

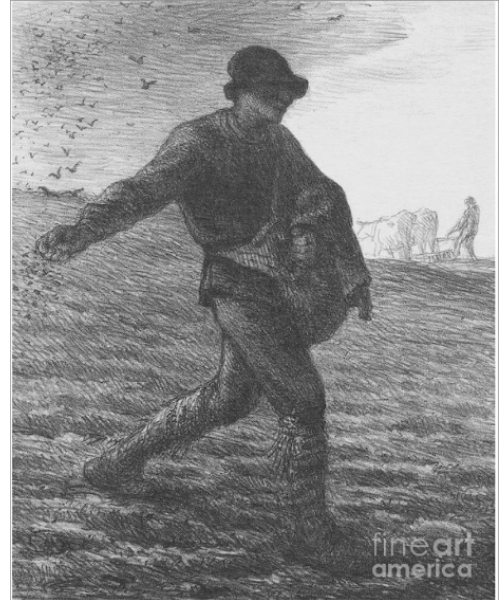
Un•earth

Sandra Menefee Taylor brings two of the most iconic figures of nineteenth-century European art into conversation with her ongoing contemplation of land, asking us to consider the value and assumptions we put on soil and food production in the Anthropocene Era (defined by Oxford as “the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment”).

In the early nineteenth century, Jean François Millet and other painters challenged established conventions of fine art by portraying peasants at labor, on the land. At times, their compositions transgressed even farther by elevating these mundane subjects *above* the horizon line, **where their humanity was profiled against the sky.**

Simply put, using high-culture art to portray manual labor and poverty was a *problem*, in the eyes of art and political establishments both.

Speculation about Millet’s intention continues within the Art academy. But if we dismiss it as a purely academic discussion, we do so at our own peril, because some of the conditions criticized and defended at the time persist in today’s society, particularly concerning the stewardship and exploitation of land and those who work on the land.



Is **The Gleaners** merely sentimental, or was it a protest against class structures that consigned many to lifelong poverty?

The peasants’ peaceable option for improving their lives was to migrate to the cities and hope to join the urban bourgeoisie, which took them away from their intimate relationship with soil and the production of food. **This is where most of us find ourselves today.**

The other option for escaping the rural poverty, of course, was revolution. That’s what had the establishment so bothered. And the revolution came, though not the one they feared.

The Anthropocene Era is said to begin with the Industrial Revolution, not long after Millet painted these images. This revolution didn’t abolish the social order; it was actually driven by wealth and capitalist enterprise. Machines took over and sped up production, and the people who left the land seeking a better life became machine operators. **This is what large-scale farming is today.**

The work of farming by hand, on foot, at walking speed was exhausting and yielded a meager subsistence for most. It’s risky to romanticize the past, an unhelpful distraction from the real and pressing problems of today.

We can't dismiss the benefits of mechanization but sheer productivity *cannot* be the only measurement. Today our food systems—worldwide—may be more vulnerable than ever: seed and fertilizer production, as well as the processing and distribution of food, are in the control of a handful of multinational corporations. Meanwhile, farmer suicides are on the rise worldwide, and last night's news reported a survey in which 87% of Minnesota farmers said they are anxious about their economic wellbeing.

The measure that has been traded away by mechanization and the gigantism of modern agriculture is the health of the soil. Poet-farmer Wendell Berry writes eloquently about the loss of "eyes to acres." He reminds us: "Soil is the one thing we have in common," and points out that no one will protect something they don't care for, and they can't care for something they don't know.

Ninety-five percent of everything we eat originates in the soil.

How is it that, as a society, we barely think about how and where the food on our table was produced? Why, then, has DIRT come to represent the negative scale of countless value judgments? Filthy/clean, humble/proud, denigrate/glorify. The disregard of soil is even embedded in our language.

And yet, in many of the world's end-of-life rituals, we repeat that we are all of the earth, and to earth we will return—dust to dust.

Thus, dirt and lace, and a question: how do you value each?

Earth/soil/dirt rises to become food, through labor. Inside healthy soil is a microscopic world called the rhizosphere, where a dark but vital process takes place. Soil scientist Dr. Rattan Lal describes it as "**the only place with the divine power to transform death into life.**"

Claire Simonson
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