

Soil in Western paintings

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It is widely accepted that humans have always considered the natural environment a subject of great interest to art. This includes cave paintings from about 30-40,000 years ago, with representations of animals. Since early antiquity, there are beautiful pictorial examples of landscapes, plants, rocks, etc., but what about an artistic vision of soil? Could a soil scientist visiting paintings at a museum recognize a soil profile on ancient paintings? Was soil a central subject for artworks in past centuries?

One can answer the 2nd question in the negative until the 19th century.

When soil was depicted by chance in the landscape it is as a line or a surface, not a volume. In some upper-Palaeolithic cave paintings, soil is represented by a line. The same goes for the Assyrian civilization (11th to 7th BC), which depicts natural scenes in which the soil surface is represented by schematic rocks and hillocks, drawn as shaped curves. In wall paintings of the Roman civilization, soil is clearly represented and in a realistic style as a surface that would never be seen during the Middle Ages until the Early Renaissance, even if rocks were clearly represented.

It is in some Renaissance paintings (by Bosch, Memling, Van der Weyden, Giorgione, Brueghel...) that the eyes of the pedologist can sometimes discern a kind of soil profile with different colors from the surface to deep horizons and/or with large roots in the soil profile. Description and reasons of these soil profiles' presence were detailed in some of Feller's publications. Three reasons cited were: to explain the resurrection of the dead (the dead was depicted like a pedologist coming out of the pit), to show a root from a magic plant – the mandragora –, or to show ploughing. Ploughing, showing realistic soil (e.g. Rosa Bonheur, 1849), was in fashion in the 19th century with rural art, but it was until the 20th century for artists to be inspired by the soil itself for the creation of their artworks.

Among the forerunners of Soil Art (a phrase created by G. Wessolek) in paintings, one can mention the American ruralist artist Grant Wood and his *Arbor day* (1932) with a kind of catena depicted in a cultivated landscape and the French artist Jean Dubuffet with his paintings series of *Texturologies* and *Matériologies* (1950-60) made with earth from his garden. After 1950, many artists used soil and represented it in paintings, such as the French artist Paul Rebeyrolles with his *Grands Paysages* (1978) and the famous German artist Anselm Kieffer and his *Aperiatur Terra et Germinet Salvatore* (2005-2006).

Since the end of the 20th century, besides paintings, artists have also used other forms of expression such as installations, performances, sculpture, videos, etc. Among them, the author of this article has a passion for soil installations by the Japanese artist Kôichi Kurita (<http://soillog2.exblog.jp/>), whose philosophy is to show that soil is not dirt but beautiful. The artist has worked with soil from all around the world for more than 20 years. For each exhibition, he collects soils from a specific region, works with soil samples as a soil scientist (he is not) and he has installed hundreds of multicolored soil samples in sacred buildings such as abbeys, cathedrals, temples etc. Visitors say “Are these our soils? How beautiful!”