

# When a Place Casts a Spell

*Jeanne Bouza Rose has found her creative inspiration in the ancient stone rings of Orkney, Scotland. Since her first encounter, the islands' charms have held her captive.*

BY AMANDA METCALF

The first question you want to ask Jeanne Bouza Rose is why the Orkney Islands? What is it about this particular place that she finds so endlessly inspiring? "I'm still trying to figure that out," Rose says. It's not that she hasn't recognized the attraction or tried to puzzle through the question, but as a teacher, she also knows that sometimes a student can get more from moving on to the next question. Rose, therefore, doesn't see the point in waiting until she figures out the answer to take advantage of her muse.





**Precious stones** • The ancient stones of the Orkney Islands have a power over artist Jeanne Bouza Rose, which she channels into paintings like *Stones of Stenness, Orkney, Scotland* (oil, 28 x 22), above, and *Colored Clouds* (watercolor, 28 x 22), at left. "The standing stones are the heart of Orkney," says the artist. "Sometimes I feel like they're the whole heart of the entire world. I can find undulating hillsides in other places, but it's knowing that the stones are nearby, it's being able to paint them when I'm home, it's looking at them, touching them, being dwarfed by them when I'm there that gives me a sense of comfort. You're caught by the power."

**That's ancient history** • More than 70 islands make up the Orkney Islands, located off the northern tip of Scotland. With Neolithic-period structures and Viking ruins, the islands are, not surprisingly, home to many archaeological sites. Two stone henges, Brodgar and Stenness, are the center of interest for Rose. The enormous Ring of Brodgar spans 341 feet in diameter, and 27 of its original 60 stones remain, reaching heights between seven and just over 15 feet. Four of the original 12 Stones of Stenness remain, spanning a slighter 144-foot diameter but reaching higher, as much as 19 feet each. Their arrangements, in rings, with "entrance ways" facing north, make it clear that the placement of the stones was an intentional, man-made design, though no one has been able to determine who placed them there or how.

**The main attraction** • Orkney is far afield from the typical European tourist sites, a quality that first drew Rose there in 1983. As an elementary school teacher, she traveled to Paisley, Scotland, a suburb of Glasgow, on a one-year Fulbright Teacher Exchange program. There she became obsessed with historical markers. "There'd be this arrow down a winding path, with sheep crisscrossing to a pile of stones that was a castle or Neolithic, prehistoric art," she says.

"Sometimes the stones would be as tall as I was and maybe there'd be hills in the distance and maybe rain or a rainbow or clouds. There was something about the age, the space . . . that just seemed awe-inspiring. I fell in love with the notion of undulating hills, and clouds passing, and curving roads and sky, and realized I wanted them in my life . . . so I began to draw and paint [them]."

Rose felt an affinity to these Glasgow sites, but it was just a start. On a break from teaching, she decided again to travel off the beaten path, bypassing London and Paris for more singular spots that she could make her own. In Orkney, standing among the monolith stones of Brodgar and Stenness, she remembers, "You were by yourself . . . You felt dwarfed by what people had done, by what man had done, but you understood why they might have done it within the context of what nature had done around them." The fact that these ancient peoples placed the stones not just anywhere, but in an atmosphere of beauty—and why—is a mystery that continues to fascinate the artist.

**Staying power** • In 1994, while recovering from cancer surgery, Rose traveled again to Orkney. Longing to retrieve the sense of both life and history that





**Stone and sky** • Along with the mysterious stones, the light in Orkney also inspires. "You're higher north," Rose says, "so you've got this butterscotch light, especially in the afternoon, that creates the longest shadows. In the summer it's light until 11:30 p.m." The magical light inspired *Brodgar Fissure* (watercolor white line woodblock, 9 x 12), at left, and *Stenness Stance* (watercolor white line woodblock, 9 x 12), above.



**Spellbound** • Rose couldn't have imagined, when she planned her first trip to Orkney, the powerful impact the place would have on her life and her art, drawing her back again and again to sketch, photograph and paint.





seem to coexist in this place, Rose revisited a familiar site—a cliff overlooking the ocean. She remembered having stood in the exact spot 10 years earlier, and sharing the view with a puffin. On her return trip, as if sensing the reenactment, a puffin positioned itself in the same spot. Then she knew, she says, that she was going to live. And with that life-affirming notion, the artist also fully realized the integral part Orkney would play in her life.

Rose no longer limits her visits to once a decade; in the past two years, she has visited four times, staying nine weeks last summer. She leads annual painting expeditions to the islands and a local gallery now represents her work. "Orkney is constantly changing. The stones stay fixed, but the clouds are never the same. The colors are never the same and the shadows are never the same," she says.

**Singular enchantment** • Sure, Rose could visit other sites, and she has, but she always returns to her inspirational home. "I've been to the Parthenon, but I've never painted the Parthenon" she says. "I have no interest in painting Notre Dame. In times of need, I've wanted to go back to Orkney. In times of happiness, I wanted to go back to Orkney. So, now, I may not go to Egypt ever, but that's OK."

Where another artist may crave variety, Rose cherishes the relationship she has with Orkney, the acquaintances and partnerships she has established there, and the constant but ever-changing inspiration surrounding the formidable and fascinating rings of stones. "When something really works for you, it really is a blending of whatever technical skills you have and the inspiration you experience. My artwork didn't bring me joy until I found the inspiration," she says. Rose has found in Orkney something many artists never find: long-lasting fulfillment. ❧

**The Orkney magic** • The islands' Neolithic stones attract Rose with an almost magnetic force. Below is another artistic tribute, *A Trio of Elegance* (watercolor, 22 x 28). But there's more to Orkney than the stone structures. "There are no trees; there are no high, craggy mountains, so wherever you are, you feel like you can go 360 degrees around and see the entire sky," says Rose. "Shore birds are making sounds all the time. There's the sound of the sea mostly, no airplane traffic, no road traffic. There's no claustrophobia," she says, describing a mystique that's celebrated in *View Across the Stromness Harbor* (watercolor, 9 x 24), above.



**Amanda Metcalf** is a freelance writer and editor living in New York City. **Jeanne Bouza Rose's** home-away-from-Orkney is in Wantagh, New York. For more information on her art or Orkney Art Adventure trips, visit [www.rosecrossing.com](http://www.rosecrossing.com). To learn more about Orkney history, visit [www.orkneyjar.com](http://www.orkneyjar.com).