

## Psychiatry in pictures

CHOSEN BY ROBERT HOWARD



Angus McPhee (1916–1997): Woven jacket, grass boots, peat creel and beech leaf rope

Born into a crofting family on South Uist, Angus McPhee learned the local skill of making rope out of grass to put over haystacks, secure roof thatching or to lead horses from the fields. While serving with the Lovat Scouts Regiment in the Faroes from 1940, McPhee became ill. Returned home to his family croft, he became solitary and self-absorbed, with behaviour that was too erratic and difficult for his family to manage. He was admitted to Craig Dunain Hospital near Inverness and spent the next 50 years of his life, virtually without speaking, on the farm ward. When not at work on the hospital farm, Angus would weave ropes, garments, shoes and containers from grass, beech leaves and pieces of sheep's wool collected from hedges and fences. In 1996, as the hospital closed, he was transferred to a nursing home on Uist. In her book, *Angus McPhee Weaver of Grass*, the art therapist Joyce Laing describes her first encounter with Angus and his art. Visiting Craig Dunain in search of Art Extraordinary, she had been told about a patient who made things out of grass and whose work could be found under the trees and bushes of the hospital grounds. 'Jim and I began to rummage about under the bushes, "Look," I cried excitedly, "It's a boot." Seconds later Jim emerged from the undergrowth, triumphant with another boot. We placed them on the grass – they were a pair. Then like kids at a party, we ran in and out of the bushes, bringing out all manner of garments, a coat, trousers, a peat creel and on it went. The charge nurse, watching us from the ward window, decided to join us. "Would you like to meet Angus?" he queried. We couldn't wait. He sent the young nurse to the fields to find Angus. Shortly, Angus appeared, a fine handsome man, over six foot tall. Dressed in grey hospital garb, he also sported a grass cap on his head, a sheep's wool muffler and a sheep's wool handkerchief with the pointed triangle showing from his top jacket pocket – the touch of a gentleman'. Angus never spoke about the purpose or meaning of his weavings and stood and watched impassively as the hospital gardeners raked them up and burned them with the autumn leaves each year. The surviving fragments of his output have a beauty and a power that belies their fragility and give an eloquent if enigmatic voice to this silent man. These and other grass weavings by Angus McPhee can be seen in the Scottish Collection of Art Extraordinary, The Old Manse, High Street, Pittenween, Fife (tel: 01333 311425). With thanks to Dr Allan Beveridge, Queen Margaret Hospital, Dunfermline, Fife for telling me about Angus McPhee and to Dr Beveridge and Joyce Laing of the Scottish Collection of Art Extraordinary for supplying the images.