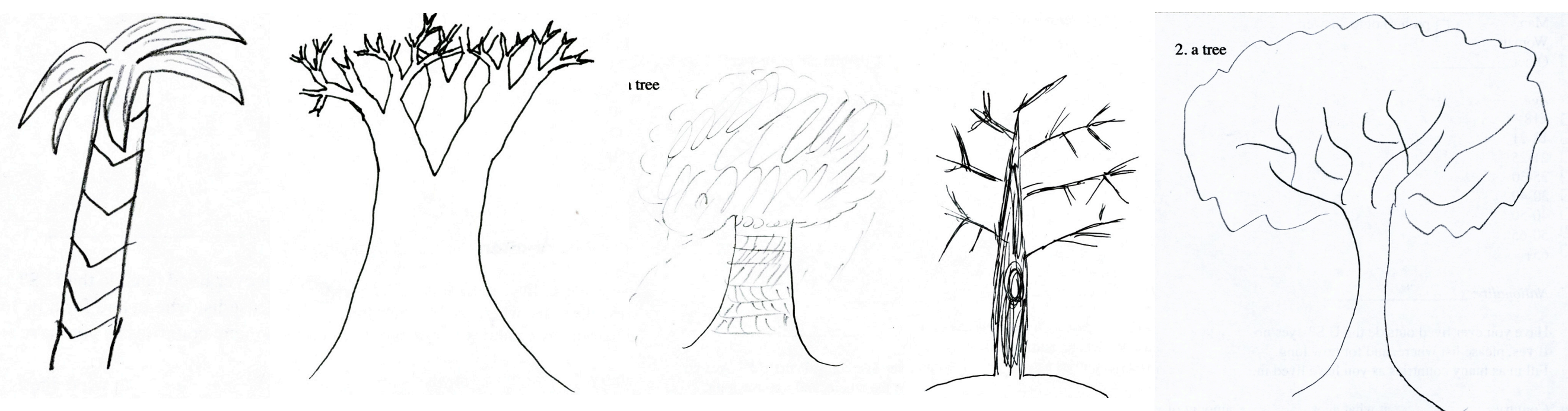




# Draw a Tree: A Study Examining Visual Assumptions



## Research Questions:

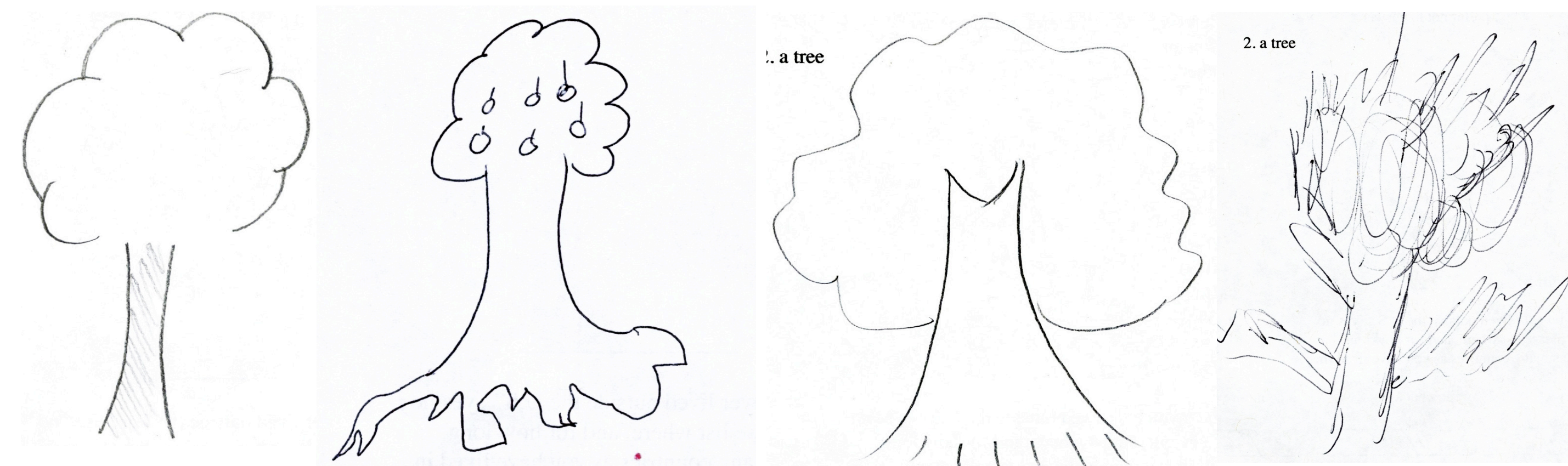
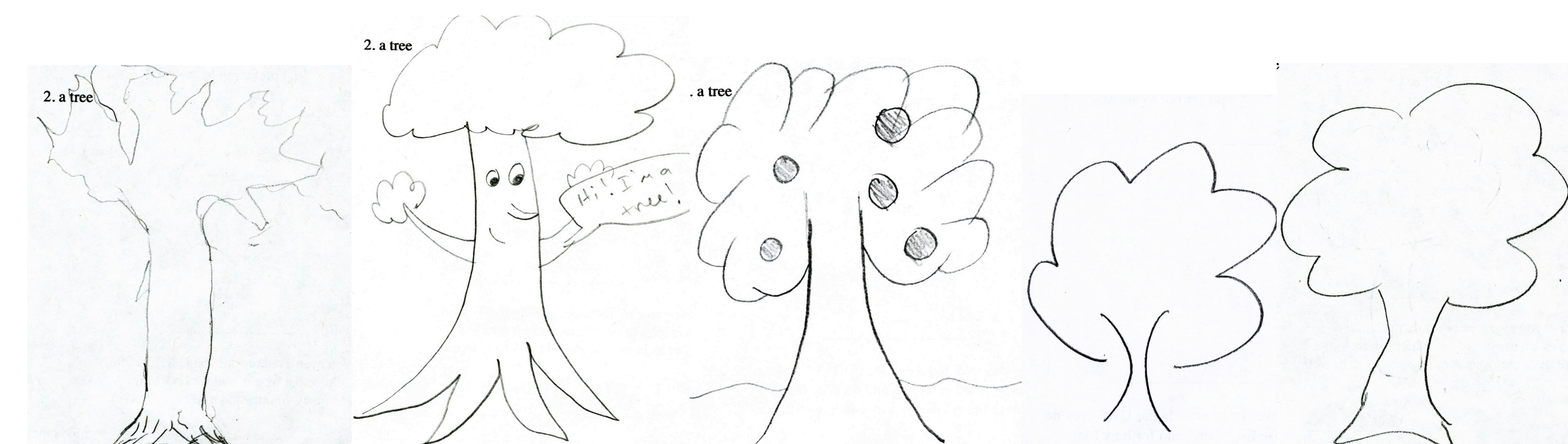
1. Will people draw trees differently based on where they lived as a child?
2. Will the specific type of tree correlate with the natural environment of a place where they once lived?
3. Would their drawings of other objects – a clock, a loaf of bread, and a bridge – indicate having lived in a specific area of the world?

**Why?** While studying abroad, it came to my attention that I drew nature themed items differently than my peers. For instance, in a geography course I drew triangular mountains with snow caps while everyone else drew rounded, green mountains. It made me wonder: do environment and surrounding culture affect our visual concepts?

## Literature Review

Other researchers and critics have noted differences in visual treatments of environmental features across locations. Art critic John Berger (1980) noticed that landscape paintings by Chinese Hu county peasants rarely included a sky or horizon. Berger attributed this as corresponding with “the experience of peasants working the land” (p.82) versus traditional Chinese landscape paintings.

In 1991 Martin Krampen collected drawings of buildings from Turkish and German school children. The participants were asked to draw six types of buildings. Rural children drew apartments and offices differently than urban children, a factor Krampen attributed to the differences in architectural environments. These, and other research studies promote the idea that it may be possible to find correlative factors between where people live and how they draw elements from nature.



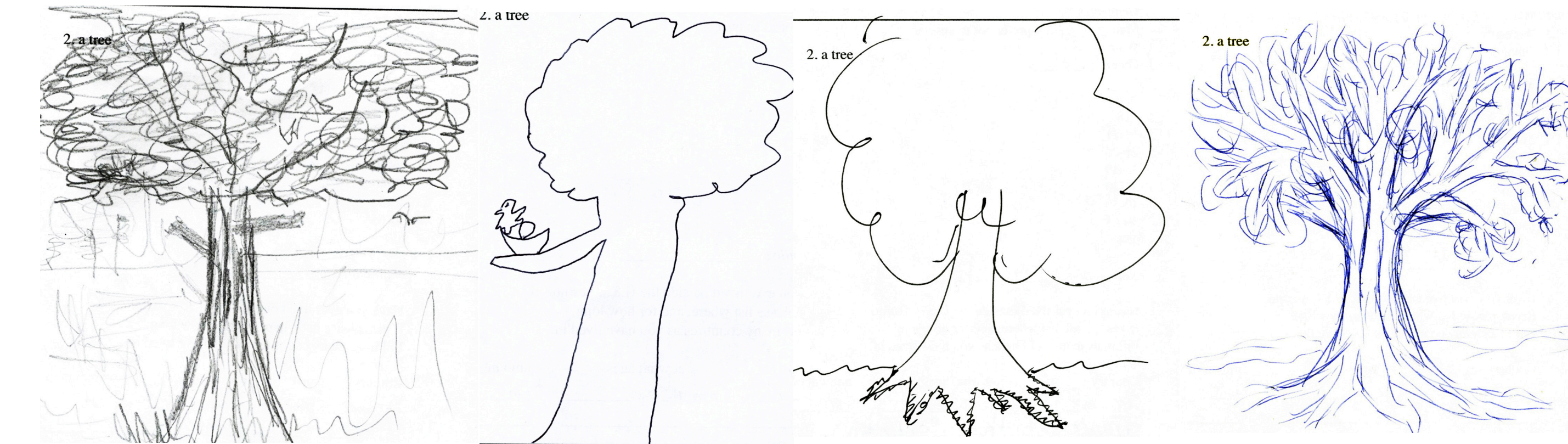
## Why trees?

Humans have a historic relationship with trees. Everything from the Biblical tree of knowledge to our use of trees as a natural resource raises gives them a level of importance. Furthermore, Darius Kalvaitis and Rebecca M. Monhardt studied children’s relationships with nature in *The Architecture of Children’s Relationships with Nature*, and found that trees surfaced as a common element in a “demonstrated association of trees with nature (216).” Trees make strong representatives for nature, and often serve as subjects of visual art. Another reason for collecting drawings of trees is that while not everyone may have experienced a plant such as an iris, everyone has experienced a tree.

## The Process

I collected drawing surveys from 50 participants. Besides a variety of U.S. states, there were participants who had lived for long periods of time in Australia, Bulgaria, China, Denmark, Egypt, England, Ethiopia, France, Guyana, Iceland, India, Mexico, Moldova, Scotland, Sweden, and Vietnam.

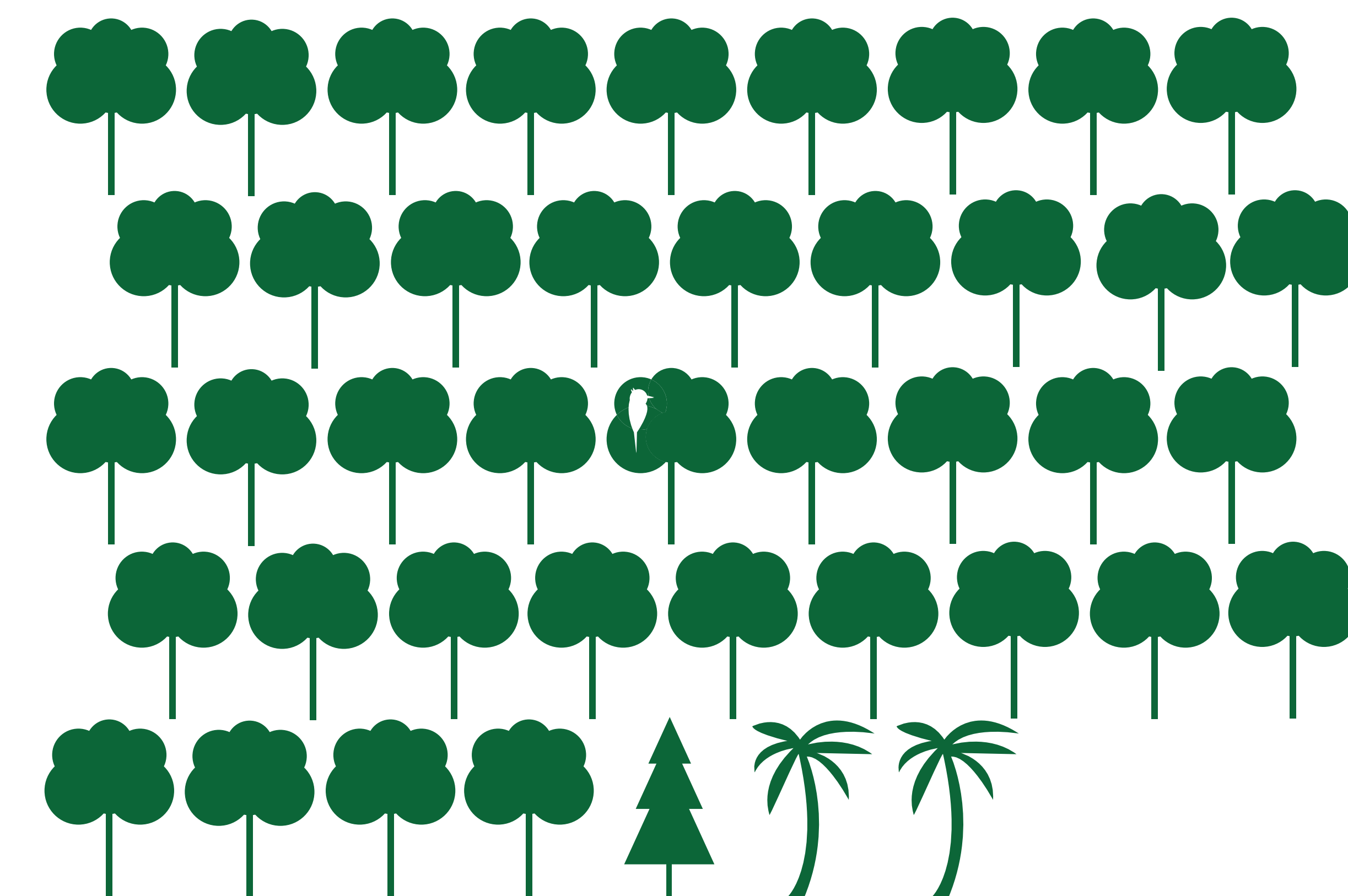
Each survey had the participant quickly complete 4 drawings (a bridge, a tree, a clock, and a loaf of bread), and then fill out information about where they had lived prior to Minnesota and for what amount of time.



## The Results

45 participants drew deciduous trees of varying degrees of complexity, 2 participants from California drew palm trees, an individual from the U.S. Midwest drew a pine tree, and two surveys did not include tree drawings.

Interestingly, in the bread drawings there arose two categories: sliced bread drawings, and baguette drawings. All of the participants who spent long periods in Europe drew baguettes. The other participants from other locations drew mixed amounts of baguettes and sliced bread.



## In the end...

There were no conclusive results concerning my research questions. The sample size of participants from a specific location was too small to support any credible correlations. In future investigations it would be prudent to narrow the focus to compare drawing from individuals who had lived in two or three very specific environments.

However, as the unexpected correlation between baguettes and European drawings demonstrates, it would be worthwhile to see if more visual expectations exist in certain locations or cultures. In the current global society, inter-cultural visual communication could be improved if with better understanding of what other cultures expected to see in reference to visuals.