

*The Angel, Cookham Churchyard c1936-7*



If you follow in the footsteps of Stanley Spencer, walking from his childhood home in Cookham High Street to the river, you will come across a beautiful angel presiding over the entrance to Holy Trinity Church. She - or is it he? - captured the imagination of the artist so much that he painted the statue (a memorial to a young man who died in a boating accident on the Thames in 1890) twice – the only time he ever repeated a subject.

The first painting of the Angel was bought from the Royal Academy's 1934 Summer Exhibition by John Spedan Lewis, founder of the John Lewis Partnership, who owned property in Cookham. The story goes that one of the artist's rich local patrons liked it so much that she commissioned another. However in November 1936 we find Spencer writing to his friend Gwen Raverat offering to paint it for her. Granddaughter of Charles Darwin and a fellow Slade pupil, Gwen was a great supporter of the artist throughout his life and the painting hung on her wall for many years before being passed on to her family and eventually sold.

Depicted in profile, with no sign of a plinth, the angel in Spencer's painting could almost be a real person deep in contemplative prayer. The soft tones of the drapery and hair contrast with the deeper hue of the face, highlighted by the St George flag on the tower of the church. The steely grey sky has a luminous quality to it, set against the foliage - some real,

some imaginary – which frames the picture. The overall impression is of great serenity.

The painting is now on long-term loan to The Stanley Spencer Gallery where it delights and inspires visitors and budding artists alike (not in present exhibition).



*Stanley Spencer with the angel, 1950s*



*School visit to the Gallery, 2019*