

MARGARET ELDRED

I like to see how other people live, so one of my favorite ways to travel is to wander on foot from village to village. After some interesting walking trips to Pakistan, Nepal, and other places, I drafted a book of travel essays. I took classes at Sacramento City College and started doing pen and ink drawings to illustrate this book.

I didn't become interested in art about agriculture specifically until my older son, Steve, joined the Peace Corps and spent two+ years in a farming village in Morocco. When we visited, we were able to see his host family at work in the fields. On rare occasions, I was actually able to work alongside them. And of course we took a lot of photographs.

I was struck by how similar the landscapes were to the landscapes of northern California and by the sheer number of crops common to both countries: olives, wheat, almonds, figs, grapes, citrus, apricots, artichokes, peaches, prickly pear, persimmons, and pomegranates, to name a few. I was equally fascinated by the differences in agricultural practices. The availability of water, machinery, and labor, the quality of the soil, the geography, the size of plots, and the farmer's production goals—all affect his or her farming methods.



Margaret, her son Steve, and his host nieces near their house in Beni Mekoud, Morocco



Margaret and her husband Bob, on Kuari Pass hike in Uttarakhand, India



Iman, Miriam, Mina and Margaret resting while picking lentils in Beni Mekoud, Morocco

People sometimes think the farming methods shown here are primitive. I think a better word is traditional. Many times the farmers use traditional methods because they do not have the economic resources to buy modern equipment. Location also matters. Steep hillside fields, for example, may be unsuitable for tractors. And farmers often use traditional methods by choice. The Moroccan farmers have an olive-pressing machine, but many of them think the stone-ground olive oil tastes better.

Agriculture is a dynamic profession and farmers world-wide are creative in their approaches. I wanted to share my enthusiasm with other people. Back at home, I decided to do a series of paintings on Mediterranean agriculture. I set out by bicycle and car to explore Yolo County and the Sacramento Valley to complement my photos from Morocco. In succeeding years my husband and I took walking trips through Spain, Italy, Turkey, South Africa, India, Thailand, Indonesia, and Morocco, again.

I aim to do two things in my paintings. First, I strive to celebrate modern agriculture in all its nuances from planting and irrigating to harvesting and preparing for market. Second, I enjoy playing around with color. You can see how my palette has changed from a focus on primary colors--red, blue, and yellow -- in my earlier work, to more realistic colors in the middle ones, to greater freedom in my more recent paintings. I have also become interested in form and have started concentrating on farm structures. I am fascinated by the interplay between the big, simple shapes of silos and the intricate detail of the ladders, pipes, vents, and other structures.

My artistic style has changed over the years but one thing remains constant - my love for living in a part of the world where I'm surrounded by working farms.