

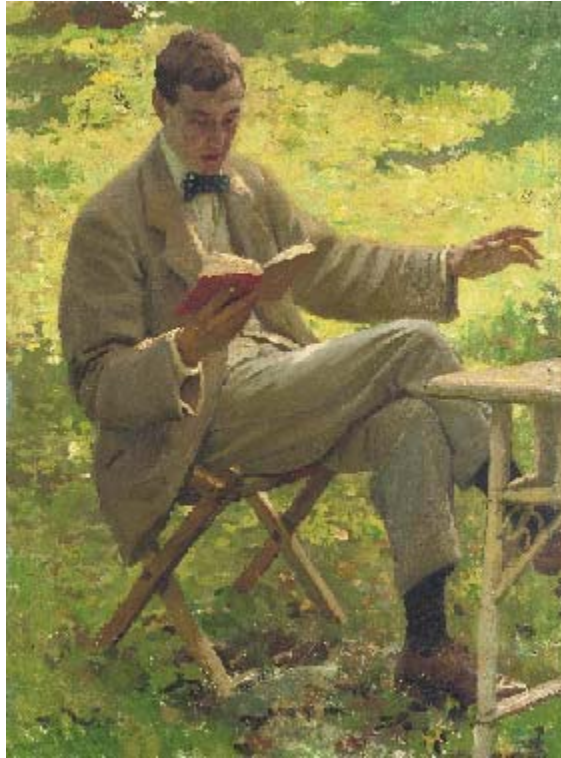
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CHRISTIE'S

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A REMARKABLE DISCOVERY

**Early Portrait of the Renowned Painter Sir Alfred James Munnings
Hidden for Nearly a Century beneath the Canvas of another Painting**



London – Christie's London announce the discovery of a rare portrait of *Sir Alfred James Munnings Reading*, circa 1910, by Harold Knight, R.A. *illustrated above* (estimate: £30,000-50,000) which will be offered in the sale of *Victorian & British Impressionist Art Including Drawings & Watercolours* on Wednesday 16 December 2009.

During a detailed examination of a painting by Dame Laura Knight, R.A. (1877-1970), *Carnaval*, circa 1915, Christie's Specialist Tom Rooth noted that the back of the canvas was unusual; there appeared to be the edge of not one but two stretched canvases. In the process of skillfully removing all 83 nails which firmly pinned down Laura Knight's canvas, Rooth first glimpsed a flash of luscious, almost luminous, green painterly brushstrokes in one corner. Finally, to his astonishment, he revealed a highly important early portrait of the young Sir Alfred James Munnings (1878-1959). Munnings was one of the key exponents of British Impressionism and eventually became President of the great British art institution - the Royal Academy. Very few portraits of Munnings exist and the fact that this work depicts him as a young man, still a struggling artist, makes it particularly significant.

Tom Rooth, Christie's Specialist of British, Irish and Sporting Art: *"Having catalogued and seen the backs of thousands of pictures over the past ten years, I felt sure that there was something unusual about the reverse of the painting. To be perfectly honest, I could barely believe my eyes when I removed several of the nails. The intensity and freshness of the colours before me, uncovered for the first time in almost a century, took my breath away. The true*

importance of the discovery fully set in the moment that I realised the magnificent portrait depicted Munnings. It was an incredible, seriously exciting moment; this is the most important discovery in my career, to date. I was captivated: was it by Laura Knight whose canvas had covered it, or another artist? Why was such a beautiful and important work hidden so deliberately? I began my in-depth research of a painting which I believe encapsulates the intrigue, romance and complexity at the heart of the community of British Impressionist artists working in Lamorna, at the beginning of the 20th Century.”

Research has revealed that *Alfred James Munnings Reading* closely relates to *The Sonnet*, a lost work by Harold Knight, Laura Knight's husband, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1911. The existence of a preparatory portrait by Harold of Florence Carter-Wood, who is amongst the group depicted in *The Sonnet*, supports the attribution of this newly discovered portrait to Harold. He is thought to have executed the present work around 1910, whilst Munnings sat for him in his studio garden.

Sir Alfred James Munnings Reading is a superb work, of beautiful proportion and great vitality. Harold evocatively conveys both the atmosphere and the man, in wonderfully loose brushstrokes and with a fluidity which recalls the work of Munnings's himself. He deftly employs light and shade to impressionistically pick out details in Munnings's suit, shoes and celebrated bow tie, placing him in silhouette against the seductive warmth of the dappled Cornish light.

The most remarkable result of this portrait being concealed under another canvas for nearly a century is that it is afforded a unique attribute: its condition. Having been hidden from light, pollution and all possible elements that could damage the work, it is immaculate - a time capsule retaining the freshness and vibrance of the Cornish summer's day in which Munnings sat for Harold.



The Sonnet depicts a larger scene with the charismatic young Munnings delivering, as in the present portrait, one of the dramatic readings for which he became renowned; this time to a group of young ladies including his future wife Florence, on the far right, and Laura Knight, to his immediate left. Laura's memoirs recall that such readings were, like amateur dramatics, a popular pastime in the artist community of Lamorna. The reading takes place over tea, a theme also found in Harold's earlier work *In the Spring*, both observe the alfresco settings favoured by British Impressionists such as John Lavery and James Guthrie. There is a clear parallel to the moment in E.M Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908) when Cecil Vyse reads aloud from a romantic novel, demanding the attention of the book's heroine, Lucy Honeychurch, and hero, George Emerson. In both the newly discovered portrait and the lost *Sonnet*, Harold evocatively captures Munnings' confident, relaxed demeanor as he holds court from his 'campaign' chair with such insight and precision that the characterisation of Munnings' contrived gestures suggest it may, in part, be a work of gentle satire.

The relationship amongst the group of artists in Lamorna was fuelled by passion and was in turn fraught with tensions of adoration, love, irritation, jealousy and, in the end, tragedy and loss. This was epitomised by the complex relationship between Munnings, Harold and Laura Knight. The quieter and more reserved Harold was the opposite of Munnings, the flamboyant extrovert. It is known that Laura was a great admirer of Munnings, causing her husband uncalled for yet considerable concern, not aided when the three were temporarily thrown together to share a sitting room and meals at Mrs Beer's boarding house. Harold turned the situation to his artistic advantage painting both the present portrait

and the group scene, perhaps taking the opportunity to subtly poke fun at his fellow artist. Munnings' marriage to the beautiful young Florence Carter-Wood was fated. A troubled young soul who suffered from ill health and was often lonely, when her husband travelled, Florence committed suicide in 1914. The tragedy shook the group, leaving a great sense of loss and sadness.



There are many reasons why this superb, newly discovered portrait of *Sir Alfred James Munnings Reading* may have been hidden away and forgotten beneath Laura Knight's canvas *Carnaval*, circa 1915, illustrated left. Perhaps Harold's dislike of Munnings led him to dispose of the painting and Laura rescued it; her fondness of the sitter would indeed explain this action. So as not to anger her husband, it is plausible that she hid the canvas, abandoning it to its fate: hidden for almost a century beneath *Carnaval*, which was exhibited in 1916, sold a number of times and passed through several different, unassuming hands. Or perhaps when Florence died it was covered because it evoked too many memories of a lost chapter amongst the group. The real reason will never be known, but it appears to be wrapped in the complex intrigue of matters of the human heart.

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- *Victorian & British Impressionist Art Including Drawings & Watercolours*
Viewing: 11 - 16 December 2009: Christie's London, 8 King Street, St. James', London, SW1Y 6QT
Sale: 16 December 2009: Christie's London, 8 King Street, St. James', London, SW1Y 6QT

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