

MICHAEL ANCHER

1849–1927

5. Sketch for “Taking the Lifeboat Through the Dunes,” 1883

(*Skitse til “Redningsbåden køres gennem klitterne”*)

Oil on canvas, 18 x 22¾ in. (46 x 58 cm)

Signed with initials lower left: M.A.

PROVENANCE: Arne Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 454, 1983, lot 244, ill. p. 179 (described as *Redningsbåden går ud i snestorm*).

LITERATURE: Elisabeth Fabritius in Elisabeth Fabritius (ed.), *Skagensmaleren Michael Ancher 1849–9. Juni–1999*, exhibition catalogue Michael og Anna Anchers Hus, Skagens Museum, 1999 (on the composition); Elisabeth Fabritius, *Michael Ancher og det moderne gennembrud 1880–1890*, Skagen, 1999, chapter II.4; this painting ill. p. 112, oeuvre no. 277; Patricia G. Berman, *In Another Light, Danish Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, New York, 2007, ill. p. 143.

This compositional sketch is very close to the finished painting, which measures 5⅔ x 7¼ ft. (171 x 221 cm). It was purchased by Nationalgalleriet (subsequently Statens Museum for Kunst), Copenhagen (Fig. A), at the Charlottenborg exhibition 1883, where Ancher had enjoyed a success. The painting portrays the Skagen lifeboat crew on its way out toward the shore with the huge boat that in Ancher’s day was rowed out to shipwrecked sailors by a large lifeboat crew. It is winter; the snow is lying on the dunes, with their withered, yellow lyme grass; the sky is leaden and gray. Two major wrecks occurred at the end of 1881, and these may have inspired Ancher to choose this particular motif. The Skagens Museum owns an 1882 sketch of dunes in snow.

Ever since his arrival in Skagen in 1874, Michael Ancher was fascinated by the drama of the frequent life-saving actions; he warmly admired the heroism the fishermen demonstrated time after time by risking their lives. Sometimes they succeeded in their rescue efforts, though at other times drowning was the result both for themselves and the shipwrecked. Between 1876 and 1895, Ancher created an epic series of large-scale, carefully composed paintings depicting the stages of a rescue operation, culminating in a gigantic work, *The Drowned Man*, 1895 (Statens Museum for Kunst). These large-scale paintings are highly realistic, but in their harmonies they are at the same time deeply rooted in the Western European painting tradition and thus representative of the renewal of Danish figure art, which was Michael Ancher’s contribution to the Modern Breakthrough of the 1880s.

In this sketch, Ancher has experimented to see whether the motif could be achieved in a snowstorm.



FIG. A Michael Ancher
Taking the Lifeboat through the Dunes, 1883
5⅔ x 7¼ ft. (171 x 221 cm) Statens Museum for Kunst

Two major shipwrecks at the end of 1881 might have inspired Ancher to choose winter for this motif. In November 1882 he made a painting of snow-covered dunes with withered lyme grass beneath a leaden sky. There is inspiration from the art of the Renaissance and the Baroque behind the composition of the finished painting, which nevertheless has a very realistic effect.

E.F.