

# Plant-life inspiration for artist in Orkney

COLIN Johnstone is an artist living at Stromness. Having moved there from Glasgow two and a half years ago, the inspiration which he found in the plant life and flowers of the region is now being recognised in London. The gallery owned by dealer Rebecca Hossack will be showing his large pictures for one month from November 6.

Johnstone trained as a printmaker in Glasgow and lived there for one year after his studies. During that time, he was employed as the assistant manager of the Glasgow Print Studio, but after moving to Orkney with his wife, Brenda, who is an art teacher, he established himself quickly as a painter.

His paintings are made in cramped conditions, his studio being a small room in the house. By the light of its one window, he has developed an interest in the illustration of the native plant life which surrounds him.

He shuns many of the formal methods of painting, preferring to

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□ IAN McKAY

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prepare his canvases with a simple rabbit-skin glue size. On to this he uses vegetable stains, earth and paint which give an authentic but semi-abstract background for his more detailed representations of the floral and herbal specimens.

Unlike the familiar prints in a herbalist's manual; however, these paintings are far bigger — some, in fact, so big the canvases have to be folded to allow him to work on a section at a time on his kitchen table. As the gallery assistant in London told me, occasionally he has been known to hang his paintings on the washing-line to see them better.

His day is not time-tabled in the way perhaps one thinks it would be for an artist showing on the London gallery circuit. He divides his time between odd jobs, gardening, walking and the

painting, which sometimes he goes for weeks without doing.

Beverly Smith, an archaeologist in Orkney, supplies him with the snippets of information which provide some of the factual evidence for the use of plants in the diet of our distant relatives. Other knowledge is gleaned from books and his impressions are accumulated in the final picture.

It is interesting that in an age of prepackaged food, saturation farming and mass-produced medicines, there is a demand for the paintings of an artist immersed in the folklore of a different age altogether.

The homoeopathic remedies which use the plants he now paints were as common to the Viking invaders as they are to Johnstone. Perhaps that is why there is a demand. The culture-hungry art buyers in London are eager to secure for themselves a slice of the past which, despite being overtaken by their own big businesses, still offers an intriguing message for them to contemplate.