Images of the Past
Across Cultures and Time

Introductory Paper Proposal:

What did the past “look like”—before there were movies, photographs, maybe even before painting? How did what people thought looked “normal” vary between civilizations and over centuries?

Your research project this spring semester is to choose “images” or visual ideas to insert into your paper, and then, using your own words, to describe, explain, and compare and contrast each image with parallel images from other times and places. So you are doing two things in this project: First, you are searching out images (possibly photographs, but more likely paintings, drawings, etc.), since the focus of your images should range from the time of early civilizations up to about 1600 CE or so. Obviously, some of these images (paintings or drawings) might come from the 19th or 20th centuries, but they should reflect what life probably looked like before about 1600 CE. Second, you write to describe (analyze) what each image says to you: what it means, and what it shows us as a subject, ideal, or style, etc.—and how each image relates to the others you have chosen.

The first thing to do is to think about what sort of “image” or visual idea you want to look at across different cultures and ages. For example, how did your image or visual idea appear in Europe of the Middle Ages, vs. in ancient China, Japan or Korea (or elsewhere in Asia), vs. in ancient Meso-America? Or perhaps you’ll want to consider a depiction of something from ancient Egypt, Greece, Mesopotamia, or Africa. For this project you will need to find at least three (3) different cultures to compare and contrast your image or visual idea.

For the next few days, we will use any good online source—on your computer—to explore what did “x” look like in these three or more different cultures and/or eras. What could “x” be? Here are just a few suggestions—maybe you will think of something even better!

- What did “monarchy” (or a real “king” or “queen”) look like across cultures and times?
- A peasant?
- A warrior?
- A dancer?
- A student, teacher, or scholar?
- A weapon?
- A religious leader (priest, monk, rabbi, imam, etc.), or religious follower, saint, or pilgrim?
- A writing or written manuscript?
- Some mathematical formula or equation?
Suggestions, continued:

- A musical instrument?
- A musician, actor, entertainer?
- An athlete?
- A sports arena?
- A political assembly (in Greece, Rome, medieval England, for example)?
- Places of worship or styles of worship? Temples?
- The dress of certain kinds of women or men?
- Money?
- Images of wealth, or of poverty?
- Images of God or gods?
- Images or examples of laws / law codes?
- Images of people “in power”?
- Images of people not “in power”?
- Ships?
- Army formations / troops / battle?
- Fortresses / towers / defensive structures?
- Disease or plague?
- “Beauty” or “ugliness”?
- The human figure, or face?
- Jewelry?
- How to keep time?
- Footwear?
- Ideas/images about the earth / space / stars / time?

- Can you think of a better image to compare across times and cultures??

As you find images, definitely you will need to save these images to your hard drive so you can use them in your paper. Be sure to record the URL to note where you found this image, and the date and time you found this image. You’ll need this information for your paper, and you might need to go back to the image to copy it into the platform we will use for this project. Before long, we’ll talk about this platform for your paper. In the meantime, decide on your image or visual idea and start looking for images that you can compare and contrast.