

Foundations for College and Beyond: Looking Back on AP Art History

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As hushed whispers and remarks filled the museum, we gazed at a dark oil painting—a group of shepherds huddled around a baby, faces illuminated by a single flame. “Hey... Sarah,” I murmured, nudging my best friend, “Do you think that’s a Vermeer or a de La Tour?”

“It’s definitely a de La Tour! Don’t you remember anything our AP Art History teacher taught us? Just look at how the light source is from a candle, and it’s a scene with multiple people. Vermeer favors scenes with one or two figures in the acts of everyday life.”

It was years after our AP Art History course in high school, and two years after college. We’d decided to fill a day during the Thanksgiving visits appreciating fine art. Prior to that AP course my senior year of high school, touring an art museum had seemed like the equivalent of going to the dentist. But after countless mornings rubbing sleep from my eyes during that AP Art History course, I gained a rich understanding of art, human history, and analytical abilities that travel with me today.

This AP course, along with AP Biology, English Literature, and U.S. History (on all four of which I obtained scores of 4’s and 5’s), shaped me in positive ways. While students naturally harbor differing opinions on AP courses depending on their personalities, schools, and teachers, the AP courses I took were positive experiences. Taking a deeper look at my AP Art History class highlights how these experiences have shaped me.

First of all, the style of AP classes reflects college course structure. My AP Art History class was not the usual

10-minutes-of-homework high school course. Instead, my teacher utilized a style of lectures, slide discussions, and films, followed by weekly tests and essays. Matching other AP courses I took, this style provided the rigid structure and repetition needed to memorize and retain copious amounts of information. Our slow but steady progression through history left me with a base of knowledge more concrete and vivid than any other course I have taken.

This college-like structure can only function with a proper student mind set. I left my AP courses with an ability to make connections and analyze issues at deeper levels. This would never have occurred without our Art History teacher’s trust in our capabilities. We felt we were being treated as adults for the first time in our school experiences. As college professors do, he allowed us to take the course in the direction we deemed, to either challenge ourselves or to sit in the back of the class and doodle the hours away. As the test day neared, it was our choice to attend evening study sessions and slide reviews, just as it is the college student’s choice to push him or herself to succeed. Also, since our test study sessions were held after school, students not taking the AP test did not feel excluded in any way during class time. By the time the test was upon us, not only could I name the artist, style,

and time period of almost every piece in our 1,200-page book, but I could also analyze different theories, philosophies, and styles, while explaining the “bigger picture.”

Now that I knew and understood these topics on an intimate level, I could articulate my knowledge through that crucial college test-taking form—the essay. Whereas college courses tend to test students through a blend of comprehensive exams and essays, few, if any, of my non-AP high school courses even tinkered with essay writing. However, my AP Art History course was saturated with essay practice, as our teacher drilled us weekly for the seven slide-based essays and two long essays we would need to produce on the AP test. On top of this, other AP tests utilized different styles of questions, so I practiced voicing my arguments in a multitude of ways, including document based and free response questions. Some students feel their teachers tried to guess what the AP test essays would focus on and thus biased their teaching emphasis, but my teachers stressed that these essay-writing drills were merely a practice session acting as a strong foundation. So we wrote and wrote and wrote, we got criticism, and we got red marks on our papers. Through this harsh and lengthy process, we learned to write with clarity and conciseness, organizing thoughts, hooking the reader, and outlining arguments backed by valid examples and points. This is not only vital in college, but also important in the “real” world, even now, as I write this article. In addi-

tion, while some students and teachers complain that the pressure of the AP test is too much, this weight worked in a positive manner for me. As if dreaming of finishing a marathon, I now had a reason to stay alert at 7:30 in the morning. If the course had lacked the AP test, I would have been less enthusiastic and motivated to go the extra mile. Thanks to the intense test-taking experience of AP courses, six-hour-long Organic Chemistry finals didn't seem *quite* so daunting in college.

While some students complain of dry courses, focused only on the test in a strict lecture-and-notes style of teaching that deflates their passion for those subjects, my AP experiences were the opposite. Although my AP U.S. History teacher later admitted that she feels pressed to lecture for a majority of the time in order to cover all of the material, she teaches as diverse a curriculum as possible. This includes hands-on, visual, and audio forms of learning. A few of the creative activities in my AP courses included a semester-long book report in English; fetal cat dissections in biology; skits, role-playing, and art projects in U.S. History; and a visit to the Chicago Art Museum in Art History, all of which fostered enthusiasm for learning while creating close bonds with fellow students and teachers. To cover all of the required material and leave time for creative projects, some teachers assigned summer reading. Another technique to make AP courses more engaging was illustrated through my AP U.S. History class, taught in a yearlong block with two periods back-to-back in combination with AP American Language. This block plan with the same teacher allowed sufficient time to engage in hands-on learning techniques, such as debates and historical simulations. This wide array of teaching techniques fostered an engaging and well-rounded education.

Depending on each college's standards, students can use high test scores as college credit, bypassing basic introductory courses. This came into use multiple times for me at college. During

my first two years at Colorado College, I pursued my interest in biology and, thanks to that AP Biology credit, I was able to advance my major and finish my biology requirements by the end of sophomore year. With a strong interest in art remaining, I used my AP Art History credit to squeeze in a Studio Art minor.

But the big question was, would my AP courses keep me afloat as I skipped introductory classes? Now focused on art again, I was able to compare my AP Art History course to the college's version through fellow students. Walking around campus, I witnessed other students lugging around their 10-pound *Introduction to Art History* books that I, too, had carried in high school and still keep with me today. They emerged from darkened rooms after hours of gazing at slides just as I had a few years earlier. After weighing the experiences of my fellow students, it is obvious that one year of intensive study in high school allowed more time for the information to soak in and make deeper impact than Colorado College's block plan, where students take one course at a time for three and a half weeks.

The truest test of my AP Art History course came on the first day of my 200 level *Revolution in Tradition in Modern Art 1880–1945* course, for which Art History was a prerequisite. Walking into the windowless room, blank notebook and fresh pen in hand, butterflies bounced around my stomach like the flickering light in a Caravaggio painting. Would I be able to keep up with this upper level college course? I hadn't touched an art history book in three years. But after the first three hours of class, I waltzed out, confident that I would be able to pull my weight. This course was structured in the same style as my AP course had been, with note taking, lectures, slides, essays, and papers. I could handle the challenge, thanks to the bank of skills I had gained in my AP Art History class. And handle it I did, with full understanding of the background needed for advanced topics.

With a solid foundation of knowledge gained through AP Art History and the knowledge of what skill it takes to create a masterpiece through my Studio Art minor, I now see art in a new light. No longer do I whine and complain as I walk through museums. Instead I stop in my tracks in awe. Artist after artist forces me to step closer and examine their brush strokes and use of color. I take a step back to view the overall effect, then a step closer again. Those paintings I memorized in the art history book so long ago are now alive, coated with human history.

Back at home from our trip to the museum, I showed Sarah some oil paintings I'd created. "So what do you think?" I asked timidly.

"Wow, looks great!" Then, upon closer inspection, she asked, "Is that a little bit of Chagall's influence I see?"

"Yeah, I guess it is, similar use of colors and expression, huh?"

"Maybe a little Kandinsky too?"

"How'd you guess?" 🌍

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

"The Digital Imaging Project," by Mary Ann Sullivan, offers many visual examples of art via artists and art historical sites: www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/index/index3.html.

The "Art History" link in Best of History Websites lists websites and lesson plans: www.besthistorysites.net/index.php/art-history

"Art by Period" offers numerous useful links: www.teacheroz.com/Art_Periods.htm.

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