

President: Dr James Fox

Vice-president: Miss Shirin Spencer

An organisation within the Stanley Spencer Memorial Fund, registered charity no 307989

Patron: Lord Richard Harries of Pentregarth, formerly Bishop of Oxford

‘Unflinching’ self-portrait added to Gallery’s collection

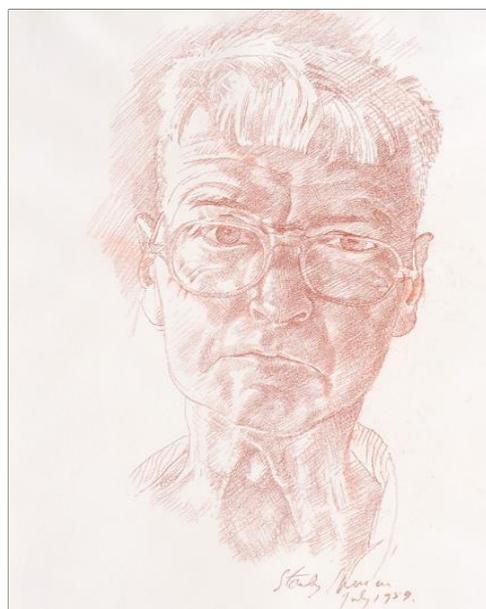
We are proud to present our latest acquisition: this moving self-portrait of Stanley Spencer (right), executed a few months before his death in 1959.

The work, which has been acquired with the financial support of the Art Fund on behalf of the Stanley Spencer Gallery, as well as The Band Trust, a V&A Purchase Grant Fund and The Friends of Stanley Spencer Gallery, is now displayed as part of our current exhibition, *LOVE, ART, LOSS: The Wives of Stanley Spencer* (open until October 2021).

The drawing was commissioned by Joy Smith, a friend of the artist. Spencer had a close relationship with the Smith family, and frequently visited their home in Yorkshire. He drew the self-portrait in red conté while observing himself in a dressing table mirror. It is an intense, unnerving image, its immediacy of line expressing the frailty of the sitter.

In a letter dated 16 February 1959, Spencer wrote: *‘I know I have promised it but it may never be done all the same. When I went into hospital, I realised that I must do only the work that I wished to do.’* When Spencer’s cancer went into remission, he embarked on what would be his last visit to Yorkshire. On 8 July, he met Joy at the Great Northern Hotel before taking the train north. Shortly after arrival, he drew the present sketch at her request.

In the event, Joy was not happy with the resulting image. She apparently did not find it a true



likeness, but it is more likely that she found it too uncomfortable. Days later, she and Spencer went to Leeds, where he bought canvas and oils to paint another version, which is now at Tate Britain. The oil medium has subdued the immediacy, vigour and raw emotion of the present sketch, in which the weight of mortality bears down upon the sitter.

Only two months after that work was completed, Spencer was in the Canadian Hospital in Taplow, not far from Cookham. After a short remission he returned to hospital in December, where Joy visited him. According to her notes, they discussed *‘the nature of inspiration and the importance of physical form as a source of inspiration and love’* – a conversation whose essence must surely be found in this self-portrait, at once a triumph and a resignation. Spencer died shortly afterwards, aged 68.

Amanda Bradley

The Learning Programme

In the third of a series about the people who help to run the Gallery, Dick Brealey talks to Will Smith, who coordinates school visits.

Will, how did you come to be involved with the Gallery?

I have long been a fan of Stanley Spencer. After I retired five years ago, I bumped into a custodian at a WEA course, who suggested that I might like to join the team! Little did I then know...

You weren't involved with the Gallery's Learning Programme at that stage?

No, I took over the role from Catherine Saker, on a gradual basis, towards the end of 2018.

Can you tell us something about the Learning Programme and why we have it?

I think it is very important that the Gallery has a responsibility to tell children about a much-celebrated artist, who was so closely associated with Cookham. We hope that it will kindle their enthusiasm for art, and encourage them to get painting. As an accredited museum, it is crucial that we demonstrate our involvement in educational activities in the wider community, for both adult groups and children.

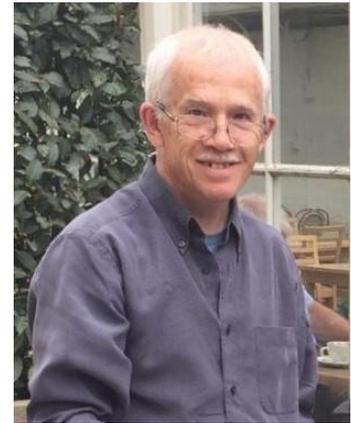
What types of schools are involved and what do they experience?

The schools are local for the most part. There is a good mixture but the balance is tilted more to primary/junior/middle than to senior schools. As a rule, the groups come to the Gallery, but, on occasion, we have 'Art Out' days, in which we take examples of Spencer's work into a school to provide the basis for a talk.

The format of a typical school visit comprises, first, a talk in the Gallery about Spencer, with a focus on the works on display. This is followed by a guided walk around some of the sites in Cookham that are depicted in Spencer's paintings.

You must have had some interesting reactions from students?

Yes, you never know what questions are going to come out of the blue. One boy, for example, wanted to know



Will Smith

whether I was Stanley Spencer. I was happy to declare not.

How many students do we get on these school visits?

In the final quarter of last year, we had 142 visiting students. Among them was a group of young adults with special needs. They spent some time sketching in the Gallery after the talk, and they were left, *still* sketching, on Bellrope Meadow before the journey back.

For the first two months of this year there were two further Gallery visits from schools in Windsor and Maidenhead, which together accounted for 170 students.

Would you like to expand the programme?

The principal issue would be to get extra volunteer support. At the moment, there are up to 10 custodians who are involved on a regular basis. The programme could not run without their tremendous help.

Presumably lockdown stopped everything?

Sadly, yes, and it is difficult to see when we will be able to get going again. We are thinking about other ways that we can connect with schools, perhaps using something like the Zoom online meeting app – but that is all in the future.

Thank you, Will. It is obviously very important that we are able to reach out to the young. So I hope the Gallery's Learning Programme can get going again before too long.

A treasure trove of memories

As preparations were underway for the current exhibition, the Gallery was visited by Stanley's daughter Shirin and his grandson John. They brought with them a treasure trove – an old battered suitcase filled with memories. As Amanda Bradley (our curator) helped them to unpack it, out came Hilda's handbag, a lock of her hair, shopping lists, letters and the necklace which is on loan to the Gallery (and can be seen in Hilda's self-portrait in the exhibition).



John then produced the most wonderful surprise – the suit that Hilda made herself, which served as her wedding dress. In the exhibition you can see the lovely drawing of Hilda



Left to right: Amanda Bradley, Shirin and John Spencer

standing on a table being fitted for a traditional white gown. Famously we know that Stanley took fright at this and called off the wedding. Eventually he accepted that she could wear this black and brown striped velvet suit – set off with a tri-corn hat.

Amanda said: 'Sometimes in art history we talk about characters, but forget that they were real people with real lives. These kinds of memories really bring them back to life.' The Gallery is so lucky to have this contact with Spencer's family, which gives us a unique insight into his life.

Update from Sandham Memorial Chapel

The summer at Sandham has been considerably quieter than usual, but our closure has provided the plants and wildlife with an opportunity to flourish uninterrupted.

In August we welcomed Michael Portillo to the chapel to film for the new series of Great British Railway Journeys. The old Oxford to Winchester line ran adjacent to the chapel until its closure in 1960, sitting between the Spencer's home at Chapel View and the chapel itself. Highclere station was a few hundred yards down the line and the first resident of cottage 1 had been a railwayman before his war service. The new series is due for broadcast in Spring 2021.



Whilst we're still awaiting a date for our reopening, we've been keeping busy with gardening, cleaning and maintenance tasks and over the last few weeks we have enjoyed catching up with our volunteer team over socially distanced tea and cake in the garden of reflection.

For more details about the chapel, visit our website www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sandham-memorial-chapel.

Paul Grist, Property Operations Manager

News from the Friends' committee

We lose a valued Treasurer and welcome a new one

Alan Harding, who has served as Treasurer of the Friends for the past 12 years, has opted for more time on the golf course and at the bridge table. In addition to keeping a careful watch on our finances and maintaining our membership list, Alan has been a wise and much valued member of the committee. We are sorry to see him go and are enormously grateful for all his help.

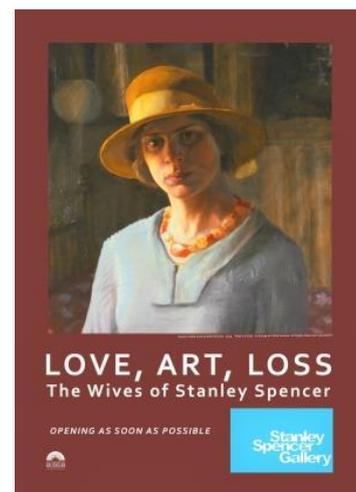


Stanley Spencer:
Clare George,
aged nine

Alan will be succeeded as Treasurer by Clare Millar. Clare has a long association with Cookham and Spencer. She grew up in Fernlea, Stanley Spencer's old house, and her mother, Joan George, was a good friend of Stanley, the author of *Stanley Spencer Remembered* and one of the founders of the Gallery. Clare herself was the subject of three drawings by Stanley. She reports that she is a keen fan of the cinema, opera and ballet, as well as quite a traveller. We are delighted to have Clare as our new Treasurer.

Life under coronavirus

After five months of lockdown, the Gallery has now reopened with the postponed summer exhibition, *LOVE, ART, LOSS: The Wives of Stanley Spencer*.



On show for the first time is the newly-acquired self-portrait by Stanley Spencer, drawn shortly before his death. It has not been an easy period for the Gallery, with no revenues coming in, and we were therefore delighted that the Friends could step in to make up the shortfall to allow the purchase of this wonderful drawing to go ahead.

Regretfully, lockdown meant that we had to cancel the annual meeting and the visit to the Lightbox gallery, and to put other planned visits on hold. We will of course resume normal service as soon as it is safe to do so. Meanwhile, our Facebook page, which is managed by Julia Munday, has helped to keep Friends in touch with each other and with Gallery news.

We have also used the enforced idleness to undertake some efficiency improvements. The first is to split the jobs of Treasurer and Membership Secretary. Second, thanks to the hard work of Trevor Knight, we have started to employ a new mailing system. One advantage of this is that it has helped us to identify for the first time a number of Friends who have changed their email addresses. Hopefully, we can now keep them fully informed of any Gallery news.

Dick Brealey