Did You Know? You’d be surprised to learn how many things come from the ancient Near East. Cities and writing—to name just a couple—were first invented there more than 5,000 years ago!

Are you ready for a message from thousands of years ago and halfway across the globe from New York City?

We’re off to the ancient Near East!
If the Hat Fits...

Start in the Raymond and Beverly Sackler Gallery for Assyrian Art. This room is similar to one in the royal palace at Nimrud (in modern-day Iraq), built 3,000 years ago by the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal [a-shur-NAH-seer-pahl] II.

In the ancient Near East there were no newspapers, televisions, or Internet, but rulers still got their messages across as clearly as they do today. Let’s explore this room to learn how the king gave all who entered important messages about his power, achievements, and beliefs.

Take a moment to look around this grand space. What you see on the walls are reliefs (raised images carved from stone) from the king’s palace.

Can you find the figure shown in the picture above?

You might notice that his face looks the same as those of the other figures. But, to the ancient people who visited this palace, it would have been clear who he was because of the hat he wears. Look closely at his hat. He is the only one wearing one like this, which means he is King Ashurnasirpal himself. What other clues might show that he is a king? Look at his muscles, the jewelry he wears, and the dagger, sword, and bow he carries. What do all these clues tell us about how he wants to be seen?

What a Relief!

These walls tell a story. If you lived in the ancient Near East, who the characters were (the king, his attendants, and winged figures) and what they were doing (performing a ceremony for the gods) just as if you were reading about them in a book.

Did you notice that there are also lines of writing running through the middle of the picture? This type of writing is called cuneiform. Unlike in a comic book or a label, the writing doesn’t explain what the figures are doing, but it does give us other information about the king—how he built his palace and what a powerful leader he was.

It’s a Zoo in Here!

Just as they are to us today, animals were very important in the ancient Near East and are often found in their art. Frequently animals were used to communicate certain messages. For example, a lion might bring to mind strength, fierceness, and majesty.

Can you find the lions in this relief? (Hint: look closely at the decorations on the weapons.)

Now can you find the figures that seem to be a combination of human and animal? Of all the supernatural beings in this room, probably the most noticeable are the two creatures on either side of the doorway (they’re on the cover of this guide, too). These were the guardians of the palace, meant to protect it from evil and impress visitors. Their features tell you something about their great supernatural and physical powers.

Think of some of the superheroes you know. Which superheroes have wings or other features borrowed from animals?
We might think our modern lives are so unlike the lives of the people who lived in the ancient Near East. Can we really understand what they were trying to tell us through the objects they created? Perhaps our lives aren’t so different after all.

Let’s head to the Ancient Near Eastern art galleries and, with a little help from this guide, figure out what the images tell us.

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Activity

Build Your Own Superhero

What animal(s) would you choose to create your own superhero or a supernatural guardian for your home? Draw it here:

Map on the back!

Did You Know?

Cuneiform, the writing system of the ancient Near East, included over 600 different signs! This one means “palace.”

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Above and right: Relief of King Ashurnasirpal II (detail), Neo-Assyrian period, reign of Ashurnasirpal II, 883–859 B.C.; Mesopotamia, excavated at Kalhu (modern Nimrud); gypsum alabaster; H. 92 1/4 in.; Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1932 (32.143.4,6)
Activity

5 A-Hunting We Will Go

The king invites you to join him in one of his favorite activities: A royal hunt! In the galleries on either side of this palace room, you will find many different animals shown in the works of art. Which of these can you find?

____ Bull  ____ Deer  ____ Ibex
____ Cow  ____ Boar  ____ Goat
____ Lion  ____ Horse  ____ Ram

Did you find any other animals on your hunt? List them here:

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

Time for one more idea...

It's possible you spent about an hour in these galleries. Thanks to the people of the ancient Near East, who were the first to use the number sixty to measure time, our hour has sixty minutes and our minute has sixty seconds! Tick, tick, tick.