

DUKE STREET GALLERY

INFORMATION SHEET



SIR ALFRED MUNNINGS KCVO, PRA, RWS (1875–1959) OARE,
EXMOOR FOREST

Materials

Oil on Canvas, Signed
21" x 25"

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Signed, Oil on panel, 7.75" x 10.75"

Provenance

Beugnet & Bonjean, Paris

Emile Strauss, Paris

Georges Petit Galerie, Paris, 3rd June 1929 Emile Strauss Auction No. 40 in catalogue, illustrated.

Baron Edouard de Rothschild, Paris

Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild, Tel Aviv

Inventar Rothschild, No ER22

Frost & Reed Ltd 2003 "Boudin to Chagall Exhibition" illustrated in Catalogue

Literature

Robert Schmit "Eugene Boudin, 1824 - 1898", Vol.II. Paris, 1973 No. 1238 page 3 illustrated

Born towards the end of the 19th century, he knew nothing of the degradation and poverty suffered in urban areas at that time. Sir Alfred's ancestors were farmers and millers descended from generations of East Anglian country folk. The boy was educated first at Redenhall Grammar School and then at Framlingham College which he left at the age of 14. He was apprenticed to Page Brothers of Norwich as a poster artist, working from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., after which he would put in a further two hours study at the Norwich School of Art. John Shaw Tomkins, a director of Caley's Chocolates for whom Munnings made posters and designed chocolate boxes, gave him his early commissions and took him on a visit to the Continent. With his earnings Munnings purchased an old carpenter's shop in Mengham and turned it into his first studio.

From these simple beginnings, Munnings began to paint the everyday scenes of Norfolk life as they unfolded before him. Horses, village characters, hunting subjects, country fairs, landscapes in oil and watercolour flowed from his easel. And always horses, horses of all type and breed; still so much part of country life during the dying years of the 19th century. His first clients were the farmers and country tradesmen who relished Alfred's ability to portray them and their way of life. When funds permitted, he would journey to Paris, where he attended the Academie Julien, sitting in on life classes by day and experiencing the bohemian lifestyle of Montmartre by night..A total contrast to the Norfolk countryside, but an essential blending of life's variety in the creation of a young artist. In passing, it is interesting to note that in 1898 (the year he lost the sight of his right eye in an accident suffered whilst walking his dogs) ,he sent his first picture to the Royal Academy. By 1959 he had shown over 250 works in that Institution

In 1911, Munnings left Norfolk and went to Cornwall where he joined the celebrated Newlyn School He settled in Lamorna and there met Harold and Laura Knight and the Proctors. All became close friends, especially Laura, who was a regular visitor to Castle House in Dedham in later years It was in Cornwall that Alfred met and married Florence, his first wife. This was a disaster, the marriage was apparently never consummated and it ended with Florence's early death within a year.

Depression settled on Munnings, but his friends suggested he should explore new horizons and accordingly he took himself to Hampshire where, as already described, he found a whole new life style which was to provide him with a wealth of new subjects. Pictures shown at the Royal Academy such as "The Departure of the Hop Pickers" and "Gipsy Life" further enhanced his reputation and established him as a serious and noteworthy artist.

With the declaration of War in 1914, Munnings volunteered for and was rejected on medical grounds by the Army. However, a contact with the Daily Telegraph resulted in his being attached to the Canadian Cavalry. In 1918 he was sent to France with the regiment as an official war artist. A continual flow of pictures from the front (most of which are now in the Imperial War Museum, Canada) brought him to the notice of General J.B.Seely, whom Munnings painted on his charger, "Warrior" This led to a commission to paint the Earl of Athlone, the brother of Queen Mary.Munnings had arrived at the door of the Establishment. The following year he was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy.

In 1920 Munnings met and married Violet McBride, a young and aspiring widow. She was a horsewoman of great reputation, having won the Gold Cup at Olympia and she was able and very willing to introduce her husband into society, thus providing

him with endless opportunities to meet owners and breeders of fine bloodstock, as well as the leading members of the most prestigious Hunts.

So the miller's son became the friend of Kings and Princes through his remarkable ability to capture on canvas the essence of his subject. By now Alfred and Violet had acquired Castle House, at Dedham in the heart of the Constable country. Today it is the Sir Alfred Munnings Museum. They also purchased a house in Chelsea, but this was only used as an office and a workshop when strictly necessary. Whilst success paid the bills, it often resulted in Alfred being away from home for long periods and he hated being away from East Anglia.

In 1944 Munnings was elected the President of the Royal Academy and was Knighted that same year. Five years later, racked by gout and fuddled by medication, he made his farewell speech at the Royal Academy dinner. The occasion was broadcast live for the first time and before the BBC introduced the 'bleep' for such events. His vituperative comments on modern art and artists split the nation. Many years before, John Ruskin had observed that "To be a great painter, you must not be pious, but rather a little wicked and entirely a man of the world" Just so, but since that time Sir Alfred's work has been universally decried by most critics and the Royal Academy has turned its back on him, denying him a major retrospective show in 1978 to mark the anniversary of his birth.

The late Stella Walker, in her inspired book "Sporting Art" summarises his place in the history of English artists as follows: "Criticism of the artist's talent as facile and slight has not been lacking, but his splendid studies of rough cobs and gipsy lads, the superlative expertise of "The Return from Ascot" with the Windsor greys, his studies of heavy weight -carriers, of robust foxhunters and racing two-year-olds were to bring to equestrian art of the 20th century a brilliance of achievement not seen since the epoch of George Stubbs"

On a memorial plaque in Westminster Abbey are inscribed the words by the Poet Laureate: "Oh friend, how very lovely are the things, the English things you taught us to perceive"