

RICHARD GREEN

SIR ALFRED MUNNINGS
Mendham 1878 - 1959 Dedham

Ref: CD 227

Crossing the ford



Signed and dated lowe right: *A.J. Munnings / 1908*
Watercolour and gouache: 12 ¼ x 18 3/8 in / 31.1 x 46.7 cm
Frame size: 18 ½ x 24 ½ in / 47 x 62.2 cm



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RICHARD GREEN

Provenance:

Private collection, UK;
Sotheby's London, 17th December 2015, lot 63;
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With his instinct for composition and fine draughtsmanship, Alfred Munnings was an excellent painter in watercolours, which he studied at Norwich School of Art while completing his lithographic apprenticeship with Page Brothers. His skills were further developed in his advertising material for the Norwich firm Caley's Chocolate. Munnings exhibited watercolours regularly in the first half of his career.

Crossing the ford is part of a series depicting horses being driven through shallow water, which culminated in Munnings's large oil *The ford* (Lord Lloyd Webber Collection), shown at the Royal Academy in 1911. Munnings was inspired by the Munich artist Heinrich von Zügel's paintings of cattle watering in shallow streams, which he had seen on trips to Germany with his patron John Shaw Tomkins, Managing Director of Caley's. He was especially impressed by Zügel's picture of a peasant washing his cattle in the shallows of a stream, 'a large, vigorous sketch done on the spot'¹. Zügel's painterly naturalism provided an intriguing counterbalance to the French Impressionism, which influenced so many English painters in the first decade of the twentieth century. This included Munnings himself, who studied at the Atelier Julian in Paris in 1902.

This watercolour, made in 1908, was among Munnings's earliest explorations of *The ford* motif. At that date he had a studio at his aunt Polly's Church Farm in Swainsthorpe, five miles from Norwich, but frequently returned to the family home in Mendham on the river Waveney. He had acquired a gypsy caravan, a string of ponies and a groom-cum-model named Shrimp, 'an undersized, tough, artful young brigand' who 'had no home of his own, no family ties, no parents that he knew'². It suited Munnings's romantic, Bohemian view of himself to roam East Anglia with this pack, painting *en plein air*, but while Shrimp 'slept under the caravan with the dogs'³, Munnings enjoyed the feather beds of local inns.

The watercolour shows Shrimp leading the grey pony *Augereau* and a group of bay ponies through a ford, with the gypsy caravan following on behind. As so often, Munnings makes a grey animal the focus of a painting, revelling in the blue and lilac shadows of the creature's coat. *Augereau* trots forward confidently, giving a thrust of movement to the composition. Munnings fearlessly tackles the foreshortening of a head-on view, particularly with Shrimp, who leans towards us as his mount takes the upward slope.

The pony *Augereau* was one of Munnings's favourite models. Named after a French General in WG Wills's Napoleonic romp *A Royal Divorce*, which Munnings had seen at the Theatre Royal, Norwich, he was bought from the gypsy horse dealer Drake, who also introduced him to Shrimp. *Augereau* appears in the oils *On the road* and *The old gravel pit*, shown at the Royal Academy

¹ Sir Alfred Munnings, *An Artist's Life*, London 1950, p.238.

² Sir Alfred Munnings, *An Artist's Life*, London 1950, p.207.

³ Munnings, *op. cit.*, p.207.

RICHARD GREEN

of 1908, and went on to star in *The ford* (RA 1911) and *A Norfolk sandpit* (RA 1912; Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery). He remained with Munnings for many years, ‘not only bringing me wealth, but earning his keep a hundredfold’⁴.

In this watercolour, as in several of the *Ford* oils, Munnings is interested in the complexities of subdued light. The ‘grey weather’ subject allows him to explore the tonalities of brown, blue, slate grey, ochre and cream which ripple across the painting, binding the composition together. By cutting out the horizon and the sky he gains a sense of immediacy and concentrates on the energy and beauty of the horses. Touches of yellow watercolour and the cream paper showing through at the left of the painting indicate the unseen sun filtered through cloud and reflected in the river.

In his autobiography of 1950, *An Artist’s Life*, the seventy-two-year-old Munnings wrote lyrically of those far-off days painting *The ford* motifs: ‘Standing on rising ground, looking down on the leading ponies coming out of the water, I spaced the design – cutting out the sky – using the distant country for the top portion of the picture. Ponies, water, reflections, filled the rest of the space....I hear myself shouting, “Hi! wake that dun horse; shove his head up!” or, to a boy with a pole, “Keep the water moving.”’⁵

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.198.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.239.

RICHARD GREEN

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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.