

Essay on Representations and Images

The assignment: Write a 3- to 4-page essay using depictions of the ancient Roman world to take a position on the representations of ancient cultural ideas and beliefs, following one of the following two options.

OPTION 1: Two pieces in a museum

How a culture sees abstract ideas (masculinity, virtue, old age, divinity, and so on) is often reflected in its artwork. What can two different works of art depicting the same idea, but from different times or places, tell us about how the cultures that produced them?

For this option, you need to choose two works of art from the Roman world that (a) represent the same idea or concept but (b) come either from different periods or from different places in the Roman world.

In your essay, compare three things that these works have in common, using those comparisons to make an argument about what these two artists believed in and the insights this gives us into the times and places they came from.

Choosing your subjects

- Your two works of art must represent the same idea or concept. For example, you can choose two little girls, two warriors, two fertility goddesses, etc. The idea is to look for how similarities and differences in representations of the same idea tell us about the cultural beliefs and expectations that shaped the artists and their own culturally-conditioned visions of that idea.
- Your works of art must be from two different places or two different periods in the Roman world (before 500 CE). This allows you to talk about two separate societies and how they represent the same concepts differently. The two pieces can be in any visual medium: sculpture, painting, relief, etc..
- Ideally, you should experience the artwork face-to-face by attending a museum in person. Possible venues include: Metropolitan Museum's Greek and Roman Art Collection; and Fordham Museum of Greek, Etruscan and Roman Art. You are, of course, not limited to these venues, and you are not limited to New York.

Writing your paper

- **Choose three aspects** of the works you can discuss for both pieces that seem to reflect how the artist felt about the subject and what the subject stood for.
 - Some possibilities include facial expression, dress, use of technique or medium, stiffness/fluidity, apparent strength/weakness, idealism/realism, or any other elements offering some kind of insight into what the artist was trying to convey. Describe and discuss your subjective impressions of these three aspects in the two works.
 - For each aspect, compare how it manifests in the first piece; then talk about how the second piece is similar or different and in what way; and finally talk about what these similarities or differences tell us about what each artist believed about their subject and what that might tell us about the cultural beliefs they came from in relation to the subject being depicted.
 - For example: say the works you've chosen are two sculptures depicting a goddess of love from different cultures, and one has a crafty expression while the other has an innocent expression. The different facial expressions can be used to talk about how each artist, and the cultures they came from, might have thought about things like the gods' attitudes toward creating relationships between mortals; the nature of love; motivations of the gods, etc.
- **Make an argument** about how consistently the same core idea was seen in the two times or places that produced these two works. If art is an expression of cultural values, what do the differences between these works tell you about the respective cultures they come from? What do their similarities tell you about what these cultures have in common?
- On a separate "Works Discussed" page after your essay: List the title of each work, the artist, the approximate date it was created, the city or region it came from originally, and the name of the museum gallery where the work can be found. Paste in photographs of the items. If it's permitted at the museum, take a picture of the items while you're there. If it's not, find pictures of those specific items on the museum's web site.

OPTION 2: *The ancient world on film*

Every depiction of an historical event, whether in prose, poetry, painting, theater, or film, involves an artist using history to convey his or her own beliefs. What do the creators of the film and the authors of the source material it was based on want you to believe?

For this option, you need to choose a film that is set in the Roman world and that is based on an ancient primary source. In your essay, compare the agenda of the filmmakers with the agenda of the authors of the primary source. Describe and discuss the similarities and differences in how these creators reshaped this event for their own purposes. Use these similarities and differences to make an argument about the ways in which this particular event is leveraged to impose ideas on audiences and about what this event means to the people who create art about it.

Choosing your subjects

- First, choose and watch any feature-length film set in the Roman world (before 500 CE). You can also choose two episodes of a television series set in the ancient world.
- Then find the ancient primary source material it was based on and read it. For example, if you chose the movie *Gladiator*, which is set the reign of Commodus, the primary source you'd need would be the main ancient accounts of the life and times of Commodus..
- There is a list of suggested films and associated primary sources on the website, on the Images Essay page. Online English translations of ancient texts can be found on the Ancient Texts page on my website (linked to from the Resources page).

Writing your paper

- Choose three moments or depictions from the film and find the corresponding events or depictions in the primary source.
 - For each moment or depiction, describe and discuss how it appears in the film and how it is presented similarly or differently in the primary source material.
 - For example:
 - In the movie *300*, Xerxes and the Persians are depicted in a very distinctive and heavy-handed manner. If this is one of your three topics, could describe and discuss what tropes and visual and dialog cues the filmmakers were using to suggest how we should think of the Persians in the film, and why the filmmakers might have chosen to represent the Persians this way as part of their overall point about these events.
 - Meanwhile, Herodotos's presentation of the Persians is very different, which you can use to discuss what Herodotos wanted us to think about the Persians and the role he saw them as playing in this war.
 - After that, you could discuss how and why the two depictions are different and what this means for their two different perspectives on differences between Greeks and Persians.
- Use these similarities or differences to make an argument about (a) the agenda of the primary source author and how it compares to the agenda of the filmmakers, and (b) the ways this historical event is used by others to present their own ideas, and what this tells us about the shape and meaning of this event's impact and legacy on history.
 - **Please take note:** This essay is about the agenda of the primary source author as much as the filmmakers'. Do not use the source to "fact check" the film and list what it got "wrong". You must consider the primary source to be at least as skewed, manipulative, and agenda-driven as the film.
- On a separate "Works Discussed" page after your essay, list the title of film, year, director, stars and studio. Then list the book or books you drew your written evidence from, using standard citation style. The references to the primary source must also be properly cited in the text as usual.