

Visual Descriptions:

A Brush with History: Stanley Spencer and Modern British Art.

In partnership with Southampton City Art Gallery

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Introduction

Welcome to the Stanley Spencer Gallery in Cookham. Thank you for visiting us.

The Gallery is run by a group of volunteers who are passionate about the work of Sir Stanley Spencer and his relationship with this home

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village of Cookham and its residents! One of our volunteers, the Custodian, will have welcomed you as you came into the Gallery. If you have any questions about the Gallery, the Exhibition, Stanley or facilities in the Village, please ask them.

Stanley Spencer

He was born at Fernlea on the High Street at Cookham on the 30th June 1891. He was the 8th of 9 surviving children and had a younger brother Gilbert who was also a respected painter. He was a graduate of the Slade School of Art, winning scholarships, and prizes despite competing against contemporaries including Paul Nash, Nevinson and Gertler.

He served in the Royal Army Medical Corps and subsequently the infantry in the First World War.

He married Hilda Carline, who was also an artist, in 1925 and had two daughters -both have now sadly died -and a grandson who is still alive.

In 1932 he was elected to the Royal Academy but resigned after a difference of opinion in 1935. He re-joined in 1950, the year he was awarded the CBE. In 1937, Hilda divorced Stanley who married Patricia Preece four days later, but they separated immediately with her going on the 'honeymoon' with her lifelong partner Dorothy. Patricia and Dorothy were also artists. Stanley and Hilda corresponded regularly following their divorce.

Stanley was a war artist in the first and second World Wars and painted a series of works depicting the war effort in the shipyards on the Clyde.

Apart from periods away to sketch and make preparatory drawings he lived much of his life in Cookham, dying in 1959 at the Canadian War Memorial Hospital which was across the river from the Gallery.

Stanley painted a wide range of subjects from landscapes to portraits and biblical scenes. Stanley's style can be described as figurative art, that is clearly derived from real object sources and so is, by definition, representational. The term is often used in contrast to abstract art. However, figurative does not necessarily mean that he subscribed to realism in the context of the figures in his imaginary works.

The Gallery

You are standing in the Gallery. You may hear sounds reverberating around you. This is because it is primarily a single room with a wooden floor. It was originally a small Methodist Chapel with rafters holding up the roof and no ceiling. It is about the size of an empty double-decker bus. You may hear the lift in the background taking visitors who are unable to use stairs to a mezzanine floor. You may also hear the automatic entrance doors to the Gallery opening and closing. There are narrow benches in the middle of the gallery so please take care as you move around the Exhibition. Stanley's mother was a key member of the Chapel and Stanley would attend the Chapel as a boy.

The Exhibition

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*.

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4. Mark Gertler *The Rabbis and his Grandchild* 1913,

Oil on canvas, 50.8 x 45.9 cm

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

This is a portrait of two people, with a picture size of height 51cm, and width 46cm. It contrasts the lined face of an old Jewish Rabbi on the left-hand side of the picture with the fresh young face of a girl, supposedly his grandchild, on the right-hand side, with a grey background. Only their faces and upper bodies are visible in the painting.

The Jewish Rabbi is wearing a Rabbi's cap, has thick dark eyebrows and wide-open eyes under a wrinkled forehead. He has a prominent nose and a long luxuriant grey beard and moustache. He is looking slightly to his left, so neither directly at the viewer or directly at the young girl. His expression is one of support and care.

He is wearing a very dark green jacket, with a band of lighter green on the edge. The lighter green band is repeated on his Rabbi's cap.

His long right hand is a prominent feature of the portrait and extends across the lower middle of the painting, with his middle finger touching the girl's chin, as if in support.

The girl is looking slightly to her right, out from the picture. She looks as though she is a young teenager, with a round pale face, rosy-cheeked and innocent looking. She has long auburn brown hair which is swept

flat across the top of her head and tied back. Her eyes are slightly open, looking down and away. She has prominent red lips, unsmiling.

She is wearing a plain dark red jumper. A red earring is visible, and she is also wearing a long reddish-brown necklace.

The painting is called 'The Rabbi and his Grandchild' and perhaps the Rabbi is wanting to show support and encouragement to the girl, to present her and show pride in her to the viewer of the painting. Interestingly the two figures were not actually related, were painted separately and never met.

The painting is signed quite prominently on the left-hand side of the picture, on the Rabbi's jacket, with the inscription, 'Mark Gertler, May 1913'.

Keith Miller

6. Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, *Loading Timber at Southampton Docks*

This is a medium-sized oil painting in a landscape format, slightly wider than it is tall. It shows a busy scene in a dockyard, with cranes and workers loading timber onto ships. A quayside cuts diagonally across the bottom right third of the canvas, with a row of large ships moored alongside. The foremost ship dominates the left hand side of the canvas, its black hull rearing up towards us. Behind it, two or three more ships (it is not clear how many), recede into the distance. The right hand side of the painting – the quayside – is filled with long rectangular timbers, some stacked in piles, others being loaded onto ships by cranes and men. Some men are shouldering huge timbers as they step onto the gangplanks. The men are dwarfed by the enormous ships and timbers. In the top of the painting we see blue sky above the ships, intersected with the black arms of cranes, and behind the cranes, streaks of white clouds.

The overall impression is strong and dynamic. The artist has used a limited palette: black for the ships' hulls and cranes, yellow/brown for the timbers, blue for the sky, white for the ships' upper decks and funnels, livened with splashes of bright red on the painted funnels and a solitary waving flag. Even more striking is the artist's use of diagonal lines throughout. The diagonals of the raised timbers coming in from the right meet the diagonals of the cranes reaching across from the left, while black lines of rigging and white streaks of cloud criss-cross the picture. There is hardly a curve in the whole painting. The scene is crowded. It fills the canvas right to the edges, creating a sense of purpose and efficiency, but also menace. This is a mechanised world in which humans are dwarfed and subservient.

Before the outbreak of the First World War, Nevinson had been interested in the Italian Futurist painters, and had studied with Gino Severini. This painting shows their continued influence. Nevinson served on the Western Front as a hospital orderly and ambulance driver, tending to wounded soldiers, but this painting portrays the industrialised rather than human aspect of war. On his return from France, Nevinson told a journalist, 'This war will be a violent incentive to Futurism, for we believe there is no beauty except in strife, no masterpiece without aggressiveness.' There is beauty in *Loading Timber at Southampton Docks*, but it is an aggressive beauty, filling us with awe and fear.

Amy Lim

12. Lesley Cole, *Naval Base- Women's Royal Naval Service Sick Bay* 1942

This is a medium sized oil painting – 54.5 x 77.4 cm - the subject of which, as the title states, is a Women's Royal Navy Sick Bay. It was painted in 1942 by Lesley Cole who was employed as an official war artist during the Second World War.

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It is painted in such a way that you feel as if you are in the medical room, alongside the characters depicted, witnessing what is going on.

There are three hospital beds, arranged diagonally across the picture, but your attention is immediately drawn to the middle bed where the action is taking place. A young woman sits sideways on the bed having a wound on her head dressed by an older looking nurse who stands beside her. The bandage goes around her chin and encircles her forehead – her curly hair springing out above it. The nurse works deftly, a stern look of concentration on her face. She wears a dark blue uniform over which is a stark white pinafore cinched in at the waist. Her hair is held back in a fulsome white veil-like nurse's cap which gives bulk and gravitas to her figure. Starched white collars and a bright red wrist cuff look uncomfortable to wear but add an air of efficiency.

Behind her, in between the beds, is another patient – standing or leaning against the wall, crutches at her side. She looks across at a second nurse who stands sideways on to us on the right of the painting, her face hidden. The full skirt of her pinafore partly obscures a table beside her upon which is a medicine bottle. She holds a kidney shaped bowl in her left hand.

The other two beds are occupied by young women in distinctive red dressing gowns. The girl on the left, in the foreground of the painting, sits on the side of her bed, her hair pulled back into a loose bun, her left leg outstretched and resting on the middle bed giving us a glimpse of her striped pyjamas. The patient in the third, right hand, bed does not look so well. She is lying in a slumped position, despite being supported by plumped pillows upon which her dark hair spills. Her bright red gown accentuates the pallor of her face. Her bed clothes are held up in a tent shape – probably by a frame protecting her legs. A medical screen made from floral fabric leans against the wall beside her. This echoes the decoration on one of the bedspreads, another has a diamond pattern upon it. Both give the beds a cosy homely feel.

Windows are depicted wide open at either side of the painting, very necessary to dispel the unhealthy air insinuated by the sickly green of the walls. The overall scene however has a patriotic feel about it, created by the predominance of red, white and blue – the colours of the Union Jack flag.

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25. Sir Stanley Spencer, RA. *Domestic Scenes: Neighbours*, 1936

Oil on Canvas, 76.2 cm x 50.8 cm
Stanley Spencer Gallery, Barbara Karmel bequest.

This painting was part of Spencer's Domestic Scenes series which illustrated his love for his first wife, Hilda, and his childhood here in Cookham which he loved. Given he was 45 when he painted this scene, it illustrates his photographic memory for detail and an ability to capture a feeling.

The painting is about shoulder width wide and 1 ½ times the width in height.

Stanley lived in a semi-detached house built by his grand-father. The other half of the building was lived in by his Aunt, Uncle and cousins. This painting is a scene looking out from an upstairs window onto the gardens of the two families. In the gardens, Stanley has shown his sister, Annie, receiving a gift of tulips from her cousin picked from her cousin's garden next door

The scene is depicted from a high view-point in an upstairs room. The choice of a high viewpoint is a characteristic of Stanley's work. Another characteristic and technique he has used in this painting is to strategically place a boundary in the scene so the viewer can compare and contrast two sides of a 'scene'.

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The painting is divided into two almost equal halves by a hedge which is depicted at shoulder height to the characters in the painting. The hedge is composed of a series of small leaved privet bushes.

On your left-hand side of the hedge, Stanley depicts a girl we know is his cousin. She is shown in profile with her facial features clearly distinguishable. She has long dark hair, loosely tied at the back, stretching past her shoulders. She is wearing a beige Gillet with no sleeves but fringed at the bottom with fur. She has a red skirt or dress which stops at her knees and is wearing black stockings and shoes. Three red tulip plants are growing beside her feet in the lawn in the foreground of the painting. She has picked five tulip stems and is passing them over the hedge to her cousin, Annie, who is standing on the right-hand side of the hedge from the viewer's standpoint.

Stanley's sister has short brown hair which is shoulder length. She is wearing a short sleeved brown sweater with wool tassels over a knee length brown skirt and dark stockings. She has her head tilted slightly to the right, away from the viewer consequently none of her facial features are visible.

The hedge leads the viewer's eye through the painting towards the background.

The 'arch' depicted by the outstretched arms of the girls is mirrored about $\frac{2}{3}$ rd of the way into the painting with a dead lower limb extending from a large, knurled trunk of an old tree in the cousin's garden on your left. The hedge stretches beyond the tree to the horizon at the back of the garden.

Another black silhouette of the trunk of a young tree is visible in Stanley's garden to the right .

However, it is a totally different scene in the cousins' garden. There is a fence consisting of thin metal posts with a hoop at the top linking each vertical post. Beyond the fence there is a dog kennel indicating that his cousins had a dog. A few feet behind the dog kennel to your left there appears to be a wooden shed wall with a greenhouse behind the shed. The greenhouse structure is white wood supported on a brick wall, probably about waist height.

Stanley regarded his well-to-do cousins home as rather posh and depicts that feeling by contrasting the contents of the two gardens - relatively lavish for his cousins and more basic for Annie's and himself.

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There are no flowers or other objects in their garden. They don't have a dog. They don't have a greenhouse.

However, this is a very warm picture. A picture of love. Vibrant greens with the warm red of the tulips and the red and brown of girls clothes reinforce the subject of this painting - the love and friendship as one cousin tenderly hands tulips to her cousin. He also uses various tones of red to and white to lead the viewer to round the garden with reds in clothes, flowers, wood and white in the clothing, green house and tree.

Stanley regarded Cookham as 'heaven on earth' and he clearly loved Cookham and its residents. This scene reflects the love between two cousins. Two families, two gardens united in love.

Dennis Jeffrey

17. Sir Stanley Spencer, RA. *Portrait of Eric Williams, MC 1954*

Oil on Canvas 45.7 x 35.7 cm

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

This portrait was commissioned. Originally Stanley was commissioned to do a drawing but was not satisfied with the result and then proceeded to create this beautiful painting.

It is relatively small being only 12 inches wide and 18 inches high but reflects the classical portrait aspect on a contemporary photograph.

He insists on rendering accurate detail and insisted in placing his subjects in familiar settings and relaxed poses.

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The painting hanging before you is a painting of a Second World War hero. He is depicted in a head and shoulder's aspect at the very front of the painting. He is posed at a slight angle to Stanley and you.

His left shoulder is turned slightly towards you with his neck sitting comfortably but nevertheless his head is turned slightly further away from you.

There is nothing between you and Eric but slightly disarmingly he is not staring at you staring at him!. His brown eyes are looking to the right as he stares into the distance past your left shoulder. We don't know what he's looking at but the lights in his eyes suggest it may be a window. He has a weathered face which, with the model sailing boat partly hidden behind him on a shelf on a cabinet, gives a clue to him possibly enjoying sailing.

He has a receding hairline with dark hair, with grey flecks, swept back. The colouring is continued in his neat moustache which merges into a beard.

He is wearing a cable knit seaman's sweater in beige and white with a different pattern in the sweater collar indicating this is not a working sweater. The sweater is worn over a shirt with small checks in different hues of brown. Each stitch on the sweater and check on the shirt are painted in painstaking detail. This is not simply a wash of paint with lines overpainted.

Behind Eric we have a brick wall with grey/beige bricks with a quarter of a painting visible over Eric's left shoulder. There also appears to be a bright light source to your right because there is a shadow from the model boat onto the brick wall.

Stanley has created a strong image of a powerful man. I feel I can understand why he could win the Military Cross.

Additional Painting: Sir Stanley Spencer, RA.
The Angel, Cookham Churchyard, 1933

Oil on canvas, 86cm x 71cm

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The painting is set in the churchyard of the medieval Cookham church. In the foreground, the view is framed by a stone monument in the form of an angel, shown in profile from the thighs up. The angel is very close to us and fills the left hand third of the painting. It leans forward, head bowed, hands clasped in prayer. The angel's hair waves back onto its shoulders, leaving its face uncovered, but cast in shadow. The stone is white but is slightly dirtied and weathered, and there are patches of green lichen on the angel's robes. The top and right hand sides of the painting are framed by trees, with the branches of a fir tree above the angel, and the broad leaves of a deciduous tree on the right.

The church fills the space beyond. It has a squat, square tower with crenelations and is topped with a flag pole from which a St George's flag flutters in a light breeze. Twin red-tiled roofs extend to the right of the tower. There is a void of cloudless sky above the roofs, painted in a leaden grey.

By framing the picture with the angel and the leaves, Spencer makes us feel as though we are in an enclosed space, looking out at the church beyond. The angel leans protectively over us. The atmosphere is calm and still.

Spencer painted this in 1935—6 for his friend Gwen Raverat when he was in financial difficulties, as she had promised to buy a painting or drawing from him if he needed help. He suggested he might 'do that angel landscape again'. He had already painted the same view two years earlier. Although this second version is almost identical to the first in composition (although slightly smaller), Spencer utilised a different palette, changing the painting's mood. The shaded blue sky of the first version has been replaced by monochromatic grey, and the fresh tones of green leaves and lichen and red roof have been subdued, giving the scene an austere simplicity. The mood is sombre and contemplative.

Written by Amy Lim

Feedback

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We hope you have enjoyed your visit. We are very keen to receive your feedback about your journey here, your experience at the Gallery and any suggestions you have on how we can improve your experience at the Gallery.

You can contact me, Dennis at access@stanleypencer.org.uk