Introduction

Slide comparisons are the mainstay of an art history exam. If you have been going to class, you already have a good idea of how they work, as your professor has used them in lectures. Why do we do this? Because while we can talk until we are blue in the face about what is new or different about a work of art, there is nothing like a well-chosen comparison to illustrate our point. We might show comparisons to highlight developments in handling the figure, composition, or color. We might simply want to show how the same subject, such as a portrait of musicians, can be handled very differently, depending upon whether we are looking at a Caravaggio or a Picasso. Comparisons highlight change, and this is what we want you to see. The two images might be from different time periods, or created in different geographical regions, or by different artists. Your task is to consider each work closely and critically, and identify the changes that the pair highlights. This will involve careful thinking and writing, and a combination of specific observations and broad statements.

In terms of length and structure, slide comparisons on exams vary. They might run anywhere from five to twelve minutes (or longer). Your professor might provide you with a leading question to help focus your essay. Otherwise, you are on your own. For the purposes of this book, let's take the more challenging route—let's say you must construct the comparison essay yourself, without a leading question.

Examples

As mentioned previously, your professor will not choose two random slides and ask you to compare them. He will show you a pair that illustrates an important point. To give you a sense of how this works, I have provided below a series of possible slide pairs from ancient to modern art with guidance on how to compare them. Review them carefully; not only will they give you a sense of how to approach this part of the exam, but these specific pairs are actually chosen very frequently by professors!

1. Khafre (fig. 1) vs. Augustus of Primaporta (fig. 2) (Egyptian vs. Roman art).

These works share some very basic similarities: both are freestanding sculptures and portraits of rulers. Both, also, communicate the power of the person represented. Note that each of the figures wears the attributes of rule: the Khafre with his customary headdress and kilt, and Augustus with his armor displaying scenes of military triumph.

The way the figures are conceived and posed, however, present dramatic differences. For example, Khafre sits erect and somewhat rigidly, with his entire body perfectly frontal in pose. He is as still and geometric as the chair in which he sits. Khafre seems removed from our world, and conveys a sense of divinity that is typical of ancient Egypt, in which rulers were worshipped as gods. Augustus of Primaporta, on the other hand, stands in the naturalistic contrapposto of the classical era. His bent left leg, slightly turned torso, and raised right arm create a sense of believable movement.

What is the point of the above comparison? First, to lead you to consider how they are similar: both are rulers, both deal with the theme of political power. Second, it is to lead you to see how two works of the same general subject can differ dramatically. It is your job to enumerate the ways in which they differ and what makes each typical of its period.

2. The sculpted tympanum by Gislibertus of the Last Judgement from the Church of Autun, Saint-Lazare (fig. 3) vs. the central tympanum, west facade, of the Royal Portal at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Chartres (fig. 4) (Romanesque vs. Gothic art).

At first glance, these two works seem quite similar. They are both examples of relief sculpture, and both decorate the portal of a church. Both belong to the medieval period. However, they illustrate an important development from Romanesque to Gothic art. At Autun, an enthroned Christ dominates the image: the space around him is filled with dramatic scenes from the Last Judgment—the resurrection of
the dead, the weighing of the souls, the saved going to heaven, the damned going to hell—all this is contained on the flat surfaces of the stone. Christ, like the other figures, is elongated, and his drapery, swirling in linear patterns around his long limbs, adds to the drama of the image.

By contrast, the Chartres portal is spare and calm. Here, too, Christ sits enthroned, but now he is carved in much higher relief, creating a real sense of volume of stone projecting out from the wall plane behind. The depiction of Christ has also changed; the elongated, expressionistic form at Autun has been replaced by a naturalistically proportioned figure. He is not surrounded by scenes from the Last Judgment but by the four symbolic beasts of the evangelists. Unlike at Autun, moreover, these surrounding forms are not packed together. Rather, empty spaces separate each of them, allowing for a much greater sense of readability.

The point of this comparison? First, for you to see that both are typical works of the Middle Ages: sculpted church portals depicting Christ. Second, for you to see a shift from Romanesque linearity and expressionism to the new Gothic sense of organization, clarity, and naturalism.

3. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Bathers (1887) (fig. 5) vs. Pablo Picasso Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (1907) (fig. 6) (Impressionism vs. modern art).

Both of these works depict a group of female nudes. In Renoir's painting, the three women represent ideal beauty. As they play and cavort by the riverbank, they seem designed to arouse the viewer: for example, the central woman rubs a towel along her back, a gesture that serves to frame and highlight her nudity. The figures are bathed in gentle colors and modeling, suggesting round bodies and soft, youthful skin. Renoir's style of representation, moreover, is naturalistic; the figures and the details of the setting are included and recorded with relatively precise detail. The pastel colors, soft modeling, and painterly style are typical of Impressionist art.

Although Picasso's work features the same subject matter, it has been interpreted in a very different way. The artist has transformed the figures from idealized nudes to angular, inelegant forms, defined not by soft modeling but by harsh outlines. In place of the smiling, playful Renoir bathers, Picasso presents us with grim-faced women who confront us with raised arms in a gesture of frank sexuality. In this way, the artist has abandoned the typical representation of the female nude as an object of male arousal and created instead an image that seems aggressive and almost primeval.

The point of this comparison? To show how differently the same subject matter can be handled. The pair illustrates the contrast between the idealized female beauty typical of the Impressionist era and the abstract and almost aggressive portrayal of females in the modern age.

Organizing the Comparison.

Now that you have a sense of the content of a good comparison, let's attack the problem of how to write it. It is crucial to have a system of organization. In the section below, I have outlined the sequence of steps to take.

Step 1: State the Obvious.

Notice how in each of the above comparisons, I have stressed the importance of stating the obvious ways in which the works are similar. Students often forget to do this. Why? Because they know that the person grading the exam already knows the obvious. And we do! But we still want you do begin with it. As a rule, pretend you are writing for someone who is intelligent but has no previous knowledge of art history. So for example, with the comparison of Autun and Chartres, start out by stating that both are medieval church portals, both are relief sculptures, and both depict Christ. Then, and only then, move on to the differences between them. So the first part of your essay should look like this:

Autun vs. Chartres Portals

I. Similarities:
   A. Both are medieval
   B. Both are church portals
   C. Both are relief sculptures
**Step 2: State the Nature of the Comparison.**

Now that you have established the basic similarities of the two works, you should consider the nature of their relationship. Was one produced earlier than the other? In another geographical area? Were both produced by the same artist but at different periods of his life? This statement is very important because it tells the professor you understand the point of the comparison. So the second part of your essay should look like this:

**Autun vs. Chartres Portals**

II. Nature of Comparison

A. Autun was produced in the Romanesque period (c. eleventh century)

B. Chartres was produced in the Gothic age (c. thirteen century)

C. The comparison shows the development of medieval sculpture

**Step 3: Enumerate the Differences.**

Next, enumerate the differences between the two works. This is the most complex task, because typically the two works will be distinguished by several elements. To manage the volume of information, organize your comparison into categories such as form and content. So the third section of your comparison should look like this:

**Autun vs. Chartres Portals**

III. Differences

A. Form

1. Organization
   a. Autun: cluttered
   b. Chartres: clear

2. Volume and space
   a. Autun: flat, linear
   b. Chartres: much more projecting of forms; more relief

3. Treatment of the figure
   a. Autun: elongated, angular
   b. Chartres: naturalistic

B. Content:

1. Autun shows the Last Judgment
2. Chartres features Christ and Four Evangelists

**Step 4: Create Your Macrostatement.**

You have now finished the hard part: differentiating between two works. Now you have only one final task to face: you must move beyond the immediate slide comparisons and turn to the macrostatements. First, what makes each work typical of its period? Start by making a macrostatement about form: for example, the flat, linear style of the portal at Autun is typical of the Romanesque. Use the word typical. It will show your professor that you understand more than just the works on the screen—you understand how they fit into a broader art movement.

Now that you have stated what is typical in terms of form, place the works in their broader historical context using macrostatements. For example, with its elaborate Last Judgment scene, the Autun portal was produced at the turn of the first millennium, a time of great anxiety about the coming of the end of the world. You could point out that the flat, elongated figures, with their nervous linearity, express this feeling in visual terms. The portal at Chartres, however, was produced in the thirteenth century, an era which witnessed the rise of intellectual inquiry in France, and particularly a new interest in the physical universe. The naturalism of the figures at Chartres may be viewed as a reflection of this movement. Notice how these statements show that you know more than just the works themselves you know how they relate to the world in which they were produced. So the fourth and final section of your essay should be organized like this:
**Autun vs. Chartres Portals**

IV. Generalizations on Form and Context

A. Autun
   1. Form: flat, linear style, long figures typical of Romanesque art
   2. Context: nervous quality of forms reflect anxiety about end of world

B. Chartres
   1. Form: sense of volume, spatial clarity, naturalistic figures typical of Gothic art
   2. Context: naturalism and clarity reflect new rise of learning in thirteenth century

**An Essay Checklist**

At this point, you may be asking yourself, "Will I be able to remember all this when I get into the exam?" This is certainly a valid concern. You can't expect to know everything about every slide. But the key to success in slide comparisons is not just having a lot of memorized knowledge; it is about having a systematic approach. If you use the system laid out here, you will not only be able to complete the comparison more thoroughly, but you will also be less likely to panic (always a deterrent to recalling information). Below is a checklist of questions to ask yourself. It is not likely you will be able to bring it into the exam, but try studying with it—the more you internalize it, the better you will structure your essays.

1. How are these two works similar?
   - Form
   - Content
   - Same artist
   - Same period
   - Same medium

2. Which was produced first?
   - left slide
   - right slide

3. How are they different?
   - Medium and materials
   - Form (here you want to go into detail)
   - composition
   - space and volume
   - figure
   - style
   - Content

4. What makes each one typical of its period?

5. How does each work reflect the world in which it was produced?

**Tips on Writing the Slide Comparison.**

Unlike slide identifications, comparisons require you not only to know facts, but to organize and communicate them clearly. This is not so easy during a timed exam. It is easy, however, to panic, and this is often evident in the kinds of student essays I have read. Below are twelve tips on performing well under pressure:

1. Identify both works before beginning. Write down the vital statistics of the works in left and right columns before beginning. Too often, in the rush to get started, students forget to do this. Although you might go on to identify the works in the body of the essay, your grader might not notice. It is easy to lose points this way, so make a point of remembering to identify the works at the beginning.
2. Draw an outline. The previous outline was presented for the purposes of showing you how to structure
your essay. However, time will not permit you to compose such a detailed outline on the exam itself. It will have to be much more schematic. However, even if it is just a few lines, make sure to sketch your outline on the exam. Not only will it help you to structure your essay, but if you don't manage to finish in time, your grader will be able to see where you were going and not mark you down as harshly.

3. Make description work for you. In the slide comparisons, you will spend some time describing each of the works. But remember, you have limited time; you can't describe each work in great detail. Instead, focus on describing the elements of each work that allow you to compare them. Let's say you are comparing Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (1907) and Fernand Leger's Three Women (1921). Both depict a group of nude women. Would you then focus on the black cat in Leger's painting that sits behind the group? (As intriguing as this beast might be, the answer is no).

4. Be specific. Always provide details. You must back up everything you say with specific observations and examples. If you are going to say that one work is abstract, you need to say why and how. If you think a figure appears "stiff," you need to make specific comments about body parts and posture. Being vague is a sure way to bring your grade down.

5. Write in complete sentences. Instead of writing an essay, students will sometimes list key words or phrases instead. Do not do this. Write out complete sentences with subjects, verbs, and objects.

6. Write in paragraphs. I am often faced with a comparison essay consisting of a single, disorganized paragraph. At this moment, I care little whether the ideas presented are good or not—I am already in a foul mood from the prospect of eyestrain. If you are confused about when to open a new paragraph, think in terms of key ideas. Are you switching from a discussion of one slide to another? From a discussion about the figure to one about space? Or from the exterior to the interior of a building? Any time you change the subject, change your paragraph! The body of the paragraph should contain observations and statements in support of the key idea.

7. Avoid "chicken scratch." Again, take pity on the person grading your exam. If it is your professor, he or she might be very ancient and suffer from severe eye problems—after reading thousands of books, journal articles, and, of course, exams like yours! Whoever your grader is, he or she will be annoyed by "chicken scratch," perhaps enough to mark you down for it. Don't take the chance. Write clearly!

8. Watch your language. Art-historical terms, when used correctly, will also earn you points. There are two special terms to use in comparisons: "anticipate" and "recall." Use "anticipate" when one work contains the seeds of the other, more recent work, as in the following sentence: "Suger's light-filled ambulatory at St.-Denis, a work of Early Gothic architecture, anticipates the High Gothic cathedrals of the thirteenth century." Use "recall" when a work refers back to an earlier tradition, as in "Manet's Olympia, with its reclining nude, recalls Titian's Venus of Urbino." These are wonderfully useful terms because they succinctly imply a relationship between the two works of art.

9. Refer to the works correctly. In the interest of saving time, many of my students will refer to works of art as "slide A" and "slide B" in the body of their essay, or "the one on the left" and "the one on the right." Professors generally prefer that you use an abbreviation for the work based on its title ("Totem III"), its artist ("the Titian"), or its location ("Bourges"—for Bourges Cathedral).

10. Write something, anything! Students often feel that if they don't have anything specific to say about the slides, they have blown the entire answer and leave it blank. Don't! Remember, slide comparisons are generally not graded as "right" or "wrong"—you will probably receive partial credit if you simply write something. And if you have been fairly conscientious, you will be surprised at how much can actually be said about a given work of art. Let's say you are faced with a comparison of two works that you can't remember. What should you do?

   A. Describe the two works, noting similarities and differences. This will at least show your professor that you can look carefully at images. And the more art-historical terms you use in your description (when appropriate), the more points you will receive.

   B. Don't focus on what you don't know—use what you do know. Perhaps your professor shows you a slide of an early Christian basilica (a longitudinal, aisled structure, usually with a curved
termination, or apse) and you can't remember its name or date. However, you were paying attention in lecture when the professor discussed why the basilica was chosen as the official architecture of the Christian church. Use this knowledge! Including this kind of information will earn you points even if you can't identify the works.

Questions about architecture are particularly daunting on exams, since architecture can appear on your exam in so many different ways. Let's say you are confronted with the ground plan of a Greek temple. You know the work, but you really can't think of anything to say about the plan in particular. You spent all your time studying the elevation and decoration of the building. Have you blown it? No! There is no reason why you can't incorporate what you do know into the essay, or why you can't discuss aspects of the work that are not represented in the slide on the screen. In fact, doing so will show that you know more about the object than simply the slide put in front of you. This kind of resourcefulness will impress your grader.

11. Practice, practice, practice! One of the most difficult aspects of the art history exam is that each section is timed. If you tend to panic under pressure, you can easily lose your nerve and end up blowing the exam. This is the "choking" syndrome common to professional athletes. As in sports, however, there is one virtually foolproof solution to this problem: practice. Don't just study for the exam—actually practice working through comparison essays with the clock running. Pick out a couple of slide comparisons. If you can't decide on them, go through your lecture notes and find one that your professor has already used. Then set your watch and start writing. It doesn't matter if these same comparisons are not on the actual exam—it is a question of acclimatizing yourself to the test-taking process. Getting a little anxious, and working through that anxiety to actually complete a slide comparison will double your confidence about taking the test. And who knows, you might just have chosen a comparison that is on the exam!

12. If you run out of time. During the exam, try to stay aware of the time. Even if there is a clock in the exam room, bring your own watch so you don't have to look up and break your concentration. But let's say that you are running out of time on a comparison. Make sure that you have identified the slides so that you can return to the essay later if you have time. Even better is to make a little sketch of the slides before they are taken off the screen. Also, be aware that in evaluating your incomplete essay, the grader will scan your booklet for clues to the direction in which you were headed. This is why drawing up a quick outline on the exam booklet is so important—and it will probably earn you a few extra points.
Illustrations

Fig. 1. Khafre, C. 2520-22494 B.C.
Diorite 5'6" high

Fig. 2. Augustus of Primaports, c. 20 B.C.
Marble, 6'8" high

Fig. 3. Gislibertus, Last Judgement, c. 1120-1135
Limestone, 21' wide

Fig. 4. Chartres Tympanum, c. 1145-1155
Limestone
Fig. 5. Renoir, Bathers, 1887, Oil on canvas, 3'11” x 5’8”

Fig. 6. Picasso, Demoiselles d’ Avignon, 1907, Oil on canvas, 8’ x 7’8”