

Symbolic meeting led to cross-Atlantic collaboration

EXHIBITION

by VICTORIA RHODES

A CHANCE meeting at the Ness of Brodgar last summer has led to collaboration spanning the Atlantic, which will hopefully help to boost archaeological research in Orkney.

Last weekend, an exhibition of fine art intaglio prints by renowned American artist Professor James B Thompson opened at the Orkney Museum. Professor Thompson, of Willamette University, Oregon has donated all the prints that make up *The Visual Language of Ancient Scotland* exhibition to the Orkney Archaeology Society, so they can sell them to raise funds to benefit archaeological research in the county.

Nick Card, chairman of the Orkney Archaeology Society (OAS), travelled to America in February, to talk to students at Willamette University about his work at the Ness of Brodgar. Next summer, students from America will come to Orkney to take part in a field school and learn about our

archaeological history first hand.

James and his wife, Martha, first came to Orkney in July 2009.

"It was a very short trip, I'd been down in Perthshire researching at Pictish stones and we just came over here for two days," explained James. "Someone told us to go to the Ness of Brodgar and we had a lovely tour. It was a fantastic site, everyone seemed totally involved in what they were doing, which was lovely to see. One of the archaeologists, Dan showed me a stone that he'd discovered cut with lines. He said these would be the equivalent of what we'd call art, although they probably had no word for it."

James and Martha were so taken with the site they waited for Nick Card, the site's director, to return and they soon struck up a mutually beneficial friendship.

"It was really when I came here to Orkney, the whole experience, that I was inspired to complete these prints," said James. "I began to look at sites that are quite well known, such as Skara Brae, and got very intrigued by the place itself and where these items were within the landscape. As I looked more at the scenery and this incredible stonework, how carefully it was put together, it made me think about how I wanted to approach it."

He took about eight months to create the collection, using the intaglio

printing technique and varying levels of ink to create different effects and patterns. "I started working on all of them first, to get them all in progress, then slowly built each one up. It's similar to the process archaeologists are involved in. They are scientists but are intuitive too, very visual, which is interesting to me. I've learnt a lot about the relationship between art and archaeology, the landscape and people."

He continued: "Nick has a great respect for people, the land, what they do and how they do it. I think it's wonderful; if I can help by giving art to the society so they can use the funds to continue their work here, then that's great. I've been working as a professional artist for about 35 years, it's nice to give something back."

He added that archaeological work in Orkney is well known in the US, with people coming here just to see it: "You have a world treasure, for people of the world. That's exciting, that's unique; there is no other place like these islands in the world, what they contain in terms of human history."

Nick Card said: "It was a total chance meeting, we've had so many people coming to the excavation and you don't always think there'll be any follow up, but we started exchanging emails straight away. Then James managed to secure funding for me to go over and give a series of lectures. While there, he came up with this wonderful gesture of donating his art to the Orkney Archaeology Society."

"While I was at Willamette I established links with the archaeology department, and Professor Scott Pike and I have arranged for several students from West Coast universities to come over here to take part in a field school next July and August. Hopefully this will be the start of a long-term relationship with Willamette University, bringing potential students



ORIGINAL ARTWORK ON SALE: Professor James Thompson (centre) with Martha Thompson and Nick Card at the Orkney Museum. Below are two of the prints that the artist has donated to the Orkney Archaeology Society. PICTURES ORKNEY MEDIA GROUP

over here and helping to bring international money into Orkney."

He added: "The whole thing's just been quite stupendous. If it hadn't been for James and Martha inviting me over to Oregon, I wouldn't have gone to Washington DC and established links with National Geographic and the Harvard Club of Washington, which are going to promote Orkney archaeology and Orkney as a whole to a wider audience."

"This year at the Ness of Brodgar we've been pleasantly surprised by not just the new volunteers, but the people who've come to Orkney to see the dig in action."

Each print in the exhibition costs £1500; every one is unique and there will never be another like it printed.

"Considering what an eminent artist James is, in America and in this

country, that's an absolute snip!" said Nick. "The money won't just go to the Ness of Brodgar dig, OAS support and promote all archaeological projects throughout Orkney. Potentially, a lot of projects will benefit from the sale of these prints. It's a lot of money in itself, but money also attracts money, so we will be able to use some of this as match funding to apply to a range of grant giving bodies this year."

If anyone wants to buy a print, they should lodge interest with the museum and their details will be passed on to the OAS.

The Visual Language of Ancient Scotland by Professor James B Thompson runs until October 23 at the Orkney Museum. The exhibition is being supported by Orkney Islands Council's Education and Leisure Services.



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Gifted artwork to benefit Orkney's archaeology

Archaeology in Orkney looks set to benefit thanks to a two-day visit to the county by an American artist last year.

Professor James B. Thompson, of Willamette University, Oregon, has donated a set of 15 intaglio prints to the Orkney Archaeology Society. The prints are to be sold in aid of funds for the continuing support of archaeological research in the county.

Prof Thompson's prints will go on display in the Orkney Museum on Saturday in an exhibition entitled *The Visual Language Ancient of Scotland*.

The Orcadian caught up with Prof Thompson earlier this week, where he explained the story behind his generous gift.

He said: "Though I am not an historian, anthropologist or an archaeologist, I am a visual artist exploring mark-making, visual images, symbols, shapes, lines and patterns, so this emphasis on ancient landscape, culture

and process in the creation of images and structures intrigues me personally, professionally and artistically.

"In the summer of 2009, I came over to Scotland to research Pictish symbol stones. On that trip, one of the things my wife and I decided to do was take a two-and-a-half day trip to Orkney to see some of the sites found here.

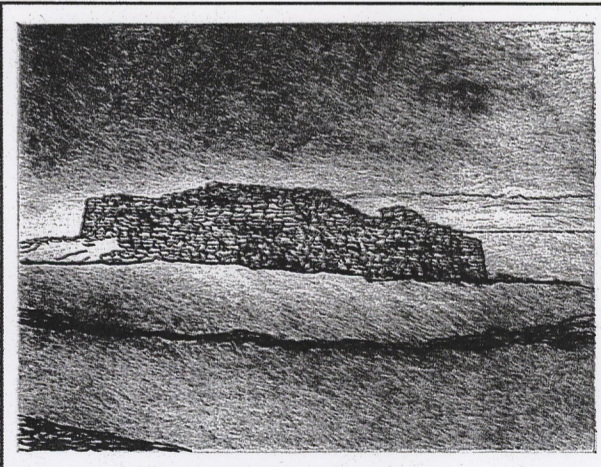
"So we came up in July for a couple of days and were driving around to see some of the sites such as Maeshowe, Skara Brae, Gurness and the Brough of Birsay and I got more and more intrigued by the landscape and how these sites were situated.

"As we were going to the Ring of Brodgar, we saw these people working on a site from the side of the road. Someone had told us there was a dig we might want to go see.

"We stopped and had a tour of the site and what was going on. Having seen some of the other sites it dawned on me this was fairly impressive — not just the archaeology but where it was situated, between the two rings, on this thin strip of land with lochs on both sides.

"My wife suggested we could get somebody over to Willamette to talk about the excavation, so we introduced ourselves to Nick Card [chairman of the Orkney Archaeology Society and site director at the Ness of Brodgar excavation] and invited him over to the States to give some talks."

"It was then that I became aware of all the work that goes on behind the scenes of archaeological research, in particular the funding. It's not just this beautiful, wonderful world of practising. So I decided let's give them some sort



Broch, one of the 15 intaglio prints donated to the Orkney Archaeology Society by Professor James Thompson.

of gift — my prints — and I hope that people will be intrigued and perhaps want one on their wall."

He added: "People here are so interested in archaeology, but its outside the islands that its really having an impact. Here, in Orkney, it's right there, right in front of you. The prehistory, the Neolithic, the Iron Age, signs of people living here for thousands of years. And it's fascinating."

Regarding his prints, Prof Thompson explained: "In my travels around Scotland, and up into Orkney, I noticed the visually arresting use of stone in the construction of walls, architectural structures, dwellings for the living and cairns, or burial chambers, for the dead, as well as the exquisitely dry stacked stone that has somehow remained watertight, intact and level through the ages. Stone was utilised to demarcate

the landscape, emphasize seasonal and celestial events, create sacred spaces, designate areas for ritual, and signify other places of importance.

"Some of the stones were elaborately carved to depict battles, reflect objects or wildlife common to a given set of people in their time while others had been incised with images, patterns, messages or symbols that were understood visually as information in the time of prehistory. I realised that there were parallels between the way in which these ancient people from the Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age and Pictish periods — of what is now known as Scotland — incised stone and the way in which I incised my metal plates in the process of making marks that would become my intaglio prints.

"The more I noticed the treat-

ment of these stones, and their inherent spatial relationships to the surrounding landscape, the more I realised that a kind of visual language was at work among the ancient people of prehistory who quarried, carved, dressed and decorated these stones seemingly as part of a larger process through time.

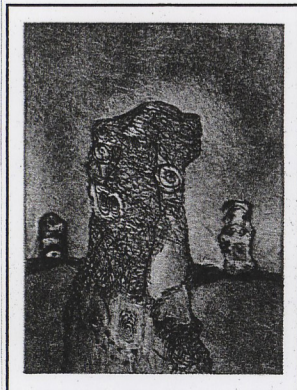
"The connection that these prehistoric peoples shared with their surrounding landscape and cyclical seasonal shifts seemed to me to be interrelated with the process of constructing and reconstructing with stone as well as the surface treatment or decoration of the stones. It appeared that, like me, these ancient peoples also had a relationship with each other in a larger cultural context through time as they overlapped, progressed and still engaged in rituals that revealed their connection to a kind of continuum."

He added: "I hope to honour the significance of mark-making in both, the ancient world and my present, by creating contemporary works that engage in this ongoing visual dialogue and share the same emphasis on process, spatial relationships, landscape, patterning, symbol and line that visually connect us all as a culture through time."

Nick Card said: "On behalf of the Orkney Archaeology Society, and Orcadian archaeology in general, I would like to thank James for his exceptionally generous donation. It couldn't happen at a more opportune time with the recent *Art and Archaeology* initiative.

"To be associated with such a prominent artist as James raises not only the profile of Orkney's archaeology but also Orkney as a whole to a new audience. This friendship with James has also been instrumental in the development of ties between Orkney College and the archaeology dept at James's university in Oregon. James and his wife, Martha, should be hugely thanked for the time and effort they have put into their trip to Orkney and I'm sure that this will not be their last!"

● The exhibition is supported by the Orkney Islands Council's Education and Leisure Services and runs until October 23.



Megaliths, by Professor James Thompson.