to approach the dilemma of being able to identify previously unseen works. To oversimplify Chagall, one might summarize: people are floating in the air, presence of violins, use of Russian clothing, colorful, and depictions of Russian-Jewish villages. Students should be cautioned that not all of these attributes will be present, and though students will not always be correct, they will have a strong chance of identifying a painting by Chagall or one influenced by him.

The same broadly repetitive summative method is used for identifying art time periods and styles: by viewing different artists of the Renaissance, students will gain an overview of Renaissance style. Viewing numerous examples by Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and others will give a flavor of characteristic Renaissance styles.

It is important to introduce vocabulary specific to art history. Comparative charts of stylistic movements and of individual artists can prove extremely useful. The next step is to prepare comparative/contrasting charts for successive art periods. Useful supplementary works include various concise review books, the *AP Art History Teacher's Guide*, and Sylvan Barnet's *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*.⁴ Attending AP workshops enables teachers to learn from other teachers and obtain ideas on the curriculum and the test itself.

Possible Course Organization

One method of course organization that has worked well for my classes is to introduce each unit with a general summary of the prevailing beliefs, values, and philoso-



Figure 3: *Madonna of the Meadow* by Raphael (above)



Figure 4: *David* by Michelangelo (above)



Figure 5: *Madonna with the Long Neck* by Parmigianino (above)

phy of the time period. We spend about one or two days on this. Then I introduce brief examples from literature and possibly music to show how these were also influenced by the cultural time period. The next step is to show a bridge between these generally held ideas and the type of art created as a result of these ideas. This usually embraces the major schools and artists of the time. However, each period or movement also stimulates resistance, either individually or in the form of a new movement. We explore these “rebels” and the rationale behind their opposition to the “accepted” school.

This introduction and explanation of the philosophical beliefs and values of a time must occur before the actual examination of different art works during that period. Artists’ creations are influenced by the historical and cultural contexts. Generally, artists perceive what their intended audience wants and create accordingly. Individual artists, based on their temperament, may follow these expectations or defy them for shock effect. By going against the grain, some will receive wider publicity. Students understand the relationship between the antics of some of today’s “stars” and the corresponding notoriety received.

Illustrative Examples

The utilization of this cultural background approach can be demonstrated in a lesson on sixteenth century Mannerism and the succeeding Baroque style. The early sixteenth century was a time of unrest and change, with some European historians referring to it as a Century of Crisis. The Protestant Reformation of 1517 was followed by turmoil and religious wars. There were fears of invasion by the Ottoman Turks. The discovery of America in 1492 fueled economic and political power shifts from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. Huge influxes of gold and silver from the new Spanish colonies in Latin America created massive inflation. The Copernican Revolution created philosophic questions about man’s place in the universe. This age of stress and anxiety was reflected in the arts.

Mannerism’s cultural style posed a transition between the Renaissance and the Baroque periods. Students will have studied the different eras of the Renaissance, including the High Renaissance—the time of such masters as Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael. These artists were already recognized as geniuses during their lifetimes. Thus, the next generation of artists felt compelled

to imitate their styles. They painted in the “manner” of these masters, following Renaissance guidelines on perspective and proportion. These new artists were considered Academic Mannerists. In order to be successful, they needed to be aware of the artistic canons set forth by the preceding generation.

Another group of artists wanted to be more independently creative. However, they had to first recognize the expected canons in order to flaunt those rules. These artists became known as Free Mannerists. Renaissance painters normally employed a triangular composition and depicted people with “perfect” proportions, a calm demeanor, and posing singly or in small groups with static monumentality. Therefore, Mannerist painters employed non-symmetrical, overcrowded compositions utilizing diagonal lines. People were emotional, often extremely active, and possessing disproportionate bodies with discordant colors. Students can compare Raphael’s calm, static *Madonna of the Meadow* or Michelangelo’s statue of *David* with Parmigianino’s disturbing *Madonna with the Long Neck* (figures 3, 4, & 5).

Following the models of classical Greece and Rome, Renaissance architects predominantly used columns,



Figure 6: *Villa Rotonda*
by Andrea Palladio (top left)



Figure 7: *Palazzo del Tè*
by Giulio Romano (top right)



Figure 8: *Creation of Adam*
by Michelangelo (left)



Figure 9: *Last Judgment*
by Michelangelo (far right)

straight lines, pediments, and domes, as did succeeding Academic Mannerists. Free Mannerist painters and architects, therefore, used twisting columns, curves, and other jarring architectural elements. Students can compare the Renaissance style *Villa Rotonda* by Andrea Palladio with the Mannerist *Palazzo del Tè* by Giulio Romano (figures 6 & 7 detail).

Whereas the Renaissance tended to be logical, Mannerism and the succeeding Baroque styles were emotional. The Catholic Church of the Counter-Reformation stressed emotion and religious fervor in hopes of appealing to the masses. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) retreated into dogmatic conservatism and reacted against the freethinking of the Renaissance, releasing the *Index*, a list of prohibited published works that contradicted Catholic doctrine. The Catholic Church instructed artists to create obvious, emotional, easily identifiable themes for the mainly illiterate population. The Church built grandiose churches filled with emotional paintings and sculptures. The intent was to instruct and incite piety according to Catholic doctrine.

Whereas the Renaissance Church had supported a humanistic view of religion (portraying God as the Loving Father

and Jesus as the Good Shepherd), the Reformation Church became defensive and condemned the erroneous thoughts of rational Humanism (in punishment for such “Protestant” thoughts, God and Jesus were shown as terrifying judges). Michelangelo lived during the Renaissance and into the new era of Reformation and the splintering of the Catholic Church. His Renaissance *Creation of Adam* on the Sistine Chapel’s ceiling reflected Renaissance beliefs. However, his *Last Judgment* painted much later in a Mannerist style on a wall in the same chapel revealed his pessimism and dismay with religious events. Jesus was now the condemning Final Judge and much space is devoted to the collapse of civilization and the fate of sinners (figures 8 detail & 9 detail).

Examining aspects of Baroque styles reveals for students the importance of patrons. The Aristocratic Baroque refers to the monumental paintings, sculpture, and architecture of the wealthy patrons of the time. Benefactors supported grandiose endeavors because they demonstrated their own power and importance, much as the Gothic cathedrals had trumpeted the power of the Medieval Church. As mentioned, the Catholic Church com-

missioned large churches and similarly large paintings and sculpture that would fit in the massive Baroque churches. Kings, such as Louis XIV, built palaces such as Versailles to flaunt their power.

The Bourgeois Baroque was startlingly different. It was primarily in Protestant countries, and especially in The Netherlands. The early Protestant Reformation stressed austerity and serenity based upon a desire to return to the earlier, “purer,” Church. There were no extremely wealthy patrons to support the arts. Most patrons were middleclass merchants. They commissioned smaller paintings that would fit on a wall within their homes. Subject matter was more austere, in line with Protestant beliefs of the time. It is meaningful to compare Caravaggio’s *Beheading of St. John the Baptist* (size 142.1 × 204.7 inches, painted for a Roman church with Jan Vermeer’s *The Lacemaker* (size 9⁵/₈ × 8¹/₄ inches, painted for an individual). (See figures 10 detail & 11.)

Artists working in these areas realized their payment would be significantly smaller than artists working for kings, aristocrats, or the Church. They also had to satisfy the tastes of their buying public: thus, they painted secular genre scenes



Figure 10: Caravaggio's *Beheading of St. John the Baptist* (Far left)



Figure 11: Vermeer's *The Lacemaker*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

"ArtCyclopedia" lists movements, artists, and museums:
www.artcyclopedia.com.

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of everyday life, portraits, still lifes, and landscapes. Early Protestantism forbade religious imagery so artists employed still lifes, portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes.

Preparing for the Exam

Not all students will take the exam in the spring. Some discover that their college of choice doesn't accept AP scores; others may not believe they will do well enough to get the score required by their college; and still others take the course merely for the intellectual stimulation. Those factors should be the guide when organizing the course's timeline. Some teachers believe it is imperative to teach all the content before the spring so that students will have effectively "learned everything" before the exam. They are then left with one to two months of time to fill, often opting to use this for student projects based on the course.

I structure the course differently, pacing it to last through the school year. How then to prepare students for the exam when it is always given weeks before the end of the school year? Beginning in the spring, students who have elected to take the exam begin extra meetings after the school day ends. (This insures that students who are not taking the exam don't feel superfluous or inferior. They remain an equal part of the class those last few weeks.) In the extra meetings, we review content already learned, reinforce vocabulary, introduce upcoming knowledge not yet presented to the rest of the class, and practice answering essays,

both orally and written. When students answer questions orally, teachers have the opportunity to stop them in the midst of an answer to redirect the focus or to reinforce specific examples that may be utilized. Students can also assist each other by suggesting examples, comparisons, or contrasts that will yield a better answer on an exam.

Some teachers may fear that spending more class time on the era's beliefs and philosophy will harm student scores by decreasing the time devoted to individual artists and art movements. However, correlating art to its historical background has yielded successful results. One example is the class in which Laurel Schoenbohm (see her article in this issue) was a student. Of the 32 students in the course, 18 took the AP exam. Others took the course out of personal interest. In fact, the class's strongest student did not take the exam because her future college did not accept it. The class scored higher than the national average in both the multiple-choice and essay segments.⁵ The national weighted multiple-choice score was 37.0, while this class's weighted score was 42.8. Similarly, the national weighted score on the slide essays was 60.6, whereas this class scored 64.8.

Social studies teachers can be extremely effective at teaching AP Art History. To maximize success, teachers should invest time creating a visual library, attend AP workshops whenever possible (though these are not offered at all sites on a regular basis), and take relevant history courses if necessary to

better understand the background of an artistic era. AP Art History teachers also need to review previous exams in order to structure the course so that students will be well prepared for the exam. Yet, as mentioned, it is important to keep in mind that some students take the course purely for personal interest. 🌍

Notes

1. College Board. AP FAQs, <http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/faq> (scroll to Art History: "In what areas do students have difficulty on the AP Art History Exam?")
2. Prehistoric art was omitted from the exam as of 2010 because of the difficulty of interpreting it in context.
3. Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art Across Time*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011); Hugh Honour and John F. Fleming, *The Visual Arts: A History*, rev. 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2009); Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: A Global History*, 14th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012); and Marilyn Stokstad and Michael W. Cothren, *Art History*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall/Pearson, 2011).
4. College Board, *AP Art History Teacher's Guide* (New York: College Board, 2009), http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/repository/ap_arthis-tory_teachers_guide.pdf; Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*, 10th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2011).
5. Appleton North High School in Appleton, Wisconsin, currently has about 1,600 students with a graduation rate of 90 percent. It offers 14 AP courses. Students scored an ACT composite of 24.2 on the recent ACT exam. Appleton North is a suburban high school in an economically vibrant community.

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