

Stanley Spencer Gallery

Everywhere is Heaven: Stanley Spencer & Roger Wagner

9th November 2023 – 24th March 2024.

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EXHIBITION

1. Stanley Spencer, John Donne arriving in Heaven

1911, oil on canvas, 37 x 40.5 cm.

John Donne's metaphysical poetry was much loved by Stanley Spencer. Here he shows the poet on Widbrook Common, Cookham, a space which here represents Paradise. Spencer felt that 'everywhere is heaven so to speak', and so Donne is shown looking at four praying figures who face the points of the compass.

2. Roger Wagner, Ash Wednesday

1982, oil on canvas, 48.5 x 58.5 cm.

Spencer's John Donne was painted when the artist was a student at the Slade, and this too is a student work, painted while Wagner was studying at the Royal Academy. Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent for Christians, a time of devotion and repentance. This painting was inspired by words from T.S. Eliot's poem, Ash Wednesday, which was written at the time of the poet's conversion to Christianity.

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3. Roger Wagner, Sacred Allegory: Apocalypse (Study)

2023, oil on canvas, 33 x 38 cm.

This is a powerful modern-day allegory, with our world depicted as an industrialised Babylon. Humanity is shown shackled in the foreground, but it is on the brink of a revelation. In the background the captives have been freed and guided by angels, they can see the new Jerusalem reflected in the sea. The lamb is now a lion, a beast of strength to guide humanity not just now but for all future.

4. Stanley Spencer, Making Columns for the Tower of Babel

1933, oil on canvas, 53.9 x 48.9 cm.

The narrative of the Tower of Babel is taken from Genesis, which served to illustrate how peoples of the world spoke different languages. Spencer's painting was done from studies for a commission to decorate the University
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Library in Cambridge – a project which was never fulfilled. Spencer originally intended to use this scene as part of a larger arched design.

5. Stanley Spencer, The Builders of the Tower of Babel

1933, pencil, wash and oil on paper, 305 x 533 mm.

This is a scaled-down sketch of Spencer's project for the University Library at Cambridge. Spencer has included various architectural 'languages': fluted columns, Ionic capitals, and Gothic arches, as well as hods of Berkshire red brick being carried by the builders. The Gothic archway has clear resonances with Holy Trinity church in Cookham.

6. Roger Wagner, Abraham and the Angels

1986, oil on canvas, 40.6 x 50.9 cm.

This painting illustrates an episode in Genesis, when Abraham, the first of the Old Testament patriarchs and founder of the Hebrew nation, offers strangers food and drink. These visitors turn out to be angels who announce

that Abraham's wife Sarah, long past child bearing age, will miraculously give birth. These same angels are also agents of destruction, who will then go on to wreak destruction at Sodom and Gomorrah. This diminutive group, sit in a shady glade alongside a Suffolk wheat field, dwarfed by the hulking presence of the nuclear plant, Sizewell A.

7. Stanley Spencer, The Last Supper

1920, oil on canvas, 91.5 x 122 cm.

It was typical for Spencer to locate biblical events in Cookham, a place which was for him 'heaven on earth'. In this painting he has imagined the Last Supper taking place in a Cookham malthouse. Christ is shown at the head of the table, breaking bread, with his disciples gathered around him. This final meal instituted the tradition of the Eucharist into Christian liturgical tradition, re-iterated by Spencer in his use of red and white in the composition.

8. Roger Wagner, The Harvest is the end of the World and the Reapers are Angels

1989, oil on canvas, 154.9 x 188 cm.

This painting refers to the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13: 40-42), which illustrates how at the end of the world, the faithful will be gathered up, and non-believers cast away. This is an apocalyptic scene with a difference; the Suffolk landscape sets the scene for the reaping of the wheat by angels with vast wings casting shadows across the field.

9. Stanley Spencer, Sarah Tubb and the Heavenly Visitors

1933, oil on canvas, 94 x 104.1 cm.

Here Spencer unites his love of Cookham with his religious feeling. He has painted Granny Tubb (modelled by her daughter Sarah) sinking to her knees at the sight of a sunset caused by Halley's Comet, convinced that the apocalypse was nigh. She is presented with 'emblems of

what she is like' and 'all those things she loved' by heavenly beings.

10. Roger Wagner, Walking on Water III

2005, oil on board, 76.2 x 101.5 cm.

This painting is based on the part of the River Thames where the artist grew up. He shows Christ and Peter reaching out towards each other at low water. These main figures are diminutive in scale, compared to the monumental cranes and Battersea Power Station behind. Images of faith set against towering, overwhelming constructions, which represent the follies of mankind, have been described as 'the bedrock of Wagner's painting.'

11. Stanley Spencer, Study for Christ carrying the Cross

c.1920, oil and pencil on paper, 355 x 320 mm.

Here Spencer uses tonal blocks of colour to explore form for this miraculous event which takes place on Cookham High Street. Spencer's vision of the road to Calvary is not

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one of impending death, but rather a positive vision which looks forward to his resurrection. Christ is depicted as one of us, a man on earth, carrying his cross in the same way that the Cookham workmen carried their ladders. The finished canvas is in Tate.

12. Stanley Spencer, Study for Christ Robed by Soldiers

Pencil on paper, 273 x 21mm.

Before his journey to Calvary, Christ was stripped, dressed in a scarlet robe and mocked. Spencer here shows Christ being roughly handled as one of the soldiers fits Christ's arm awkwardly into the robe. This was a sketch for a canvas of the same subject now in Tate, which was paired with *The Disrobing of Christ* (Tate), when the robe was removed and his own garments returned to him before his final journey.

13. Roger Wagner, The Flowering Tree

2014, acrylic and oil pastel on paper, 2300 x 800 mm.

This is a working drawing used in the making of the stained glass window for St Mary's church, Iffley. Christ is crucified on a flowering, springtime tree, thick with blossom. It is as if the wood of the cross has been reborn,
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a mirror of Christ's own resurrection. The tree also serves as a metaphor for Christ's descent into hell and ascent into heaven; its roots descend deep into the earth, but its branches arc into the sky, merging with the heavens. A river weaves its way through the lush landscape, symbolic of baptismal rites, and a flock of sheep - Christ's followers - stand at peace below their Saviour.

14. Stanley Spencer, The Angel, Cookham Churchyard

c.1936-7, oil on canvas, 70 x 50.8 cm.

Cookham was an earthly paradise for Spencer, and for him its churchyard was heaven's 'holy suburb' – a phrase which derived from the poet John Donne. It was somewhere Spencer walked often, and ultimately came to rest on his own death. The picture was painted for Spencer's close friend and fellow artist, Gwen Raverat.

15. Roger Wagner, The Burning Fiery Furnace

1989, mixed media on blue paper, 53.4 x 38 cm.

The book of Daniel describes how three Jewish men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace by the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, because they refused to worship his image. The three men do not perish in the flames, and are joined by a fourth heavenly figure – ‘one like a son of the gods’. The scene is set in Lucy’s ironworks on the side of the Oxford Birmingham canal.

**16. Stanley Spencer, Shipbuilding on the Clyde:
Burners 1941,**

coloured lithograph on paper, 680 x 990 mm; printed on mount, lower left, ‘STANLEY SPENCER. SHIP BUILDING ON THE CLYDE. BURNERS’, and lower right, ‘published by the National Gallery Crown Copyright Reserved / The Baynard Press’

Burners was one of four works by Official War artists from which prints were commissioned. Spencer was the master of elevating the everyday to the celestial, and here welders using oxy-acetylene torches to cut metal sheets into shape exude powerful energy. They are set against an abstract

jigsaw of metal sheets, which fan out dynamically, and are viewed from above, as if by God.

17. Stanley Spencer, Christ overturning the Money Changers' Table, 1921

oil on canvas, 99.7 x 88.2 cm

This painting illustrates John 2:15, 'And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables.' It formed part of a triptych, which hung in a private chapel belonging to Henry Slessor, a patron of Spencer's. The subject matter was an apt choice for a man averse to capitalism.

18.1 Roger Wagner, Elijah and the Angel 1996,

acrylic on Nepalese paper, 245 x 245 mm.

A series of three illustrations depicting an episode from the Old Testament book of Kings. The prophet Elijah has fled from Queen Jezebel, who is determined to kill him. In the desert, he sat beneath a juniper tree and asks God to

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die. An angel is sent by God, who brings him bread and water to sustain him on his subsequent journey of forty days. At the end of his travels he encounters God on the Holy mountain as a 'silent voice.'

18.2 Roger Wagner, Under the Juniper Tree

1996, acrylic on Nepalese paper, 245 x 245 mm.

18.3 Roger Wagner, A Silent Voice

1996,

acrylic on Nepalese paper, 245 x 245 mm.

19. Stanley Spencer, St. Veronica Unmasking Christ

1921,

oil on canvas, 75 x 60 cm.

St. Veronica mopped Christ's face on his way to Calvary, resulting in Christ's features being retained on the linen. St. Veronica subsequently became a symbol of Christian

charity. Her bold pose, with uplifted arms mirrors Christ's in Christ Overturning the Money Changer's Table. The story of St Veronica is not found in the Bible but is drawn from the apocryphal Acts of Pilate.

20. Stanley Spencer, The Betrayal

oil on canvas, 39.5 x 50.5

It was typical of, and logical for, Spencer to paint Christ's arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane in Cookham. The scene takes place in the back garden of Fernlea and The Nest in Cookham High Street, behind Spencer's school room. Over the walls are the malthouse buildings, which he had painted in Mending Cowls, Cookham in 1913. He depicts two soldiers seizing Christ's robes, and at the same time Simon Peter cuts off the ear of the High Priest's officer, Malchius. The naked figure alludes to a figure fleeing the scene, described in St Mark's Gospel (15:51-2) – 'And there followed him a certain young man, having a linen cloth cast about his naked body: and the young man laid hold on him; and he left the linen cloth, and fled from them naked.'

21. Stanley Spencer, Study for the Resurrection: Port Glasgow, 1949

pencil on paper, 375 x 965 mm.

This study shows the man and woman who meet in the centre foreground of The Resurrection: Port Glasgow (Tate). Spencer identified the figures as himself and his first wife, Hilda Carline, who was to die the next year in 1950. The drawing was probably made in February 1949 when Spencer added an extra seven feet of canvas to the left-hand end of the painting.

22. Stanley Spencer, Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta

1952-9, oil and pencil on canvas, 205.7 x 535.9 cm.

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, who are all dressed according to their status. It was perfectly natural to Spencer that Christ

should appear in Cookham, it being his own heaven on earth. The canvas is squared in preparation for the transfer of these sketches onto the canvas.

Thank you

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. If you would like this document in a different format, please contact me and I will try to arrange that. You can contact me, Dennis at access@stanleyspencer.org.uk. We can also try to arrange a group visit if you are a member of a group for visually impaired people.

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