

# The rehabilitation of British artist Stanley Spencer

Paul Mitchell

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The work of British artist Stanley Spencer (1891-1959) has undergone a resurgence of interest in the art world recently. Long viewed by some as a provincial joke, several artists and critics now claim Spencer was the greatest British artist of the twentieth century.

A major retrospective exhibition of Spencer's work was mounted earlier this year at the Tate Modern in London. The exhibition can also be seen in Toronto and Belfast.

According to the sculptor Anthony Gormley, Spencer is a hero for the post-modern generation. "Spencer stands for the absolute subjectivity of the artist. His commitment to the personal and the parish is a celebration of the provincial, as the necessary texture of the global," Gormley concludes.

This is a one-sided conception of Spencer's work. It is impossible to consider Spencer's intensely personal art outside of the profound objective contradictions that existed in the first half of the twentieth century. I think it is no accident that two of the greatest visionary British artists should have lived through periods of profound intellectual ferment—William Blake (1757-1827) during the French Revolution and Spencer in the period around the First World War and the Russian Revolution. Like Blake, Spencer was never religious in the conventional sense and thought that organised "religion is a gloomy wretched thing, a depressing atmosphere". Spencer's world was one permeated with the "Holy Spirit". He had a vision of humanity bound together by "the imaginative powers which we all possess" in universal brotherly love.

Spencer produced his most challenging work in the struggle to reconcile this religious vision with the reality of the world around him. When his world went into crisis as in the First World War—he complained that "my ideas were beginning to unfold in fine order when along comes the war and smashes everything"—he tried to restore his vision through his art.

Stanley Spencer was born in 1891, the son of a professional musician. The nine children in the Spencer family were self educated, literate and musical. His parents were religious but freethinking, and he attended the Church of England and the Wesleyan chapel. "I loved the gentle atmosphere that was characteristic of the poor who came to it," he later wrote.

He spent most of his life in the place of his birth—the "holy suburb of Heaven"—the village of Cookham, to the west of London. It provides the crucial setting for many of his landscapes and figurative paintings such as *Christ carrying the Cross down Cookham High Street*. It is, for Spencer the symbol of childhood "cosiness"—a sacred place in which he fights to re-establish his vision.

Spencer grew to maturity at a turbulent period in history. Far-reaching social and scientific changes challenged previous ideas about the nature of man and his relationship to the world. It produced considerable intellectual and political shifts, epitomized in the growth of the international socialist movement at one pole and the cultivation of nationalism and imperialist militarism at the other. Ferment in artistic circles took the form of a fight against tradition, philistinism and

sentimental romanticism.

In 1908 Spencer joined the leading London art college, the Slade School of Art. According to his contemporary and friend, the artist Paul Nash (1889-1946), it was "seething under the influence of Post Impressionism ... The students were by no means a docile crowd and the virus of the new art was working in them uncomfortably". Picasso's Cubism is the most famous example of this modernist or Post-Impressionist movement, the first to reject the striving to reproduce an illusion of reality as a guiding principle. Writing about the "Manet and Post-Impressionists" exhibition he organised in 1910, the leading art critic of the day, Roger Fry (1866-1934), said the artists "do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life but to find an equivalent for life". Each line, colour and shape should be assessed in its own right, he added.

Many Slade students were to become leading artists in modernist artistic styles. The Futurists and Vorticists (see "Striking visions of the First World War — CRW Nevinson: The Twentieth Century") called for a "strong, virile and anti-sentimental" art that faced up to the modern mechanized world. Others such as the Neo-Primitives—with whom Nash and Spencer were associated—also looked for inspiration to art from Africa, Mexico and mediaeval Europe, and Giotto (1266-1337) in particular.

Spencer viewed the concentration on pure form and abstraction as rather like "contracting a disease" that suppressed his "imaginative capacity to draw", but nonetheless many of his paintings of the period have a recognisable Post-Impressionist quality to them. So much so that his *John Donne Arriving In Heaven* (1911) was included in Fry's second Post-Impressionist Exhibition along side works by Picasso, Matisse and Gauguin. The picture shows the poet John Donne in white robes with four people praying behind him facing the four points of the compass. The figures, as one critic said, look like "clumsily modelled marionettes" and have the flat, otherworldliness of many Post-Impressionist paintings of the time.

Spencer's 1913 *Apple Gatherers* is very similar to Gauguin's style of flat, broad figures painted in unnatural colours and lack of perspective.

In *Zacharias and Elizabeth* (1913-14) Spencer paints the angel Gabriel telling Elizabeth that she will give birth to John the Baptist. A wall of pure white strikingly divides the painting. A child tries to look over it, hoping to glimpse the sacred events on the other side. Writing about the picture, Spencer said, "Jesus was the trouble from my babyhood. I had hitched my chariot to that star and that star unfortunately for me was completely invisible." It seems even then that he had difficulties with his vision. The wall—a repeated theme in Spencer's paintings—symbolises, for him, a barrier in the way of true religious perception.

Shortly before he was called up for military service he painted a beautiful *Self-Portrait* (1914), the light effects being reminiscent of Caravaggio.

Spencer's first war duty was as a medical orderly at the Beaufort War Hospital near Bristol, England. He remarks how his "patriotic ardour"

vanished as he walked through the “Hell-mouth” front gates. His abiding memories were of monotony—the continuous scrubbing of floors, washing and laundering. He tried to make sense of his predicament by reading the Confessions of Saint Augustine, in which even the most menial of tasks can glorify God.

Later Spencer was sent to fight in a working class infantry battalion in the Balkans where he contracted malaria and was almost shot. His favourite brother Sydney was killed. In his comrades—“these disgraceful characters”—he saw “the true power of forgiveness” Although he would draw little sketches for them to send back home with their letters, his artistic imagination made him feel an outsider. “But what is a mystery to me is, if I can enter into these men’s little interest and hopes why can’t they enter into mine?” His answer, dressed up in his usual religious language, was firmly down to earth. “I feel that the poorer classes (only poor as touching filthy lucre) are not being given a proper chance to ‘live’. It is well to give them enough to keep a family ‘going’ but still they will be heavily hampered and their progress seriously impeded, towards attaining a really high understanding of truth, purely through the fault of unnecessary, petty material inconveniences... I pray for the day when it will be accounted sin in anybody not to know the Diabelli Variations. There is no such thing as ‘individuality’, ‘personality’, and ‘originality’. Every man has the same Name.”

Although Spencer had a great empathy with the working class he rejected a political solution to inequality. “One thing I will not do is belong to some organised thing whether it is a club or society or a religion or political party.” He felt such organisations were dominated by people who had an “incurable love of making their fellows unhappy” such as the priest “inwardly delighted at the shock he is able to give the novice (who says the wrong prayer)”. His lack of political understanding laid him open to drawing wild conclusions. On one of his few trips abroad—to China on a cultural exchange in 1954 for celebrations of the Chinese Communist Party—he said to Premier Chou En Lai, “I feel at home in China because I feel that Cookham is somewhere near”. He saw in the peasant communes the possibility of his vision being put into practice.

The end of war and threat of revolution produced different moods in artistic circles. Many of the modernists had fought in the war and experienced the mechanical inhuman nature of it. They sensed their art was similarly inhuman. Some saw in Bolshevism a direct contact with the masses and a way out of their isolation. Others rejected Bolshevism, whilst still retaining their interest in what had become the horrors of modern living. Many turned away from social concerns and the city back to landscape and the pastoral. Attempts to reunite the pre-war avant-garde failed. No major foreign exhibitions were held between 1921-28.

Spencer himself was to produce many landscapes, often of places in Cookham that had a special meaning to him. In this sense, he could be seen as part of the retreat back to nature to try and find some meaning to life. However, Spencer was at least conscious of making a retreat and felt that it had been forced on him for the most practical of reasons. He writes often in his diaries that he catered to a general mood in the art buying public to produce “potboilers” that enabled him to survive.

After the war one of his first paintings was *Travoy's with Wounded Soldiers Arriving at a Dressing Station at Smol in Macedonia* (1919). Mules and stretchers are lined up outside a brightly lit field hospital in which an operation is being performed. Spencer tried to show the “stillness in the theatre and outside the swift silent steps of those ‘fetching and carrying’”. It looks like a Nativity scene. It is a brilliant response to the government’s request for Spencer to paint a picture “under such title as *A Religious Service at the Front*”.

In 1922 Spencer moved in with the leftist, internationalist minded Carline family. He had met the artist Richard Carline (1896-1980) during the war and now began a courtship with his sister Hilda, whom he married in 1925.

From 1923-32 Spencer painted panels for the high-ceilinged rectangular Sandham War Memorial Chapel. Perhaps one would expect scenes of death and destruction. But there is not a gun... and only one officer in sight. Entering the chapel you see ahead vivid white crosses tumbling from the sky and piling up around the altar. Soldiers are emerging from their graves in a Resurrection scene. The other walls depict the everyday life that Spencer himself experienced. Even with titles such as *Sorting and Moving the Kit-Bags* Spencer imbues the paintings with such beauty and meaning that as he himself says, “they don’t look like war pictures, they rather look like heaven”. He continues, “the picture is supposed to be a reflection of the general attitude and behaviour of men during the war”, when a soldier would fondly remember the “caress of a sweetheart” or “sitting in his doorway chatting to his neighbours”. For Spencer himself the five years it took to complete the works was a means to “recover my lost self”.

At this time he also painted *The Resurrection* (1924-7), also known as *The Cookham Resurrection*. It was a favourite theme for Spencer—a sign of rebirth and redemption. Again, the dead open up their graves and push away the headstones, but as one delves into the imagery one becomes aware of the extraordinary sexual tension that exists between the multiple figures of Spencer and Hilda and Richard Carline. (For a picture and fuller discussion of this imagery see Judith Whittet’s article).

Then another crisis hit Spencer that caused him to lose his “utterly believed in vision”.

It was the period of the General Strike and Wall Street Crash. According to his contemporary, artist William Coldstream (1908- ), “The 1930 slump affected us all very considerably... One painter I knew lost all his money and had to become a traveller in vacuum cleaners. Everyone began to be interested in economics and then in politics. Two very talented painters who had been at the Slade with me gave up painting altogether, one to work for the Independent Labour Party, and the other for the Communist Party... I became convinced that art ought to be directed to a wider public; whereas all ideas which I had learned to regard as artistically revolutionary ran in the opposite direction. It seemed to me important that the broken communication between the artist and public should be built up again and that this most probably implied a movement towards realism.”

This rejection of non-realist art was also the position of the Communist Party, which was promoting Social Realism. Spencer’s religious symbolism would have been unacceptable to the Communist Party and the circles it influenced.

This general mood towards realism no doubt contributed to the rejection of Spencer’s 1934 painting *The Dustman (or the Lovers)* by the Royal Academy because of its “distortions and peculiarity”—brought about by Spencer’s attempts to show a dustman “transported to heaven while in the execution of his duty”. He resigned as a result.

Spencer was also having problems in his marriage that were related to his artistic ones. He embarked on an affair with another Slade artist Patricia Preece (1894-1966), in the hope he would regain his vision. It turned out to be a disaster. Even though he wrote in 1934 he enjoyed “abusing her, because she does not allow me to do otherwise” Spencer married her in 1937 shortly after divorcing Hilda. On the honeymoon, Preece left him to live the rest of her life with the artist Dorothy Hepworth.

In this period, Spencer painted a series of nude portraits of Preece and himself. Never have I felt such an extraordinary sense of estrangement and sexlessness appear in a nude portrait as it does in *Self-Portrait with Patricia Preece*. This is even more stark in *The Artist and his Second Wife (The Leg of Mutton Nude)* 1937, in which a naked Spencer crouches behind an outstretched Patricia. A leg of mutton lies on a table in front of them.

Spencer’s feelings of inadequacy and being dominated come through in the 1937-8 series of paintings known as *The Beatitudes of Love*. With

titles such as *Desire for Passion*, *Knowing*, *Contemplation* they portray various couples—frequently large women engulfing small men or vice versa. Spencer rejected the claims of critics that these couples were grotesque or ugly. They showed ways to “experience the kinds of joy different types and kinds of people would or might experience for each other” and so offered a way to overcome his misfortune. (Spencer destroyed some of these paintings after he was threatened with prosecution for obscenity in 1950. He kept the *Leg of Mutton* painting wrapped up under his bed until the day he died).

For a period of time he lived almost as a recluse, painting the Christ in the *Wilderness* series.

During the Second World War, Spencer spent four years in the Glasgow shipyards painting pictures such as *Burners* and *Welders*. They resemble the Ford Motor Company frescoes painted by Diego Rivera. Again, Spencer manages to elevate everyday activity into something special.

Meanwhile, he had been trying to effect a reconciliation with Hilda and nursed her through a mental breakdown in 1942. He completed the somewhat sentimental but touching *Love Letters* just before Hilda died in 1950.

The painting shows the two of them sitting together on a large sofa that seems to engulf them. Spencer clasps and kisses a bunch of Hilda’s letters that she extracts from her dress. He was to continue to write to her nearly every day.

In 1959 it seems he knew he was dying from cancer and in five days painted another self-portrait. It conveys a sense of defiance yet satisfaction ...perhaps he thought that he had managed to regain his artistic vision after all.

Stanley Spencer possessed a highly personal and flawed vision, but his work is often beautiful. The impulse for his creativity came out of his own idealistic efforts to articulate suffering humanity’s craving for a better world. He sought salvation through the redemptive power of God and Christ, but his efforts to portray a heavenly nirvana also encouraged him to throw a revealing light on vital aspects of life and the human condition.

The Stanley Spencer exhibition at the Tate Modern, London can still be viewed online at:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/spencer/>

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada

September 14 - December 30, 2001

[http://info.ago.net/exhibit\\_index.cfm?ID=583](http://info.ago.net/exhibit_index.cfm?ID=583)

Ulster Museum, Belfast, Northern Ireland

January 25 - April 7, 2002

<http://www.ulstermuseum.org.uk/>



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