

Delmar VanderZee's *Prairie Wisdom*

by [Lil Copan](#) in the [June 2023](#) issue



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Prairie Wisdom, by artist and biologist Delmar VanderZee, is a 15-tile sculpture of impressions of plants from the tallgrass prairie that used to range across the north-central United States. The tiles detail the plants and grasses that once comprised a large biome, plants that grew from the topsoil for millennia and then supported the vast farmlands that became known as the nation's breadbasket.

A kind of frozen-in-time record was created in these tiles of plants in their summer-through-autumn course, their changes of color, and their movement from flowering to seed. It's a "continuously changing tapestry," says VanderZee in an artist's

statement. “There the lines of tiles imitate the rise and fall of landscapes and the view of the horizon.”

The tiles follow the course of the gently undulating lines of the earth where these grasses grow. If the cathedral of the plains had its own milky stained glass representing this geological grandeur, would it look like this—windows holding images of sacred grasses as though moving with the wind? VanderZee’s work echoes Psalm 104:24, which speaks of the works of God made in wisdom—works that, in ecological terms, brim with biodiversity, fecundity, resilience, works that sustain the land from which they emerge and to which they return as seasons of growth soon quiet into fallow restoration.

These resilient organisms hold luminous and whispery voices along their terrains, sounding incantations from those tallgrass prairies growing upward of 12 feet high. “There’s something magical about being at those places,” land conservator Heather Jobst has said of the remnant prairies in the Midwest. It’s something these tiles seem to gather, with their grassy dimensionality, bowed heads laden in growth and seed holding a promise that echoes across the landscape.