Soil’s Social and Cultural Connections
Melanie Szulczewski

No one can deny that soil’s most significant role to humankind stems from its numerous ecosystem services, including its ability to produce food, breakdown organic matter, and sustain the entire food web. Societies have long recognized how crucial soil is to survival, from birth, through life, and even in death. Society has expressed this recognition for thousands of years through religion, writing, and art, while making use of many of soil’s properties for social and cultural services. The International Year of Soils will end by celebrating the theme of “Soils, Culture, and People” in December 2015. This essay briefly introduces some of soil’s social and cultural connections.

Soils Significance to Religion
Religion has been used for thousands of years as a way for humans to understand the world. Most religions lay out a belief system to explain natural cycles and phenomenon and to provide a moral guide. The importance of agriculture and fertile soil is evident starting with ancient religions. Even thousands of years ago, the Egyptians understood they owed their success to their fertile fields near the Nile River. Many of their gods held connections to the Nile. The prominent Egyptian god, Osiris, was king of the underworld. Because of this connection with the afterlife, he came to represent hope for life after death, and thus eventually new life in spring and fertility. As their god of agriculture, he represented the new fertility from the Nile River that came each year. The Nile River and its surrounding fertile soils played as strong a role in the religion of the Egyptian people as it did in their daily lives. Several other gods also held connections to the Nile.

Both ancient Greece and Rome also followed a goddess of agriculture, fertility, and the harvest. Demeter, the Greek goddess, would gift her people with a bountiful harvest if they cultivated their soil in a sustainable way. The Roman version was Ceres, who had many lesser “helper gods” who assisted with each stage of the agricultural process, from plowing to harvest.

Many Native American tribes also depended on the cycles of nature for their harvests, and this was reflected in various spirits designated to agricultural aspects of life. Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, also believe that humans and nature are closely connected, and that humans must respect the bounty of the earth. A central tenet of Hindus is that since the world is a divine creation, all parts should be honored, from insects to animals to the environment itself.

This belief takes a slightly different form in the dominant monotheistic religions of the world: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All three believe that God is an almighty but merciful being who created the earth and all that it contains, choosing humans to reign on earth. Inter-
All three religions tell the story that humans came from the soil. The book of Genesis in the Christian faith relates that Adam, the first man, was formed by God from the dust of the earth, the Jewish Talmud says he was formed from mud, and the Islam Quran details his formation from various clays (“He created the man of clay like the potters”). All three religions often use the soil or farming as a subject. Many passages from Isaiah include advice and even praise about working the land, such as “My beloved had a vineyard on a fruitful hill. He broke the ground, cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines” (Isaiah 5:1-6) and “Does he who plows plow all the time, breaking up and furrowing his land?” (Isaiah 28:24).

Hundreds of references to fertile fields, farm labor, and vineyards appear in the New Testament of the Christian holy book, the Bible. Jesus often spoke through metaphors and parables, and he used subjects such as farming and vineyards that people of that time would most appreciate. For Muslims, the Quran also provides many parables and words of advice connected to the productivity of the soil. One passage relates the greatness of Allah through his abundance but moralizes against waste: “It is He who produceth a garden, with trel- lises and without, and dates, and tilth with produce of all kinds, and olives and pomegranates, similar (in kind) and different (in variety): eat of their fruit in their season, but render the dutes that are proper on the day that the harvest is gathered. But waste not by excess: for Allah loveth not the wasters” (Quran, 6:141).

Soils Significance to Literature

Religious texts are some of society’s first writings, but human creativity expresses itself through poetry and prose as well. Soil, or the land, serves as a metaphor for productivity and growth throughout modern literature.

The soil itself may not often be the subject of a poem, but a few examples praising the importance of fertile, organic-rich soil do exist. Walt Whitman (1819–1892) wrote prolifically about nature, including a poem entitled, “This Compost.” At one point, he exclaims, “Behold this compost! Behold it well!” The American poet, Andrew Hudgins (born 1951), also praises soil in “Compost: An Ode.” His verse eloquently describes “everything that rots,” which “gives up what it once was to become pure dirt.” The wonders of soil have inspired many scientists to write poetry on the subject, including Isaac Newton, Benjamin Franklin, and Charles Darwin.

More typically, soil finds itself in a poem as a symbol or metaphor, sometime for life and sometimes for death, as the ultimate resting place. The American writer and social activist, Langston Hughes (1902–1967), perceived the imagery of soil as a symbol of renewed freedom, not just for black people but for all citizens. In his poem, “Daybreak in Alabama,” Hughes declares what wonderful things he will put in music some day, including “the smell of red clay after rain” and “And red clay earth hands in it.” There have been countless poems and songs using the earth, soil, or land as metaphors for numerous themes.

Soils Significance to Art

Soil and its gifts are used both literally and symbolically by artists and artisans as well. Soil is the source for clays, and the most significant and universal artistic and utilitarian use of clay is for ceramics and pottery. Artists and craftsmen have created everything from bricks to tiles to dishes to ornamental figurines and sculptures from clay. When artists aren’t using soil resources as their medium, they often use the soil and its encompassing landscape as a subject in paintings.

Before the 17th century, the subject of most paintings were connected to religion, history, or war. At this time, a new wealthy and powerful Dutch Republic entered what is called the Dutch Golden Age. Artists began to create scenes of everyday life, often called genre painting. Although many of the subjects were indoors, some artists began highlighting the role of farmers and other rural peasants as well as the countryside itself. One of the most well-known rural landscape Dutch painters is Aelbert Cuyp (1620–1691). Many of his paintings, such as Landscape with Cows and Herdsmen with Cows, used yellow ochre, a product of the soil itself, to illuminate the land and soil.
at the end of his life. These paintings connect nature, beauty, the productivity of the soil, and the viewer’s emotions about the cycle of seasons.

British landscape paintings at this time included idyllic farms and laboring peasants instead of just vegetation. John Constable (1776–1837) may be the most famous British landscape artist, producing many works of the Suffolk region. As the son of a successful land and mill owner, he wanted these occupations and the local countryside to illicit the same emotional response as past socially elevated subjects. Numerous paintings depict detailed renderings of the cultivation of crops and flowers. His deeper knowledge of agricultural practices shines through in paintings such as *The Ploughing Scene in Suffolk* (1814), which shows a plowed field, left fallow for one summer before receiving manure in the fall, a two-year crop rotation system typical of the region.

Americans today are still justifiably proud of their fertile soil. Rural life and farming continue to inspire artists of all types. In fact, there is an “Art about Agriculture” movement in many areas, such as an annual art competition and collection hosted by Oregon State University or an annual exhibit in Ventura, CA. A Land Art Movement in the 1960s connected the land directly to the art with soils, rocks, sticks, and other natural materials in the works of art. American artist Robert Smithson (1938–1973) called the method of manipulating the land, usually with heavy machinery, earthworks. His most famous piece is *Spiral Jetty*, built into Great Salt Lake in Utah in 1970. This 1,500-ft-long twisting jetty is made of mud, salt, and rocks and can still be seen today when the water level recedes.

Contemporary society faces many daunting challenges, many tied to the health and productivity of our soils. Soil has been important to society for numerous reasons for thousands of years, and our newfound appreciation for soil has its roots in our religions, writings, and artworks.

Content in this essay is summarized from a chapter by Melanie Szulczewski in the forthcoming book, *Soil Ecosystems Services*, edited by Mary Stromberger, David Lindbo, and Nick Comerford, to be published by the Soil Science Society of America, Madison, WI.