

RICHARD GREEN

FINE PAINTINGS • ESTABLISHED 1955

SIR ALFRED MUNNINGS

Mendham 1878 - 1959 Dedham

Ref: BS 257

*Ponies grazing on Exmoor*



Signed lower left: *A.J. Munnings*

Oil on panel: 7 x 10 in / 17.8 x 25.4 cm

Frame size: 10 x 13 in / 25.4 x 33 cm

In an eighteenth century style carved and gilded fluted frame

Painted in the 1940s



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*Provenance:*

Private collection, UK

During the Second World War, Alfred Munnings's Castle House, Dedham in Essex was requisitioned by the Army and he spent the war years at Withypool on Exmoor in a cottage which his wife Violet kept for her annual hunting holidays. Freed from the burden of formal commissions, he produced some of his most sparkling landscape studies.

Munnings sent twenty-six studies of Exmoor ponies to his exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in autumn 1947. The ponies' existence, like that of the gypsies whom he had painted in the 1920s, seemed to epitomise the freedom for which he longed: 'Ponies on the moor – I always wanted to paint them. Wild ponies wandering free over thousands of acres of wide, undulating expanse....Imagine an April day; the moors a patterned harmony of buff and brown....A stationary group of ponies against the sky, others lower down the slope, their foals lying basking in the sun, whisking curly tails'<sup>1</sup>.

The difficulty was to track down the ponies on the vast moorland. Munnings equipped himself with a 'pony-painting outfit, a strong fishing-bag, bought from Mr. Burgess at South Molton'<sup>2</sup>, containing 'my pochard painting-box, a carrier in which I could slide six wet panels, a cardboard box filled with small paint-tubes, bottles of turps, oil and copal varnish'<sup>3</sup>. He rode out with his groom Harry Bayfield until they found the herd, then sent Bayfield off with his own horse, to return at 5pm when the painting day was done. 'Standing there alone, two or three suspicious mares would stare at me, ready to trot off, whilst I pretended to look the other way, and walked nearer to them backwards. Then, sitting down, getting my pochard palette set, with a small selection of colour, and brushes in hand, I would wait awhile. At last, the mothers, seeing I was harmless, resumed grazing, whilst I stood up, crept nearer and began to work....Some of those small sketches, done in an hour, had a completeness and look of truth about them that one would never attain on a larger size'<sup>4</sup>.

The present study amply demonstrates Munnings's comment. The ponies and foals are strung out gracefully across the panel against the purple-green moorland, the low, raking light catching the dazzling white of the foals' legs. A tinge of pink sunset hovers on the horizon. Free, but exquisitely modulated brushwork gives a sense of movement among the herd. 'Theirs is a life of freedom, mine is not', Munnings wrote wistfully of the ponies in his poem *An Exmoor Lane*<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Alfred Munnings, *The Finish*, London 1952, p.108.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p.108.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.109.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.110.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.111.

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## **SIR ALFRED MUNNINGS, PRA, RWS**

Mendham 1878 - 1959 Dedham

Born in Mendham, Suffolk, Alfred Munnings was the son of a miller. He was apprenticed to a firm of lithographers from 1893 to 1898 and studied at the Norwich School of Art and in Paris. There he was impressed with *plein-air* naturalism; this, together with his introduction to the racecourse in 1899, influenced the themes for which he became famous.

While in Mendham, Munnings painted many scenes of country life, particularly horse fairs. He went to Cornwall in 1911, and for many years was an important addition to the Newlyn School of artists. When the First World War broke out, Munnings enlisted, despite having the use of only one eye owing to an accident in 1899. He became an army horse trainer near Reading and later went to France as an official war artist, attached to the Canadian Cavalry Brigade.

The year 1919 was a major turning-point in all aspects of Munnings's life; he painted his first racehorse, *Pothlyn*, the winner of the Grand National, and became an Associate of the Royal Academy. He met Violet McBride, whom he was to marry, and bought Castle House, Dedham, where the Munnings Memorial Trust maintains a permanent exhibition of his pictures. Munnings's prolific career, spanning over sixty years, brought him honour, with election to the Presidency of the Royal Academy in 1944, a Knighthood in 1945, and a personal award from the Sovereign in 1947, when he was created Knight of the Royal Victorian Order.