

Delight in Nature: Stanley Spencer's World

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Quotation from The Scotsman newspaper printed on the 2nd July, 1936

"Spencer paints landscape as they [the Pre-Raphaelites] didwith the same prodigious delight in all the facts of nature for their own sake. He loves to paint nettles and grasses leaf by leaf, blade by blade, as they did. He loves it all too much to leave anything out."

The natural world was an intrinsic part of Stanley Spencer's (1894-1956) artistic vision. The topography of Cookham, as well as its flora and fauna were at the core of his practice. In his writings he did not distinguish between the practice of landscape and still life painting; for him the two were indistinguishable. Stanley complained that some of his landscapes were 'pot boilers' – easily saleable works that helped him survive financially – but in reality his study of nature informed and became a part of his figurative work. Not only were landscapes and still-lives painted with exquisite detail, but they were also expressions of his spiritual vision of the world.

This exhibition will demonstrate how the natural world and the everyday were unified with Spencer's artistic practice: how rubbish became something beautiful; suburban spaces were considered places for mysterious, heavenly happenings; and how the sacred co-existed with the profane.

Beginnings

From any early age Spencer found inspiration 'sitting among the hollyhocks and runner beans'. One of his earliest works titled, *Fairy Goblins emerging from High Corn*, shows how he revelled in the beauty of his local environment and used it to complement his imaginative work.

Cookham was essential to Spencer's artistic vision and emotional stability. When he was posted to Macedonia during the Great War, he marvelled at the rugged landscape there, the craggy rock faces often appearing in works after his return home. His letters home, however, demonstrate how much he missed Cookham. He described in great detail the plants and trees in the garden at his home, Fernlea, which later came to feature in many of his paintings.

Fairy Goblins emerging from High Corn

c.1906

pen and ink on paper, 501 x 433 mm.

signed, bottom right, *S. Spencer*

private collection, on long term loan to the Stanley Spencer Gallery

The young artist (aged around 15) has used wispy striations and cross hatching to capture the movement of corn and poppies in the field, the form of which is echoed by the willowy fairies in pointed hats. Spencer has tentatively captured a rabbit shooting into his burrow as the fairies approach. The scene is evocative of children's book illustrations that were a long-lasting influence on Spencer.

The Fairy on the Waterlily Leaf

c.1909

pen and ink on paper, 41.5 x 32 cm.

bequeathed by Ruth, Lady Gollancz, 1973

The Cookham landscape, with Strand Castle (now demolished) provides the setting for this scene. Spencer combined cross-hatched shading with a pared down linear style to evoke the textures of wheat, grass, sand, leaf and ripples of water. The two figures are effectively bound within their own enclosed space, by a wall of wheat and a tree, a device that Spencer used frequently not only as a pictorial device, but also to evoke mythical boundaries.

Pack Mules

1918-19

pencil, pen and ink and wash on paper, 447 x 467 mm.

acquired in memory of Tessa Sidey, with assistance from her bequest, 2012

Wounded carried by Mules, Macedonia

1918-1919

pencil, pen & ink and wash on paper, 492 x 390 mm.

acquired in memory of Tessa Sidney, with assistance from her bequest, 2012

Travelling to Salonika during the Great War, Spencer likened his journey to that of Odysseus and revelled in the spectacular landscapes that unfolded before him. Spencer was also transfixed by the mountainous gorges which made 'huge dock-leaf shapes'. These dramatic fissures came to feature in his post war work such as the 1921 *Crucifixion*, with Christ's cross pitted into a rocky crevasse.

Dirt and Metal

Cookham had always been Spencer's 'holy suburb', a place where landscape served to give context to visionary happenings, but after the Great War this association assumed a more profound resonance. Landscape became a form of pastoral redemption. Quite often he included unexpected - or what were conventionally considered ugly-objects. For him, the lowly and real had spiritual meaning. This matter-of-fact representation of the world shared characteristics with the movement in 1920s Germany known as New Objectivity. Equal

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prominence was given to what was perceived to be both beautiful and ugly, although Spencer did not share the satirical outlook of his German counterparts. In this way, discarded metal, machinery and even a dustbin became objects of mystery and veneration.

The Cultivator

1927

oil on canvas, 44 x 59 cm.

Lynda Grier Collection, Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford

Spencer wrote how this 'big iron hay machine' provided a 'pleasing contrast with the lush long grass and flowers in which it is half hidden.' The picture was painted in Oxfordshire, whilst the Spencer brothers were staying with the patroness Ottoline Morrell, at Garsington. It expresses the artist's own philosophy in its elevation of the mundane or discarded into something of spiritual and aesthetic significance.

The Dustbin

1956

oil on canvas, 76.2 x 50.8 cm.

Royal Academy of Arts

From an early age, dustbins and rubbish had played an important part in Spencer's consciousness. The painting sums up Spencer's reverence for the everyday, the mundane, and even the discarded. The act of throwing away dead flowers from a vase has been elevated to something ritualistic and mysterious. We cannot see the woman's face, but she is absorbed in contemplation of this sacred act.

Study for the Month of September: The Dustbin

1926

49.5 x 38.1 cm.

Pen on paper

Private collection on long term loan to the Stanley Spencer Gallery

In 1926 Spencer was commissioned to illustrate a commercial almanack, using recollections of his childhood and life in Cookham. *The Dustbin* was copied exactly from the design for September. This drawing was acquired by Spencer's lawyer and patron, Wilfred Evill, so when the

artist came to paint the version in oil some thirty years later, he worked from a squared-up illustration in the printed Almanac.

The Mill, Durweston

1920

oil on canvas, 40.5 x 50.8 cm.

private collection, on long term loan to the Stanley Spencer Gallery

The Mill was one of nine landscapes painted outdoors in Dorset shortly after Spencer's return from war. The swathe of rusting mill-race machinery across the foreground of the picture contrasts happily with the soft pink of the masonry, heightened by abstract casts of light. Spencer later wrote about how the pattern of the small windows appealed to him.

Sacred and Profane

Cookham was an earthly paradise for Spencer. As such it became an essential part of his relationships and also his faith. His obsession with Patricia Preece (who was to become his second wife) coincided with his return to Cookham in 1932, on the completion of his war murals at Burghclere. Spencer embarked on a life-long but never-fulfilled project to decorate a chapel (called the Church House, or Church of Me), which commemorated his loves, including his first wife, Hilda Carline, and life, set in the context of Cookham.

Spencer's conventional faith in a Christian God was shattered after the war. His faith became more personal, and more diverse, with a particular nod to Eastern philosophy. Biblical and Christian images continued to be an important part of his artistic practice and were often fused into the Cookham landscape.

Patricia at Cockmarsh Hill

1935

oil on canvas, 76 x 51 cm.

private collection, on loan term loan to the Stanley Spencer Gallery

The Cookham landscape became an expression of Spencer's obsession with Patricia Preece, an artist who was later to become his second wife. He had met Patricia at a teasshop in Cookham in 1929. The artist felt a reconciliation of 'old feelings' for Cookham and 'new feelings' of exaltation in Patricia who personified his 'new sexual ideals'. Cockmarsh is a site of historical and scientific interest, with Bronze Age burial mounds and rich botany. He wrote about how the diamonds and amethysts around her neck chimed with the purple thistles in the meadow around her.

View from Cookham Bridge

1936

oil on canvas, 71 x 94 cm.

accepted by H.M. Government in lieu of tax and allocated to the Stanley Spencer Gallery, 2003

Spencer considered the river a vehicle for spiritual feelings and happenings. The tower of Holy Trinity church can be seen in the background. The sharp cut of the towpath along the Thames, the stack of brightly coloured punts radiating in the foreground, and the impressionistic pools of water demonstrate Spencer's ability to transform landscape into a dynamic artistic vision.

The Angel, Cookham Churchyard

c.1936-7

oil on canvas, 70 x 50.8 cm.

private collection, on long term loan to the Stanley Spencer Gallery

The Angel is almost monochrome, save the muted tones of the church's brick roof and an almost-frame of leaves and pine needles. The contrast of texture between the church, the smooth surface of the statue (save the merest hint of green lichen on the sleeve), and the void of sky is a masterful essay in balance.

Protective barrier:

The next painting isn't glazed. There are therefore two metal posts with a canvas band between them approximately one foot in front of the next painting to ensure visitors do not accidentally touch the painting.

Magnolias

1938

oil on canvas, 56 x 66 cm.

private collection

The beauty of this image belies the personal anguish that Spencer was experiencing at that time; he had been divorced by Hilda, and had separated from his second, Patricia, who had effectively evicted him from his own home. Only months later he went into self-imposed exile at Adelaide Road in London, where he painted the *Christ in the Wilderness* series. His rent was paid for by the M.P., Malcolm Macdonald, who had bought this picture soon after its completion.

Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta

1952-9

oil and pencil on canvas, 205.7 x 535.9 cm.

private collection, on long term loan to the Stanley Spencer Gallery

This work, unfinished on Spencer's death, places Christ at the heart of Cookham regatta, a highlight of the village year. It was destined to be the central picture in the river aisle of the Church House project. For him, the river was a 'holy of holies', bound up with life, love and art. Christ sits in a basket chair, dramatically lunging forward as he preaches to the villagers.

The Mystic Space

Walls and boundaries often appear in Spencer's work, often with figures peering over, from one mysterious space into another. Spencer spoke of his 'over the wall feeling', which was not just something connected to spiritual happenings, or the metaphysical, but it was also about childlike wonder. He also equated an 'over the wallish feeling' with trying to get to know the inner feelings of his first wife, Hilda.

He used the device in religious and landscape painting alike. In his religious paintings, walls are not only a useful compositional device, but they also served to separate time and action, the seen and the unseen. Spencer also enjoyed painting the iron railings separating domestic gardens in Cookham. The architect Clough Williams-Ellis, who wrote against the overdevelopment of modern Britain, described railings and fences as 'cages'. For Spencer they were a positive addition to the landscape. For him they represented safe, cosy spaces, destined for divine happenings.

Domestic Scenes: Neighbours

1936

oil on canvas, 76.2 x 50.8 cm.

Barbara Karmel Bequest, 1995

Spencer's sister, Annie, receives a gift of tulips from her cousin next door. Fernlea, Spencer's childhood home, and Belmont (the house next door) were built by his grandfather for his sons. Spencer compared the 'next door' feeling to Heaven; and – moreover - he considered his well-to-do cousins' home 'rather swell'. Boundaries or the separations of space were important to him and he noted the 'different feelings' evoked by the two gardens.

The Betrayal

1919

oil on canvas, 39.5 x 50.5

acquired with assistance from the MGC/V&A Fund, 1984

Christ's arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane here takes place in Cookham, in the back garden of Fernlea and The Nest in Cookham High Street, behind Spencer's school room. The scene is divided horizontally by a wall, over which the disciples peer. It provides a useful compositional backdrop and at the same time separates the earthly presence of the disciples from the religious happenings in the foreground.

Study for the Month of April: Clipping Privet Hedge

1926

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pen and ink on paper, 26.7 x 38.7 cm.
inscribed 'April'
recto: Study for the Month of April: Neighbours
Barbara Karmel bequest, 1995

In this preparatory sketch for the Almanack, Spencer's brother Sydney is shown clipping the hedge in front of their family home. Spencer found the small front gardens in Cookham, separated by railings, fences and hedges, cosy and magical spaces. Even in pen and ink, Spencer has beautifully described the contrasting textures of metal and brick, along with the voluminous mound of leaves piled into the wheelbarrow.

Study for the Month of September: Walnut Bashing
1926
pen and ink on paper, 590 x 504 cm.
Stanley Spencer Gallery

The Spencer boys are shown picking walnuts from the tree at the end of their garden In a letter from Salonika, Spencer reminisced about his garden saying:

'where rises a big Walnut tree which spreads out over our garden but I am more particularly looking at the yew tree which is framed by the Walnut tree forming the background. This fir tree has many apertures, openings etc. which greatly excites my imagination. They all seem holy and secret.' [sic]

Redemption

Post War, Spencer's life failed to settle back into the idyllic rhythm he had known in Cookham as a child and young man. He reconciled himself with the horrors of war through his art, notably at Sandham Memorial Chapel. Landscape and nature provided important and symbolic backdrops for his images there. During his time off, he took respite in painting the landscape around him.

In the 1930s, Spencer's emotional life became the scourge of his middle age. His divorce from Hilda Carline, marriage to Patricia Preece, and their immediate separation scarred him emotionally and financially.

Spencer's dealer, Arthur Tooth, helped him settle his financial situation and manage his clients. In his later years, he made a good living painting the natural environment for wealthy Cookham residents. Although some of these pictures were borne out of financial necessity, they were also a form of personal redemption.

Cookham Rise: Cottages

c.1935-6

oil on canvas, 75.6 x 49.5 cm.

Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford (Lynda Grier Collection)

The iron railing was an important part of Spencer's vision of Cookham, both mysterious and yet 'cosy'. This painting celebrates the beauty of the suburban garden, fusing landscape with intricate flower painting and still-life. Spencer has revelled in the textures of leaf, gravel, brick and wood.

View from the Tennis Court, Cookham

1938

oil on canvas, 56 x 71 cm.

private collection, on long term loan to the Stanley Spencer Gallery

This painting is almost dominated by the utilitarian fencing, which fills the foreground. Spencer has painted this as carefully as the profusion of trees and fields in the middle ground beyond. The startling void of the tennis court demonstrates Spencer's eye for artistic balance. This view was probably painted at Harwood House (now a nursing home), high up in Cookham Dean.

Study for the Month of April: Clipping Privet Hedge

1926

pen and ink on paper, 26.7 x 38.7 cm.

inscribed 'April'

recto: Study for the Month of April: Neighbours

Barbara Karmel bequest, 1995

In this preparatory sketch for the Almanack, Spencer's brother Sydney is shown clipping the hedge in front of their family home. Spencer found the small front gardens in Cookham, separated by railings, fences and hedges, cosy and magical spaces. Even in pen and ink, Spencer has

beautifully described the contrasting textures of metal and brick, along with the voluminous mound of leaves piled into the wheelbarrow.

Beacon Hill, near Burghclere

1927

oil on canvas, 46 x 61 cm.

Barbara Karmel Bequest, 1995

In 1927 Spencer and his wife Hilda moved to Burghclere, where he was to paint his monumental murals for Sandham Memorial Chapel. Spencer still found time to sketch the landscape around him. This suggests that he was not so averse to painting 'potboilers' as he might have otherwise suggested. Beacon Hill is one of England's most famous hill forts.

Bluebells, Cornflowers and Rhododendrons

1945

oil on canvas, 51 x 76 cm.

British Council Collections

In a burst of idealism, Spencer has filled the canvas with spring flowers. It was painted in Glasgow, in the garden of his boarding house. At this time, he was Official War Artist, painting his iconic *Shipbuilding on the Clyde* series. During major commissions such as this, he often took time out to paint the natural world.

Cookham from Englefield

1948

oil on canvas, 76.2 x 50.8 cm.

private collection

The house belonged to Gerard Shiel, an avid collector and supporter of Spencer, who not only bought his earlier work but commissioned five works from him. Commissions like this gave Spencer financial stability during his last years. It is a technically accomplished work, with the highly detailed landscape and path receding into the distance, and a vast expanse of cloudscape above.

Englefield House, Cookham

1951

oil on canvas, 76.2 x 50.8 cm.

private collection

This was the third picture that Spencer painted for Gerard Shiel. It was painted during July and August, with the wisteria just in second bloom. The density of detail was a painstaking exercise for the artist.

The Foreshore at Whitehouse, Northern Ireland

1952

canvas on board, 30.5 x 40.6 cm.

private collection

Spencer visited his elder brother Harold, in Ireland, a number of times in the early 1950s. It had been a difficult beginning to the decade; Hilda had died in 1950, and in 1951 he had stopped his annulment proceedings against Patricia. It must have been liberating to escape to the Irish coast, and Spencer was clearly captivated by the landscape there, painting a number of striking views.

Clear acrylic display cabinet located at the top the stairs on the right-hand side of Mezzanine Floor

This displays a letter from Stanley Spencer to Desmond Chute.

A large print copy of this letter is available from the Custodian.

Sketch of a Rose

1959;

signed and dated bottom right: *Stanley Spencer/ august 26th 59*

Pen, ink and pencil on paper

436 x 538 mm.

This sensitive sketch, drawn perfunctorily in biro, sums up Spencer's appreciation for the natural world. He gave it to his friend and patron

Philip Metz, signing it for him to seal its authenticity and value. Spencer's bedroom in Fernlea had been covered in wallpaper with small roses.

Portrait of Rachel Westropp

1959

Oil on canvas

590 x 406mm

Private Collection

This is one of a number of portraits of female acquaintances of Stanley in the post-war period. Stanley captures Mrs Westropp in a 'head and shoulder' format dominating the foreground with Holy Trinity Church and graveyard and the adjacent house in the background with a soft, cloudy summer sky.. As usual with Stanley, the background is appropriate. Mrs Westropp is the Vicar of Holy Trinity's wife. She is wearing a blue knitted jumper over an open-necked patterned blouse with a single strand, choker pearl necklace.

Domestic Scene: At the Chest of Draws

1936

Signed and dated lower right, 'SS.36'

Oil on canvas

508 x 660mm

Private collection

This domestic scene shows Stanley and Hilda getting ready for a wedding. The two figures are interlinked with a diminutive Stanley crouched beneath an exaggerated, large woman – Hilda. She simultaneously chooses a collar from a bundle of collars and probably a shirt from the lower draw which is being opened by Stanley. In the background there is a red hot ware bottle nestling in an unmade bed.

Photographs of Stanley Spencer. Photographer John Neal.

Clear acrylic display cabinet is located on the Mezzanine Floor to the left of the stairs:

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This displays the old pram used by Stanley to carry his easel, paints etc. around Cookham when he was working in the village.