

AD TRAVELS: ENGLAND'S MUNNINGS MUSEUM

THE RENOWNED EQUESTRIAN PAINTER'S ESSEX RESIDENCE

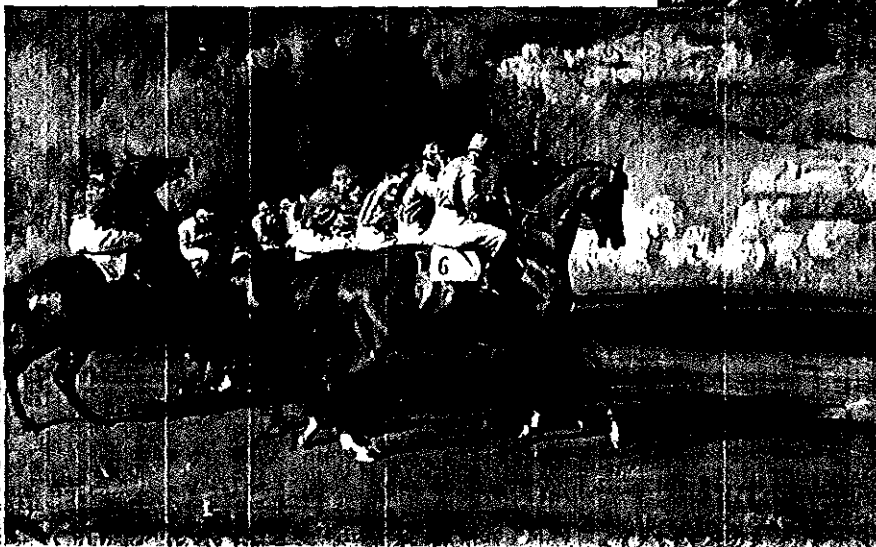
By Nicholas Fox Weber



COURTESY SIR ALFRED MUNNINGS ART MUSEUM



PHOTOGRAPHY: DEBBY MOORE



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Painter Sir Alfred Munnings (above left) lived at Castle House, in Dedham, England, from 1919 until his death in 1959. ABOVE: The gabled structure was built in the 14th century; Georgian rooms—including the bowed drawing room—were added more than four centuries later. The restored house is now a museum.

Munnings decried modernism as “violent blows at nothing” in a 1949 speech he gave as president of the Royal Academy. LEFT: Painted in a studio on the grounds behind Castle House, Munnings’s 1957 *Under Starter’s Orders. Newmarket Start* is characteristic of the horse-racing scenes that distinguished his career.

Sir Alfred Munnings lived in the twentieth century, but his paintings evoke an equestrian ideal that is timeless in the English countryside. Distancing himself from the new and avant-garde, he dwelled on the world of racing and the hunt—its beasts and settings, its accoutrements and conviviality. And he prized a time-proven approach to the

craft of painting as well as old-fashioned notions of the life of a country gentleman. If the style of his art and the wide knots of his ascots did not suit everyone else in the age of modernism, he seemed only to enjoy the distinction.

The milieu Munnings portrayed is the one in which he lived. For forty years the artist resided in

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LEFT: Castle House's interior reflects a blend of styles and periods typical of 19th-century English country houses. In the dining room, two Munnings paintings of hunters are near an Edwardian version of a Georgian sideboard and a mixed set of English dining chairs, including Chippendale and Queen Anne styles.

BELOW: A Biedermeier table centers the drawing room, which is joined to the dining room by double doors that allowed easy flow during the dinner parties given by Munnings and his wife, Violet. The painter's 1919 *Tagg's Island*, shown at the Royal Academy in London in 1920, hangs in the drawing room.

the part of East Anglia more generally associated with his great artistic predecessor John Constable. The village of Dedham, in Essex, is the center of "Constable country"—a region of picturesque towns amid rolling terrain perfectly suited to horses. Munnings lived less than a mile from the center of Dedham, at Castle House, a country estate that is more attractive and functional than grand. The artist's residence provided everything he needed: spaces for living and entertaining well, studios for painting and stables for his horses.

If for most of his life Munnings was part of the upper-class world he portrayed in his paintings, his artistic skill and sheer diligence had gotten him there. Born in 1878, he was a miller's son. Yet early on Munnings developed his draftsmanship. His youthful drawings of boats and ponies were a sportsman's dream; his Indian scalp-hunters wearing feathered head-dresses while riding galloping steeds were so well done that when he was fourteen a family friend urged his father to apprentice him to a lithographic firm, Page Brothers. For the next six years Munnings worked ten-hour days while attending the Norwich School of Art at night.

His work was soon discovered by a director of A. J. Caley & Son, Chocolate Manufacturers—one of Page Brothers' key accounts. In little time Munnings was



designing Caley's posters, chocolate-box tops and advertisements. John Shaw Tomkins, the executive who had spotted Munnings, commissioned him to do a portrait of his father. He also whisked him abroad to the Leipzig Fair, where the young artist painted posters for the chocolate company's stand.

Munnings was on his way to a brilliant career. In 1899, at age twenty-one, he had two works accepted for exhibition at the Royal Academy in London. The day he received the news, a friend persuaded him to skip work and go to the Bungay Races to celebrate. Munnings described the occasion in his autobiogra-

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phy: "I saw thoroughbred horses and jockeys in bright silk colours, going off down the course. The peaceful School of Art, the smelly artists' room at Page Brothers faded away and I began to live!"

Although Munnings was offered a job at the lithographer's at a salary of five pounds a week, he decided to try to make a go of it as a painter. For fifty pounds he bought a carpenter's shop that he turned into his studio. And in spite of blinding his right eye—shortly after venturing forth on his own, he got a briar caught in it while lifting a dog over a hedge—he began to paint more and more.

Munnings's favorite subjects were horses, hunting themes, rural scenes and landscapes. Twice he went to Paris to study at Julien's atelier, but mostly he moved from one location to another in Norfolk. Accompanied by his man, Bob, and a gypsy boy called Shrimp, as well as eight horses and ponies and a donkey, he'd go into the country for stints as long as two and a

half months. Living out of his blue horse caravan in what he called "a sylvan setting . . . an Arcadia," he painted the animals and the landscape.

Eventually Munnings achieved this arcadia at home. After serving in World War I—as an official war artist for the Canadian Cavalry Brigade in France—he bought Castle House in Dedham, where he lived almost exclusively from 1919 until 1959, the year he died. He called it "the house of my dreams."



ABOVE: "Augereau was the most picturesque of white ponies—an artist's ideal," said Munnings of the pony he portrayed in many early works, including the 1911 canvas displayed in the skylit hall. Working from a study he had done almost fifty years before, Munnings added the groom to the painting in 1956.



ABOVE: The library features a Knoll-style sofa and an 18th-century Chippendale-style bureau. Volumes by Munnings's favorite authors—Dickens, Balzac, George Elliot—have been preserved on the alcove shelf. The two studies of jockeys are from 1935–1940.

Castle House was constructed in the fourteenth century as an L-shaped timber-frame building. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the ell was filled in with a semicircular drawing room, a proper dining room, a library, a large entrance hall and second-floor bedrooms. Castle House is a mixture of styles; the Tudor-Gothic doorframes at the front suggest a different mood from the larger passageways and ample staircase beyond. The house's eclectic charm and jaunty informality suited Munnings well.

In 1920 the artist married Violet McBride, a renowned horsewoman. With his wife's help as a manager and promoter, he traveled all over England, America and the Continent to paint commissioned portraits, most often of people on their horses.

A number of these works are on view to the public in the house today, along with many of Munnings's furnishings and objects. The dining room, where the

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artist and his wife regularly entertained, has a mahogany table with a large, ornate silver wine bucket in the center. An assortment of unmatched Chippendale-style chairs with the occasional Queen Anne style thrown in suggests both a love of quality and an ease about breaking the rules. Ten canvases that range from a sketchy oil study of a foxhound to the more fully developed *The Ancient Huntsman, with Hounds, in the Grounds of a Country House* and the imposing *Portrait of Lady Munnings Riding a Bay Hunter* hang on the walls.

The paintings throughout Castle House include works in the permanent collection as well as some on loan. *King George V on Jock*, in the entrance hall, belongs to Christchurch Mansion in Ipswich. The homey space, with its copper bed warmers and urns and caldrons in the corners, complements Munnings's presentation of the king, who looks relaxed

and unroyal in his pale gray riding suit, seated on a white pony.

The outstanding painting in the drawing room is the large 1919 *Tagg's Island*—a splendid evocation of the good life and high spirits made possible by the end of World War I. In it, a party of well-dressed young men and women are laughing and drinking wine in one another's arms. The sun is shining on the water behind them, and trees are in full leaf. It is a bacchanal outfitted on Jernym Street.

Everything in the drawing room gives the impression of bonhomie. There is a lampshade by Dame Laura Knight gracefully painted with scenes of people frolicking on the beach. In her autobiography, *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*, Dame Laura, a frequent guest at Castle House, described Munnings "sipping port at a shiny mahogany table." She reported that the sight of him "took you back 150 years; . . . even his clothes had a

cut that belonged to the past." He was "several people in one; for a flash a poet, a supersensitive creature of refined tastes and instincts, of culture; one moment canny, the next plunged back into great generosity. . . . He could be the best of hosts, and the best of entertainers."

Munnings was, in fact, well known for the success of his parties, his flamboyant style of dressing, and his way of telling stories and performing ballads he had written himself. It's no surprise that the books in his library—a blend of period furniture and objects, enveloped by a rich green flocked wallpaper—include lots of Trollope and George Eliot along with volumes such as Smollett's *Peregrine Pickle*. These are precisely the sort of books you might want to read there after a day at the races. On the walls hang Munnings's studies of Newmarket, which capture the excitement of the starting line, the wide

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open sky and the local landscape.

Castle House also features two large picture galleries created after the artist's death. The person responsible for these spaces is the keeper of the Munnings flame, Stanley Booth, chairman of the trustees and author of *A. J. Munnings*.

After the artist died in 1959, Violet Munnings asked Booth to help handle her affairs. Lady Munnings had periodically opened up Castle House to the public, and Booth set up a trust for her to ensure its future. But when she died in 1971, there was still a lot to do. "It was a run-down, sordid place when Violet opened it," explains Stanley Booth. "They were old, and the place was shabby. We've done a tremendous amount of work." The Tudor Gallery is in a space that had been "sculleries, broom closets and whatnot; it was a terrible mess," he says. The Courtyard Gallery occupies a Victorian outbuilding that Booth

decided to restore rather than demolish. Both are filled with a range of Munnings's paintings. In addition, Booth renovated the existing rooms, made an office for himself in the artist's bedroom and brought in work to complement the existing collection.

In the two studios behind the house Booth has installed examples dating from Munnings's years as a lithographer, and a series of paintings of women with white parasols canoeing down a willow-shaded river. Munnings's palettes and painting smocks—one entirely stiff with dried pigment—are also on display, as are his riding outfits, jockeys' silks and other props. The artist would often work in these studios until one in the morning, then feel his way back to the house along the laurel bushes until he could see the lamp Violet kept lit for him in the drawing room window.

Stanley Booth's task of dealing with Alfred Munnings's reputation has not

been entirely easy. While the artist achieved great success—in 1944 he was elected president of the Royal Academy (a post he held for five years) and was knighted, and in 1947 he was appointed Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order—he also antagonized many members of the art establishment because of his violent stance against modernism. In a 1949 academy banquet speech that was broadcast live over the radio, he attacked the Tate Gallery for its holdings of work by Matisse and declared, "I find myself President of a body of men who are what I call shillyshallying." He proclaimed "this so-called modern art" to be "affected juggling . . . violent blows at nothing . . . foolish drolleries . . . damned nonsense." It's no wonder that Stanley Booth has had to contend with the refusal of a Royal Academy president to open the most recent large Munnings exhi-

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bition. No academy president has ever visited Castle House, a situation Booth considers "disgraceful."

But the racing establishment still cherishes the artist. Munnings's work figures prominently in such well-known American collections as those of the Whitneys and the Mellons. And the artist's devotees make pilgrimages to Castle House during its few hours of opening each summer.

They come in part because the artist revealed the world of horses. "Although they have given me much trouble and many sleepless nights," Munnings said of the animals, "they have been my supporters, friends—my destiny in fact. Looking back at my life, interwoven with theirs—painting them, feeding them, riding them, thinking about them—I hope that I have learned something of their ways. I have never ceased trying to understand them."

Munnings also believed ardently in art, however out of vogue his standards. In the century of Cubism,

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Dadaism and Surrealism, he stood in marked contrast to the prevailing trends, but the main reason was that he cared for something else: "What are pictures for?" asked Munnings. "To fill a man's soul with admiration and sheer joy, not to bewilder and daze him." He lived accordingly—in the pursuit, and attainment, of sheer joy as he knew it. □

*The Sir Alfred Munnings Art Museum
Castle House
Dedham, Colchester
Essex CO7 6A2
44-262-206-127*
