

## ...Then the Themes

Once you've answered all the fact questions, go back and read the passage. Keep in mind the type of theme question you're going to need to answer. Are you going to need to know the main point of the passage? How about reasons which lead to the conclusion of the passage? You are still going to be looking for information, but, unfortunately, it won't be as easy as looking for simple facts.

Are you going to read the whole passage? Nope. Read only the first paragraph and the first sentence of each subsequent paragraph. Usually, the first sentence will clearly tell you about what is going to follow. If the paragraphs are long, read the last sentence as well. If you still don't get the main idea, then keep reading until you do. Last, read the entire final paragraph. Don't pay attention to details, names, and dates when theme reading—pay attention to ideas, arguments, and direction. Finding out the author's argument is critical to answering theme questions.

## Reading Zone 4.1

Read the following passage and then answer the questions that follow. You can check your answers on page 236.

The crucial years of the Depression, as they are brought into historical focus, increasingly emerge as the decisive decade for American art, if not for American culture in general. For it was during this decade that many of the conflicts which had blocked the progress of American art in the past came to a head and sometimes boiled over. Janus-faced, the thirties look backward, sometimes as far as the Renaissance; and at the same time forward, as far as the present and beyond. It was the moment when artists, like Thomas Hart Benton, who wished to turn back the clock to regain the virtues of simpler times came into direct conflict with others, like Stuart Davis and Frank Lloyd Wright, who were ready to come to terms with the Machine Age and to deal with its consequences.

America in the thirties was changing rapidly. In many areas, the past was giving way to the present, although not without a struggle. A predominantly rural and small town society was being replaced by the giant complexes of the big cities; power was becoming increasingly centralized in the federal government and in large corporations. As a result, traditional American types such as the independent farmer and the small business man were being replaced by the executive and the bureaucrat. Many Americans, deeply attached to the old way of life, felt disinherited. At the same time, as immigration decreased and the population became more homogeneous, the need arose in art and literature to commemorate the ethnic and regional differences that were fast disappearing. The incursions of government controls on the laissez-faire system, acting to erode the Calvinist ethic of hard work and personal sacrifice on which both the economy and public morality had rested, called forth a similar reaction. Thus, paradoxically, the conviction that art, at least, should serve some purpose or carry some message of moral uplift grew stronger as the Puritan ethos lost its contemporary reality. Often this elevating message was a sermon in favor of just those traditional American virtues which were now threatened with obsolescence in a changed social and political context.

In this new context, the appeal of the paintings by the Regionalists and the American Scene painters often lay in their ability to recreate an atmosphere that glorified the traditional American values—self-reliance tempered with good-neighborliness, independence modified by a sense of community, hard work rewarded by a sense of order and purpose. Given the actual temper of the times, these themes were strangely anachronistic, just as the rhetoric supporting political isolationism was equally inappropriate in an international situation soon to involve America in a second world war. Such themes gained popularity because they filled a genuine need for a comfortable collective fantasy of a God-fearing, white-picket-fence America, which in retrospect took on the nostalgic appeal of a lost Golden Age.

In this light, an autonomous art-for-art's sake was viewed as a foreign invader liable to subvert the native American desire for a purposeful art. Abstract art was assigned the role of the villainous alien; realism was to personify the genuine American means of expression. The argument drew favor in many camps: among the artists, because most were realists; among the politically oriented intellectuals, because abstract art was apolitical; and among museum officials, because they were surfeited with mediocre imitations of European modernism and were convinced that American art must develop its own distinct identity. To help along this road to self-definition, the museums were prepared to set up an artificial double standard, one for American art, and another for European art.

In 1934, Ralph Flint wrote in *Art News*, "We have today in our midst a greater array of what may be called second-, third-, and fourth-string artists than any other country. Our big annuals are marvelous outpourings of intelligence and skill; they have all the diversity and animation of a five-ring circus."

The most commanding attraction in this circus was surely that of the American Scene painters, a category that may be broadened to accommodate both the urban realists, like Reginald Marsh, Isabel Bishop, Alexander Brook, and the brothers Isaac, Moses and Raphael Soyer, and the Regionalists, like Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood. American Scene painting was, to a degree, a continuation of the tradition of Henri and the New York realists, which had by no means died out. Its stronghold was the Art Students League, where John Sloan was elected director in 1931, and Kenneth Hays Miller and Yasui Kuniyoshi, also former Henri students, perpetuated Henri's approach. Here, too, Thomas Hart Benton preached the gospel of Regionalism.

1. According to the passage, one painter from the “urban realist” school was
  - (A) Grant Wood
  - (B) Thomas Hart Benton
  - (C) Joan Sloan
  - (D) Isaac Soyler
  - (E) Isabel Bishop
  
2. According to the passage, in the 1930s, abstract art was seen as
  - (A) uniquely American
  - (B) uniquely European
  - (C) relevant to post-war traumaticism
  - (D) imitative of European modernism
  - (E) counter to American regionalism
  
3. American Scene painters were characterized by
  - (A) landscape painting
  - (B) abstract painting
  - (C) representing American values
  - (D) exploring an atmosphere of internationalism
  - (E) depicting religious sentiment
  
4. In 1931, the director of the Art Students League was
  - (A) Ralph Flint
  - (B) Kenneth Hayes Miller
  - (C) Thomas Hart Benton
  - (D) John Sloan
  - (E) John Steuart Curry

5. The “artificial double standard” mention in the passage refers to
- (A) the difference between standards of judgment for European art and American art
  - (B) the difference between standards of judgment for realism and abstract art
  - (C) the difference between museum officials and the common American perception
  - (D) the distinction between art’s movement toward Puritanism and America’s movement toward hedonism
  - (E) the difference between standards of judgment for politically oriented intellectuals and museum officials
6. According to the passage, one artist who advocated a return to earlier values was
- (A) John Steuart Curry
  - (B) Thomas Hart Benton
  - (C) John Calvin
  - (D) Raphael Soyer
  - (E) Ralph Flint
7. The best word to describe America in the 1930s would be
- (A) reactionary
  - (B) consistent
  - (C) dynamic
  - (D) stolid
  - (E) melancholic
8. According to the passage, one response to industrialization was
- (A) abstract art
  - (B) a conservative movement in art
  - (C) a movement toward mobile art
  - (D) an abandonment of art
  - (E) a removal from European influences

9. According to the passage, Stuart Davis was a representative of
- (A) regionalism responding in art
  - (B) dadaism as the future of art
  - (C) modernism as included in art
  - (D) futurism as expressed through art
  - (E) industrialization accepted by art
10. The best choice for title of the above passage would be
- (A) “The Thirties in Art: Reaction and Rebellion”
  - (B) “America in the Thirties: A Changing Time”
  - (C) “Thomas Hart Benton and Regionalism”
  - (D) “Art, Politics, and Growth in America”
  - (E) “The Art Students League: A History”

## Reflection

For any question you got wrong, go back and leave notes next to each answer choice indicating why it is correct or incorrect. It's important that you not only practice, but also reflect on your performance! This way, you'll see what issues give you trouble and gain a better understanding of how to improve.