

XVII International Congress on Dry Stone

“Dry stone perspectives: challenges after the UNESCO inscription”

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Presence of dry stone in the arts

Abstract:

Abstract: If dry stone building is an art per se, recognized as such by UNESCO, we can see that dry stone is present in many works of art, either as a theme or as the very material of the work. We therefore find dry stone in land art (it's obvious) but also in literature, architecture, sculpture, painting, photography and, less expected, in music, cinema and even dance.

We can see that dry stone has been present in artistic creation for millennia, all over the world and in very varied forms. This article attempts a first inventory approach, very partial, of works using dry stone or taking it as a theme. It is also intended as an incentive to seek out works and artistic disciplines in which dry stone has a place and to pool everyone's findings to enrich the inventory by extending it to various cultures.



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*The website of the association Pierre Sèche en Vaucluse has a page intended to receive contributions from anyone interested:
<https://www.pierre-seche-en-vaucluse.fr/arts-et-pierre-seche/>*

Keywords: art, work, support, dry stone, theme

Introduction

The art of dry stone building has been officially recognized as such by UNESCO, which has listed it as a world heritage knowhow, but we have long considered it an art in itself.

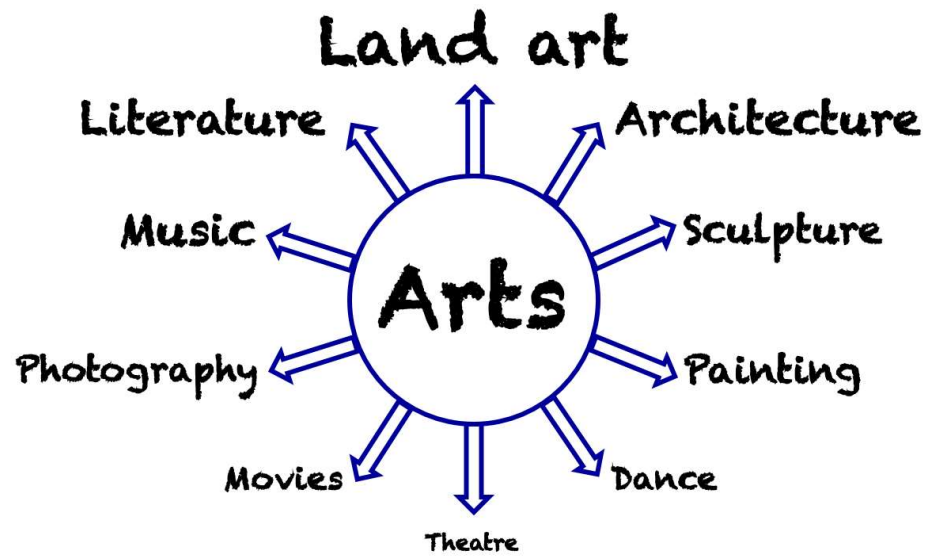
This prompts us to ask the question of the link between dry stone and the other arts: to what extent is dry stone a source of inspiration for creators, which disciplines use dry stone as a material?

I propose here a first approach, voluntarily limited, of this research in the hope that it will arouse the desire to go further and that some readers will be able to seek in their knowledge to gradually build inventories to share their discoveries.

To organize this beginning of research, I chose to combine two criteria:

- Distinguish between the works according to whether they use dry stone as a theme or as a material.
- Classify the works according to about ten artistic disciplines, each of which is more or less interested in dry stone.

Each chapter of the development will give some examples and some clues on how a discipline deals with dry stone. The order in which we will deal with these disciplines is arbitrary.



Sculpture

Let's start, randomly, with sculpture.

Stone is obviously a natural material for sculptors, but what about dry stone as such?



Dimitri Gutton. © Midi-Libre, Marie-Pascale Vincent 2020

The Greek Jannis Kounellis (1936-2017), steeped in abstract expressionism and informal art, used it to express the limit, the closure, especially in the series of doors with the opening filled with dry stones.

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Frenchman Dimitri Gutton (born in 1970), also a craftsman builder based in Saint-Germain de Calberte in Lozère, plays with the variety of stones to build images like building a wall, often playing on the contrast between stones of different colors.

However, dry stone is an obvious material for the Arte Povera movement. Mario Merz's igloo in 1968, as well as Giuseppe Penone's cherry tree in 2008 or his dry stone discs are representative of this current, as is the work of Giovanni Anselmo or that of Michelangelo Pistoletto, whose president of the SPS, another Michelangelo, created a "Third Paradise" in dry stone for an exhibition in Bari.

This third paradise, the basic motif of Pistoletto, is often produced in the most diverse materials. In Bari, Pistoletto asked Michelangelo Dragone to create the pattern in a room on the first floor of the Soprintendenza de Belle Arti.



Michelangelo Pistoletto. Third paradise, Realization and photo Michelangelo Dragone.

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The imagination and knowhow of the sculptor Gilles Perez shaped the dry stones of the Auvergne volcanoes to assemble them in fantastic and aerial shapes, giving an unexpected momentum to their assemblies. These sculptures are accessible, grouped in a park the "Chemin Fais'art" in the Puy de Dôme. The park is enriched every year with new works.



© *Tourisme-Combrailles.*

Painting

The boundary between sculpture and painting takes us to other places, to other times.

The "Deer Stones" from northern Mongolia, straightened before or most often after being engraved and painted, date from the 2nd and 1st millennia BC. From one to several meters in size, they represent in a stylized way different animals, tools and weapons, seldom a face. The whole is inserted in recurring geometric patterns and oriented towards the east.

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From southern Siberia to the high valleys of the Himalayas, there are several hundred sites.



© Aloxe 2008

Closer to home, painter and illustrator, Thérèse Jeanneau lives in Paris. She illustrated Jacques de Longeville's book "Inscrit dans les pierres".

Surprising as it may seem, the many frescoes of everyday life on the walls of villages in Sardinia seldom show dry stone landscape. One can find few exceptions including one in Foni in the centre of the island.

Watercolourist passionate about dry stone, Chantal Rouchouse illustrates the inventories in which she participates in Ardèche on the Laoul plateau.

Axel Simonin's superb pencil stroke illustrates research into the history of dry stone construction in the Besançon region.

Literature

Let's move on from the graphic arts to literature.

Novelists and poets were inspired by dry stone either as the spirit of the places where their characters act or as a poetic subject.

Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) : *En allant à la Chartreuse de Miraflores*

Oui, c'est une montée âpre, longue et poudreuse,

Un revers décharné, vrai site de Chartreuse.

Les pierres du chemin, qui croulent sous les pieds,

Trompent à chaque instant les pas mal appuyés.

Pas un brin d'herbe vert, pas une teinte fraîche ;

On ne voit que des murs bâtis en pierre sèche,

Des groupes contrefaits d'oliviers rabougris,

Au feuillage malsain couleur de vert-de-gris,

Des pentes au soleil que nulle fleur n'égaie,

Des roches de granit et des ravins de craie,

Et l'on se sent le cœur de tristesse serré...

Mais, quand on est en haut, coup d'œil inespéré !

L'on aperçoit là-bas, dans le bleu de la plaine,

L'église où dort le Cid près de doña Chimène !

Louis Aragon (1897-1982) about the « Mur de la peste » in *Prose du bonheur et d'Elsa* (1956) :

Et ce serpent ruiné sans rien qui tienne ensemble ses écailles

Ce long cheminement qui est ce qui reste d'une muraille

Comme il s'agissait toujours de marquer les propriétés

Mais regarde-moi ces zigzags c'est drôlement mal arpenté

C'est un fichu cache-nez que les siècles ont mangé aux mites

On a depuis belle lurette oublié ce qu'il délimite

Et que ce fut le grand terrain domanial de l'épidémie

Danièle Faugeras lives in Gard. An excerpt from his poems:

Pierres jointées

À rebours

de vertige.

Pour être mur

s'il suffisait de compter

sur ses pierres...

Le mur connaît le prix

qu'il faut payer

au lierre.

(Ce qui joint

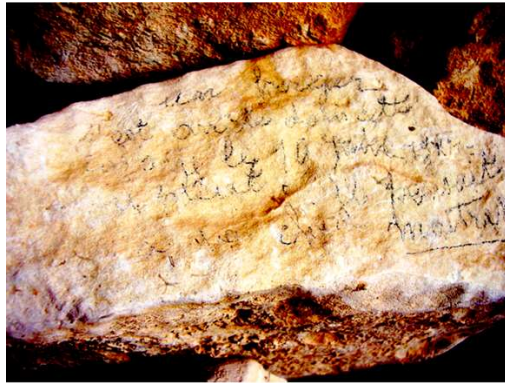
à la fois conjoint

et disjoint.)

I have only given here a few brief examples of French literature, mainly in poetry, but the same is true in all dry stone countries. Thus, its presence in the landscape reinforces the setting of the magnificent Croatian novel *Red Water* (Jurica Pavičić).

If poets write figuratively on dry stone, some do so literally. Thanks to Jean Laffitte –we miss him very much – we know that authors as discreet as they are furtive have left a few lines on the stones of cabins for posterity. Especially near Ferrassières, on the Albion plateau. Like these few lines:

Un berger
s'est arrêté dans cette
cabane le 10 juillet 19xII
Il pleut. Il pensait
à sa chère maîtresse



© Jean Laffitte

And, in another hut:

Le revisitèrent
moult contents le 17 avoust 45
et moult volontiers leurs noms
à la pierre apposèrent
Martel P

It would be interesting to extend this inventory to other places and other countries to better understand the themes of these writings, which are as fleeting in their creation as they are lasting in their medium.

Photography

Photography is an art of the gaze and the dry stone works attract the eye. A few talented photographers know how to show its soul, like Pierre Ricou whose images have been published as postcards or, more recently, Miodrag Aubertin who knows how, on occasion, to pay homage to the stone artist who was Roland Mousquès.



© Miodrag Aubertin : Mur de Roland Mousquès

Let us also mention Benjamin Larderet, Alex Hare, John Keates, Marc Waldbillig, Ángel Roca, whose strength in certain photos is to create a dialogue between the dry stone structures and the landscapes in which they are integrated.

Movies

Coming from photography, cinema is less lavish in celebration of dry stone, but they are so much a part of the universe in which certain

scenarios are bathed, often from novels in which the landscape is an integral part, that they impose themselves to the picture.



We see it for example in the Sicilian series of Montalbano, very faithful to the work of Camilleri or, to a lesser extent, on certain plans of Jean de Florette by Claude Berri after L'eau des sources by Pagnol.

The dry stone is also a significant element in Wang Quan An's film The Marriage of Tuya, in Chinese Inner Mongolia.

Music

And music, what does it do with dry stones?

One can draw inspiration from their universe as does friend Renat Sette with Jean des Pierres or the complete artist Emmanuel Dilhac who makes the stones sing. Moreover, at Dilhac, dry stone is not only a theme but also an instrument.

And this is the other facet of dry stone in music: stones, properly chosen and well used, can sound like an instrument in deep connection with nature.

It is the lithophone.

While commonly used today in various musical genres, the instrument has been around since the dawn of time. Thus, the percussionists of the Orchestre National de France gave a concert in the spring of 2014 with lithophone stones from the 8th millennium preserved in the Museum of Natural History in Paris on contemporary music composed by Philippe Fénelon.

Percussionists are naturally drawn to the particular timbres of different varieties of stones. Thus, the drummer Fabrice Bony fell in love with the instrument in its current version while in the South-East of Viet-Nam we are rediscovering the lithophone from blades updated in the middle of the last century.

It was indeed in 1949 that during road works in the high plateaus of Tây Nguyên that eleven stones were discovered, later identified by the ethnologist Georges Condominas as lithophone blades, probably dating from a period between the fourth and first millennium BC.

Other blades were later found and even the remains of a manufacturing workshop in Khanh Son. The stones, volcanic, are generally rhyolite.

The twenty blades of the Hoa Nam lithophone were discovered by chance in 2003 in a shelter dug in a garden and represent an exceptional ensemble.

Today, a wide variety of musical styles can be played on these ancient instruments.



© Vivutravel, Hanoi

Land art

We can consider land art as the type of creation that is most closely related to dry stone.

Note in the picture below, that the work of Mino Specolizzi in the Orto dei Tu'rat in Ugento in the extreme South-East of Italy, also has a utilitarian objective: to concentrate the water of the dew to moisten the soil. Moreover, land art is sometimes as much part of the art of living as it is of the plastic arts.



© Architettura Ecosostenibile

Australian Andrew Rogers' geoglyph Rhythms of life, in Yucca Valley, Southern California (below), measures 50m by 50m.



© *Andrew Rogers*

Many other examples illustrate the use of dry stone in land art:

Alejandro Guzzetti, creator of Argentine land art established in the Hautes-Alpes, has for several years, structured in the mountain a site on the hillside where one finds remains of occupation in dry stone. He installed a “stone sofa”, La Poltrona and remodeled the environment (below).

Today, the place lives, frequented by the inhabitants of the surroundings and as the seat of a biennale of land art.

Gilles Clément imagined a “water tower” (of which Ivan Delahaye explained the principles and the realization to us during a previous congress) which integrates brilliantly into the landscape of the watershed line near Mont Gerbier de jonc at the sources of the Loire.

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Finally, Andy Goldsworthy's creations make dreams come true that forcefully combine natural space, movement, dry stone and our imaginations.

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© Association La Poltrona

Dance

This movement is obviously found in the art of dance and, if it must be said that there are not many choreographic works related to dry stone,

the Belgians Thierry de Mey and Michèle Anne de Mey have created in 1993 a 23-minute choreography, *Love sonnets*, which makes the dancers evolve on stone reliefs, using as music the sound of the stones being trodden.



© *Thierry de Mey*

Architecture

Not having found any theatrical work using dry stone (but if you look carefully, you should find some) let's end this brief exploration with architecture.

We are all familiar with dry stone dwellings such as the farm buildings of the Cabanes du Breuil in the Dordogne or the Village des Bories in Gordes, the trulli of Puglia are also emblematic of architectural creation in dry stone as are the blackhouses of Lewis and St. Kilda.

But the large ensemble of Great Zimbabwe is perhaps less well known.

Great Zimbabwe is a set of ruins of a medieval city in southern Africa, located about fifteen kilometers south of the town of Masvingo, in southern Zimbabwe.

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This city was, from the 13th to the 15th century, the center of the ancient kingdom of Zimbabwe which covered the territories of present-day Zimbabwe (which takes its name from the city) and Mozambique. The city must have had around 18,000 inhabitants at the time.

Zimbabwe means "the big house of stones" and, in fact, all the constructions, dwellings, enclosures, reserves and passages are built of dry stone.



© SmugMug



© Jimidi

Open conclusion

At the end of this brief journey between the arts and dry stone we have enough elements to appreciate the place of dry stone in many artistic disciplines, both as an instrument and as a theme.

There was obviously no question in this communication of attempting a catalog raisonné and even less of drawing up an exhaustive inventory, but I wanted to share this beginning of research and call on those who are interested in it to enrich it.

Those readers who feel like it can make their contributions on the Pierre Sèche en Vaucluse website: <https://www.pierre-seche-en-vaucluse.fr/arts-et-pierre-seche/>

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