

## **ENVIRONMENTAL ART**

Environmental art, sometimes called earth art or earthworks, emerged in the 1960s and included a wide range of artworks, most site-specific and existing outdoors. Many artists associated with these sculptural projects also used natural or organic materials, including the land itself. This art form developed during a period of increased concern for the American environment. The ecology movement of the 1960s and 1970s aimed to publicize and combat escalating pollution, depletion of natural resources, and the dangers of toxic waste. The problems of public aesthetics (for example, litter, urban sprawl, and compromised scenic areas) were also at issue. Widespread concern about the environment led to the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act in 1969 and the creation of the federal Environmental Protection Agency. Environmental artists used their art to call attention to the landscape and, in so doing, were part of this national dialogue.

As an innovative art form that challenged traditional assumptions about art making and artistic models, Environmental art clearly had an avant-garde, progressive dimension. These artists insisted on moving art out of the rarefied atmosphere of museums and galleries and into the public sphere. Most Environmental artists encouraged spectator interaction with the works. Environmental artists such as Christo and Jeanne-Claude made audience participation an integral part of their works. Thus these artists intended their works to connect with a larger public. Ironically, the remote locations of many earthworks have limited public access.

## **THE ENDURING POWER OF NATURE**

A leading American Environmental artist was Robert Smithson (1938-1973), who used industrial construction equipment to manipulate vast quantities of earth and rock on isolated sites. One of Smithson's best-known pieces is *Spiral Jetty*, a mammoth coil of black basalt, limestone rocks, and earth that extends out into the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Driving by the lake one day, Smithson came across some abandoned mining equipment, left there by a company that had tried and failed to extract oil from the site. Smithson saw this as a testament to the enduring power of nature and to humankind's inability to conquer nature. He decided to create an artwork in the lake that ultimately became a monumental spiral curving out from the shoreline and running 1,500 linear feet into the water. Smithson insisted on designing his work in response to the location itself; he wanted to avoid the arrogance of an artist merely imposing an unrelated concept on the site. The spiral idea grew from Smithson's first impression of the location:

As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement. The site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty.

The appropriateness of the spiral forms was reinforced when, while researching the Great Salt Lake, Smithson discovered that the molecular structure of the salt crystals that coat the rocks at the water's edge is spiral in form. Smithson not only recorded *Spiral Jetty* in photographs, but also filmed its construction in a movie that describes the forms and life of the whole site. The photographs and film have become increasingly important, because fluctuations in the Great Salt Lake's water level often place *Spiral Jetty* underwater.

Visit [robertsmithson.com](http://robertsmithson.com) for images and more information about *Spiral Jetty*.

## **CAPTIVATING ENVIRONMENTAL INTERVENTIONS**

Christo and Jeanne-Claude intensify the viewer's awareness of the space and features of rural and urban sites. However, rather than physically alter the land itself, as Smithson often did, Christo and Jeanne-Claude prompt this awareness by temporarily modifying the landscape with cloth. Their pieces also incorporate the relationships among human sociopolitical action, art, and the environment. Christo studied art in his native Bulgaria and in Vienna. After a move to Paris, he began to encase objects in clumsy wrappings, thereby appropriating bits of the real world into the mysterious world of the unopened package whose contents can be dimly seen in silhouette under the wrap. Starting in 1961, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, husband and wife, began to collaborate on large-scale projects.

These projects normally deal with the environment itself; for example, in 1969 Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped more than a million square feet of Australian coast and in 1972 hung a vast curtain across a valley at Rifle Gap, Colorado. The land pieces require years of preparation, research, and scores of meetings with local authorities and interested groups of local citizens. The artists always consider the process of planning and of obtaining the numerous permits, and the visual documentation of each piece part of the artwork. These temporary works are usually on view for a few weeks. *Surrounded Islands 1980-83*, created in Biscayne Bay in Miami, Florida, for two weeks in May 1983 typifies

Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work. For this project, they surrounded 11 small human-made islands in the bay (from a dredging project) with specially woven pink polypropylene floating fabric.

This Environmental art project required three years of preparation to obtain the required permissions, to assemble the necessary labor force of unskilled and professional workers, and to accumulate the \$3.2 million cost (accomplished by selling preparatory drawings, collages, models, and works of the 1950s and 1960s). Huge crowds watched as crews removed accumulated trash from the 11 islands (to assure maximum contrast between their dark colors, the pink of the cloth, and the blue of the bay) and then unfurled the fabric 'cocoons' to form magical floating 'skirts' around each tiny bit of land. Despite the brevity of its existence, *Surrounded Islands 1980-83* lives on in the host of photographs, films, and books documenting the piece.

Visit [christojeanneclaude.net](http://christojeanneclaude.net) for images and more information about these, and other, works.

## **MISSISSIPPIAN MOUNDS**

Effigy mounds, earthworks in the shape of animals and birds, were raised in North America in areas that now correspond to parts of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Iowa, and Ohio. The profile images, seldom more than six feet high, include felines, bears, and deer, and they suffered considerably with the increase in farming settlements in the nineteenth century, when many ancient Native American mounds were plowed under. Fortunately, the extraordinary size and recognizable depictions saved many of the effigy mounds from such a fate. The grandest of the representational mounds is the depiction of an undulating snake, perhaps a stylized rattlesnake, in Adams County, Ohio, known as the Great Serpent Mound. Over 1,300 feet long, with an average height of four to five feet and a width of 20 to 25 feet, the serpent is located on a wedge-shaped, slightly convex ridge in the rolling hills of southern Ohio where it overlooks a waterway called Brush Creek. It first came to scholarly attention in the 1840s. Early researchers suggested that the very shape of the bluff upon which the serpent was worked evoked a giant reptile, thereby explaining the original selection of the site. The exact function of the great mound, within the clay structure of which no culturally identifiable objects have yet been located, is uncertain. While burials have been discovered in the effigy mounds further to the northwest, none have been found in the Ohio mound.

The period in which Great Serpent Mound was erected is currently debated among archaeologists. Long thought to have been made by the Adena peoples (500 B.C.–200 A.D.) based on the contents of burials discovered nearby, recent archaeological research into the structure of the mound itself has suggested that the serpent is later in date (1000–1200 A.D.). If so, its serpent imagery might relate to the rattlesnake of Mississippian iconography, a prominent image in that cultural manifestation. The oval at the mouth of the serpent was initially considered to be something being swallowed, perhaps an egg, but another view is that it is the eye of the serpent.