

THE EXPRESSIVE STYLE OF ALFRED J. MUNNINGS

by Joseph H. Sulkowski



Oil Study of Roy from life. by Joseph Sulkowski

Sir Alfred J. Munnings commands unprecedented popularity among equine artists and collectors alike as one of the greatest equine painters of all time. At any sporting art auction, you will see the highest prices bid for this extraordinary artist's work.

When one looks upon a canvas by Munnings, one is struck by the artist's brilliant style and technique. That's because Munnings felt a canvas was successful if he could bring to it a freshness and 'virility of paint.' Artists at this level moved their brushes with speed, precision and grace and in the process put the world on canvas. There was not a meticulous rendering of textures, eyelashes or blades of grass, but the very essence of all those things and more; indeed a poetic vision and not a photographic realism. Munnings is a modern example of how the challenge of any truly great

master is to continually distill his or her knowledge into a greater and simpler truth and then to develop the facility with brush in hand to bring that truth into being.

What made Munnings so desirable, among first the rural gentry of England and then the wider world audience, was his uncompromising dedication to the truth. And it is fair to say he came by it honestly. To begin, he grew up in 'Constable Country,' the beautiful landscape made famous in the canvases of the early 19th-century British painter, John Constable. Munnings also spent a great deal of time admiring what he called 'first class' pictures whether by non-living artists or by his contemporaries. He felt himself influenced by a variety of the very best work, and was 'inspired to carry on.' One of his favorite painters was the great 19th-early 20th-century artist, John Singer Sargent,

known for his bravura portraits. In fact, Munnings himself has often been referred to as 'the Sargent of the horse.' The connotation conjures up an image of an artist with brushes loaded with great gobs of paint laying out his vivid visual impressions with passionate intensity. But there is more. In the tradition of the Old Masters, it was Sargent's teacher, Carolus Duran, who urged his students to study the 17th-century Spanish painter, Velasquez, a master who magically 'expressed the maximum by means of the minimum.' Back in 1632, as court painter to King Phillip the IV of Spain, Velasquez created the great *Equestrian Portrait of Count-Duke Olivares*. Here he subjugated all details to the greater masses and forms drawn directly upon the canvas with his fluid pigments. Such results were only possible by being directly inspired by the live model before him expressed spontaneously with formidable draftsmanship. One quickly observes how Munnings exhibited these same uncanny powers for seeing the larger aspects of a composition giving the viewer the impression that even the most minor elements have been precisely recorded and expressed. The forms are not completely blended nor are they merely abrupt, but always balanced. It has been written of Velasquez that his ruling passion was that of 'painting paint'; he luxuriates in the very act of painting. Such may also be said of Munnings.

As a painter of light, Munnings gave supreme attention to its direction and intensity and composed his subject accordingly. He added to this a counterpoint of rich and luminous shadows and a brilliant color sense to give depth and finish to the canvases. Great facility combined with expert draftsmanship gave artists like Velasquez, Sargent and Munnings the freedom to develop truly unique and powerful styles. Whether laying on paint with a brilliant dragging of the brush as Velasquez or through vigorous modeling of thick impastos, each artist ultimately produced a work of great veracity charged with the spirit of life itself.

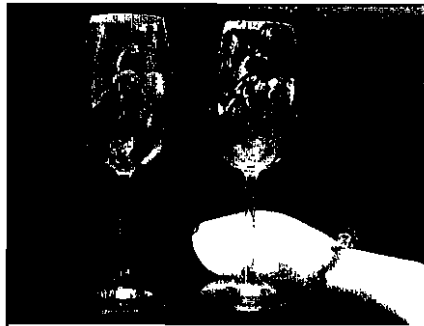
Munnings himself declared that 'so long as the visual arts continue, one generation must learn from the last.' As equine artist extraordinaire, Alfred J. Munnings gives much for the eye to behold and revel in, and as a painter's painter, artists of all generations, present and future may find in him one of our greatest teachers. ♦

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