

Journey to the Stones

Plein Air Drawing in Orkney, Scotland

Christine Manwiller, Jessie Pautsch, and Kelsey Temanson ❖ Art & Design ❖ University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire



Abstract:

Our journey to the Scottish isles of Orkney allowed for an immersive artistic experience in which we learned to capture and portray the Orcadian landscape and culture, within which we lived and worked for six weeks. Through on-site drawing of subjects - from wildlife and seascapes, to architecture and town - we worked en plein air whilst cultivating our technical and observational drawing abilities. On-site drawing enhanced our knowledge of key artistic elements such as composition, perspective, color theory, and the perception of color as light and shade. Our art was created primarily with oil pastel, carried daily to each site, where we first observed and explored the area before selecting a subject to draw. We departed Orkney with a rich knowledge of Orcadian history, both cultural and natural, as well as a new intercultural perspective on art and life, and we returned home to Wisconsin with a body of artwork reflecting our learning experience.

Brief History:

- The Orkney Islands have been a center of human activity for over ten thousand years, beginning with the Neolithic builders whose architectural ruins at sites such as the Ring of Brodgar and Maeshowe have earned honors as UNESCO World Heritage Sites and national monuments.
- Evidence of Iron Age, Bronze Age, and Pictish life also abounds in Orkney. Fortified brochs and settlements, as well as decorative artifacts of jewelry and ceramic vessels, have been found.



Broch of Gurness



Ring of Brodgar

- The most (in)famous settlers of the islands arrived in the 9th century from the east - Vikings, looking for both an outpost and an area to colonize. The invaders left Orkney with a rich cultural legacy, from the grave-goods of burials to the soft Scandinavian inflection which the Orcadian accent still bears. From Orkney, the Vikings were able to harry the Scottish coast and travel as far as Ireland on raiding parties before returning home to their new farms and halls to celebrate their voyages. During this time, a line of Norwegian jarls came to rule these islands, a line of prince-lords whose adventurous lives and exploits were immortalized in The Orkneyinga Saga. The most famous of these would become St. Magnus Erlendsson, for whom Jarl Rongvald Kolsson founded Kirkwall's magnificent **St. Magnus Cathedral** in 1137 A.D.
- The Scottish mainland has always had an influence on Orcadian politics and life. Eventually, Norway was forced to officially relinquish the islands, along with Shetland, during a dowry settlement with King James III. This Scottish annexation would lead to the islands falling into the hands of the Stewart dynasty during its darker days, and ultimately ending up as part of Scotland and the United Kingdom. Due to its strategic location in the North Sea, it was also a crucial station point for the British Navy during WWII and a keep for prisoners of war.



The Earl's Palace



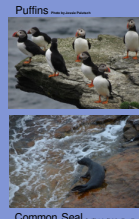
St. Magnus Cathedral



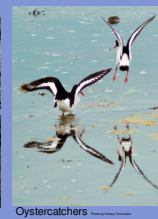
St. Magnus Cathedral

Natural History:

- Seated at 59° North latitude where the North Atlantic joins the North Sea, the Orkney Islands enjoy long hours of daylight in the spring and summer before being enveloped in darkness during the fall and winter months; however, the archipelago is kept fairly temperate by the Gulf Jet Stream. Orkney is renowned for constant winds which scour the landscape; exploitation of this natural resource is evident throughout the islands in the form of numerous small and large scale wind turbines.
- The land is primarily rolling green hills and valleys, ringed by impressive coastal cliffs and rocky shores. The surrounding sea has some of the most powerful and dangerous in the world, beset by fierce tidal races and quick moving tides. Wave and tidal power generation is thus emerging as a very real natural resource, in which Orkney is leading the way in worldwide research and development.
- In a few locations the islands take on the rugged topography of the Highlands, with steep slopes awash in heather. Beneath all of this, and often exposed at the surface, are unique rock formations. Once the bed of a massive Devonian freshwater body called Lake Orcadie, the now exposed stones of Orkney vary from tessellated flagstone, favored by builders through the ages, to banded rock still bearing the marks of ancient ripples.
- Interspersed amongst the rocky shores and farmed lands are a remarkable number of birds. Colonies of puffins, gannets, various seagulls and guillemots make their homes in the cliffs, while massive groups of oystercatchers and curlews pick the fields between rooks, ravens, and hooded crows. The mammals are somewhat more limited, being primarily small rodents, like the Orkney vole or the introduced hedgehog, although friendly Common and Grey Seals frolic year-long in the surrounding waters.



Common Seal



Oystercatchers

Orkney Culture:

- The Orkney Islands are primarily agricultural, with an emphasis on beef and dairy industry. Additionally, the rough waters surrounding the isles provide rich fishing grounds for herring, crab, haddock, and other sea foods. The late Orcadian writer, **George Mackay Brown**, described the islanders as being "fishermen with ploughs". The town of Stromness was a whaling port from 1770 to the 1900's, and by the late eighteenth century three-quarters of the Hudson's Bay Company workforce in Canada were Orcadians.
- Beyond the work of land and sea, Orkney is home to a vibrant arts scene. In May, Stromness hosts a week-long folk music festival, and Kirkwall in June hosts the week-long St. Magnus Festival, a massive gathering of international classical musicians, playwrights, opera and all arts audible (visual, performing, and written). Music is an integral element of daily Orcadian life, thriving as community concerts and ceilidh dances, as well as in jam sessions in pubs and homes. The distinctly northern style of fiddling can be heard from many violin strings, and Kirkwall boasts a community pipe band.
- Orkney is a convergence point for visual artists. Drawing from the beauty of their land, sea, and heritage, Orkney has produced numerous painters, printmakers, metalsmiths, and textile artists, while luring visiting artists from across the world.
- In written word, Orkney has produced two of the twentieth century's premier poets: Edwin Muir, and his protégé George Mackay Brown (fondly named the Bard of Orkney). Brown's own work grew in part upon the islands' natural beauty and historic lineage, often echoing the Viking skalds in a modern voice.



Kirkwall Pipeband



Christine & Jessie drawing at Broch of Gurness



Kelsey drawing at Broch of Gurness

Art Media and Process:

- Oil pastels are crayon-like sticks of pigment bound in linseed oil and a wax carrier. Our drawings were created by first preparing archival Stonehenge cotton paper with a coat of gesso, which provides pastels a texture of ground that amplifies the texture of stone. The initial layer of color is rubbed deeply into the gessoed paper to create a film of pastel, which is then built upon from dark to light. Layers may be blended together, scumbled, and scraped away with a knife blade. After completion, the image is sprayed with a fixative to prevent smudging, to protect it from the atmosphere, and to unify the surface.



The Four Lassies on the steps of St. Magnus Cathedral



Christine drawing at Skara Brae



Jessie drawing at the Ring of Brodgar



Kelsey & Christine drawing at Ynabry



Kelsey drawing at Ynabry

Acknowledgments

We sincerely thank all those who made this educational research experience possible:

- ORSP (Office of Research and Sponsored Programs)
- CIE (Center for International Education)
- Department of Art & Design (UWEC)
- Associate Professor Sandra Starck, UWEC Printmaking & Drawing
- Bla & Amie Tait and Family (Orkney)
- Higgins Travel Leaders (Travel Agency, Eau Claire WI)
- LTS (UWEC Learning and Technology Services printed this poster)