

SOREN EMIL CARLSEN (1853–1932)

Barnacled Rocks, 1920

Oil on canvas board

15 ½ x 19 ½ inches

Signed lower left

Titled and dated 1920, verso

[Carlsen] is not so much the painter of trees and skies and the dimly lighted interiors of woods and forests, nor of waves and cliffs and clouds as he is of the moods these natural objects inspire in his soul.

—John Steele¹

Emil Carlsen established his reputation with mood-infused still lifes, and ultimately became known for his Impressionist landscapes and seascapes with a distinctively poetic sensibility. Inspired by the rustic still-lives of Jean-Baptiste Simeon Chardin (1699-1779), he chose similarly humble objects for his own contributions to the genre, such as ceramic jugs, copper pans, the catch of the day and vegetables. He painted the hypnotic movements of the ocean from the shores of his native Denmark, the rocky coast of Maine, and the sandy beaches of California and Cuba. His views of the New England landscape combine a heightened attention to the effects of light and atmosphere on natural appearances with efforts to convey the emotional resonances behind such appearances.

Though he studied architecture at the Royal Academy in Copenhagen, Carlsen spent much of his youth painting and sketching, honing his skills through informal lessons with a cousin who was a marine painter. When he was barely twenty years old, Carlsen left Denmark for America. Settling in Chicago, he immediately found work in the offices of a local architect, and taught mechanical drawing on the side. Soon he was hired as an assistant to the Danish-born marine painter, Lauritz Bernhard Holst, whose Chicago studio he took over upon the latter's return to Denmark in 1874.

The following year Carlsen travelled to Paris to see artistic masterpieces firsthand, including Chardin's skillfully painted common objects, which became a major inspiration. When he returned to the United States, he resided briefly in New York, and then in Boston, supplementing his income with work as a designer and engraver. In 1879, he moved back to Chicago, where his still lifes, marked by simple beauty and expertly rendered textures, began attracting notice. Art dealer T.

1 John Steele, "The Lyricism of Emile Carlsen," *Internatinal Studio* 88 (October 1927): 57.



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J. Blakesee provided him a constant stream of commissions for such works. In 1884, Carlsen returned to Paris to study at the Académie Julian. Influenced by French Impressionism, he lightened his palette and began painting rural landscapes. At this time, he broke his contract with Blakesee.

Upon his return to the United States in 1887, he settled in California, where he became director of the San Francisco School of Art . In 1891, he returned to New York, drawn by its stimulating artistic climate and greater opportunities for sales and exhibitions. While there, he taught at the recently established Art Students League, and established relationships with leading American Impressionists Childe Hassam and J. Alden Weir. He soon became associated with the Connecticut School Impressionism, purchasing a summer home in Falls Village in 1905. Though he did not cease painting still lifes, the landscape was now his primary subject. His reputation grew rapidly in New York, where he gained membership at the National Academy of Design and Salmagundi Club, and had numerous solo exhibitions at the prestigious Macbeth Gallery.

Barnacled Rocks is typical of the seascapes Carlsen executed around the turn of the century, when he resided between New York and Connecticut. Rather than focusing on the specificity of place, however, Carlsen chose to depict the sea subsumed by a particular mood, and in the majority of cases, this mood is one of complete tranquility. When describing a similar seascape, *Summer Light*, ca. 1913 (The Wadsworth Athenaeum) Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser points out, “Rather than seeking to evoke the internal forces and power of the ocean, as seen in the works of Winslow Homer—which were familiar to Carlsen—the artist tried to depict the sea's internal calm.”² Carlsen pares down the elements of the composition to include a rocky projection of coast overarched by a cerulean sky and a sparkling spread of endless ocean. Beneath the apparent simplicity of the composition lies an intricate rhythm of shape, color and texture, which allows the viewer to experience the feeling of the sea environs even more than the look of it. Carlsen works the surface to great effect as Mankin further notes. “Another distinctive quality of Carlsen's seascapes is the deliberately dry, granular paint surface....”³

2 Kornhauser, Elizabeth Mankin, *American Paintings before 1945 in the Wadsworth Atheneum* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 172.

3 Ibid.