

BEHIND
THE
PICTURE

AN TEALLACH COMES ALIVE

It's one of our finest mountains. Now it has the painting it deserves. And it's all thanks to a remarkable artist with a passion for colour, geology and wilderness walking.

WORDS DAN ASPEL
PICTURE JAMES HAWKINS

James Hawkins speaks for anyone who's ever seen the most dramatically notched 1062m mountain in Britain when he says "An Teallach is amazing". What *Trail* couldn't get him to say (but we can now, to spare his modesty) is that his paintings of this Scottish peak capture it like nothing else you're likely to lay eyes on.

Take the image printed here. The landscape is lashed by reedy needles of rain above a shimmering foreground of heather and brush. There's a blurry unreality to some parts and an arresting crispness to others. The mountain outline at its centre is stark.

But that's just our opinion; to find out how James makes such vivid images, we spoke to the man himself. "Being out on the hill is many experiences in one," says the 37-year resident of Loch Broom's shores, "and there's a lot of movement – from the walker themselves, to the wind around them, to the trees. Trying to distil all of that, you have to create something more than just a single static image."

To achieve these he uses "a combination of memory, drawing and photographs". This means that once back in the studio after – very likely – many walks, he'll run a slideshow of all the images he's collected of a certain peak and draw inspiration from "the colour in a bit of sky", or "a profile of a mountain from a neighbouring summit". He'll then meld these together in a combination of many moments. And here's where things really get interesting; because to make the image seem alive with movement, he'll dot it with "little pockets of complementary colour".

"If you have an area of green and it's just not quite green enough," he explains, "drop in a spot of red and it suddenly 'pings'. I use that all the time. Yellow and purple is another example – anything opposite on the 'colour wheel'. If you want to make a painting dance and sing, then simply put in bits of complementary colour, pockets of agitation that appear in the corner of the eye. You're making the viewer animate the painting themselves as they glance from one to the other. You're bringing movement to it."

Even more pleasingly, Oxford-born James isn't simply an artist who paints the occasional stack of rock; mountains are in his blood. He and his wife Flick have spent nearly four decades exploring the unique landscape of Scotland's north-west, and their understanding of it is much more than skin-deep.

"When painting a peak, I'd always choose to do a circum-

navigation rather than a climb," says James. "You don't just need to grab the peaks, and Flick and I do a lot of rather random walks where we go off-piste. We're free to change our minds throughout the day, and we come across little jewels of islands in lochans that deer can't get to, so trees grow happily beside unseen views of the mountains. You find things that way, rather than sticking to the more obviously beaten track."

And spending so much time out in the wild has fed a natural curiosity too, one that has further informed and enriched his painting: "I like to inform myself about geology," he says. "We live on the edge of the Moine Thrust Belt – which is where the first discoveries of fault and plate tectonics were made. What you

have is a great plate of rock that started off in Inverness and slid over the top of the younger rock underneath. What it has made is a great irregular edge of cliff, which cuts over valleys and gorges for at least 100 miles, and you can see dramatic changes of vegetation on one side of the glen between that Moine Thrust and the opposing Torridonian Sandstone. In autumn you get green vegetation on one side, and red and brown on the other. Geology really is the bones of the job."

Visit the couple's website yourself and you'll discover a horde

of mountain paintings to pore over. From Beinn Eighe to Slioch, Quinag and Suilven, James has been busy in his lifetime spent among our strangest and most memorable peaks. But ask him what the future holds, and you'd think he'd only just arrived: "I need to visit them time and time again in different seasons and weathers before the mountains are there in my subconscious," he says. "The longer I go on, the more I realise I'm just beginning. That's the wonderful thing about Scotland: it's never going to run out. You're always seeing new things." www.jameshawkinsart.co.uk 

James Hawkins



● WALK AN TEALLACH YOURSELF THIS MONTH! FULL ROUTE ON PAGE 130.