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On The Rocks, North Shore, Massachusetts, c. 1916-19
Watercolor, pastel and pencil on paper
13 3/4 x 19 3/4 inches
34.9 x 50.2 cm
Signed at lower center: Prendergast
AG 4077

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Provenance:

Charles Prendergast, the artist's brother, 1924

to his wife, 1948

Coe Kerr Gallery, New York, 1987

Private collection, 1987 until the present

Exhibitions:

Coe Kerr Gallery, New York, *Maurice Prendergast: The Unknown Pastels*, November – December 1987, p. 17, illus.

Adelson Galleries, New York, *Maurice Prendergast: Paintings of America*, May-June 2003, no. 41, pp. 115-6, 122, illus. in color p. 123

Literature:

Cecily Langdale, "The Late Watercolors/Pastels of Maurice Prendergast," *The Magazine Antiques* no. 132 (November 1987), p. 1084-85, illus.

Carol Clark, Nancy Mowll Mathews and Gwendolyn Owens, *Maurice Brazil Prendergast, Charles Prendergast: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Williamstown, MA and Munich: Williams College Museum of Art and Prestel-Verlag, 1990), no. 1287, p. 521, illus.

Maurice Prendergast began his career as something of a “painter of modern life,” first depicting fashionable women and children enjoying themselves in Paris and then portraying Americans at leisure in New York City, Boston, and along the Atlantic shore. As the years passed, Prendergast continued to represent American park and seaside scenes, but, moving with the currents of modernism, he increasingly incorporated less realistic elements into his work. He expanded his aesthetic to include compositional and figural types derived from a range of inspirations, including paintings by Gauguin, Cézanne, and Matisse. *On the Rocks, North Shore, Massachusetts*, with its mix of fully and partially clothed women, exhibits continuity with Prendergast’s earliest images of recreation while demonstrating how complex and even abstract these types of pictures had become by his late career.

On the Rocks, North Shore, Massachusetts sets monumental figures reminiscent of bathers by Renoir within one of Prendergast’s favorite settings, the rocky coast. The women on the right side of the composition are among the most full-bodied Prendergast ever depicted and have been given long and luxurious hair, quite different from the more simplified cap of hair he employed in many other seaside scenes from the same period. The standing woman in a white shift and blue skirt in particular lifts her arms as if to touch her lavish tresses in a gesture that brings to mind a similar pose often seen in Renoir’s bather imagery. The rounded bodies and faces of the figures are placed among the regularized curves of rocks on the shore, creating an undulating rhythm that suggests a timeless idyll rather than any identifiable spot along the Atlantic coast. But while Renoir’s bathers often resemble classical nymphs, the women here embody a more modern goddess type, based in the real with their parasols, dresses, and hats, but at the same time located in the realm of fantasy.

As Nancy Mowll Mathews points out, Renoir was especially favored in the 1910s by Americans, who appreciated his balance of classical compositions and figure types with a more “primitive” emotion, achieved in part through luminous color.* Prendergast, in works like *On the Rocks, North Shore, Massachusetts*, pushed his tonal range into even more high-key areas than Renoir, in keeping with more advanced modernist painters like Matisse and the Fauves, with whom the American artist also felt an aesthetic kinship. The saturated, jewel-toned palette of *On the Rocks, North Shore, Massachusetts* derives an extra level of chromatic punch from the application of pastel strokes atop the watercolor base. The blues of the stylized sky, for example, are highlighted by acid green pastel marks, adding to the opalescent sheen characteristic of many of the artist’s pictures. The work thus belongs to the exceptional group of images combining pastel and watercolor that Prendergast created after 1910.

* Nancy Mowll Matthews, "Maurice Prendergast and the Influence of European Modernism," in Carol Clark, Nancy Mowll Mathews and Gwendolyn Owens, *Maurice Brazil Prendergast, Charles Prendergast: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Williamstown, MA and Munich: Williams College Museum of Art and Prestel-Verlag, 1990), pp. 42-3.