

LOUVRE

Lens

SUBTERRANEAN WORLDS

20 000 LEAGUES UNDER THE EARTH



EXHIBITION
FROM 27 MARCH TO 22 JULY 2024

Press Release
Temporary Exhibition

27 MARCH - 22 JULY 2024

SUBTERRANEAN WORLDS

20 000 LEAGUES UNDER THE EARTH



Eva JOSPIN, *Nymphées*, Installation, Carton, Bois, Collection de l'artiste

What is happening underground? What do these worlds that have been firing our imaginations since the dawn of time look like?

Echoing the history of the Hauts-de-France region and its coal mining past, *the Mondes souterrains (Subterranean Worlds)* exhibition offers an exploration of these unseen places that are little known to man. From invisible depths to mythical and fabulous worlds and frightening universes marked by an incredibly creative and inspirational activity, the reality of this realm takes multiple forms.

Veering between the ideas of death and fertility, ignorance and knowledge, our relationship to subterranean worlds has evolved throughout the history of civilisation and from one artistic current to the next, reflecting developments in our societies above ground. Like an inverted mirror, these realms are the province of things we hide and things we bury, things we fear and things we love, things we do not know and things we can foresee, things we are repelled by and things that inspire us. Their legends and myths, as well as their realities and riches, embody the various contradictions of the human soul.

This constant fascination with the earth's depths has resulted in a profusion of artistic creations spanning paintings, sculptures, objets d'art, installations, books, films, documents and buildings. Featuring more than 200 works, this exhibition, in which the arts from every period dialogue with each other, reveals the full extent of the ambivalence and the fertility of these worlds.

This exhibition invites visitors to embark on a sensory journey that traces our relationship with the hidden depths, gradually moving as it unfolds from shadow to light.

Curators:

Alexandre Estaquet-Legrand, heritage curator, director of the MUDO – Musée de l'Oise

Jean-Jacques Terrin, architect, doctor of architecture, emeritus professor of architectural schools

Gautier Verbeke, director of education and audience engagement, Musée du Louvre

Exhibition design: **Mathis Boucher**, architect and exhibition designer, Louvre-Lens



John Melhuish STRUDWICK, Le fil d'or (A Golden Thread), 1875, Huile sur toile, Tate © Tate

EXHIBITION LAYOUT



PROLOGUE: THE SYBIL'S CAVE

Knowing the ways in, the Sibyl welcomes visitors to her cave, introducing them to the journey that lies ahead. It begins by exploring the darkest depths of the earth, before discovering its buried riches. At the intersection of these two paths is Plato's Cave, marking the transition from shadow to light.

Jean-Jacques CAFFIERI, La Sibylle d'Erythrée, 1759, Marbre, Paris, musée du Louvre, département des Sculptures © RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Hervé Lewandowski

1. EXPLOING THE DEPTHS

Exploring visible or invisible worlds

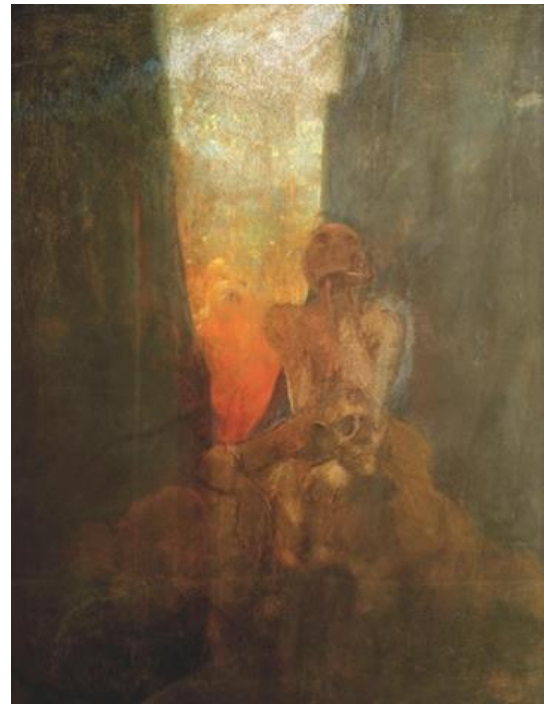
What is going on underground? This question has been asked down the ages. In order to find out, man has studied, with **fascination and fear, the numerous openings in the earth** which reveal its insides. He has discovered narrow cracks, mysterious caves, steaming craters into which artists, such as **Rubens, Courbet, Christo** and **Gao Xingjian** have ventured. He has sensed or experienced its dangers. During Antiquity, the subterranean world was feared: the smoke and the rumbling that emanate from it were seen as the presages of mythological cataclysms. Vulcan is said to have buried the giant Mimas beneath Vesuvius, which sealed the legend of Pompeii. Earthquakes were thought to be supernatural rages: for the ancient Greeks, Zeus, king of the gods, imprisoned the Titans underground. It was not until the modern period, and particularly the 18th century, until scholars attempted to explain these phenomena.



Gustave COURBET, Vue de la caverne des géants près de Saillon, 1873, Huile sur toile, collection des Musées d'Amiens

Travelling through imaginary geographies

On the edge of these abysses, people wondered what the world below was like: was the earth empty? Or filled with water? Does it burn with an inner fire? Is it populated with living creatures? There were many hypotheses, religious assertions and philosophical reflections. In the absence of a convincing answer and unable to explore these depths physically, man was persuaded that **mysterious forces** ruled this underworld. Invisible and unexplored, harsh and unpredictable, the subterranean world led many artists to create **exaggerated or fantastical topographies, inhabited by improbable creatures**. In these imaginary underground cartographies, artists and writers, men and women, depicted fabulous landscapes that appeared like a striking reflection of the world above: stormy seas, rivers, flaming mountains and gaping chasms, like the one of **Mucha** exploring the depths of the soul. The fascination exerted by these places was enriched by various mythological, religious and literary tales. The descriptions of the circles of Hell by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265 or 1267–1321), who was inspired by The Aeneid by Virgil (70–19 BC) probably consulted one of the most inexhaustible sources of the phenomenon in the West. **John Martin** imagined *Pandémonium*, the capital of Hell, while Jacob **Isaacsz. Van Swanenburgh** reinterpreted the descent of Aeneas, hero of the Trojan War, in this infernal kingdom.



Alphonse MUCHA, *Le Gouffre*, vers 1898, Pastel sur toile, Paris, musée d'Orsay © RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) / Hervé Lewandowski



Auguste RODIN, *Le Désespoir*, vers 1882-1885, Plâtre, Paris, musée Rodin © DR

Dante and Virgil guide us through hell

The *Divine Comedy* is a fantastic medieval poem written in Italian by Dante Alighieri between 1303 and 1321. The author travelled through Hell then Purgatory — the place where the deceased souls were purified of their sins before reaching Heaven, in the Catholic religion. In the various circles, he meets all of the damned from mythology, history and literature. At the gates of Hell, he reads the famous inscription: *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate* (Abandon all hope you who enter). It haunted **Auguste Rodin**, for whom the creation of the *Gates of Hell* was his most important work. It revealed a repertoire of new forms like *Despair*, which plays on an original asymmetry.

2. BURYING DREAD IN THE DARKNESS

The precipice of shadows

Inaccessible and only partially visible, the subterranean world has fired imaginations since early antiquity, to the point of becoming **the seat of all fears**.

Who has not experienced, just when they are about to go to sleep, the strange sensation of falling, an experience so disconcerting that it forces us to promptly wake up? **Falling into an abyss** is a real fear that has been explored by various Western mythologies, and about which painters and sculptors have produced powerful works. **From the abduction of Persephone** by the god Hades to the fall of the rebel angels, the chasm leading to the underworld forms the entrance to a frightening and hostile universe, synonymous, for those who are cast there, with a gruesome fate. The very origin of the word 'abyss', derived from the Greek *abussos* meaning 'bottomless', reflects this fascination tinged with anguish:



François GIRARDON (d'après), Pluton enlevant Proserpine, Bronze, Paris, musée du Louvre, département des Objets d'art



PIRANÈSE, Les prisons (série), Eau-forte, Musées royaux de Belgique, Liège, Musée des Beaux-arts/La Boverie

The realm of nightmares

Isolated from the light as well as social conventions, the subterranean world is a place where **rules are reversed** and **criminals and the condemned** are held captive in order to not disrupt the established order. It is home to places suitable for hiding what societies do not tolerate. Its cavities, initially natural, before being adapted through architecture, have provided prisons in the form of **gaols, dungeons and oubliettes**. It has provided the setting for a litany of ordeals and nightmares, from the legendary **torture of Ixion** – tied to a flaming wheel in hell by Zeus for trying to seduce Hera – to the abuse written about by the Marquis de Sade (1740–1814). They were brutally taken up by modernity: from the Spanish Inquisition, represented by **Velázquez**, to the trenches of the **First World War**, in the work of **Otto Dix** and **André Devambez**.



Maurizio CATTELAN, *Mother*, 1999, Tirage photographique, cibachrome monté sur plexiglas, Pinault Collection © ADAGP 2024, DR

Buried alive

Often seen as the ultimate punishment, being buried alive is probably one of our biggest terrors. Fear of this sadistic punishment, unless it is the result of an accident, existed as early as antiquity: **vestal virgins**, Roman priestesses of Vesta, goddess of the hearth, could be buried alive if they failed in their duties.

This fear persisted through the centuries, fuelling imaginations and giving rise to such monsters as the vampire. More recently, armed conflicts and natural catastrophes have given concrete form to this fear of encountering death underground.

3. DESCENDING INTO THE BEYOND

the kingdom of the dead

The underworld and death were interlinked from earliest times. In many civilizations, **dead bodies, whether preserved by burial or destroyed through cremation, were returned to the earth.** Burial, a response to both hygiene considerations and religious beliefs, led societies to venture underground. The wealth of symbols adorning the coffins of ancient Egypt, such as that of **Sepi** (1866–1843 BC), testifies to the importance attached to life in the hereafter.

Necropolises, literally ‘cities of the dead’, were created **alongside the cities of the living.** The humblest tombs were dug out of the earth or rock, while those of the rich were erected where they could be seen by everyone. Catacombs, those ‘tombs from below’, began to flourish in the Roman empire in the 2nd century AD. Pagan or Christian, the most famous are those in Rome, Naples and Paris. In this particular instance, they are not catacombs but a rather old quarry repurposed as an ossuary at the end of the 18th century. Inspired by these lugubrious places, the contemporary photographer **Bernard-Xavier Vailhen** produced a series of striking images in the catacombs of the Capuchins of Palermo (Italy), breathing life into these mummies frozen in death.



Cercueil rectangulaire : Sepi (intendant), *Moyen Empire*, 12^e dynastie, 1866-1843 avant Jésus-Christ, Bois peint, Paris, musée du Louvre, département des Antiquités égyptiennes © DR



Joseph FRANQUE, Hercule arrachant Alceste des Enfers, vers 1806, Huile sur toile, Collection musée de Valence, art et archéologie © DR

The road to hell

The **geography of the kingdom of the dead** is complex, because hell can take many forms. However, numerous civilizations have imagined what it looks like and described **passages for reaching it**. In Greece, Hesiod (late 8th century or early 7th century BC) described the river **Styx**, which the souls of the dead had to cross. **Tibetan Buddhism** evoked the **Bardo**, the intermediate state between death and rebirth.

These passages that the dead had to take were not without their guardians or dangers. Terrible trials awaited them and, even more so, any mortals who chose to venture there.

Braving the rules of life and death, many gods and heroes attempted to pass through these gates: **Orpheus, Hercules and Christ** were travellers in the world that inspired artists.

Infernal bestiaries

According to mythological and religious sources, hell is teeming with frightening life forms. The expressive contours varied according to the society, but in every case **an impressive bestiary could be found there**. This bestiary includes numerous hybrid guardians, such as the terrible three-headed dog **Cerberus**, who guarded the gates to Hades for the Greeks and Romans. **Monsters and demons** are universally present: from Judaeo-Christian beliefs to those of the Far East, demons with large ears and prominent fangs use their powers to terrify mortals. They populated **legends**, like that of the Vouivre du Puits-Noir represented by **Just Becquet** and **Hokusai's** hundred tales of ghosts.

Reflecting the hierarchical societies of mortals, such divinities as **Hades** and the goddess **Hecate**, mistress of sorcery for the ancient Greeks, **Mictlantecuhtli** in Aztec mythology, **Emma-ō**, among the Buddhists, and **Satan** in the Bible, ruled over these lower worlds.



Le roi Enma (Enma-ō 閻魔王), 1700-1900, Bois laqué et verre, Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet © DR

4. FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT : VENTURING FROM FICTION TO REALITY

The exhibition's transition centres on the **question of knowledge**. Underground myths have structured a vast expanse of human history. The philosopher Plato (5th century BC) was the first to investigate the importance of invisible worlds through the **myth of the cave**, which was synonymous with ignorance, in which people see nothing but shadows that are their only representation of reality—recreated by the contemporary artist **Huang Yong Ping**. In the modern period, people have sought to **understand this underground world**.

The theories of vulcanism (or plutonism), which held that rocks were formed by volcanic activity, and neptunism, which put forward the idea of a primordial ocean that retreated, were thought to explain the origins of the earth's interior. In the 18th century, Enlightenment scientists investigated volcanic eruptions, particularly those of Vesuvius, and studied geology to understand such tragedies as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. In the 19th century, at the beginning of the industrial age, more practical considerations came to the fore, as man ventured underground to exploit the earth's resources.



*Huang YONG PING, La Caverne de Platon, 2009, Installation, Pinault Collection © Adagp, Paris, 2024
© Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris Photo Marc Damage © Pinault Collection*

Littérature and cinema

At the intersection of knowledge and beliefs, the fiction of subterranean worlds flourished early on, in myths, **expanded dramatically in 19th-century literature**. **Jules Verne (1828–1905), who was from Amiens**, imprinted these worlds on the collective imagination. In *Germinal*, Émile Zola (1840–1902) took readers into the mines of northern France, and **Lewis Carroll (1832–1898)** plunged young Alice into a whimsical universe that mirrored Victorian society.

Various genres turned them into an obligatory setting: fantasy literature, science fiction and crime thrillers used them to excess almost. Well-known examples are the vampires that regenerated themselves there and the horrific creatures of Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890–1937), who perpetuated ancient legends that were haunted by a hybrid bestiary.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, **cinema also mined this vein**. It began by adapting novels before creating new universes, as screenwriters developed various visions of these inexhaustibly intriguing worlds.

A library section and cinema invite visitors to take a break in the heart of the exhibition and immerse themselves in these stories.

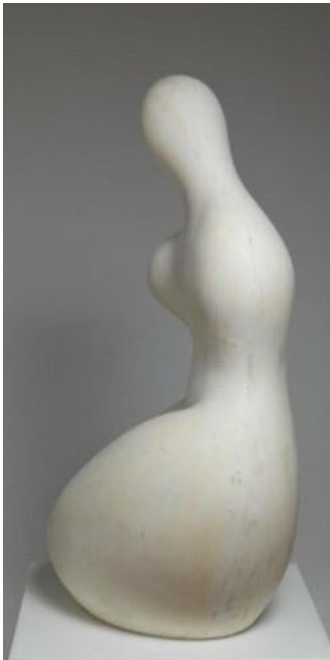
The miner, the modern hero of the subterranean world

This central nucleus is also dominated by the **figure of the miner**, often depicted by artists and the people who commissioned them as heroes of the subterranean world. His athletic appearance, moral strength and courage, comparable to those of **ancient heroes** like Hercules and Aeneas, are the distinctive features of this imagery, which flourished in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Overcoming the fear of descending hundreds of metres below ground in awful conditions, he was an example of virtue who contributed to industrial might for the benefit of all, putting his life in danger, as in the catastrophe of Courrières in 1906. Unlike mythical texts, he turns the subterranean world into a **real experience** devoid of monsters and devils, but full of dangers in the form of firedamp, water leaks and tunnel collapses. Depictions of him on **postcards** and in **statues** refer to a Greco-Roman ideal transposed to the machine age, when women also had a role to play. In the confined space of the coal seams, he battles matter, which traps him like a living element.



5. DISCOVERING THE EARTH'S RESSOURCES



Jean ARP, Déméter, 1961, Plâtre, Paris, collection du Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne-Centre de création industrielle, saisi de l'Administration des douanes en 1996, en dépôt à Clamart, Fondation Arp

Powers

Paradoxically, although subterranean worlds and grottos harbour the darkest excesses, and they frighten us and plunge us into sadness, **they also harbour luminous aspects.**

Mother Earth, the primordial goddess, who is common to many societies and religions, embodies all of the fertility and resources of life that the underground womb endlessly brings forth. For eight months of the year, the goddess **Demeter** can enjoy the presence of her daughter Persephone, released from the underworld, and endows nature with harvests and sap. With its curves and rounded shapes, the sculpture by **Jean Arp** evokes the generosity of a nourishing earth.

Male gods are also active in this **subterranean bliss**: the Egyptians depicted **Osiris** reborn after death, his mummified body covered in grain. **Mithra**, the Persian god born from a rock, enables beings to live by sacrificing the primeval bull in a cave.

In Egyptian, Persian, Greco-Roman and Mesoamerican civilizations, certain animals such as **snakes** were endowed with positive aspects of fertility and resurrection thanks to their constant contact with the ground.

Fertility and germination the earth roots

In the face of demonic creatures, **fertile deities** offer a benevolent renewal of the cycle of life and nature.

After three days during which he was thought to be dead, Christ rose from the tomb and announced the resurrection, guaranteeing eternal life in a sudden regenerative reappearance. As a symbol of life, **Edward Burne-Jones** (1833–1898) depicted **gushing water** rising from the depths and flowing from the rocks of a bottomless cavity.



Recueil de figures de plantes coloriées : la mandragore, 1701-1800, Parchemin, papier, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal © DR

As **Giuseppe Licari's** (b. 1980) installation *Humus* reminds us, all plant life draws its strength and nourishment from the germinative riches of the subsoil. Medieval illuminators even imagined miniature beings living in root systems. In memory of the wonder of the beginning of the Golden Age, described by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* in the 1st century AD, **the magical fertility of the earth was celebrated by artists**: "Spring was eternal, and the peaceful zephyrs caressed with warm air the flowers that grew without being seeded."



Buste de l'empereur Tibère, 1750-1800, Paris, musée du Louvre, département des Objets d'art © DR

A cabinet of curiosities from fossils to precious stones

The earth abounds in riches, wonderful resources and buried treasures, which **man searches for, collects and transforms** into jewels and sources of knowledge and energy.

The feverish search for these treasures, be they precious stones, archaeological evidence or fossils, has fuelled the curiosity, thirst for knowledge and greed of specialists since antiquity.

Like the oceans, the animal and plant worlds and the stars, the subterranean realm is a **haven of wonders** rich in **mineralogical (mineralia) and archaeological treasures** that in modern times have been collected by the wealthy and powerful. From the Renaissance onwards in particular, these riches were gathered together in cabinets of curiosities.

These miniature visions of the world were catalogued according to the nature of the objects, the better to convey

the complexity and incongruity of the universe. Thanks to their rarity, beauty and educational value, unearthed treasures joined unusual collections of fossils, precious stones, metals, bones and antiques that illustrated the buried world. Set by craftsmen, gems of dazzling opulence were transformed into treasures or items of jewellery.

6. SEEKING TRANQUILITY IN A WORLD OF ENCHANTMENT

Mystical caves

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Jean-François AUBURTIN, Chants sur l'eau, 1912, Huile sur toile, Petit Palais, musée des Beaux-arts de la Ville de Paris © Paris Musées / Petit Palais, musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris

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The grotto as a place of creation

Manmade **fantasy grottos** were built adjoining palaces or nestling in parks becoming, during the Renaissance, the privilege of a sophisticated, literate aristocracy: their imaginative decorations have occupied a whole swathe of artistic creation right down to the 20th century.

As early as Antiquity, ornamental grottoes were incorporated into Roman villas: the homes of nymphs, they were known as *nymphaea*. The trend spread during the Renaissance. For five centuries, thousands of decorative artificial grottoes offered princes a place to rest, cool down or hide. **They featured human figures of love**, like the Greek and Roman myths that inspired them. Telluric, aquatic, ecclesiastical, rustic and hydraulic inventories were made of this subterranean genre. Grottoes were adapted to express different moods and reflected the evolution of science. Some have disappeared but continue to haunt the imagination; that of the artist **Bernard de Palissy** (1510–c. 1589), commissioned by Queen Catherine de Médicis for the Tuileries Garden in 1565, opposite the Louvre, is visible only in fragments and moulds which provide a glimpse of its original charm.

In parallel, the appearance of grottoes was linked, in the history of taste, to a type of fanciful decoration linked to grottos through the archaeological discoveries made in Rome, notably that of Nero's ***Domus Aurea*** in the 1480s, considered at the time to be a cave, followed by those of the towns of Herculaneum and Pompeii. From the late fifteenth to the late 19th century, the ***grotesche (grotesque)*** genre became a popular part of the art of ornamentation among the rich and powerful, permitting a decorative vocabulary free, appropriate for that freedom tinged with the transgressive that is characteristic of the subterranean world. Mascarons, hybrid creatures, elevated structures, torches and interlaced motifs formed the decoration of grottos in arrangements that made no attempt at to verisimilitude.



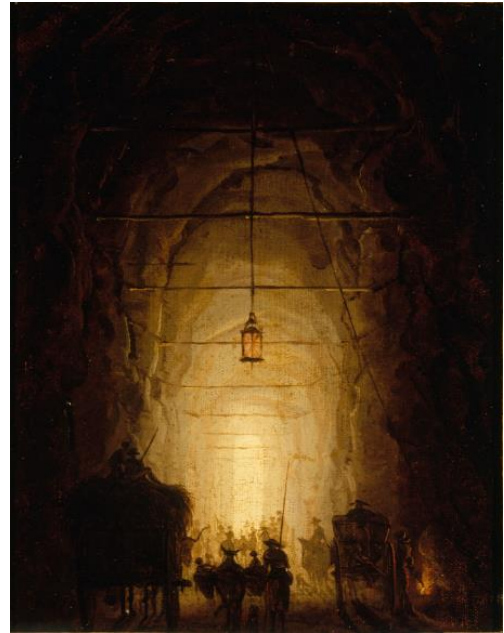
Bernard PALISSY (atelier), Brique à alvéoles, 1510-1589, Brique, terre cuite, Écouen, Musée national de la Renaissance © DR

7. LIVING IN AN INSPIRATIONAL WORLD

Living underground utopia and reality

Living underground is no longer a frightening prospect. **Going down into the earth to live, travel or work** enables us to reconcile functional, protective and even ritual requirements. **Since ancient times, cities have grown both above and below ground**, like Naples, whose subterranean city is said to be as large as the one on the surface. These underground cities have inspired more recent urban fantasies, illustrated by such films as ***Metropolis*** by German Expressionist filmmaker **Fritz Lang** (1890–1976), together with numerous urban utopias and architectural constructions.

A particularly rich underground architectural heritage developed during the **Middle Ages**, with its shelters and refuges, but the urban use of underground spaces continues today. The principle of underground urban planning, in all its complexity, was first formulated in the 1930s by an international study group led by the French architect of Armenian origin Édouard Utudjian (1905–1975). It has become a key component of contemporary metropolises.



Hubert ROBERT, La grotte de Pausilippe à Naples, entre 1760-1761, huile sur toile, Petit Palais, musée des Beaux-arts de la Ville de Paris © DR



Louis STETTNER, Odd Man In. De la Série « Penn Station », 1958, Tirage photographique, Centre Pompidou – Paris © Louis Stettner © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Georges Meguerditchian

The depths beneath London, Paris and Prague, not to mention New York, Montreal, Moscow and Tokyo, are home to veritable underground cities, usually linked to water, sewage, energy and transport **networks**, notably **railways**.

Utopias and subterranean urban construction

Today, **bold projects** are taking place beneath contemporary cities.

On the surface, the environment of today's cities is polluted, temperatures are rising, the architectural heritage is under threat due to real estate pressures, and urban expansion is becoming increasingly expensive. A number of architectural projects are flourishing underground. The theoretical foundations of the subterranean city took shape at the beginning of the 20th century, proposing in particular to bury multi-level streets underground. People seek shelter, live, work and increasingly move around below ground. These architectural creations raise multiple questions, in response to the issues raised by living in confined spaces.

Metro, culture and counterculture

In the mid-19th century, rail networks reached the edges of cities, where the underground railway system took over, linking together the principal residential, working and leisure areas in ever-expanding cities. London was a pioneer with its first steam railway line, which opened in 1863, transporting as many as 40 million passengers in 1880 after it had been extended. Paris built its first electric line in 1900 to coincide with the Exposition Universelle and the Olympic Games.

A symbol of industrial expansion, **the underground railway accentuated the contrasts and contradictions of modern and post-modern society with its ambience dictated by artificial lighting and sounds.**

At once a place of **social intermingling and isolation**, today it provides a sometimes hidden haven for the imaginations of mainly urban artists. **Countercultures and subversion have flourished here.** Out of sight and free from the restrictions of public exposure, spontaneous forms of expression thrive. Are these underground worlds inevitably doomed to be malevolent?

At the end of an artistic journey, our relationship to these buried worlds reveals more than ever their multifarious quality. **Like inverted mirrors, the places where our societies take root reveal preoccupations and aspirations and zones of shadow and light of every kind.**



Bilal HAMDAD, L'Attente, 2020, Huile sur toile, Collection d'art Société générale – Puteaux © Adagp, Paris, 2024

A cultural programme to explore the richness of subterranean worlds

A special programme of performance – a Louvre-Lens speciality – with talks, events, guided tours and new activities for visitors, explores and extends the exhibition's themes between March et July 2024. Details at www.louvre-lens.fr



PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Subterranean Worlds exhibition
from 27 March to 22 July 2024

Open daily from 10am to 6p, except
 Tuesday

Free for under 18 / 18-25 ans: 6 € / full
 price: 11 €

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Laure PROUVOST, Reading Shovel, 2015, Technique mixte, 153 x 52 x 48 cm, Crédit photo : Bertrand Huet / tutti image - Courtesy de l'artiste et de la Galerie Nathalie Obadia Paris / Bruxelles

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