



Frances Macdonald's first trip to Iona was a disaster, but you wouldn't have guessed so by looking at her paintings.

Many of her works feature the island which was also a favourite subject of the Scottish Colourists. Indeed Peplóe, Fergusson, Hunter and Cadell all worked from this compact yet infinitely charming archipelago in the Inner Hebrides.

Macdonald fits into that canon well, though she says it is more a matter of coincidence than intention. She had been painting for a while before she even looked at the works of the Colourists, and was surprised to find that many of Cadell's viewpoints mirrored her own. When we speak, she wonders whether they perched on the same rock to paint.

It is an inherent artistic vision that the two share, a connection of coincidence rather than design. Each was drawn to the same place more than a century apart, and the resulting works are entirely idiosyncratic despite their shared subject matter. This is due to process, and Macdonald's is entirely her

own. She favours a palette knife over a brush for the rough, choppy texture it lends her depictions of rocks – a subject the Colourists tackled in a far less textural fashion. Of this key difference, Macdonald says: 'I think the Colourists would be horrified at the strength of my rocks, to be honest.'

Embracing texture defines Macdonald's work. Indeed, her vivid seascapes are bordering on tangible. If you're familiar with the rugged shoreline of the West Coast, these are scenes you will know well, and it is the rocks in Macdonald's work that are most recognisable. They reach off the canvas, their surfaces freckled with the ochre-yellow lichen and burnished wrack that is synonymous with the area. Then there are the brave little sea pinks which pop up in so many of her works – those perennial wildflowers that dot Scotland's coastlines which are Macdonald's self-proclaimed favourite.

From her paintings, Macdonald's love for the landscape (and especially for Iona) is clear. So, what went wrong during that first visit, and what eventually led her back? Sometime in



TOP LEFT: *Misty Morning at the North End, Iona* oil on canvas 91.5 x 152.5 cm. **TOP RIGHT:** Frances Macdonald in her studio with a selection of her landscapes. **LEFT:** Frances Macdonald.





A heart in the Hebrides

Though her first trip to Iona was not all plain sailing, artist Frances Macdonald has since found infinite inspiration in the ever-shifting landscapes of the Inner Hebrides, says Eilidh Tuckett

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Bluebell Wood, Bracken, Poltalloch*, oil on canvas, 81 x 81 cm; *The Paps of Jura from Ronachan Kintyre* 40"x50" oil on canvas; Frances painting a triptych of the north end of Iona in her studio.

the early seventies, the Macdonald family boarded the revered steamer King George V, bound for Iona. They had not long been sailing when it transpired that their daughter, Julia, had disappeared. Sometime after a frantic call-out via the intercom, she was discovered below deck enjoying ice cream with the crew. The stress of the experience marred the rest of the trip for Macdonald, and it was 20 years before she revisited the island.

The second time was with her husband, Nick, and it was by accident. Their boat, the M V Sgarbh, ran aground just off the coast, and they had to wait for the tide to come in. Macdonald went ashore and whiled away the hours painting, and that was the start of an unlikely and enduring love. 'The colours are quite incredible,' she says. 'Colours like that don't exist anywhere else. Well, maybe in the Caribbean, but this is Scotland.'

Now, when she is serious about starting a new piece, it is Iona that she heads for.

Macdonald always wanted to be an artist. It was her father who deemed it an unsuitable prospect. He had been frightened by the fate of a cousin who had attended Edinburgh Art College and come back pregnant, a beatnik with a bairn. It wasn't to



be Macdonald's path. 'In those days, you listened to your parents,' says Frances, stoically. There is no trace of lingering resentment. Like many great artists, Macdonald's strength stems from these trials; the things that seemingly knocked her off course are what ultimately led to her success. And she is successful.

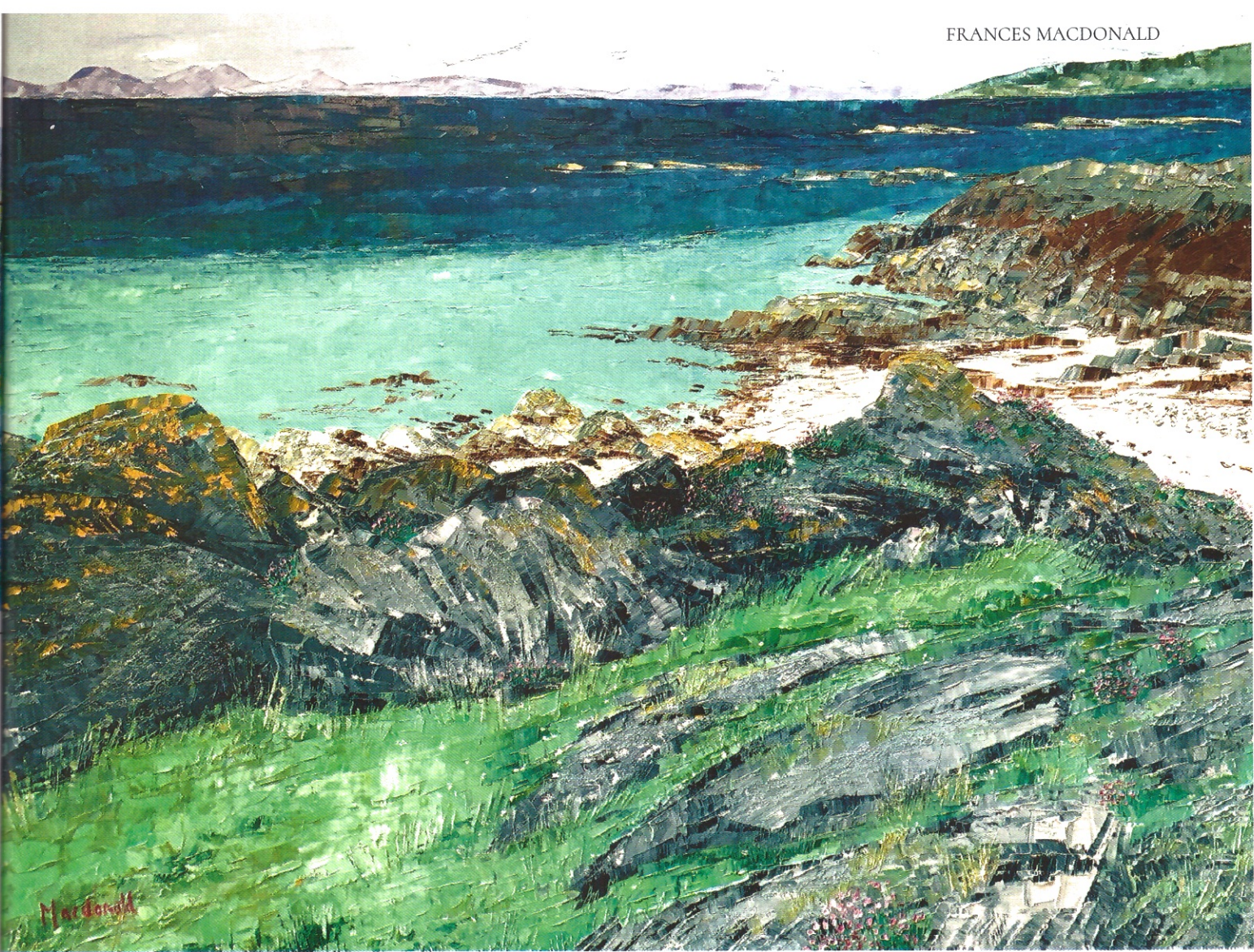
Today, Macdonald is one of Scotland's pre-eminent contemporary landscape artists, and there is no doubt that her life experiences are to thank for the richness and depth of her paintings. She may not have been an art student in the traditional sense, but in her own way Macdonald was always an artist, she was just working under the guise of other occupations.

Macdonald's early artistic life was spent in line drawing and watercolours, small pieces which could be done quickly, using a knee as a workspace. As a nurse in the Merchant Navy, Macdonald would sell paintings to colleagues on board her ship. It wasn't until her son, Ross Ryan, now an esteemed artist in his own right, came back from art school and told her to throw away the watercolours and pursue something that she was really interested in, that she reconsidered art as an occupation. It is an uncommon sentiment, for a child to be credited for a parent's successful career, but that's exactly what Macdonald does. The modern narrative is that children thwart ambition, but Macdonald points to hers when asked what made her become an artist who was serious and focused on her craft.

Until Ryan told her to prioritise her ambitions, Macdonald's art had always fitted around her life; as a nurse on board Merchant Navy ships, to running a hotel, to being a mother and a home-maker. 'I had never really been in the right place to work. I didn't have the right type of studio, and there were always people running around and dogs and things. It was always a mess. Once you've got your own space it makes a huge difference.'

Today, Macdonald's works are big, arresting landscapes that demand space. Creating them demands space too, and it was this factor that held her back from oil paints, her true





'Her life experiences are to thank for the richness and depth of her paintings'



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'Her crisp West Coast accent is like a sharp sea wind'

the way it comes together – quickly, intuitively. It's almost as though she is making up for lost time.

This pace doesn't extend to her medium, however, and she regales me with tales of paint drying which are far more interesting than they sound. At one exhibition in London's prestigious Portland Gallery, where she shows biennially, a potential buyer got more than he bargained for when he leant against a painting. As he turned to leave the gallery, Macdonald saw the waves of Argyll imprinted on his jacket. The piece had to be touched up the next day. Thankfully he never invoiced for the damage to his tweed, though he didn't return to buy the work either. Perhaps he framed the sleeve.

For an artist producing paintings with such decidedly Scottish subjects, Macdonald doesn't find her market limited. She exhibits regularly at home, in London and beyond, and her paintings can be found in several important private and corporate collections worldwide, but none of it goes to her head. Macdonald is no nonsense, and an absolute joy to speak with. Her crisp West Coast accent is like a sharp sea wind; it makes you pay attention. Hers are stories characterised by a lifetime of hard work and deep affection for the people and the places she references. She is the sort of person who makes the ordinary sparkle, and this much is evident in her paintings. They reflect the gratitude she has for her surroundings, for the way her life panned out.

Macdonald mentions her time spent abroad, her fondness for the South of France, like the Colourists, and Venice and the Amalfi Coast. It will always be Scotland, though, that she loves the most. 'It's really special to me, that feeling of heritage.' 

COAST WITH THE MOST: Frances favours a palette knife over a brush for the rough, choppy textures.

medium, for so long. Now, Macdonald has a room of one's own, an ample studio in Crinan, where she has been based for over fifty years running the Crinan Hotel and raising her family.

These experiences inform her style – a naturalistic honesty rendered in paint, which elevates the seascapes Macdonald has spent a lifetime looking at. Those years of observation are evident in her work itself and in

Painter's paradise

Frances Macdonald will be exhibiting at the Portland Gallery, London from 7-22 December.
portlandgallery.com

She also shows her work on a rotating basis at The Scottish Gallery, and at the Crinan Hotel.
scottish-gallery.co.uk;
crinanhotel.com

SCOTTISH FIELD

NOVEMBER 2023 . £4.95

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& GARDENS



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JENNY COLGAN,
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JOE MCFADDEN
HOW WE CAN SAVE
WILD SALMON

COOKING WITH GAME

How to make the most
of our rich natural larder

