



Student Performance Q&A: 2004 AP® Studio Art

The following comments on the 2004 portfolios for AP® Studio Art were written by the Chief Reader, Penny McElroy of the University of Redlands in Redlands, California. They are intended to help teachers better prepare their students for submitting an AP portfolio. An “examination” overview assesses this year’s student performance. Following that is a synopsis of common problems, issues, and successes encountered throughout the Reading, section by section. Readers are encouraged to use their expertise to create strategies for teachers to improve student performance in specific areas.

Examination Overview

In the AP Studio Art Exam, students attempt to earn college credit and possibly advanced placement in college classes by completing a portfolio of high quality artwork. The student selects which portfolio to submit: Drawing, 2-D Design, or 3-D Design. These correspond to foundation courses commonly found in a college curriculum. In June, approximately 85 experienced college and high school teachers gathered to determine how well students addressed this task.

The Drawing Portfolio has traditionally yielded higher quality work overall, in part because of its clarity and focus. Possibly another aspect of this success is the fact that drawing can be taught very well with a minimum of tools and equipment. Further, most high school teachers understand that drawing is a fundamental art skill, and it is usually a keystone in art programs.

- **Drawing Quality**

This was one of the strongest portfolio sections this year. Readers noted less “mindless drawing from photos” and more experimental approaches than in years past. Though there is still a strong emphasis on technique evident in the portfolios, Readers praised the blending of this concern with a marked increase in individual approach and “voice.”

- **Drawing Concentration**

The concentration section was the weakest in the drawing portfolio. It is clear that teachers and students still struggle with the definition of “concentration.” Readers looking for sustained development of a visual idea were often disappointed. They also noted that “mushy” or unclear concentration statements seemed to go together with weaker or undeveloped work. Though I want to avoid too much causal speculation, I do believe that students are more able to do their best work when they clearly understand the goal they

aspire to fulfill. More work should be done to help students develop cogent and original concentration statements.

- **Drawing Breadth**

Quality is up slightly in this section as well. We had trouble finding sample “1s” for standard-setting. Breadth seems to be evolving away from mere breadth of media and towards demonstration of more complex breadth of approach (a direction we laud).

The 2-D Design Portfolio debate appears to have diminished somewhat, though high school teachers and students still seem to be engaged in an elemental and somewhat thorny dialogue with two-dimensional design: What are you? How do we demonstrate mastery of you? How are you different from drawing? How are you related to drawing? What the heck are the Readers looking for in this portfolio?

It would be nice to be able to offer unequivocal answers to these questions. Some Readers have suggested that we “nail down” 2-D Design by designating specific media or exercises that should appear in the portfolio. This would certainly make this portfolio far easier to grade and likely far easier to teach. Yet the interdisciplinary nature of two-dimensional design does not permit such clarity or narrowness. Two-dimensional design is in a sense an umbrella—everything that happens on a two-dimensional surface, regardless of media, is designed. This means that a work of art that is created with drawing materials will have aspects of two-dimensional design that contribute to its success. The drawing may be well designed, showing sophisticated positive and negative space/shape relationships. It may be visually unified. It may be visually balanced. It may use color in a creative and informed way. If so, then this drawing could also be said to be a good example of two-dimensional design.

This, obviously, can be confusing. Is it a drawing or is it a design? In fact it is both.

So then, how do AP Readers evaluate this work that is both a drawing and a design? If it appears in the Drawing Portfolio, we evaluate it as a drawing, giving preference to drawing issues and qualities, i.e. using a drawing “lens.” (It should be noted, however, that the drawing “lens” includes composition; two-dimensional design is never absent from the evaluation of a work of two-dimensional art. However, in the Drawing Portfolio, the evaluation of composition is mingled with evaluation of such aspects of drawing as line quality, tonal values, illusory space, representation/abstraction, etc.) If the work turns up in a 2-D Design portfolio, we use a two-dimensional design “lens” to evaluate the work. The design qualities of the work are considered foremost. Active engagement with the elements and principles of design is assessed. The Readers ask themselves: *Is understanding of the principles of design evident in this work? Are the principles used intelligently and sensitively to contribute to its meaning? Were the elements created and used in purposeful and imaginative ways? How and what does the interaction of the elements and principles of design contribute to the quality of the work?*

High school teachers can help students with the 2-D Design portfolio by incorporating questions such as these into critique sessions, by encouraging students to use knowledge of the elements and principles of design to solve problems in their work, and by urging students to present work that shows definite and obvious mastery of two-dimensional design skills and concepts, regardless of the media.

For the past three years, 2-D Design has evoked a parallel dialogue among the AP Readers. This year we tried several new strategies in order to address difficulties with scoring that have surfaced

since instituting the new portfolio structure. Specifically we noted last year that severe and on-going confusion about the perceived overlap between 2-D Design and Drawing caused some inconsistencies in applying the rubric.

To address the 2-D Design/Drawing confusion, we began the Reading with orienting presentations that described the specific issues that constitute a 2-D Design “lens” versus a Drawing “lens” for grading. The presentations encouraged the understanding of drawing as a medium that is included under the umbrella of two-dimensional design, thus affirming the root of the confusion but simultaneously clarifying it. Further, we started the Reading with the 2-D Design portfolio, guided by the logic that the most difficult task should be tackled first and that moving from an unfamiliar 2-D Design lens to a more familiar Drawing lens would be an easier transition for the Readers than the other way around. All of these structural and instructional factors, paired with the work done by the Test Development Committee and the Chief Reader to make the rubrics clearer and more parallel, resulted in a reduction of confusion and a smoother Reading than in the recent past.

Readers reported having a much firmer handle on the two-dimensional design issues addressed by the rubric and consistently used design “language” to talk about the assessments. We also noticed that by putting 2-D Design at the start of the Reading, the standard settings were more efficient because it appeared that Readers were able to apply the concepts from the standards of one section to the other sections.

- **2-D Design Quality**

Quality was up this year. Readers noted more “on task” portfolios containing works that were indubitably about design. Many of the excellent portfolios (“5s” and “6s”) demonstrated stellar understanding of both drawing and design. This increase in quality was especially obvious in the photo and digital works. We saw more digital work that extended beyond mere application of filters, making us speculate that teachers of these media are applying high standards to the work of their students. The photographic work generally demonstrated a strong grasp of the role of design in successful photography. On the down side, it sometimes seemed that students submitting digital works took a “kitchen sink” approach to design, including too many elements or too many ideas in each piece for maximum clarity. It was difficult to discern understanding of two-dimensional design in these pieces. Teachers can counteract this trend by encouraging students who work with digital means to tackle many pieces at once. Not only is this easy with computer technology, but it allows for more ideas to be developed more fully and clearly.

- **2-D Design Concentration**

The concentration section of this portfolio suffered from the same maladies as the Drawing concentrations: lack of understanding of the concept of concentration, as well as uneven development of visual ideas. Teachers might look to bodies of work by famous artists to help students understand what is meant by the phrase “development of a visual idea.” Check out Picasso’s Blue Period paintings, Betye Saar’s *Aunt Jemima* assemblages, Jasper John’s *Number* paintings, and Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* as examples.

- **2-D Design Breadth**

This year, as last, it seemed that students were really struggling with the concept of breadth. We saw many portfolios that defined breadth as simply many works in different media, without any breadth of approach evident. See “Critique, Comment and Recommendations” section below for more information.

The 3-D Design Portfolio, though occupying a small percentage of the total number of exams, is in many ways our star portfolio. The work is generally strong, revealing obvious good teaching. For each of the past three years we have seen increasingly sophisticated work in this portfolio—work that demonstrates a solid understanding of three-dimensional design elements and principles. We saw a number of excellent portfolios that featured fashion design and jewelry. Though these were high-quality works, too often the three-dimensional aspects of the pieces were difficult to discern in the slides. Teachers can help students by ensuring that the work is informed by solid understanding of three-dimensional design elements and principles and by helping students to photograph the work so that this understanding is obvious to Readers. Fashion and jewelry design have the additional element of the human body as a part of their purpose; fashion and jewelry portfolios that demonstrated a clear sense of the relationship of the work to the body were significantly more successful than those that left this relationship unclear.

The speed of reading the 3-D Design portfolio caused problems in accuracy in 2003, but we avoided those problems this year by setting up a third Reading site with only 10 Readers. The third site allowed us to read 3-D more slowly so that discrepancies could be tracked and Readers corrected if necessary, thus making the Reading more accurate.

- **3-D Design Quality**

Quality continues to improve. In reading for standards, we had difficulty finding enough “1s” for samples. The range of media in 3-D portfolios continues to widen, though ceramics was by far still the most frequently used medium; within these portfolios, functional ceramics is still the most frequently seen type of work. The functional ceramics that we saw this year displayed an increased level of sensitivity to form as it relates to function.

- **3-D Design Concentration**

The concentrations tended to be the strongest parts of the 3-D Design portfolios. In general, they were on task and of good quality. The level of artistic thinking in this section has improved, and it is obvious that teachers are working on conceptual development as well as material skills.

- **3-D Design Breadth**

The quality of work in this section was overall weaker than the other two areas. As in other breadth sections, breadth of media, though easier to spot, is by itself not enough to score well. The best work in this section incorporated breadth of more than one aspect, media, approach, size, etc.

“Free-Response Questions”

This exam *is* a free-response question, but it is divided into parts that allow the Readers to focus on a particular aspect of making art and assess the student’s relative ability in each area.

Section 1: Quality — Excellence demonstrated in original artworks — (5 actual works, Drawing and 2-D Design; 10 slides [5 works, 2 views each], 3-D Design)

Quality is evident in the concept, composition, and technical skills of your work. It can be found in very simple works as well as in elaborate ones. You are asked to demonstrate quality through carefully selected examples of your work: work that succeeds in developing your intentions, in terms of both concept and execution.

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Section II Concentration — An in-depth, personal commitment to a particular artistic concern — (12 slides)

In this section, you are asked to demonstrate your personal commitment to a specific visual idea or mode of working. To do this, you should present an aspect of your work or a specific project in which you have invested considerable time, effort, and thought...

A concentration is a body of related works that:

- are based on your individual interest in a particular idea expressed visually;
- are focused on a process of investigation, growth, and discovery;
- show the development of a visual language appropriate for your subject;
- are unified by an underlying idea that has visual and/or conceptual coherence; and
- grow out of a coherent plan of action or investigation.

A concentration is NOT:

- a variety of works produced as solutions to class projects;
- a collection of works with differing intents;
- a group project or collaboration;
- a collection of works derived solely from other people's photographs;
- a body of work that simply investigates a medium, without a strong underlying visual idea; or
- a project that merely takes a long time to complete.

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Section III Breadth — a variety of experiences in using the formal, technical, and expressive means available to an artist — (12 slides, Drawing and 2-D Design; 16 slides [8 works, 2 views each], 3-D Design)

Drawing: *In the Breadth section, you are asked to demonstrate the range of your drawing experiences and accomplishments with a variety of art forms, concepts, and techniques. The work you submit should demonstrate that you are able to pursue advanced drawing concepts, including observation of three-dimensional subjects and work with invented or nonobjective forms...*

2-D Design: *Breadth in this portfolio refers to your experiences and accomplishments in a variety of two-dimensional art forms, concepts, and techniques. Successful works of art require the integration of the elements and principles of design; you are asked to demonstrate that you are actively working with these concepts while thoughtfully composing your art. The work you submit should demonstrate exploration in a variety of media and approaches, inventiveness and the expressive manipulation of form, as well as a knowledge of color issues and compositional organization...*

3-D Design: *In this section, you are asked to demonstrate your experience and accomplishments in a variety of three-dimensional forms and techniques. Your work in this section may be additive, subtractive, and /or fabricated; it may include studies of relationships among three-dimensional forms; and may include figurative, nonfigurative, or expressive objects...*

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Commentary on Students' Portfolios

1. Standards and Criteria

Two to three different Readers using a 6-point scoring scale evaluate each section of the portfolio. Each section counts for one third of the final score. The scores are averaged and recalculated by statisticians and translated into the AP 5-point scale. This system gives a balanced look at the student's work and provides an accurate assessment of his or her overall performance in art. Colleges use this score to help decide if a new student is ready to “pass out” of some foundation requirements.

The scoring rubric is a set of criteria that the Readers use to guide them in assigning scores to the work. The rubric evolves from year to year, based on the experience of the Chief Reader and Table Leaders, but it is not changed during the actual Reading. Current rubrics (scoring guidelines) can be downloaded from AP Central® (apcentral.collegeboard.com). Go to “The Exams” and then navigate to “Exam Questions.” On that page you will see “Scoring Guidelines”; clicking on that link will cause Adobe Acrobat to launch and the PDF version of the rubric will be downloaded to your computer.

2. Critique, Comments, and Recommendations

Section I: Quality

This section of the portfolio is an opportunity for students to show their very best, most developed work. The best work in the quality section demonstrates intentional manipulation of media in the service of a visual idea; there is a sense of confidence, visual intelligence, informed risk-taking, imagination, and “voice.” The student has obviously developed both his or her technical art skills and creative thinking/problem-solving skills. The work shows a high level of engagement with the process of making art as well as commitment and challenge. The degree to which the work demonstrates these qualities determines the score that the student earns on this section. In less successful portfolios, the work may show strong technical competence but lack a sense of invention or imagination, or vice versa. It might seem purposeful and have verve but be less resolved than one might hope to see in a student's very best work.

An average portfolio will often be a mixed portfolio, with some works much stronger than others, demonstrating some technical competence and some manipulation of ideas without the two qualities necessarily working well together. If the work addresses ideas, the student may not have the technical skills to depict them, or vice versa.

The poorest work shows little, if any, evidence of thinking; solutions tend to be trite. This work often exhibits very weak command of composition and technique. The student may not have had enough experience to understand how to develop and express a visual idea.

Section II: Concentration

This section of the portfolios is intended to provide students with the opportunity to work in the way that most professional artists do: on a body of work that is “unified by an underlying idea that

has visual...coherence.” This is intended to be a prolonged and focused investigation. It should be something that is of vital interest to the student and that lends itself to the student’s way of working. Perhaps obviously, the quality of the artwork and the evidence in it of the quality of the student’s investigation and development play an important part in the score the student earns.

I recommend that teachers spend as much effort and time helping students to develop creative and original concentration ideas as they do in teaching and evaluating the manual skills demonstrated in their students’ work. Too often we see facile manipulation of art materials in service to tired ideas (clichés) in the concentration section. Neglecting the conceptual aspects of art in deference to the physical is a disservice to students.

The strong to excellent concentrations showed a clear and focused idea that remained at the heart of the work even as the idea developed. A sense of transformation in the progression of the slides is evident. These works are engaging in both form and content. They are evocative, eliciting an aesthetic response in the viewer.

The average concentrations were not completely well handled or very effectively explored. Sometimes the idea was so broad that it made it difficult for the student to do much with it (for example, “faces,” or “nature,” or “pencil drawing”). Though it is possible to be too narrow, as well, it seems that more students have trouble focusing their ideas than broadening them. It is often productive to ask students who have these broad ideas for concentrations, “What is it specifically about faces that interests *you*?” “Why choose a topic that is so well traveled in the art world, so prone to cliché?” “What do you have to say about faces that is unique?” With this kind of supportive yet challenging questioning, students can move beyond their first (and “worst,” some might say) ideas to a concentration topic that is individual and engaging on many levels. Average concentrations have not perceptibly benefited by this questioning. They generally demonstrate limited investigation (translation: the students weren’t as interested in the topic as they thought); there is little growth in the work; or although the work might be technically well handled, it is not really a concentration).

The weakest concentrations are frequently not convincing; there is often a real sense that the student did a lot of work in art class, then made up a concentration statement to try to fit it all together. The evidence of thinking in these concentrations is generally not easy to see, and the pieces may not be very technically adept. Such a concentration might be a good start but not include enough work to be an effective investigation.

In the concentration section, students have an opportunity to illuminate the work with a concentration statement. Though these statements are not scored, they provide invaluable assistance to Readers looking at the work. A good concentration statement gives a clear and concise verbal accompaniment to the visual work in the portfolio. The statement conveys a sense of the direction of investigation in the concentration and provides insights into what the student learned in the process of doing the work. It is fruitful for students to write a concentration statement at the beginning of their work and then revise it when the portfolio is due. This reflection over time can provide students with excellent insights into the process that goes into the creation of their work and ensures that the statement actually helps the Readers look at the work. (It is advisable to type the statement, or at least write neatly in pen, to assure readability).

The order of slides can also be illuminating. One of the qualities Readers are looking for is development of skill and idea. If slides are placed to effectively demonstrate this, it works to the student’s benefit. Readers generally read the slides left to right, top to bottom, and a common

assumption is that the more recent (well-developed) work is at the bottom. Readers adjust when this is obviously not the order the student used, but in general it is a good idea to place the slides to match the Reader's natural reading preferences. If students use a different scheme to order the slides, it would be helpful to have a brief description of this order included in the concentration statement.

Section III: Breadth

The breadth section of the portfolios should demonstrate a range of abilities with technique, problem solving, and ideation.

Work that scored highest in this section showed a wide range of abilities and approaches. This work persuaded Readers that the artist had an excellent command of the tools and concepts of art and could use them to create imaginative and engaging pieces. The works moved beyond class exercises to show assimilation of the concepts and maturity in handling them.

Average portfolios were frequently varied, containing a few strong pieces mixed with less successful works. The works might be of good quality but so similar in form and content that they would be mistaken for a concentration rather than a breadth section. Sometimes portfolios that were generally of good quality but were predominantly classroom exercises without evidence of individual thinking received average scores.

The very weakest work showed a lack of understanding of the tools and concepts of art. Sometimes the portfolios in this score range were incomplete.

In all three portfolios, the debate continues about breadth in media or materials versus breadth in content and approach. It must be emphasized that Readers look for and honor both kinds of breadth, even though the content/approach breadth is sometimes less easy to spot. The breadth section offers a set of criteria that balance those of the concentration. In one, the student is asked to focus on a single compelling topic or mode of working, and in the other, the student is urged to experiment and show versatility in idea and technique. Of course, it is impossible to completely divide breadth skills from concentration skills, for shouldn't an effective concentration show a number of approaches to the topic? Wouldn't the best work in breadth show commitment to an idea or mode of working? We are dedicated to working within this Venn diagram of overlapping concerns, trying to tease out the distinctions between them. This is not the easy way, but it is congruent with contemporary art practice and with promotion of the view that high school student artists are in fact *artists* and should be given as much autonomy in the structuring of their study of art as possible.

Final Thoughts and Comments

I can't stress enough the importance of good quality slides. The slides are not projected at the Reading; they are viewed with magnifiers on a light box. That means that if the slides look dark when projected, they will be very difficult to see on the light box. Readers cannot fairly evaluate what they cannot see. Using the light box also means that work that fills the whole frame of the slide and is appropriately exposed is slightly advantaged because it is easier to see. Neutral colored backgrounds (black, white, or medium gray) are a must. If students use brightly colored backgrounds, they make it very difficult for Readers to concentrate on their work. Advise students not to do it—it's distracting and looks tacky.

I recommend that students shoot slides over the course of the year rather than waiting until the portfolio deadline to shoot them all. If slides are shot early, then those that are too dark or out of focus can be re-taken. To evaluate the slides, students should look at them as the Readers do, with a magnifier over a light box. If the student can't see the work, we won't be able to either! The *AP Studio Art Teacher's Guide* has a complete description of effective slide-shooting procedures. Other helpful resources include:

- *Photographing Your Artwork*, 2nd edition, by Russell Hart; Buffalo, N.Y.: Amherst Media, 2000. (Available at amazon.com.)
- *Photographing Your Craftwork: A Hands-On Guide for Crafts People* by Steve Meltzer; Loveland, Col.: Interweave Press, 1993. (This edition, and an earlier one published by Madrona, are available at amazon.com.)

Various tricks to “fatten up” a portfolio seldom work (and are bad karma to boot). Inclusion of un-requested, unnecessary, or un-illuminating details merely annoys the Readers and wastes an opportunity to include other work to help “make the case.”

“Sharing” of work between students is prohibited and is often discovered. Readers have amazingly good visual memories, and we do make the effort to track down possible occurrences of this kind of cheating. Copying work or claiming someone else’s work as one’s own also falls into this category. It’s dishonest, and students should be admonished not to do it.

Two years ago, we instituted an “overlap check” to determine how well students were adhering to the rule prohibiting use of the same work in the concentration and breadth sections. We found an alarming amount of this kind of cheating. Violators received a letter notifying them of the discovery of the cheating, and Readers adjusted the scores on the breadth section accordingly.

Following the directions on the poster is vital to doing one’s best on the exam. For example, the 2-D Design breadth section required students to note on the slide mount the problem addressed in the work. Surprisingly few students actually did this, but those that did benefited from increased Reader understanding of their intentions. Students are asked to put slides in the proper place, right side up; avoid shiny coverings on actual work; use neutral colored mats, etc., and we really appreciate those that follow the guidelines. It makes it easier for Readers to accurately assess the strengths of the work.

The AP Studio Art Program offers the rare opportunity to see the dedication, creative talent, and passion for art that is apparent in the work of so many student artists and teachers. I am thankful to be a part of it.