

RICHARD GREEN

SIR ALFRED MUNNINGS

Mendham 1878 - 1959 Dedham

Ref: CE 102

Going to the Post



Signed lower right: *A.J. Munnings*
Oil on board: 20 x 24 in / 50.8 x 61 cm
Frame size: 26 ½ x 30 ½ in / 67.3 x 77.5 cm

Painted *circa* 1945



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Provenance:

Thomas H Lawley, Foliejon Park, Berkshire, by 1956
Richard Green, London, 1978;
private collection, UK

Exhibited:

London, Royal Academy, *Works by Sir Alfred Munnings KCVO, PPR A*, 1956, no.294, illus.

Alfred Munnings wrote in the third volume of his autobiography: 'Each start was a fresh picture for me, as they have been, meeting after meeting, year after year'¹. He was fascinated by the tension of the jostling horses and the play of light on the jockeys' silks: 'the grouping, the movement – colour, all dependent on the lighting, the sky. Orange satin, cerise-and-white, blue-and-yellow, emerald green – a large field waiting, regrouping. At each start, determining to retain the picture in mind, too often an incident, something a horse is doing, distracts, and once again my purpose is thwarted'².

This painting is related to the two central foreground horses and jockeys in *Going to the Start*, a large (42 x 57 in / 106.6 x 144.7 cm) canvas of *circa* 1945 exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1948, now in the National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame, Saratoga Springs, New York³. The space around the figures – huge, cloud-flecked sky and featureless turf – emphasizes the unspoken rivalry and coiled energy of horses and riders as they canter up towards the Start, where their competition will begin in earnest.

When planning a big painting, Munnings executed a large number of studies to explore the play of light and refine his observations of horse and jockey, thoroughly getting under the skin of his subject. 'Starts' became a major theme of his late career in the 1940s and 50s. With the resurgence of racing at the end of the Second World War, Munnings could once again see large fields of runners, such as that he witnessed at the start of the Cambridgeshire on 25th October 1950 and records in *The Finish*, the final volume of his autobiography. Driving up to Newmarket through the glorious Suffolk countryside – through Stoke by Nayland, Long Melford and Bury – had become a luxurious ritual, topped by the crowds and excitement of the race itself. By now 'Sir Alfred', President of the Royal Academy and friend of the great and good, Munnings was fêted on the course, allowed to stand and draw at the Start, and lent an old rubbing-house as a studio where he could set down his impressions in vivid oil sketches.

In his large composition *Going to the Start*, Munnings added a further five horses to the field. He changed the colour of both jockeys' silks from the present study, but the foreground jockey still rides at no. 2.

¹ *The Finish*, London 1952, p.207.

² *Op. cit.*, p.207.

³ See Saratoga Springs, National Museum of Racing, *The Mastery of Munnings*, exh. cat. by Lorian Peralta-Ramos, p.67, illus. in colour; also illus. in *The Finish* between pp.216 and 217, size given as 48 x 66 in.

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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 1908, 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 60 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.