

A Brush with History

STANLEY SPENCER and MODERN BRITISH ART

**in partnership with the Southampton City
Art Gallery**

Wall text and Labels.

Alternative media are available.

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Introduction

Southampton City Art Gallery's racks teem with treasures, including a significant number of Modern British pictures. The works exhibited here have been chosen to provide context to Stanley Spencer's own work.

The Gallery opened in 1939, some years after the formative bequests and legacies of two city councillors, Robert Chipperfield (1817-1911), and Frederick William Smith (1861-1925). Their names can be seen on some of the labels in this exhibition.

Chipperfield's will stipulated that the Gallery should be advised by the incumbent Director of the National Gallery, London. When Kenneth Clark took on that role in 1934, the Gallery's fortunes were transformed. He had huge ambitions for Southampton and the taste of the nation as a whole. He and Southampton's first curator (George Loraine Conran) were entirely responsible for the buying spree that was to follow. During World War II, as chair of the War Artists' Advisory Committee, Clark was able to channel top-rate examples of Modern British art onto the Gallery walls, influencing the taste of a new generation of art lovers beyond what was once traditionally a London-centric art scene.

Both Southampton and the Stanley Spencer Gallery are testaments to the power of philanthropy: Southampton in its succession of generous legacies and donations; the Spencer Gallery, also in its reliance on generous benefactors, but equally in its team of volunteers who give their time to manage and run the museum on a daily basis.

THE SLADE SCHOOL OF FINE ART

Stanley Spencer arrived at the Slade in 1908, having studied at Maidenhead Technical College. The cohort of artists who were students with him there, some of whom are featured in this exhibition, were described as ‘the second and last crisis of brilliance’ by Henry Tonks, the Slade’s Assistant Professor and Master of Drawing. Spencer’s contemporaries included Paul Nash, David Bomberg, C.R.W. Nevinson, Dora Carrington, and Mark Gertler, as well as Spencer’s life-long friend Gwen Darwin (later Raverat).

Technical drawing was the backbone of study, eagerly watched over by the highly-critical Tonks. Artists began drawing from classical sculptures or casts, later progressing to meticulous observation from life, as soon as they were deemed sufficiently able. Whilst Gertler considered this ‘excellent practice’, Spencer developed a distaste for rapid sketching. Tonks encouraged artists to use a squaring-up method used by Renaissance artists which Spencer practised until the end of his life, for example in his monumental canvas, *Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta*.

- 1) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A. (Cookham 1891 – Cliveden 1959); Gladiator, Technical Institute, Maidenhead c.1939, pencil on paper**

Stanley Spencer Gallery, on loan from a private collection

Before heading to the Slade, Spencer trained locally at the Technical Institute in Maidenhead. The copying of casts, usually after the Antique, was an essential part of artistic training. Spencer had an extraordinary visual recall, and here depicts a scene from over thirty years earlier. The students are shown sketching a cast of the antique statue, *The Borghese Gladiator*.

2) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A. ; The Fairy on the Waterlily Leaf

1910, pencil on paper

Stanley Spencer Gallery, bequeathed by Ruth, Lady Gollancz, 1973

This was drawn a couple of years into Spencer's time at the Slade, when he was only 18 years old. A lute player (copied from one of Spencer's life class studies) perches on a grassy verge, looking in rapt attention at a fairy, who had been modelled on Spencer's friend, Dot Wooster.

3) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; Photolithograph after Self Portrait, 1913

Trial proof of a lithograph, c.1962

Stanley Spencer Gallery

When Spencer drew this portrait he was fresh from his studies at the Slade. The method of distinctive and

confident cross-hatching and the strong contrast of light and shade (*chiaroscuro*) seen in the lithograph was a method used by Old Master draughtsman, for example Michelangelo, about whom Spencer would have learnt from Roger Fry's lectures at the Slade.

4) Mark Gertler (Spitalfields 1891–Highgate 1939); *The Rabbi and his Grandchild* 1913, oil on canvas

Southampton City Art Gallery, purchased with the assistance of the Chipperfield Bequest Fund, 1954

Mark Gertler grew up in poverty in Whitechapel, his place at the Slade only made possible by the Jewish Educational Aid Society. The male sitter is not known, but the girl was called Dora Plaskowsky, whose father was both a friend and the family butcher. The two figures were sketched separately and never met. Dora was originally shown sitting on the rabbi's knees.

5) David Bomberg (Birmingham 1890–London 1957); *Interior of the Armenian Church* 1925, oil on canvas

Southampton City Art Gallery, bequeathed by David and Liza Brown, 2002

David Bomberg born to Polish-Jewish immigrants, and like Mark Gertler grew up in poverty in Whitechapel. He went to the Slade in 1911, supported by the artist John Singer Sargent and the Jewish Educational Aid Society. He visited Palestine between 1923 to 1927 and was buoyed by its energy and colour. During Easter week in 1925, he was smuggled into the Arab Christian Armenian Church of St. James in Jerusalem, where he recorded the Easter ceremonies in progress.

THE GREAT WAR (1914–1918)

David Bomberg recalled how he was sitting with Augustus John when it was announced that Britain was at war. Spencer and a number of his former Slade contemporaries signed up, including Nash, Nevinson and Bomberg. The desperate circumstances endured by this group of young artists sparked new depths of emotion and experience, expressed in the most strident and moving terms through their work. Whilst some artists chose to depict the raw horror of war, Spencer preferred to focus on the process of healing and redemption. His murals at Sandham Memorial Chapel at Burghclere (1927-32, National Trust) are a moving expression of post-war reconciliation.

**6) Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson,
A.R.A. (London 1889–London 1946);
Loading Timber at Southampton Docks**

1916, oil on canvas

Southampton City Art Gallery, purchased with the Frederick William Smith Bequest Fund, 1962

Nevinson's post-Slade career achieved high critical acclaim. He was one of the first of the Slade group to experience the horrors of the Front. The hard edges of Futurism helped him convey his disillusion with war, through its facelessness and lines of force. This painting almost veers into abstraction with the lines of timber jutting across the canvas, although here the effect is energetic rather than horrific. It is an homage to man at work and the efficiency of the war effort.

7) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; Wounded being carried by Mules in Macedonia

1918-9, pen and wash on paper

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

Spencer was fascinated by the mules that assisted his daily work as a medical orderly. He noted that in Macedonia 'there were nearly as many mules in Macedonia as there were men The mules always seemed to reflect the feeling the country gave me.' This drawing was executed on Spencer's return, and shows an orderly walking alongside a wounded soldier on a stretcher.

**8) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; Pack Mules
1918-9**

pen and wash on paper

**Stanley Spencer Gallery, acquired in memory of
Tessa Sidey with assistance from her bequest,
2012**

Whilst Spencer endured horrific experiences at war, he found solace in the beauty of his Macedonian surroundings. He clearly enjoyed the abstract quality of the three ravines set into the hillside, and it is possible that this natural phenomenon informed his fascination for the three-dimensional form of tents and their openings, which he sketched prolifically in preparation for the Burghclere project.

**9) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; Albert Henry
Seager**

1916, pencil on paper

**Stanley Spencer Gallery, given by Hilary Parsons
in 2017.**

Albert Seager was 19 when he joined the army, leaving his job as a clerk in a brewery in Bristol. He survived the war and later became a chauffeur. Along with Spencer he served in the RAMC at Beaufort Hospital. Tonks's training

and Spencer's ability as a draughtsman is clearly evident in the sensitive handling of the medium and subtly portrayed facial expression.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Britain declared war on Germany on 3rd September 1939. The rules of engagement and advances in technology meant it was a different kind of war to the first and as such it elicited a different response from artists. There is little of the visceral bleakness expressed by artists who had served on the Western Front, and there were more official commissions. It was felt that during the Great War the appointment of war artists had been too much of an afterthought, so the War Artists' Advisory Committee was formed, headed by the Director of the National Gallery, Kenneth Clark. Artists were limited by brief to paint eye-witness compositions and hence there is a greater element of reportage in works of this period. The board had some reservations about enlisting Spencer, but Spencer's dealer (Dudley Tooth) took up his cause. The WAAC were responsible for commissioning what was to become one of Spencer's masterpieces, the *Shipbuilding on the Clyde* series (1940–46, Imperial War Museum).

10) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus's Daughter 1947

oil on canvas

**Southampton City Art Gallery, purchased by the
Frederick William Smith Bequest Fund, 1950**

This triptych is part of the Port Glasgow Resurrection series (1945–50). The subject is taken from the New Testament (Mark 5, 21–43). In the central panel, Christ can be seen bringing Jairus’s daughter back to life. Jairus clutches the bedpost in sorrow, unaware that his daughter has risen. On the left, people resurrect in the streets, emerging from beneath paving stones, and on the right, the newly-resurrected are reunited with their families. Stanley himself appears in a checked coat, with Daphne Charlton striding before him through the gate. He seems unaware of the presence of his first wife, Hilda, behind him.

**11) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; Sketchbook
drawing for The Raising of Jairus’s
Daughter**

c.1944, pencil on paper

**Stanley Spencer Gallery, on loan from a private
collection**

The five figures in the foreground, probably the unbelievers who have been ‘cast out’ according to the biblical text, didn’t make it into the final picture. It was a judicious omission, as the windowsill, which is almost

bare save for a couple of plant pots, provides visual relief from the throng of figures either side.

12) Leslie Cole, (Swindon 1910–Brighton 1976); Naval Base – Women’s Royal Naval Service Sick Bay 1942

oil on canvas

Southampton City Art Gallery, donated by the War Artists’ Advisory Committee, 1947

Leslie Cole was praised by the WAAC for his dispassionate reportage of some of the most traumatic events of the war. This work was painted at the naval base in Immingham on the River Humber. That same year Cole had caught the attention of Kenneth Clark, and it must have been due to Clark’s influence that he was awarded a full time WAAC commission in 1943. In 1947 Southampton was allocated nine pictures from the WAAC, including this one (the largest share went to Tate and the Imperial War Museum).

13) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A. ; Shipbuilding on the Clyde: Burners 1941

coloured lithograph on paper

Stanley Spencer Gallery, acquired 2016

***Burners* was one of four works by Official War artists from which prints were commissioned to be put up in factories and canteens to boost workers' morale. Here welders are shown using oxy-acetylene torches to cut metal sheets into shape. At the top right is an indirect portrait of the artist, who has removed his cap and goggles and observes the men at work.**

14) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; Study for Shipbuilding on the Clyde: Industry II c. 1940

pencil on paper

Stanley Spencer Gallery

Spencer planned an expansive scheme glorifying the shipbuilders' activities in the yard. He presented a scaled down version to the WAAC in 1941, of which he was ultimately asked to paint five. No picture resulted from this drawing, but it demonstrates Spencer's fascination with the complex technical process of shipbuilding.

15) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; Study for Shipbuilding on the Clyde: Plumbers 1944

pencil and coloured chalk

**Stanley Spencer Gallery, presented by Mrs G.A.
Worsley, 1969**

This drawing refers to a detail in the left section of the finished work. It shows the process by which pipes were bent into shape, the 'moulders' using a small hearth for heat, and sand to stop the pipes collapsing during bending. In this highly-finished squared-up drawing Spencer has clearly enjoyed the mannered shapes created by the pipes.

**16) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A. ; Caulking a
Deck 1940**

pencil and watercolour

**Stanley Spencer Gallery, on loan from a private
collection**

Spencer decided not to use the subject of caulking for his *Shipbuilding* series, but instead produced a stand-alone oil (private collection), which evolved from the right-hand section of the drawing. The process of caulking involved stopping up the seams of a deck to make it watertight, using a caulking hammer and chisels.

17) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; Portrait of Eric Williams, MC 1954

oil on canvas

Accepted by HM Government in lieu of tax and allocated to the Stanley Spencer Gallery, 2007

In Spencer's own words, Eric Williams was a 'heluva chap'. He was held prisoner during World War II in the infamous Stalag Luft III. He managed to dig an escape route in 1943, hiding the tunnel entrance under a vaulting horse. Spencer was originally commissioned to sketch Williams, but unhappy with the result, he painted an oil for the same price, labouring for hours over the knitted texture of his sweater.

FRIENDS, FAMILY AND LOVERS

Spencer's early career was studded with a remarkable succession of self-portraits and this exploration of his own self-image continued throughout his life. His training at the Slade under Henry Tonks was instrumental in developing his skills as a portraitist and draughtsman. He did not take commissions early on, preferring to sketch or paint those who happened to be around him; for example, during the war Albert Seager, or his wives, Hilda Carline and then Patricia Preece. Later in life, Spencer took on portrait commissions, mostly from his well-to-do neighbours in Cookham.

Gilbert Spencer's portrait of the *The Rat Catcher* might be mistaken as derivative of his brother's work, but in fact it

was painted in 1922, some years before Spencer's similarly-styled commissioned works. It was acquired by Maurice Palmer, Southampton's second curator, who was instrumental in building up the Gallery's collection of Modern British art.

18) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A. ; Portrait of Gilbert Spencer 1909

pencil on paper

Private collection on long term loan to the Stanley Spencer Gallery

This charming sketch, quite hastily executed, was drawn by Stanley aged seventeen or eighteen. Gilbert, although quite child-like in appearance, with chubby cheeks, was a year younger. That year Stanley went to study at the Slade. Gilbert went to study at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts in 1911, going on to the Slade in 1913, encouraged by his brother.

19) Gilbert Spencer (Cookham 1892– Suffolk 1979); The Rat Catcher, 1922

oil on canvas

Southampton City Art Gallery, purchased with the assistance of the Frederick William Smith Bequest Fund, 1953

This is an ambitious portrait, in which the sitter fills the canvas. The mixture of textures (the pattern of the carpet, the wallpaper and rug), and the strange curve of the hearth rug rucked up by the chair, are quite Stanley-like in their exploration of shape and pattern. The identity of the sitter is not recorded, but Gilbert has skilfully captured his careworn face and hooded left eye, hardened by work. The spent matches at his feet have been used to light the pipe in his hand, so that one can almost smell as well as see the sitter.

20) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; Portrait of Marjorie Metz 1958

oil on canvas

Stanley Spencer Gallery, bequeathed by Philip Metz, 1983

Like Gilbert's portrait of *The Rat Catcher* (painted over thirty years earlier), Marjorie Metz fills the canvas, the void around her filled with porcelain figurines and spring bouquets. These attributes, colours and her strapless embroidered dress make for a deeply feminine portrait. Marjorie Metz ran Poppets café in Maidenhead, which was often visited by Spencer in later years.

21) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; Hilda with Hair Down 1931

pencil on five pieces of paper, joined

Acquired with assistance from The Art Fund, the V&A Purchase Grant Fund and the Friends of the Stanley Spencer Gallery, 2012

This is an intimate yet vulnerable portrait of Spencer's first wife, Hilda Carline. It was drawn at Burghclere while Spencer was painting the murals there. Their relationship was already rocky at this time, and it marks Hilda's return to Burghclere after the birth of their second daughter, Unity. She had given birth in Hampstead where her family lived.

22) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; Patricia at Cockmarsh Hill 1935

oil on canvas

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

Spencer met Patricia Preece at a teashop in Cookham in 1929, during a brief family holiday away from Burghclere. The artist felt a reconciliation of 'old feelings' for Cookham and 'new feelings' of exaltation in Patricia who personified his 'new sexual ideals'. The artist rapidly became obsessed with Patricia and she became his second wife in 1937. They separated immediately after the wedding. This painting was originally intended to be larger, showing Patricia six or eight times in the nude.

LANDSCAPE

Between the wars, artists began to look afresh at depicting the world around them. The 'anti-landscapes' of Paul Nash, which showed the broken earth and burnt out trees of the front, blossomed into delighted expressions of new beginnings. These representations of nature were about permanence, contrary to the mechanised atrocities of war and industrialised advancement. The tone was nostalgic and chimed with contemporary pastoral film and literature. Many artists chose to paint in great detail in the Pre-Raphaelite manner, their scrutiny imbuing their landscapes with deep symbolic significance. For Spencer, Cookham assumed an ever-deeper philosophical meaning which informed his emotional and artistic being.

23) William Nicholson (1872 Newark upon Trent–1949 Blewbury); Glade near Midhurst 1936

oil on panel

Southampton City Art Gallery, purchased with the assistance of the Chipperfield bequest fund, 1938

The burst of dappled light and use of *impasto* white brushstrokes in this landscape show Nicholson's mastery in portraying the fall of light. His early landscapes are characterised by bold striations of colour, but following prolonged visits to Spain, he found a freedom of painterly expression. Kenneth Clark bought this picture for £45

from the Leicester Galleries for Southampton. Although Nicholson was perceived by some to have no content in his work, Clark saw him as an 'essayist', whose work presented thoughtful meditations

24) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A. ; View from Cookham Bridge 1936

oil on canvas

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

Painted the same year as Nicholson's *Glade near Midhurst*, Spencer's vision of the countryside is conjured through an equally dynamic, but much more precise use of paint. 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 evoke for what was for him the heavenly beauty of Cookham.

25) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; Domestic Scenes: Neighbours 1936

oil on canvas

Stanley Spencer Gallery, Barbara Karmel Bequest, 1995

This painting was part of Spencer's *Domestic Scenes* series, destined for his Church-House project - a never-

realised chapel filled with paintings depicting his love for his first wife, Hilda, his childhood in Cookham, and his feelings of love that arose from that time and place. Here, Spencer's sister, Annie, is shown in the back garden of their home, Fernlea, receiving a gift of tulips from her cousin, who lived next door.

**26) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; Cookham
from Englefield 1948**

oil on canvas

Private collection

In the artist's 1959 list of paintings, this picture is described as 'Cedar and Cookham from Englefield'. 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. The two had connected over their shared active service in Salonika during the Great War, after which Shiel had been awarded the Military Cross.

**27) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; Englefield
House, Cookham 1951**

oil on canvas

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.

**28) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; The Mill,
Durweston 1920**

oil on canvas

**Private collection, on long term loan to the
Stanley Spencer Gallery**

***The Mill* was one of nine landscapes painted in Dorset, when Spencer travelled there in 1920 with his brother Gilbert. The rusting mill-race machinery across the foreground of the picture has been given a prominence that would have been omitted by many other artists. It contrasts happily with the soft pink of the masonry, heightened by abstract casts of light.**

**29) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; The
Foreshore at Whitehouse, Northern Ireland
1952**

canvas on board

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; his first wife Hilda had died in 1950, and in 1951 he had put an end to 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.

30) Sir Stanley Spencer, R.A.; Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta 1952-9

oil and pencil on canvas

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

This painting was to become the central picture in the river aisle of Spencer's never-realised Church House project. For him the river was a 'holy of holies', bound up with life, love and art. This vivid evocation of Spencer's childhood places Christ at the heart of Cookham regatta, a highlight of the village year, which involved races, a concert and fireworks. Christ sits in a basket chair, dramatically lunging forward as he preaches to the villagers.