

Soil Monoliths Complement Fine Art at Minneapolis Institute of Arts

By Al Giencke, retired soil scientist.

“What’s beneath our feet?” is the question that Monica Haller, artist-in-residence at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA), asked herself when creating a theme for her art exhibit at MIA. She became curious about this question when her father removed piles of soil from the family farm in Minnesota before selling the land. He had felt so attached to his land and soil that he did not want to part without taking some with him. That gesture was the starting point for intriguing discussions about soil and its many geological, historical, cultural, and sociological aspects.

In order to learn more about soil, Monica contacted geologists, soil scientists, members of academia, and Native Americans. I was among the lucky ones she chose to work with. Being a quick study, she soon realized that the best way to

display soils and soil properties indoors was with a set of soil monoliths. For the monoliths, she selected soils that were in some way related to pieces of fine art at MIA. The monoliths were later paired with the art in the exhibit.

Self-guided tours have been set up for visitors to view and read about the soil-and-art pairings. More formal, hour-long guided tours are also available. The guided tours feature an MIA docent paired with a soil scientist docent. Although scheduled for an hour, many of the guided tours go longer as people have lots of questions to ask.

Additional information regarding the display is available



Monica Haller stands with a soil that is shallow to bedrock and from the Minnesota Iron Range. The monolith is paired with a Dutch painting that shows similar soils that are shallow to bedrock in outstate New York. The painting shows many areas of sparse vegetation, as one would expect on the shallow soils in that area. The monolith seems to give a 3D effect to the 2D painting. (And, yes, she did cut the bedrock to fit into the monolith frame!)

at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6jsIYVnc60&feature=youtu.be>

The exhibit has been quite popular. Bringing soil (or dirt as some say) into a fine art museum is unusual and gets the attention of visitors. However, after a month of having the exhibit open and conducting tours, those involved would be less likely to ask “Why is there soil in the museum?” and more likely to ask “What took so long to make this connection?” As one MIA docent recently said, “I will never again look at fine art and not look at the landscape and for the affect soil has on it.”

Mission accomplished! ■



A monolith of kaolin clay paired with a 3,000-year-old Greek water vessel made from what is believed to be similar kaolin clay.

U.S. Collegiate Soil Judging Teams in Korea

By Amy Overstreet, public affairs specialist, USDA–NRCS.

Over the past 4 years, numerous colleagues in the [National Cooperative Soil Survey](#), the [Soil Science Society of America](#), and the [International Union of Soil Scientists](#) worked to launch the first [International Soil Judging Contest](#). The event took place June 5–7 on the island of Jeju, Korea, in conjunction with the [20th World Congress of Soil Science](#). The theme, “Globally Qualified to Get Dirty,” illustrates the spirit of camaraderie and fun which infused the event.

Two teams of U.S. college students and their coaches, sponsored by the Soil Science Society of America, the Agronomic Science Foundation, and their universities, travelled to Jeju for the competition. A total of 13 teams, representing 5 continents, converged on Jeju to interpret Korea’s volcanic soils. The contest hosted teams from the U.S., Japan, China, Korea, South Africa, Australia, Taiwan, Mexico, Hungary, and the United Kingdom. Maxine Levin, USDA–NRCS; Steve Cattle, University of Sydney (Australia); Cristine Morgan, Texas A&M University; and David Weindorf, Texas Tech University, helped to prepare the contest, offered guidance to the international coaches and students, and served as official judges.

The contest focused on both team and individual performance. Team USA–B and Team USA–A were victorious, earning the first and second highest team scores, respectively. Tyler Witkowski (Team USA–B) earned second place overall for individual performance out of 45 contestants. Emily Salkind, Virginia Tech; Nancy