

2003

EVERYDAY MIRACLES THE ART OF
STAPLEY SPENCER



EVERYDAY MIRACLES: THE ART OF STANLEY SPENCER celebrates the work of a great and singular twentieth century British artist. Born in 1891, Stanley Spencer is famous for his visions of the miraculous in the everyday. Comical, humane and visionary, Spencer's paintings relocated the events of the bible to his beloved home village of Cookham. 'This is heaven and we are in it,' Spencer wrote, 'if only we could realise it.' Profoundly changed by his experience of love and marriage, he sought in his most famous paintings of the 1930s and 1940s to achieve a union of the sacred and profane. Encompassing Spencer's vivid landscapes, teeming religious visions and unsparing self-portraits, this catalogue is published to accompany the exhibition of the same name, which has been curated from Australasian and English collections.

Front and back cover: Sir Stanley Spencer
Christ in Cookham 1951 - 1952
Oil on canvas, 1270 x 2057 mm
Walton Bequest Fund 1952
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
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photograph: Jenni Carter for AGNSW



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STAPLEY SPENCER

MARY KISLER AND JUSTIN PATON

A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN

DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART GALLERY

AND AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TĀMAKI

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The exhibition *Everyday Miracles: The Art of Stanley Spencer* was organised by the Dunedin Public Art Gallery and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

This exhibition was presented at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki; City Gallery, Wellington; and Dunedin Public Art Gallery

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FOREWORD

Everyday Miracles: The Art of Stanley Spencer was triggered by the realisation that, collectively, art museums in New Zealand and Australia hold a surprisingly strong selection of works by this remarkable visionary painter. From *Merville Garden Village* in Dunedin to the *Christ in the Wilderness* series in Perth; and from the significant Hayward Bequest at Adelaide's Carrick Hill to Te Papa's *Beatitude of Love*, these holdings cover much—though not all—of Spencer's considerable range.

Spencer's work is not widely known in New Zealand and no exhibition devoted to his art appears to have been shown here, but he has always enjoyed a close following among artists and gallery-goers. It could be argued, moreover, that his art is of special relevance to New Zealand, because Spencer was a profoundly regionalist artist who made a highly idiosyncratic use of the traditions of modernism. In this respect, his practice and his vision have affinities with artists as disparate as Colin McCahon and Michael Smither.

More than that, of course, his work's idiosyncrasy, inventiveness, narrative richness and his vision of the miraculous in the everyday have ensured its continuing interest for contemporary audiences. The success of Tate Britain's vast survey of the artist's work in 2001, and the new research it stimulated, made us even more determined to investigate Spencer's presence and influence in this part of the world.

To that end, we are very grateful to all our Australasian colleagues for allowing us to borrow so extensively from their collections for this exhibition—they have been unfailingly generous and we thank them for that. We are fortunate as well to be able to enrich this exhibition with a number of significant loans from English museums.

No exhibition of Stanley Spencer's work would be complete without at least one of his self-portraits and we were delighted that Tate agreed to lend the two best known of these—the portraits from 1914 and 1959. The *Self-Portrait with Patricia Preece*, lent by the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, is another pivotal work of twentieth-century British art that we are proud to have been able to include.

To all the other institutions that have loaned works, and so helped to round out this exhibition's portrait of the artist, we extend our thanks.

Although this exhibition is neither large nor exhaustive, its interpretative scope has been significantly enhanced by the inclusion of the virtual reality Church-House project curated by Adrian Glew, curator of archives at Tate Britain, for its 2001 survey of the artist's work.

An exhibition of this nature would simply not be possible without the very generous support of sponsors. We thank Principal Sponsor Simpson Grierson, through their Chairman Rob Fisher, for helping to bring to New Zealand audiences the work of one of the twentieth century's most intriguing painters.

The exhibition has been indemnified by the New Zealand Government through the Ministry for Culture and Heritage and we are no less grateful for this crucial contribution.

We wish to thank Daphne Robinson, Spencer's niece, for making available for the first time her transcriptions of her uncle's commentary on the *Christ in the Wilderness* series. Special thanks must be reserved, finally, for the artist's daughters, Unity and in particular Shirin Spencer, whose support and advice throughout helped to make this project a reality.

PRISCILLA PITTS

DIRECTOR, DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART GALLERY

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FOREWORD

RESURRECTING COOKHAM TIME AND SPACE

BY MARY KISLER

Stanley Spencer (1891-1959) has been described as the most remarkable figurative and religious painter of his time, although his view of spirituality was of a highly individual and eccentric nature. Born in the bucolic village of Cookham in Berkshire, west of London, he spent much of his life in its environs and it was the site and source of much of his art. Spencer came from a creative, intellectual family, whose home was full of music, discussion and laughter. As a child with no formal schooling apart from lessons from his sister in a back shed, he was free to wander Cookham's lanes and fields, weaving together a love of minutiae and the everyday with the biblical tales that his father read aloud to them and which served as his constant imaginative companions.

He attended both the Anglican Church of the Holy Trinity, which sits beside the Thames, and whose graveyard was to become the setting for several of his later works, and the Methodist Chapel at the end of the street. Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1684), which mapped the journey of the soul as a journey through space, was also popular at home, while Methodist preaching tended to imagine the soul's path through life in literal geographical terms. Spencer's letters are a fascinating record of the charismatic and highly individual observances at Chapel, in particular the 'human transportations' in the latter, which were described as being 'sanctified':

When they felt in that state, they would go and flop down under the auditorium. I felt I should not look, but though my eyes were

down I was trying to imagine what shape they were on the sacred piece of ground where they were 'coming to the Lord'. It was a patch of hard linoleum with only room for one man at a time. It seemed to me the taking off place for the Wesleyan heaven. When I heard someone pass by my pew and get down there I felt it was a sort of apotheosis of the grocer or confectioner or whoever it was.¹

Small details constantly caught his attention. He had a sense that creatures were in search of union with him, as he was with them, and that this was a part of religious experience. As a boy he used to pick up worms or frogs when he used the garden latrine, and place them on his knee so that he could study them. This shared intimacy would manifest itself in his adult life as a wish for a union between his spiritual and sexual desires. He was fascinated by the walls, fences and hedges of the village, forms that later became structural components of many of his compositions. He pondered what might be on the other side of these 'secret' spaces, and imagined them as sites for the Garden of Eden. Even when double-decker buses were introduced to the village later in his life and he was finally able to see into these enclosures, he was pleased to discover that he could still 'imagine' secret places there even though their reality had been revealed. Walking around Cookham, 'the instinct of Moses to take his shoes off when he saw the burning bush was very similar to my feelings. I saw many burning bushes in Cookham. I observed this sacred

quality in the most unexpected quarters'.² He had a similar attraction to nooks and crannies in the local backyards, and in one notebook entry described 'the gap behind the corrugated sides of the school and the wall in which space much rubbish is thrown. This was a great hunting ground for me and a good place for getting out of the way'.³ These experiences became the storehouse on which he drew as an artist, and the village of Cookham became the site in which he set his favourite religious themes.

As a young painter, Spencer was strongly influenced by the Italian Renaissance artists. He owned several Gowans and Grey editions of early masters, and pored over them at every opportunity, relishing the artists' 'almost nonchalant approach to the miraculous'.⁴ At the Slade, Jacques Raverat and his future wife Gwen Darwin gave him a copy of John Ruskin's essay, *Giotto and His Works in Padua*.⁵ This included an all-important diagram of the Arena Chapel, showing the format for the placement of each image within the narratives of the Life of the Virgin Mary and the Life of Christ, ending with the Day of Judgement on the wall behind the entrance. The spectator could sit or stand at any point in the room and 'enter' each scene on the wall through a cohesive architectural frame. Although Giotto didn't understand the science of perspective, he recognised intuitively that objects in deep space should be depicted on a smaller scale than those close at hand. More importantly, he was the first artist to set biblical narratives amongst landscape, buildings, flora and fauna that were recognisable as local, while the figures he depicted had gravitational weight—they appeared to be standing on solid ground.

Giotto also revolutionised the depiction of time and space. In the *Birth of the Virgin*, for example, three consecutive scenes are shown within one frame. In the foreground the swaddled new-born is having her eyes cleaned by the midwife, while behind her Anna reaches eagerly for her daughter. In the doorway a woman arrives with a gift of food for the mother, an event which occurred after the two already described. This practice of including

consecutive scenes within one frame became widespread in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as an alternative to showing ongoing narrative in the predella scenes which often form the base of an iconic religious image.

Medieval artists traditionally depicted religious figures against a field of gold, the latter being intrinsically beautiful, timeless and immutable, and therefore a perfect symbol for the abstraction that was God. Dante, who visited Giotto while he was working on the chapel, depicted his own search for spiritual salvation in the *Divine Comedy* as a journey that culminated in heaven above, reflecting the Byzantine belief that the realm of God was beyond all earthly experience. Giotto and his followers preferred to paint what they *saw*.⁶ Julia Kristeva describes the Arena Chapel as deeply subversive, because the artist's tendency to naturalise and humanise meant that he was literally 'grounding' Christian imagery, wresting it away from its previous heavenly focus, and bringing it down to earth. This was the beginning of a profound shift in Western culture as Christian attention increasingly turned away from a 'transcendent' realm of God and soul, toward the material realm of man and matter. In effect the subject was 'liberating himself from transcendental dominion'.⁷

In her chapter on Giotto in *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace* (2000), Christine Wertheim describes the chapel as the first virtual space in the history of art, because the architecturally framed scenes were identifiable as existing in the fourteenth century spectator's time. As a text that can be entered at any point and still make sense, the Arena Chapel can be read as the first hypertext in history, almost eight hundred years before the invention of computer-based virtual reality. Although this science had not been articulated in Spencer's lifetime, Giotto's revolutionary approach to time and space must have reinforced what he had already sensed in the village of Cookham as a child, formalising his sense of seeing heaven in everyday places, and strengthening his determination to paint believable biblical narratives within familiar

spaces. For instance, *Joachim among the Shepherds* (1913, p. 19), which Spencer painted shortly after he finished studying at the Slade, was directly influenced by Ruskin's text, as well as the accompanying woodcut illustrations of the frescoes of the Arena Chapel. The simplicity and monumentality of Giotto's human figures have been directly translated into Spencer's painting, while the religious theme is interwoven with his own personal experience, in that his own cousin stands in the painting as witness to the religious narrative (see commentary on p. 18).

After the outbreak of World War One, Spencer enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1915, working first as a medical orderly at Beaufort Hospital, and then with the 68th Field Ambulance in Macedonia. Unable to paint for four years, he turned to the small texts on Renaissance paintings that he had taken with him, noting in different letters his reaction to Masaccio, Benozzo Gozzoli and Fra Angelico.⁸ Although his thoughts were constantly drawn to his beloved Cookham, his war experiences had a marked effect. On his return to the village his 'earthly paradise' seemed to have vanished, and he felt he was no longer able to express the pre-lapsarian innocence and joy that had formed such an essential part of his early paintings.

Spencer was able to realise his own version of Giotto's masterpiece at Burghclere in the 1920s. He was invited to create a painted cycle in the specially constructed commemorative chapel built by two of his patrons, the Behrends, in memory of Mrs Behrend's brother who died as a result of the war. The chapel stands as one of Spencer's great achievements—he was involved in the designs from the very beginning, and was able to create a cohesion between architectural design and the narrative which culminated in the *Resurrection of the Soldiers* behind the altar. When he commenced the work, he exclaimed 'What ho, Giotto!', in delight.

While the Burghclere Chapel was a private commission specifically related to his own and other people's war experiences, Spencer was

also working on a vast painting, *The Resurrection, Cookham* (1924-26, Tate Gallery, London), which proved to be his first national success. In his notebook he described how

... Each individual in this picture is rising into a world which is just the kind of world he or she wanted. And each person is behaving perfectly, or is behaving perfectly happy. Everybody is in a state of active happiness. Everybody is thinking & most of them are doing nothing, & yet I am sure there is no feeling that the people in it are lazy...⁹

By depicting himself and those he loved as participants in the Resurrection, he sought to renew the sense of completeness that had been his before the war. In his notebook in the 1940s he recollected that he felt 'a wish to join that war-experience-hope felt in midst of war & war experience, to my Cookham love & home feeling & the religious feeling as well'.¹⁰ This gentle, contemplative atmosphere is found in all his Day of Judgement paintings, for example, *Parents Resurrecting* (p. 27).

In the early 1940s Spencer was commissioned by the War Artists Advisory Committee to do a series of paintings of Scottish shipyards. He chose to work in the Lithgow's shipyard at Port Glasgow, and depicted the ship-workers going about their tasks. From this developed *The Port Glasgow Resurrection Series*, which includes *The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus's Daughter* (1947, p. 61), in which the artist moves away from the everyday tasks of the workers and instead weaves together biblical time, the present, and the future time of the Resurrection. Typically, Spencer includes the disbelievers in the background among the saved, overturning the biblical narrative. In the left wing of the triptych, modern inhabitants resurrect through paving stones. Spencer described in his notebook how

This next Resurrection... would not simply occur in a graveyard, as it would be natural to suppose, but just anywhere on the street;



Pieter Brueghel the Younger **A Village Fair (Village Festival in honour of St Hubert and St Anthony)**. Oil on panel. Mackelvie Trust Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

out of the gutters a lady magnificently attired would push the lid off a manhole & step out, some would come up from under the drawing room carpet or the floor boards of the kitchen others would stroll out of the side of a hill or emerge from a heap of wheat in a barn...¹¹

In the right wing others arrive home like 'soldiers returning from war'.¹² To enhance this feeling, the artist has included 'Welcome Home' signs and flags and bunting over the doors. Spencer has synthesised multiple time frames and spaces here; the future Resurrection where villagers come back from the dead, rising on the left and greeting their loved ones on the right; the biblical miracle which can be seen taking place through the window of the house in the centre panel; and the time of the spectator, who gazes at each 'moment' from their own position in the 'now'. While grief (to be cut short at the realisation that a miracle has taken place) is being expressed in the biblical time contained within the house, the building's brick exterior marks it within the artist's time frame.

Spencer's second wife, Patricia, once commented that his religious paintings were reminiscent of Brueghel. If one compares

paintings such as that described above with *Village Fair* (Mackelvie Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, above) by Pieter Brueghel the Younger, the similarities are immediately apparent. In *Village Fair* the scene is meant to celebrate the festivals of Sts Hubert and Anthony but, although their effigies are being carried through the village by a small group of devotees, for the most part villagers enjoy to the full their reprieve from the daily grind and pay little attention to the reason for its occurrence. In *The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus's Daughter* there is no central pointer to the miracle occurring in the room at the centre of the painting; rather, the eye is left to wander as it wishes.

This creation of the miraculous amongst the everyday, alongside the way in which he distorted the human figure, created complaints from a wide number of people. Elizabeth Rothenstein notes that Spencer told her on one occasion that people objected to his work, while accepting the distortions of Henry Moore, because he painted things they cared about. They became angry because his *Resurrections* didn't look like their ideas about the Resurrection. 'He returned to the subject in a roundabout way later on, by pointing to a

drawing of his which showed an angel judging a flower show in heaven, "you know, the way they judge village gardens sometimes".¹³ For him the conflation of village activities with those normally associated with heaven seemed perfectly natural. Although his comments at times seemed rather eccentric, his faith was an ongoing philosophical search. He wrote once, 'One might never be able to conceive what Heaven is like, but nevertheless the contemplation of it is I think the greatest thing of all for the creative artist.'¹⁴

The 1930s had been years of turmoil for Spencer. Divorced by his wife Hilda Carline, he married but never consummated his union with Patricia Preece. While Hilda and their two children represented security and a 'cosy' sort of love, Spencer was fascinated by Preece's wit and class, and failed to note that she might see him as an escape from her resounding poverty. When he then expressed his desire to have *both* Hilda and Patricia as his wives, he met with disapproval and incomprehension on all fronts. For the next decade his art reflected his ongoing anxiety to rediscover, or resurrect, the peace and security he had felt in his early years.

He found in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* what seemed a reflection of his own spiritual growth:

I went to the Garden of Love
And saw what I never have seen;
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

From this point on many of the paintings that mattered to him most were part of what he called the Church-House, which was intended to be a union of the everyday and the divine, with internal chapels dedicated to the women in his life. In it he hoped to combine and celebrate his belief in human love, England, and his own idiosyncratic religious beliefs, which as he grew older combined elements of the Bible, Buddhism and Hinduism. He was searching for religions that believed that God was in everything and everywhere. In accordance with this belief, all people, saints and sinners alike, would resurrect on the



William Blake *Eliphaz's Vision of God*, from *The Book of Job*, 1825. Engraving. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

Judgement Day, and in their own familiar environments. The Tate *Resurrection* was to be the altarpiece of the Church-House, even though it had already been sold, as had others intended for the scheme, to ease Spencer's financial circumstances. Although it was never completed, he made innumerable drawings of its architecture and the scenes that were to go on every part of the walls and ceiling, creating in his mind a virtual space in which he, his village, and the people he loved, were worshipped and resurrected. In his mind there was a constant fusion between people, time and place.

Stanley Spencer was a man who talked and wrote constantly about his art and beliefs, although he never intended that all of the writings should be made public. He wrote:

It is only when I am aware that every kind of desire and wish within myself to feel is satisfied that I have at last got something to say. The whole committee of 'mes' have been consulted and all have agreed. Otherwise I feel that a work of mine ... is incomplete and lacking something as a work of art.¹⁵

This multiple perception of himself applied to the Church-House, which he sometimes

referred to as the Church of Me, but the same view also applied to his village, which throughout his life was a metaphor for all that he held dear. Cookham was him, and he was Cookham—he had earned the nickname at the Slade, and signed many of his letters thus, and even Hilda was Cookham on occasion.¹⁶ Everything that happened in the Bible happened at Cookham and vice versa. Yet, as he said, 'Of course in this idealising of Cookham people it was more just my own idealising of them, my own feeling of perfection projected onto them but there was no demand for the Cookham people to feel what I felt or be in any way what I made them in my pictures'.¹⁷ In the spirit of Giotto, entering his virtual space was always voluntary.

¹ Quoted in Kitty Hauser, *Stanley Spencer*, 2001, p. 42.

² Quoted in Timothy Hyman, *Stanley Spencer*, 2001, p. 136.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Quoted in Hauser, p. 35.

⁵ See bibliography, p. 79.

⁶ Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*, 1987, p. 22, quoted in Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, p. 86.

⁷ Julia Kristeva, 'Giotto's Joy', *The Kristeva Reader*, 1986, p. 27.

⁸ In the last decade of his life only Fra Angelico, alongside Signorelli, Uccello, Pinturicchio and Piero della Francesca, are referred to as ongoing stimuli. He also owned a copy of Blake's *Book of Job*, and found his text useful in resolving perceived dilemmas between the approaches of the Old and New Testament. He wrote in his notebook around 1952: 'The one attractive thing in Blake is that God is found everywhere all the time...'

⁹ Quoted in Adrian Glew, *Stanley Spencer: Letters and Writings*, 2001, p. 127.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹² David Fraser Jenkins, in Hyman, p. 219.

¹³ Quoted in John Rothenstein, *Stanley Spencer, the Man: Correspondence and Reminiscences*, 1979, p. 108.

¹⁴ Quoted in Glew, p. 254.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁶ Quoted in Rothenstein, p. 45.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

EVERYDAY MIRACLES

BY JUSTIN PATON

Grand and homely and profane and wondering and grotesque and English and reverent. 'And' is an indispensable word when describing the art of Stanley Spencer. Much of the twentieth century's spiritual art (think of Mondrian's grids, Malevich's squares) sought to refine and reduce, to purify. A fervent impurist, a believer in the power of 'yes' ('there is no one saying no in my pictures'¹), Spencer painted heaven as a place packed to capacity, full of the dirt and din of everyday life and thronging with ordinary people. Looking at the career of this English visionary can be a little like looking at one of his paintings: it takes a while to discern, amidst the sheer press of forms and passions, its larger rhythm and shape. Made on the sidelines of official histories of early twentieth century art, his paintings—garrulous religious visions; unsparing sexual tableaux; minutely attentive realist accounts—were for a long time regarded as provincial endeavours, intriguing but eccentric, and hardly deserving of the same attention as work issued from the art world's metropolitan centres. Today, in a period thoroughly disenchanted of myths of artistic progress, acutely aware that the centre is itself a province, and less quick to equate the 'eccentric' with the 'minor', Spencer's refusal to be enlisted in the cause of modernist 'development' makes him a figure of sympathy and growing fascination for contemporary artists and gallery-goers.

Spencer is the antitype of the calm professional, who patiently refines an official style and settles without friction into the comfort of a Reputation. He spoke of wanting to

gather all his 'real selves ... like objects in a museum'.² To walk into a gallery of his paintings is to enter a version of this museum. Here is Spencer the hawk-eyed realist, itemising the leaves of a cabbage or the bricks in a yard with a fierce attentiveness (p. 65). Over here is Spencer the Christian visionary, inheritor of a tradition extending through Blake and Samuel Palmer, the artist who acclimatised the stories of the Gospels and the paintings of the Trecento on his home ground in the village of Cookham and who replied, when asked how he responded to Picasso, that he'd not got beyond Piero (p. 69). And over here—perhaps the most fascinating and vexing of all these selves—is Spencer the sexual utopian and dismantler of taboos, who shook the mid-century British art world with his gawky lovers and sacred grotesques (pp. 29, 33). Added lastly to this gallery of selves must be the Spencer of popular legend—the artist glimpsed in a late photo trundling through the streets of Cookham with his pram-full of painting gear (the same pram now resides, a fittingly idiosyncratic relic, in the Stanley Spencer Gallery in Cookham) and, one assumes, his head full of schemes and plans, some of them triumphantly fulfilled and some less easily realised.

Spencer's art rests on a beautiful premise: *the miraculous is here*. '[T]his is heaven and we are in it, if only we could realise it.' The child of a self-educated, bible-reading patriarch and a close, fervently creative Victorian household, Spencer never doubted for a moment that the things around him and

the feelings they yielded were holy. God was as close by in this world as the family's beloved 'Pa'. The enclosure and intimacy of home and village became continuous with his sense of the spiritual. Cosiness was next to Godliness. The constant generator of these feelings was the village of Cookham, one hour's train-trip from London, lying low in the Berkshire countryside and almost islanded by the Thames. He loved the village so much that he took its name, and in painting after painting he celebrated his marriage to the place. Returning home after the First World War he wrote that he felt 'as if I were performing a miracle every time I beheld the familiar spots'.³ Walking the village's paths and returning to the studio to paint them, he ploughed a whole cultural tradition into its terrain: Trecento painting, romantic literature, the Gospels. To put it differently, he made a place for *his* places in the landscape of art.

This is the artist—proud, ardent—that we see in the 1914 *Self-Portrait* (p. 20). In his religious paintings from this time (*Joachim and the Shepherds*, for instance) Spencer sought to close the gap between lofty traditions and local realities—to bring Giotto to Berkshire. The *Self-Portrait*, too, is a front-on reckoning with tradition. Two years earlier, at 21, Spencer had appeared with artists such as Gauguin and Picasso in Roger Fry's Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition, but he chafed at this and any critical attempt to decree him a member of a contemporary movement. In the 1914 work Spencer enrolled himself in the broader tradition of visionary self-portraits that includes Durer's, Rembrandt's and Samuel Palmer's. All are paintings of the artist as one who *sees*, in the largest sense of that word.

Spencer's is one of the most forceful of all modern attempts by artists (Australasian examples are found in the paintings of John Perceval and Colin McCahon) to topple the Gospel stories from the abstract realm of doctrine and restore them to the world. Show me an angel and I'll paint one, said Gustave Courbet, a doubting realist. Splitting the difference between the realist and the

visionary, Spencer saw angels in precisely the gritty realities that Courbet took as a refutation of divine emissaries: 'I am on the side of angels and dirt.' The burly hero of *Christ in the Wilderness* (pp. 42-55) is so deeply grounded in the grit of the desert landscape that he seems to become it. He breathes it in, crawls across it like a baby, gets himself down to the animals' level. The earth is bleached, shingly, cracking in the heat; the trees, jagged as lightning bolts. And yet this bare place enfolds Spencer's Christ as cosily as his Cookham interiors enfold their inhabitants.

The same state of spiritual democracy obtains in Spencer's resurrections and 'last day' paintings (pp. 25, 61). In these centrifugal compositions, he seems distracted from the main event by all the bit-players and sideline events, and this distraction is his spiritual point. All are blessed, the last are first, and, yes, God is in the details. Faith in the overlooked is apparent even in Spencer's 'straight' landscapes, which he insisted in letters and interviews were lifeless, spiritually neutral, turned out during his personal crises of the late 1930s 'purely and solely for money'.⁴ For him these minutely detailed worlds weren't redeemed (or 'consummated', as he put it) until his cast of lovers and believers trooped onstage and made the scene surge with life. Critics of Spencer's work have sometimes simply reversed this equation, using his I-am-a-camera style as a club with which to beat his loopier imaginative works.⁵ But the compulsory choice between the two modes is also a false choice. No less than his 'imaginative' works, realist paintings such as *Merville Garden Village, Near Belfast* (p. 65) give evidence of a sacramental love of the lumber and litter of the world—this is not heaven, perhaps, but heaven's backyard.

Love, union, marriage: these were Spencer's keywords from the outset. Their temperature changes in the 1920s and 1930s, when Spencer, returned from war and soon married to painter Hilda Carline, grappled to recover the state of grace that he felt had underpinned his pre-war works. A late sexual

starter, he was rocked by his initiation into love and marriage; touching a woman for the first time, he said, he discovered 'a miracle that I could perform.' In sex Spencer found a new kind of sublime, a worldly version of the sacred feeling of a self joined to something larger. With his characteristic mix of open-mindedness and single-mindedness, Spencer set out to imagine what a heaven would be like that had room for these new feelings. 'I felt without any alteration to either that the religious experience & the ordinary life circumstances of my life ... needed to be joined together in a kind of marriage in order that their full meaning could be attained.'⁶

Spencer had no talent for roping off one part of his life from another—the specialisation of the self that is a stock modern habit. In his letters, in each teeming composition and in his great unrealised project, the Church-House, he wanted to create a frame large enough to encompass all his loves and wishes and selves. As the bleak narrative of Spencer's romance with Patricia Preece and parting from his first wife Hilda attests, art was the only place in which the unions he dreamed of could be brokered, and, even in art, the tensions are prodigious—his later compositions bend and warp as if with the effort.

What is this heaven of Spencer's like? It is a place of shapes and patterns. Beginning in the 1920s and on through the 1930s, when the split between the visionary and realist Spencers becomes acute, he fleshed out a strange and utterly distinctive formworld. The realist paintings remain calmly seen, tightly knit—feats of observational power. In the imaginative works, though, it is as if some switch has been flicked and a current of visionary energy released. The weave of the world starts to stretch and inflate like a bellows. Figures sway and float like ecstasies or flop to the ground like unstrung puppets (p. 31). Spaces warp and funnel back strangely. Objects take on lives, or double-lives, of their own. This robe becomes a flower; these curtains, wings. Eager to yoke Spencer's enterprise to the modernist cause, early

twentieth-century commentators saw in these distortions a concession to Cubist form and its all-over patternings. Partly, but Spencer's pneumatic mesh has less to do with any formalist wish to 'unify the picture plane' than it does with a wish to gather on one surface the sensations that meant 'home' for him. In *Hilda Welcomed* (p. 71), the patterns embrace the figures as surely as the figures embrace each other (Spencer's late paintings would be a gift to a maker of tapestries).

The bulge was to Spencer what the angle was to Beckmann: his basic sign of feeling. He loved enclosure so much that he pictured the grave as something cosy, more womb than tomb, and shell holes as human nests (p. 49). In this way, the painter's transforming art visually redeemed sites of death. And in his lifelong attempt to show 'the joins between one thing & another'⁷, he evolved a stylised version of the directional techniques found in Renaissance painting, the use of eyes and hands to catch and channel the viewer's drifting attention. Looking counts for less in Spencer's stagecraft than touch; the strange, coiling energy of the paintings resides not in the figures' serenely vacant, doll-like faces but rather their big blocky limbs. One is carried around the paintings by networks of touch, tuck-in and overlap: hands, crossed legs, fob-chains, socks, bags, cups, beds, baths, cowls. Following these patterns, one senses the artist making his way, as he could not always in life, behind and beneath the things he loved and into 'ungetatable' places.

Heaven was also, and above all, a place where 'remote things meet'⁸—ordinariness and sexuality, profundity and silliness, angels and dirt. What comes about when two unlike things meet is comedy, and with comedy comes change—the liberating blast of laughter. It is a key item in Spencer's spiritual arsenal. He once said of the word 'heaven' that 'I do not want people to ... get into their Sunday clothes the moment I use such a word...'⁹ and his religious scenes are more suggestive of comic jamborees or (as Timothy Hyman has said) love-ins than buttoned-down

sermons. More inclined to play the holy fool than the pious man, Spencer used carnivalesque humour to shake the barriers between categories. He has been likened to Eric Gill, a fellow flag-waver in the post-Victorian campaign for sexual/spiritual freedom. But unlike the clenched and humourless Gill, Spencer had a talent for what Martin Amis has called (in an essay on Philip Larkin) the 'comedy of candour'. He visited the front lines of his own embattled love life and returned with extraordinary accounts. Witness his *Self-Portrait with Patricia Preece* (p. 29). Intended for a chapel in his Church-House, the painting might seem cruel if not for Spencer's willingness to include himself so unsparingly in the picture. Up he pops in the foreground, bespectacled and blotchy with heat—the very image of the fool for love. Despite the absurdity of the scene—or perhaps because of it—it is a reverent painting. Spencer kneels at the bed like a worshipper, awed and ignored by the woman before him.

Even as Spencer's landscapes sold to a ready audience, the Preece paintings carried such a charge of scandal in their time that they were virtually unshowable. Spencer's work had exceeded comfortable bounds almost from the start, not least among the formalist, Francophile collectors and critics (Roger Fry chief among the latter) whose connoisseurship quest for 'significant form' Spencer tartly characterised once as 'a sort of wine tasting, worldly performance.' Spencer's 'imaginative' work was votive: made for particular people rather than for a generalised audience of professionals, collectors and art-world clergy. And it was compensatory: a way for the painter to hoard on canvas what he didn't have in life. Eager for art that had the status not of decoration but of deeds, Spencer saw his paintings as thinking, acting embodied presences—'picture-people'—that 'stand about in the land of me'.

The picture-people have their day in an extraordinary series from the late 1930s. In the year after his marriage foundered, alone in what had been the family home, Spencer

hatched the first of the procession of alternately weedy and lumbering lovers who make up *The Beatitudes of Love* (p. 33). Intended for private contemplation in side-chapels of the Church-House, they are among Spencer's strangest, funniest and most affecting attempts to unite worldly passion and spiritual joy. The biblical Beatitudes are Christ's declarations of blessedness in Matthew 5:3-11: blessed are the meek, the poor, and so on. Spencer offers a provocative variation: blessed are the gawky, the dumpy—and the lovestruck. It was a measure of the *Beatitudes'* originality that they affronted both liberal and conservative taste: 'unusually disagreeable', thought Elizabeth Rothenstein; 'Terrible, terrible', said Sir Edward Marsh; and Sir Alfred Munnings threatened legal action. Their reactions point to Spencer's most radical and generous move, which was to remake the grotesque as a mode of praise and empathy rather than satire and criticism.

I do myself love the 'disagreeably abnormal' persons in these paintings in the same way as I love my home or whatever my feeling has fixed upon, so I love them from within outwards and whatever that outward appearance may be it is an exquisite reminder of what is loved within...¹⁰

Some onlookers still feel compelled to explain Spencer's sacred uglies and 'disagreeable' exaggerations; coughing nervously, critics tend to reach for the words 'mannerist' or 'eccentric'. Familiar with a post-Spencer lineage of comic distortionists that includes Jim Nutt, Aardman animations, Robert Crumb, Peter Saul, Harvey Kurtzman and even, for that matter, Beryl Cook, contemporary audiences have no such trouble. Indeed, Spencer's grotesques become only more interesting when seen through the lens of contemporary art practice. The *Beatitudes* look like mid-century forecasts of the bizarre beauties painted by contemporary figurative artists John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage. And, in their wide-screen fusing of the sacred and the sexual, Spencer's true but unlikely British

inheritors are the devoutly blasphemous Gilbert and George. Timothy Hyman has called attention to the borderland nature of Spencer's project, which in its sprawl and psychological pressure recalls outsider art as much as it does more pedigreed artistic traditions; Hyman even ventures a fascinating comparison with the American painter-obsessive Henry Darger.

Created on the margins of modernism, Spencer's art is nonetheless a place (today it might be called a 'site') in which many of twentieth-century art's defining tensions rise to a high pitch. On one hand Spencer sought to give shape to old and reliable stories. On the other he sought to articulate an iconography and mythology with deeply personal roots. A pantheist and spiritual magpie, Spencer was less interested in the authority of the preacher than the substance of the prayer, and he took what he loved from a raft of traditions and symbol systems in order to fashion a visual language large and robust enough to hold all his ideals and desires. No other artist moves his viewers between such extremes of squint-eyed private detail and big-picture ambition—between heaven and Cookham, the grand and the lowly, the good of the world and the needs of Stan.

We find Spencer on a cusp, then, painting in the space between public and private, commerce and creativity, the cult of self and the claims of religion. He is joined there, later, by painters as unlike him as the American Philip Guston and the New Zealander Colin McCahon. All were alert to the splitting apart of painting and public discourse, and all focused in their art this crisis of confidence about painting's communicative powers and spiritual reach. Spencer saying in the 1940s that 'The trouble with us is that we haven't a religion to paint'¹¹ sounds very close to Philip Guston, a decade later, when he says 'I do not see why the loss of faith in the known image and symbol in our time should be celebrated as a freedom. It is a loss from which we suffer, and this pathos motivates modern painting... at its heart'; or to McCahon, a decade later still, saying 'Once upon a time the painter made

signs and symbols to live by. Now he makes things to hang on walls at exhibitions.' Without nostalgia, and with enthralling candour, Spencer sought to recover this largeness and sense of possibility for art.

He wanted nothing less for his viewers than a parallel absorption and envelopment. 'Just as a book will absorb you into a world so I hope my paintings do so. When I read a book I want ... to be held in the atmosphere of it because then you ... live in it and there is no jump between you and the affairs of the book. This same absorption is possible in pictures and is a legitimate and proper thing for a painter to aim at ... and expect the spectator to enter into.'¹² Thus each form swelled to encompass more meaning; each painting grew to encompass more forms; and each scheme widened to encompass more paintings. He wanted at once to 'absorb everything into himself... snugly tucked up in the artist and his own special glory and delight', and at the same time to 'tell everybody everything'.¹³ It was as if, to recognise his life as his own, Spencer needed to endlessly plough the material of that life back into the field of his art and writing. The process was at once fertile and compulsive, a constant gathering in and spreading out of memories and perceptions. This movement can be seen, most affectingly, in his plans for the Church-House, the never-realised Cookham chapel which was to be consecrated to all his selves and loves. Here he dreamed of recovering on his own highly personal terms the conviction and all-encompassing force that had been lost in the modern period when art was unhoused from architecture and migrated from wall to easel. One would step inside a world according to Stanley—a headspace, a virtual heaven, and a Spencerian 'song of myself.'

The Church-House idea gave Spencer reason to paint and cause for despair, since it was—like many of the private faiths and schemes that dot the landscape of twentieth century art—too personal to inspire patronage of the kind that funded his extraordinary wall-paintings at the Sandham Memorial Chapel. It

remained, in his famous phrase, a 'chapel in the air'. In his introduction to his 1955 Tate retrospective Spencer lamented that 'All the figure pictures done after 1932 were part of some scheme the whole of which scheme when completed would have given the part the meaning I know it had.' Spencer could be self-critical to a fault, and it seems wiser to celebrate what exists than to lament what was not made. So much was made, after all, and, in the ongoing attempts by scholars and gallery-goers to imagine how the 'parts' would have combined in the overall scheme of the Church-House, we have a fine symbol of the sustaining complexity and open-endedness of Spencer's art. Fragmentary as they are, the paintings in *Everyday Miracles* allow a glimpse of the painted environment that Spencer did create—a visionary, strange, vexing, generous, funny, humane and never uninteresting place.

¹ Quoted in Jane Alison, *Stanley Spencer: The Apotheosis of Love*, p. 46.

² Quoted in Adrian Glew, *Stanley Spencer: Letters and Writings*, 2001, p. 195.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁴ Richard Carline, in *Stanley Spencer 1891-1959*, 1976, p. 11.

⁵ Glew, p. 203.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁸ 'Remote things join in me'. Quoted in Kitty Hauser, *Stanley Spencer*, 2001, p. 7.

⁹ Glew, p. 150.

¹⁰ Quoted in Keith Bell, *Stanley Spencer: A Complete Catalogue of the Paintings*, p. 166.

¹¹ Quoted by Martin Hammer in *Men of the Clyde: Stanley Spencer's Vision at Port Glasgow*, 2000, p. 72.

¹² Quoted in Royal Academy of Arts catalogue, *Stanley Spencer 1891-1959*, p. 52.

¹³ Quoted in Alison, p. 42; and Hyman, *Stanley Spencer*, 2001, p. 11.

WORKS IN THE
EXHIBITION

JOACHIM AMONG THE SHEPHERDS 1913

OIL ON CANVAS

519 x 385 mm

THE MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND TE PAPA TONGAREWA

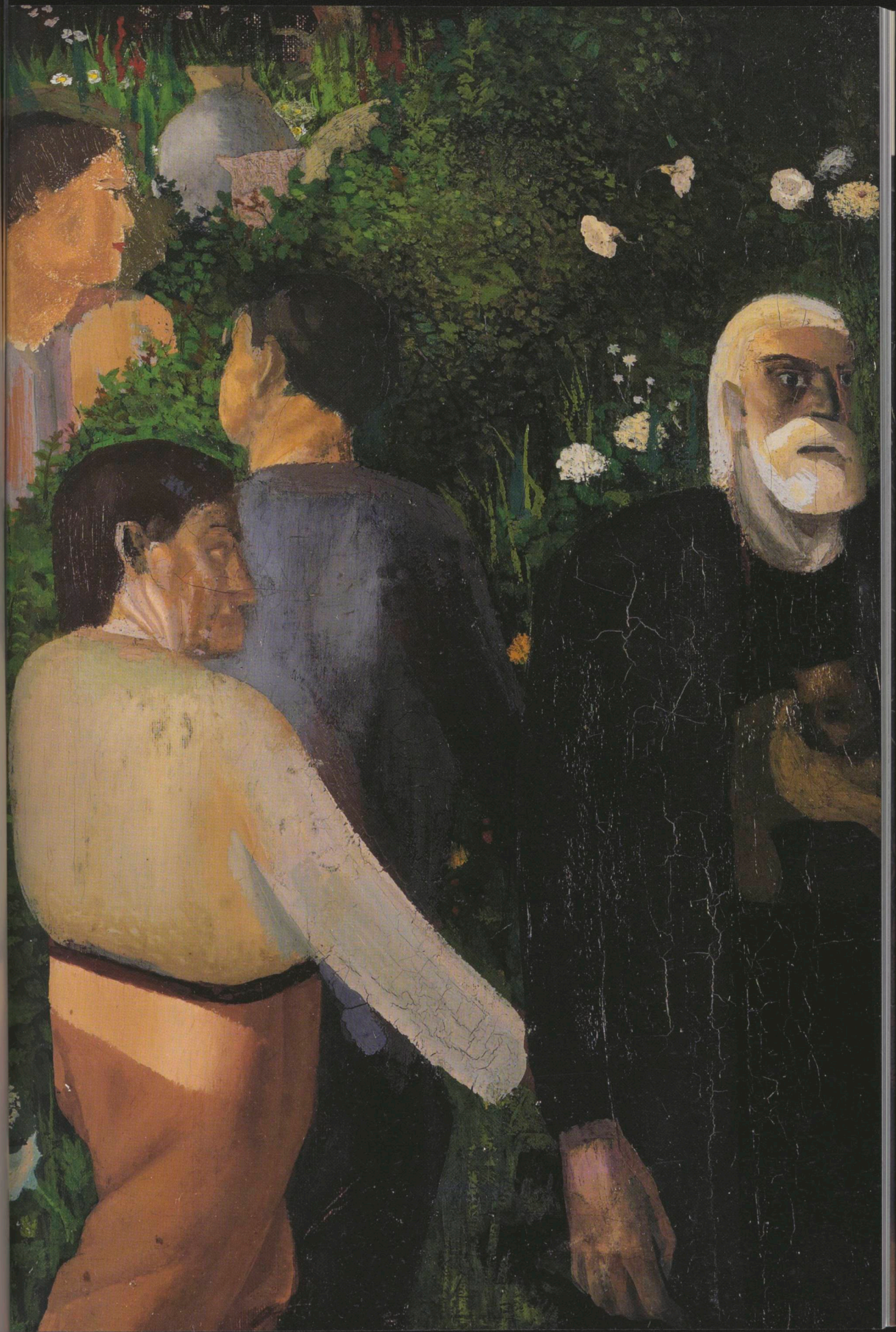
This painting was one of the first Spencer finished after completing his studies at the Slade School of Art, and was directly influenced by Ruskin's *Giotto and his Works in Padua*. The text beside a woodcut after Giotto's *Joachim Returns to the Sheepfold* (painted 1306) notes:

...And immediately Joachim rose from his bed, and called about him all his servants and shepherds, and caused to be gathered together all his flocks and goats, and horses, and oxen, and what other beasts he had, and went with them and with the shepherds into the hills...¹

As a boy, Spencer was so swept up by his father's readings from the Bible that he felt the events described must have taken place in his own village, and that his fellow villagers were witnesses to these events. This experience is directly translated into the painting, so that the right-hand figure of Joachim is shown arriving among the shepherds in Strand Meadow, Cookham. 'The man on the other side of the hedge is Jack Hatch, a cousin who lived opposite the Spencers' at Ovey's Farm... His gentle nature appealed to Spencer, who found him the very substance of the Cookham landscape.'² As such, he was an essential part of the mood of the picture.

While the simplicity and monumentality of the figures are drawn directly from Giotto, the painting also has links to one of Spencer's other favourite works, the narrative of St Peter painted by Masaccio on the walls of the Brancacci Chapel in Florence (1427), which Spencer also knew from reproductions. Jack Hatch was his St Peter. This early combination of biblical history set in his own surroundings became the basis for much of Spencer's art.

—MK



SELF-PORTRAIT 1914

OIL ON CANVAS

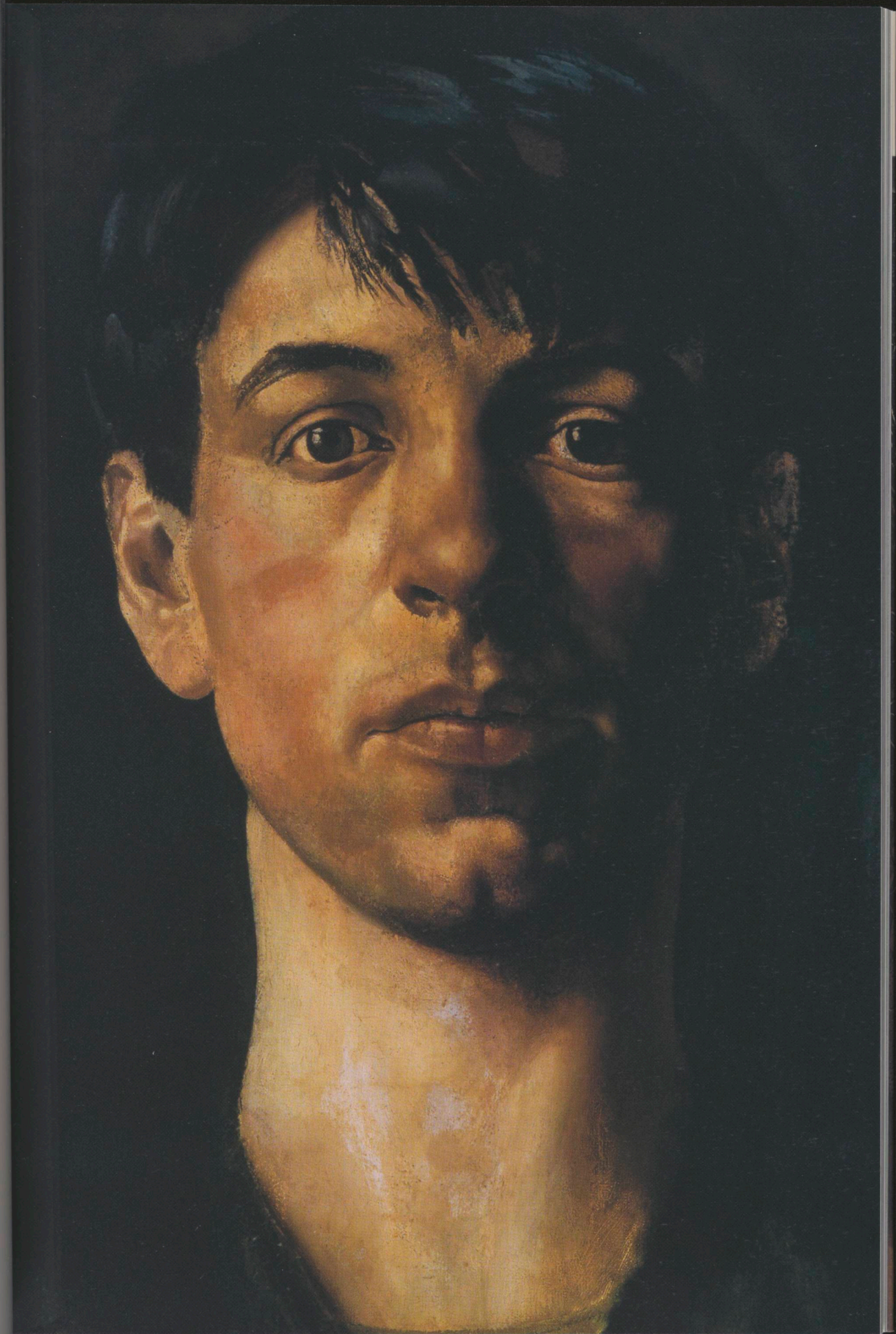
630 x 510 mm

TATE GALLERY, LONDON; BEQUEATHED BY SIR EDWARD MARSH
THROUGH THE CONTEMPORARY ART SOCIETY, 1953

How I admire Stan's Self-Portrait now finished!' This is Stanley's brother, Sydney, in his diary in July 1914. 'His portrait is to me nothing short of a masterpiece. It glows with warm, but reserved feeling and has the dignity of an old master in it. And he has done the whole of it with penny brushes!'³ It is Spencer's first self-portrait painting and, appropriately, a declaration of his calling: a portrait of a young man passionate for art.

As if in eagerness to fill the role, he makes the picture almost twice life-size (Spencer prickled when Edward Marsh asked about its size: 'Next time I start a portrait I shall begin it the size of a threepenny bit').⁴ The proud long neck and the painting's lowered viewpoint make the 5'2" Spencer seem to gaze down on us. Against the darkly curtained background, the full-bodied modelling and warm 'Italianate' light (so unlike the potato-and-turnip colouration of his later works) bring the artist forward to us as a soulful, sensuous presence. Like all of Spencer's self-portraits, and like many of the portraits made by the members of the Carline circle, with which Spencer was closely associated, this one eschews overt display. The artist is dressed with a plain, almost artisanal simplicity. He has no symbolic props and, the portrait implies, no need of them: his chief attribute is the intensity of his gaze.

The painting dates from the height of Spencer's 'innocence', the state of Cookham grace which broke apart when the First World War was declared on 4 August, and which Spencer later strove to recover in art.



SELF-PORTRAIT 1920

PENCIL ON PAPER

341 x 253 mm

ART GALLERY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA, ADELAIDE

ELDER BEQUEST FUND 1971

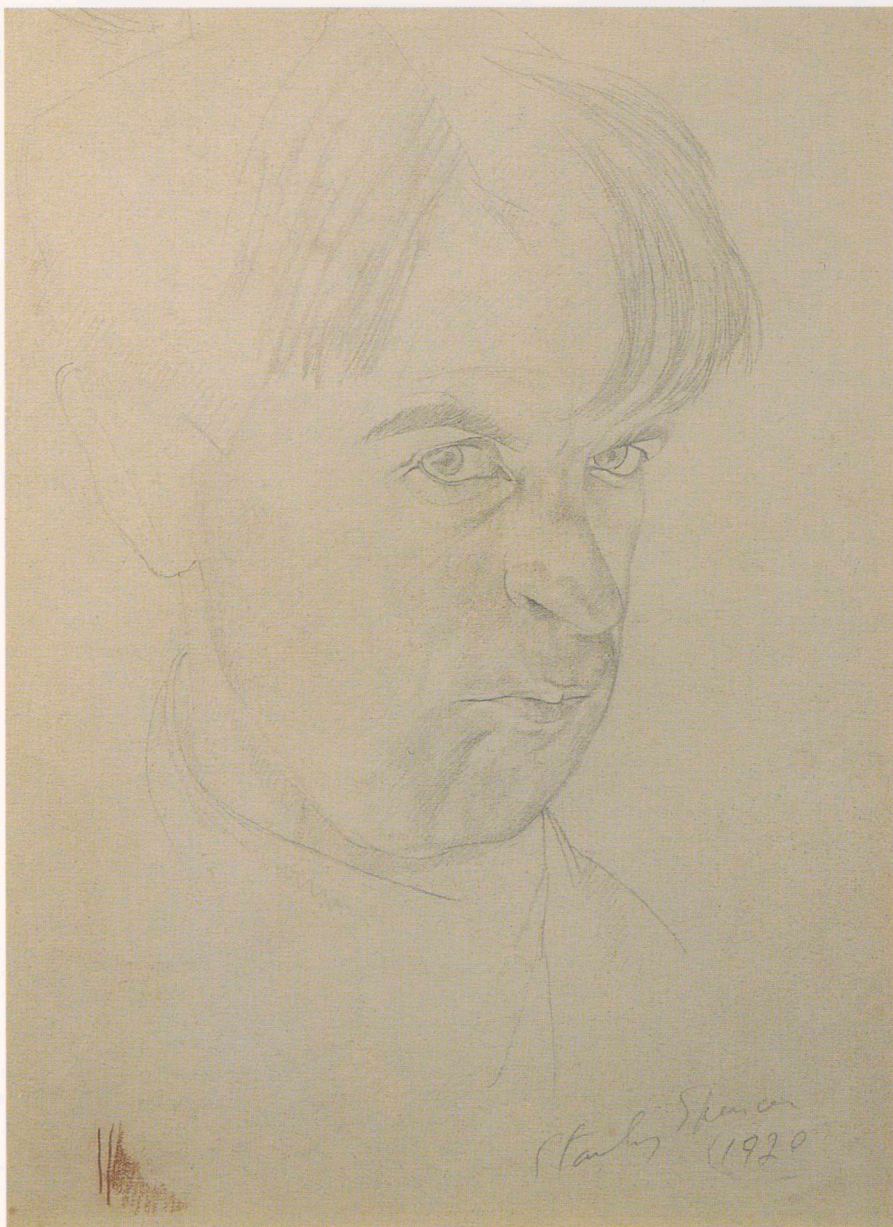
Spencer drew constantly and drew beautifully, on any available surface; a famous photograph shows him sketching in the Port Glasgow shipyard in the 1940s on a half-unfurled roll of coarse wartime toilet paper. Like his paintings, Spencer's drawings tend to divide into straight realist studies and imaginative or visionary scenes. This split reflects the division of artistic labour that he observed during his years at the Slade School of Art: life-drawing in London, and imaginative work at home in Cookham. Spencer's greatest drawings in his realist mode include tender and solicitous portraits of Hilda and some heroically unsparing, larger-than-life-size self-portraits from the late 1930s.

With the possible exception of his commissioned portraits (most of them made late in his life), Spencer drew and painted people who interested him, and the artist himself was high on this list. 'The most interesting thing I ever came across was myself.' In their sheer volume and their graphic nature, Spencer's drawings are a visual counterpart of his letters, which frequently become drawings in mid-flight. In the letters and drawings, one sees most clearly how Spencer liked to talk about himself in the third person, constantly remaking or recasting himself in the image of one of his preferred selves—lover, worshipper, watcher, homebody.

Spencer's aspect in this self-portrait seems slightly sinister, beetle-browed. But the frown is one of concentration rather than anger. Though Spencer does not show himself with the tools of the artist's trade, as he did in later painted self-portraits, it is very clearly a drawing of someone concentrating on making a drawing—chin tucked in, fringe swagged forward, and eyes on the rove between paper and mirror.

I have spoken of the great journey over the face and its world of places and how the knowledge that one will move from one moment of it to another affects the way one draws it.⁵

—JP



RESURRECTION c. 1923

INK AND WASH ON PAPER

345 x 245 mm

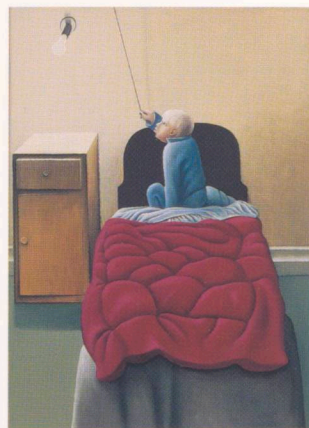
COLLECTION DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART GALLERY, NEW ZEALAND

GIFTED BY CHARLES BRASCH

This vision of people slowly clambering from their graves in Cookham churchyard is a study for Spencer's five-metre wide painting of 1924-7, the *Resurrection, Cookham*. One sees here, in development, samples from that painting's great anthology of gestures: sprawling, stretching, rising, stroking. Resurrected, the figures all take an almost preternatural satisfaction in the heft and stretch of their bodies. Far removed from fiery Old Testament visions of the Last Day, Spencer's resurrection is a soft, slow event. Under an ordinary sky in a known place, the resurrected haul free of their graves like so many workmen coming up through manholes; they brush each other down, exercise their rested limbs, yawn and lounge on the sun-baked tombs.

This work on paper was purchased (possibly in 1944) by Dunedin patron, poet and editor Charles Brasch. It was seen in Brasch's collection in the late 1960s by New Zealand artist Michael Smither, whose painting *Thomas with Light Chord* (1970) is evidence of Spencer's long historical reach. Rising from the landscape of counterpane with a gravestone-like head-board behind him, Thomas is a near-relation of Spencer's awakened souls. Smither's St Francis series of the late 1960s is likewise a conscious and affectionate homage to the natural settings and tramp-like hero of Spencer's *Christ in the Wilderness* paintings. Spencer's example was also important for Lois White, New Zealand painter of religious allegories, who, Nicola Green reports, visited Cookham in 1961 and photographed swans on the section of the Thames made famous by Spencer.

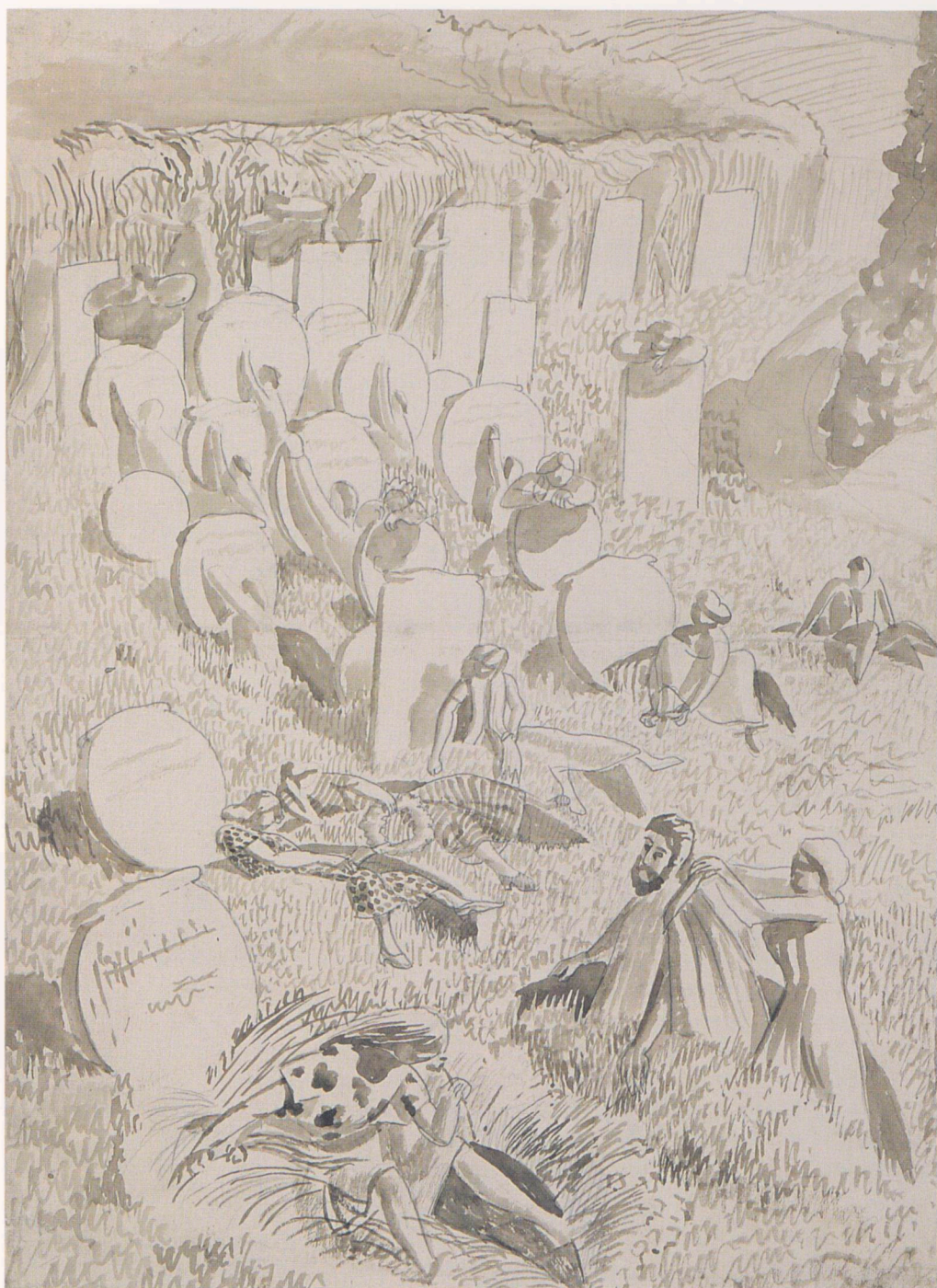
New Zealand gallery-goers of the mid-century had opportunities to see numerous works of Spencer's in touring exhibitions such as *Contemporary British Art from the Empire Art Loans Collection Society* (1934), the third *British Art Exhibition of the Empire Art Loans Collection* (1940), and *The Massey Collection of English Painting* (1951). It was in the 1950s, when Spencer was reappointed to the Royal Academy (he had resigned in the mid-1930s when his painting *Saint Francis and the Birds* was rejected from the summer exhibition) and received a late-in-life surge in acclaim, that several paintings of Spencer's arrived in the collections of the then National Art Gallery, Wellington, and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.



Michael Smither
Thomas with Light Chord 1970
Oil on board
Collection Dunedin Public Art Gallery
Purchased with funds from the Dunedin
Public Art Gallery Society



Lois White
War Makers 1937
Oil on canvas
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
Reproduced with permission of the estate
of Lois White



PARENTS RESURRECTING 1933

OIL ON CANVAS

713 x 1043 mm

NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA, MELBOURNE

FELTON BEQUEST 1943

Parents *Resurrecting* was the first painting of the never-completed series that Spencer referred to as the Church-House, and more latterly 'the Church of Me'. It is part of the *Last Judgement* and *Marriage at Cana* cycles, and shows Cookham churchyard on the Resurrection day.

On the right, fathers rise out of their graves in their brown tweed suits, linked in a trinity oddly reminiscent of the classical sculpture of the Three Graces except that they all look outwards anew at the world. They seem vaguely unaware that they are being touched and hugged by their children and grandchildren. Three witnesses stand outside the chain fence, their towels indicating that they have just come from swimming in the nearby Thames, where they have witnessed the baptism of Christ at the Odney pool.

As with Spencer's other Resurrection paintings, the scene lacks the division between the blessed and the damned that is at the heart of traditional paintings of the Day of Judgement; everyone here will be saved and their heaven will be no other place than Cookham. Spencer recorded that he wanted the scene to seem 'as real as going shopping' while the peaceful atmosphere was to create a sense of confidence in what is taking place. 'I am always wanting to establish a union between myself and what is divine and holy'.⁶

—MK



SELF-PORTRAIT WITH PATRICIA PREECE 1936

610 x 915 mm

OIL ON CANVAS

FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE

Sexual utopianism collides head-on with bodily reality in *Self-Portrait with Patricia Preece*. The result is an unforgettable painting. It is one of a group of portraits and double portraits that Spencer painted in the thick of his obsession with Patricia Preece—a calendar of longings, devotions, misinterpretations and mundane disasters that began in 1929, when they met in a Cookham teashop, and ended in 1937, when their marriage began and, on almost the same day, ran aground.

I gave myself completely to the peculiar excruciating exquisiteness I found in her and I wish you could have seen how lovely she looked, arranged in the hundreds of dresses I got her. . . . her high heels and straight walk used to give me a sexual itch and yet it was never any good except at first.⁷

Preece fills the frame; she fills his attention. The same eye that doted on her high heels and woollen jumpers crawls over her body (to use Spencer's famous analogy) like an ant. Yet this physical intimacy exists in an atmosphere of near-total remoteness. It was painted in winter, and the chill outside seems to govern the psychological temperature inside. The bedroom is not one of the canopied, firelit comfort-zones Spencer liked to paint but rather a theatre in which light and gravity make their claims on the human body. Everything declares disconnection, from the gate-like bedheads, to the grim dance of flowers on the wallpaper, to Spencer's half-wrung neck. Here any lingering trace of the idealised Victorian nude gives way to something else—the body-in-bedsit tradition that runs from Spencer and Sickert forward to Bacon and Freud.

—JP



ADORATION OF OLD MEN 1937

OIL ON CANVAS

906 x 1105 mm

LEICESTER CITY MUSEUMS SERVICE

Spencer painted two extremely unusual Adoration pictures for the Church-House, the first of Girls, and the second of Old Men, which subvert traditional themes such as the Adoration of the Magi, Susannah and the elders, as well as the pursuit of nymphs by satyrs. Five young women in various stages of sexual bliss eye up a group of startled old men who are the object of their adoration. Spencer saw himself as the swooning figure in the foreground, whose rosy patterned skirt and glimpse of lace petticoat are strangely at odds with a misshapen jersey more like fur than wool. The men have been resurrected wearing overcoats but no shirts, their bald pates gleaming and beards neatly combed. Like the one younger man in their midst, they gaze upward, unaware that they are the centre of attention. One man whose bedroll is draped over his shoulder has a doughy face and smooth chin, his beady eyes looking as if they have been freshly made by kneading fingers.

The figures are tightly framed on the left by a superbly painted high brick wall (the kind Spencer so longed to see over as a child in Cookham). On the right a flint wall draws the eye past the figures in the foreground to a group of girls playing with hoops whose curiosity has been aroused by the activities they are witnessing. Younger girls, innocent of the world of love, remain absorbed in their reading in the distance. Spencer recalled around this time: 'During the war when I contemplated the horror of my own life and the lives of those around me, I felt that the only way to end the ghastly experience would be if everyone decided to indulge in every degree and form of sexual love'.⁸

—MK



BEATITUDES OF LOVE VII, ROMANTIC MEETING 1938

OIL ON CANVAS

1040 x 510 mm

COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND TE PAPA

TONGAREWA

I can do without all my pictures except these. They are more genuine than any religious painting I have ever done'.⁹ The statement hardly readies a viewer for Spencer's *Beatitudes of Love* and their cast of lopsided, gangling lovers. The 'office boy and his wife' in *Romantic Meeting* are the seventh couple in a series of eight which Spencer planned to extend to include such qualities as 'Assisting, Holding, Fervour, Gaiety, Festivity, Marriage, Feminism, Masculousness'.¹⁰ Extravagantly elongated, her collar alertly frilled, the wife holds her arms in a gesture that suggests modesty (depictions of Eve after the fall) and exotic sensuality (Spencer admired the erotic carvings of the Hindu temples of Khajuraho, India, c. 950-1050).¹¹ The husband, one of the *Beatitudes'* many Stanley-surrogates, gawks with his entire body, from his manically checked trousers up to his gulping throat and eyes. (Spencer's painted characters, like himself, literally love to look.) Behind the lovers rest comically downbeat versions of the emblems in traditional marriage paintings: a female dust-pan fertilised by rubbish from a male broom.

—JP



Unknown Artist (10th-12th century) India
Apsara from Khajuraho, Central India
Pink sandstone
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki,
purchased 1970



WET MORNING, ST IVES 1937

OIL ON CANVAS

530 x 700mm

CARRICK HILL TRUST, HAYWARD BEQUEST

Spencer painted *Wet Morning, St Ives* during the six weeks spent there with Patricia Preece after their marriage on May 24, 1937. The flat, featureless view of the sea is a brilliant study in the reflection of light, and it is tempting to think that its expanse, devoid of humanity, reflected his state of mind. Stanley arrived at the seaside town full of the idea of a kind of 'dual marriage', whereby he would maintain a sexual relationship with his new wife as well as Hilda Carline. Indeed, while he was on his supposed honeymoon, Hilda was spring-cleaning his home for the arrival of the newlyweds. Although both parties had differing views of what transpired, Patricia moved into the room of her long-time partner, Dorothy Hepworth, who had accompanied her to the coast. Any attempt at consummation of the marriage met with failure. Stanley therefore spent the time meeting local fishermen and painting out of doors in spite of poor weather. In a letter to Mr Tooth, his dealer, he wrote:

...I have started & nearly finished two paintings of St. Ives; one looking across the bay & the other of the boats at low tide... For the first ten days the weather was very bad... I was only able to do the painting of the sea on a rainy day, which I did by standing under an arched way...¹²

By the end of his stay he had painted at least six different views of the port which capture the lucid light of that coast, although he was unable to paint on Sundays as it was frowned on by the locals.

—MK



FROM THE ARTIST'S STUDIO 1938

OIL ON CANVAS

508 x 762mm

CARRICK HILL TRUST, HAYWARD BEQUEST

This view of Cookham is that seen from an upper window of Lindworth, the large house in the centre of the village which Spencer had bought in 1932. It looks out over tiled roofs and rich red brick outhouses, to the larger buildings on the street, their chimneys creating a haphazard pattern on the skyline. Although the gathered daffodils are an intimation of spring, they collapse helplessly over the edge of the shallow bowl, in which the water reflects a still wintry sky. This bleakness is further reinforced by the lace curtains—one hangs lifelessly, while the other billows as if the window were open. Later each day, Spencer would work on one of his series of *Beatitudes*, turning 'from continuity and "coziness" to a very different imaginative realm.'¹³ By the time this painting was completed on February 13, however, he had made the house over to Patricia Preece. Shortly afterwards she turned him out in order to take in a tenant to assist with finances, and he was forced to stay with friends until the end of the year, when he moved to Adelaide Rd, London.

—MK



GARDEN VIEW, COOKHAM DENE 1938

OIL ON CANVAS

914 x 610 mm

ART GALLERY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA, ADELAIDE

MORGAN THOMAS BEQUEST FUND 1939

Cookham Dene (or Dean) is a small hamlet situated to the west of Cookham village. Unlike the studies which Spencer painted from the upstairs window of his home at Fernlea, which concentrated on back yard enclosures, here a gap in the trees opens up the view to the landscape beyond. Spencer has clearly delineated every species of plant in the garden in a manner worthy of a botanist. In 1937 Spencer commented that he liked to take his thoughts for a walk and marry them to some place in Cookham. He never tired of walking, often long distances, around the local countryside, and in later years reflected that he had lived like the horses and the cows—indeed he thought the latter were more aware than he was, for they knew where to go. Yet he had an intimation of something ahead, and he loved the exciting sensation of fusing into his surrounds, and being 'free to roam and forage. I grazed for years on the fields and plains'.¹⁴

—MK



COOKHAM, FLOWERS IN A WINDOW 1938ALSO KNOWN AS **FLOWERS AND ROOF TOPS**

OIL ON CANVAS

508 x 762 mm

CARRICK HILL TRUST, HAYWARD BEQUEST

UNlike *From the Artist's Studio* (1938, p. 37) this painting is divided centrally, so that the rooftops recede into the distance. Snowdrops and crocuses fill the bottom right-hand corner of the painting, with what look to be violets in a small vase in the centre,

while on the left purple blossoms on a pot plant are framed by the tiles of the garden shed or outhouse. It was sometimes Spencer's practice to include a detailed flower study set against a garden or landscape background.

On one occasion when he had been commissioned to do such a work, he simply went outside and grabbed handfuls of nettles, grasses, leaves and weeds in the rain rather than buying a bunch from the local florist. These weeds and grasses were then stuck into a jug, which he proceeded to transform into the desired subject matter. The fact that he loved weeds just as much as 'artistic' flowers was very much a reflection of his whole philosophy of life.¹⁵ Ironically, it was the drawing of the compositions that gave him most satisfaction, whereas the filling in of colour was viewed in a more mechanical light, so that at one point he requested the purchase of a wireless to entertain him while he applied himself to the canvas. Patricia Preece often took his landscape paintings up to London without his permission to deliver to Dudley Tooth, his dealer. They were more lucrative than his esoteric works, and she wished to collect the money.

—MK



CHRIST IN THE WILDERNESS

I did them on the table by the window. I was myself right enough in the wilderness of my little room and enjoying the peace of it.¹⁶

The 'little room' was 188 Adelaide Rd, the Hampstead address at which Spencer, spun off the edge of his ordinary existence by the collapse of his second marriage, conducted a retreat and convalescence of sorts. Hanging a cloth over his upstairs window and taking up the carpet, Spencer worked, read the bible and Thoreau, and cultivated his solitude for three and a half months.¹⁷ Here he turned to one of the most elusive and evocative episodes in the Gospels—Christ's forty days and nights' fasting in the desert. The story is over with quickly in the biblical narratives, and, even in the fullest account (Luke 4:1-13), one learns less of the fast than of the devil's final temptations of Christ. Taking this sparseness of detail as a licence to invent, Spencer imagined his way into the mysterious tract of space and time and painted a vision of the fast in all its daily grit and joy. He envisioned two lives for the series: as decorations on the roof of his Church-House, or, failing that, as a meditative cycle on a mantelpiece shrine, to be viewed one each day of Lent.

As each one was done I put it on the mantelpiece. With the fire below and the subdued light above it was a little shrine. Sitting on the side of the bed I would gaze at them or on my afternoon's rest until I fell asleep.¹⁸

In the Cookham-based religious works, Christ and the disciples are often treated with a Spencerian disregard for hierarchy. Seen through Spencer's radically democratic eye, they're figures among other figures in the general congestion. *Christ in the Wilderness*, by contrast, is Spencer's fullest attempt to imagine Christ alone, and the series is powered by his characteristic impatience with

lofty or pious visual conventions. Spencer's big-boned hero simply shoulders aside the pale, enhaloed Christs that waft through Victorian religious painting. This Christ is a brawny, frame-filling wild man—pacifist, proto-hippy, shrub-hugger, man-mountain. Spencer's strategy here parallels Pasolini's use of non-actors in the 1964 film *The Gospel According to St Matthew* to shake the biblical story into freshness, immediacy.

I did them in an exercise book, forty little squares and then filled in as many as I could with how Christ may have spent each day, the great adventure all by himself with leaves and trees and mud and rabbits and rocks, just as I was having among two chairs, a bed, a fireplace and a table.¹⁹

In the hands of another artist, a series devoted to Christ's 'great adventure' might have focused on the drama of temptation, the spiritual stand-off that climaxes the fast. But the punitive idea of temptation held little interest for a sexual utopian such as Spencer; there is redemption in his art, but no damnation; lovers, but no sinners. The wilderness story in his hands instead becomes a story about spiritual home-making and intimacy: 'the mystery of love is that it can find its abode in something not meant for itself, and yet when it does, it is clearly its home.' Deeply engaged at this time by other religious traditions and forms, Spencer underlines the connection between Christ in his wilderness and a larger, cross-cultural cast of solitaries, ascetics and holy renouncers, such as the sacred hermits of Hinduism. Always hypersensitive to fabric and all that it hides, Spencer delights in the scoops, cowls and folds of Christ's big tented robe. He never forces the rhyme between his own retreat and Christ's, but his writings about the period do hint gently at some parallels in their circumstances.

I had on a very thin vest and wore it so long that it sagged and hung on me and felt so comfortable, but it got black from the coal.... But I loved it so that I wore it till it was just a rag. I wish I had drawn the way the folds went.²⁰

In his most radical paintings, the mid-1930s images of love and lovers, Spencer seeks to picture spiritual union as a counterpart of sexual intimacy. Less radical as theology but more resolved as paintings, the *Christ in the Wilderness* works express spiritual union through Christ's barefoot intimacy with the natural world. The monumentally calm work *The Scorpion* (not in this exhibition, but reproduced below), was partly inspired, Spencer said, by the memory of sitting in the outdoor lavatory and placing earthworms on his thighs. Dirt, stones, bugs, plants—Spencer's God is in the earthbound details.

In Christ, God again beholds his creation, and this time has a mysterious occasion to associate himself with it. In this visitation, he contemplates many familiar humble objects and places: the declivities, holes, pit-banks, boulders, rocks, hills, fields, ditches and so on.²¹

A marriage of vulnerability and monumentality makes *Rising from Sleep in the Morning* one of the best-loved works in the series. It is set in a crater that is both biblical wilderness and the bare-boned landscape of Macedonia—a visual redemption of the battlefields Spencer saw during the First World War, and which he made the site of his 1921 *Crucifixion*. Deep into his forty days and nights, Christ aims his arms and eyes skyward, and his robe is transformed as if by the force of faith into a vast flower, an opening lily, its folds reminiscent of Georgia O'Keeffe's suggestive blooms. It is a concise and powerful visual equation: prayer as a flowering in a dry place. As Kitty Hauser has remarked, 'This device of making ordinary objects look like extraordinary objects *whilst still retaining their everyday identity* was one of

Spencer's favourite tricks. It adds to the revelatory quality of his works [and] formally parallels the central mystery of Christianity, Christ's identity as both human and divine.'²²

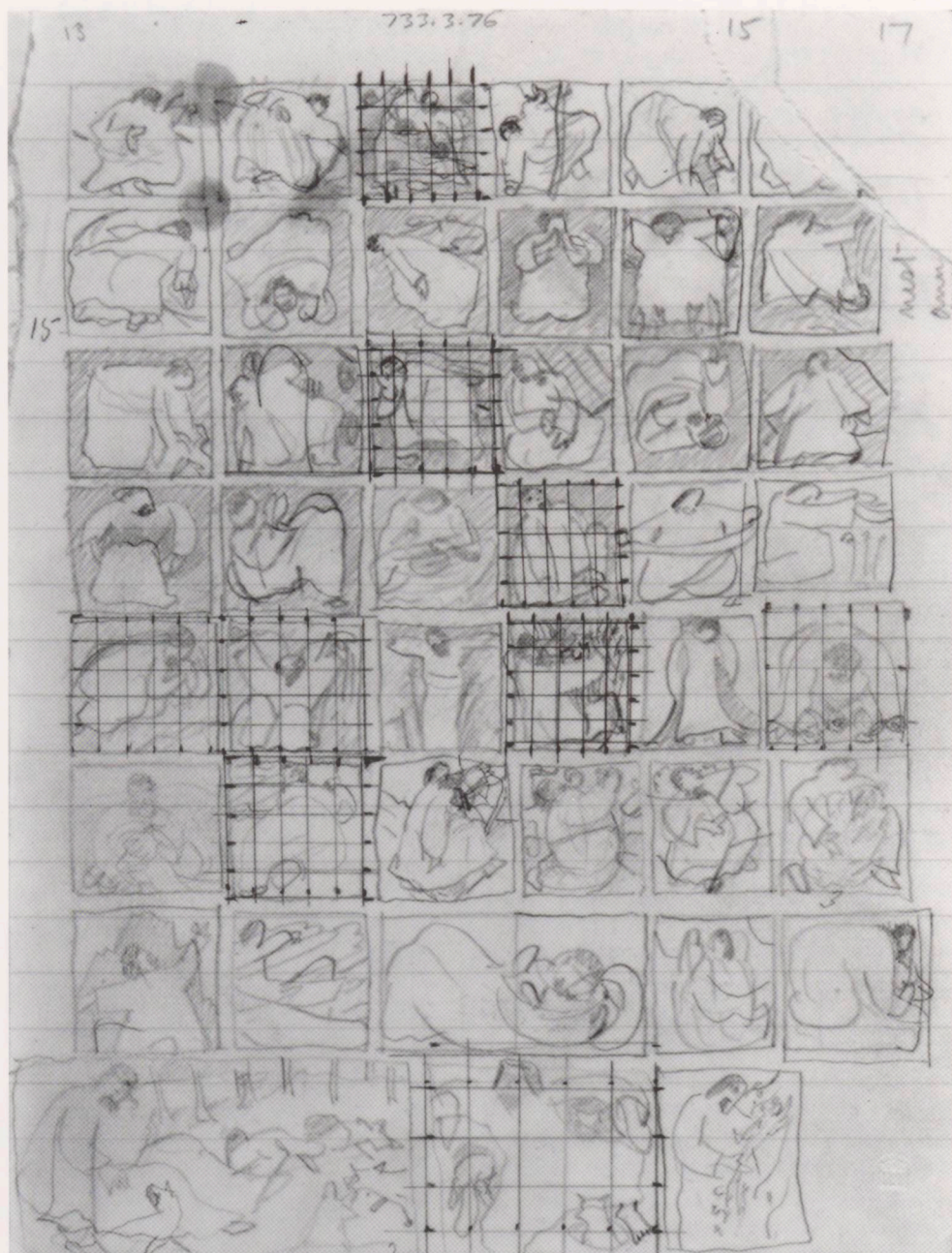
After sweeping the floor and dusting a bit, I would sit down on one of the two chairs and think and look at the floor. Oh, the joy of just that!²³

The forty days and nights is a story of physical temptations overcome and spiritual knowledge attained. It is tempting to argue that in choosing this subject Spencer was consciously retreating, in the wake of the personal trials of 1937 and 1938, from the controversial subjects of the Patricia Preece paintings and the *Beatitudes*. Yet even in these celebrations of solitude Spencer's abiding themes of love and union are never far from view. Indeed, there is a sense in which Spencer's time making these works at Adelaide Rd was itself a kind of romance. Christ's ecstatic intimacy with the wilderness parallels Spencer's with his captive spiritual audience: 'I loved it all because it was all God and me, all the time.'²⁴

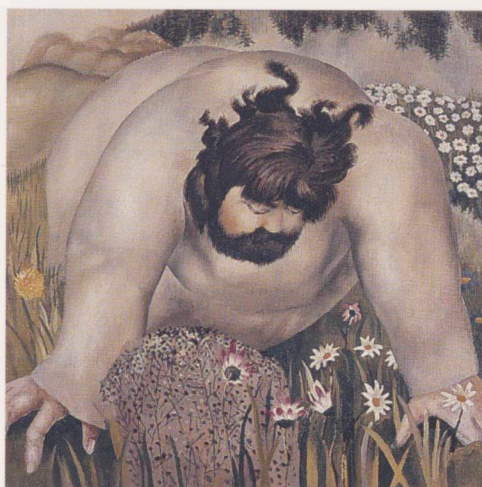
—JP



Stanley Spencer *Christ in the Wilderness: The Scorpion* 1939
Oil on canvas
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth (not in exhibition)



Stanley Spencer
Preliminary drawings for
Christ in the Wilderness (not in exhibition)
Courtesy Tate Archive.



CHRIST IN THE WILDERNESS
(STUDY FOR **CONSIDER THE LILIES**, 1939)

1939

PENCIL STUDY ON PAPER (PAINTING NOT IN THE EXHIBITION)

254 x 254 mm

ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA, PERTH

I think I got this notion from first having made a small study of Shirin [Spencer's first daughter] when she was a baby out on the grass, crawling about looking at the flowers. It pleased me, perhaps, more than most, I think, because it seemed to be very much more what I wanted. It seemed to be a more auspicious and possible happening, and the leaning over the flowers gives me a sense of the Creator brooding over his Creation, and the analogy between what a baby might do and what God might do is so near in its feeling. Perhaps this is why I have shown the kind of white meadow flower that I specially liked as a child, as for instance the wig-wag-wanton or quaking grass. Perhaps, with apologies to Michaelangelo, I was thinking of his painting of God moving upon the face of the waters.

—STANLEY SPENCER, AS DICTATED TO HIS PIECE DAPHNE



CHRIST IN THE WILDERNESS (STUDY FOR *THE FOXES HAVE HOLES*, 1939)

1939

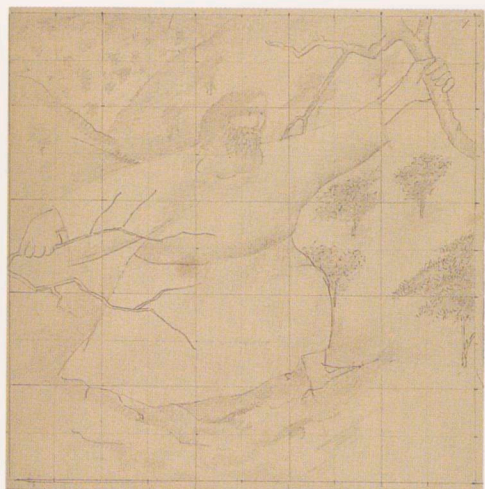
PENCIL STUDY ON PAPER (PAINTING NOT IN THE EXHIBITION)

254 x 254 mm

ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA, PERTH

This bringing of Christ into things in nature satisfied me in this picture of the foxes going in and out of their homes. In one or two things it was satisfying. 1: that I have always had feelings about foxes and their homes, which I had never seen; and 2: that banks in woods never had any special attraction for me; and here, both the foxes having their homes and Christ being with them, watching them having their lives, again brings me to this part of nature that I had always found difficult to have any feeling about. It is a sort of 'placeless' place—rather like in a wood of youngish trees—you are in a sort of nowhere and nowhere is not home, and this making a double home—one for the foxes and one for Christ—brings about a homely feeling that I want without altering anything in Nature... I feel he is in the Wilderness, that it is quite living and human and yet remote from human life.

—STANLEY SPENCER, AS DICTATED TO HIS NIECE DAPHNE



CHRIST IN THE WILDERNESS
(STUDY FOR **DRIVEN BY THE SPIRIT INTO THE WILDERNESS**, 1942) 1939

PENCIL STUDY ON PAPER (PAINTING NOT IN THE EXHIBITION)

254 x 254 mm

ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA, PERTH

When I came to this one, I could see that some important attempt was being made to bring about, in my feelings, that fusion between the impersonal element of nature (by nature I mean landscape) and the essence of its reverse, namely what is personal and human.

By making an arbitrary and meaningless division between landscape and figure pictures, I have brought about an unpleasant hiatus between them. In this painting I have liked, in a sense, the emptiness of the landscape, namely, the dearth of human being aspect, because it seemed to leave the very place that I wanted for Christ—the Christ was both. Again I specially liked this wish because it enhanced once more the peacefulness that one feels the Wilderness is expressive of. The impersonal thing was the thing I wanted because it showed he was away from human contact. This, of course, is really meant to illustrate the words 'He was led by the spirit into the Wilderness'. The place in my mind is in Macedonia . . . Macedonia, the place, had a loneliness which was mixed with the personal terror of being cut off from one's home life.

—STANLEY SPENCER, AS DICTATED TO HIS NIECE DAPHNE

CHRIST IN THE WILDERNESS:
RISING FROM SLEEP IN THE MORNING

1940

OIL ON CANVAS

560 x 560 mm

ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA, PERTH

I imagine that Christ liked to feel the fact that he was a man and that he might do a lot of the normal things that a human being might do, such as going to bed and getting up in the morning: that it would be a wonderful experience—that it would be, so to speak, the first getting up of a human being—almost like a rehearsal of the act—that the joy would consist in the waking and awareness of his great lover 'God'. I think I was, perhaps, thinking of a flower opening. That pit that he is in, which I have regarded as his selected bed, being the shape of a sort of nest, is also wished for by me because it, so to speak, takes the sting away from the fact that it is probably a shell hole or like one.

—STANLEY SPENCER, AS DICTATED TO HIS PIECE DAPHNE



CHRIST IN THE WILDERNESS:
HE DEPARTED INTO A MOUNTAIN TO PRAY

1939

OIL ON CANVAS

560 x 560 mm

ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA, PERTH

The shape of the rock suggests to me an altar. In fact I deliberately made a piece of rock to coincide with that shape. In doing this I was consciously fulfilling my wish regarding indoors and outdoors, making them both in the one picture.

—STAPLEY SPENCER, AS DICTATED TO HIS PIECE DAPHNE



CHRIST IN THE WILDERNESS: THE EAGLES

1943

OIL ON CANVAS

560 x 560 mm

ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA, PERTH

This painting shows what are meant to be eagles devouring a carcass. I have always been a bit perplexed and a bit worried at the thought of killing and all these things—not so much death, but killing. And I still feel there is something terrifically wrong about it. At the same time I feel that all this is part of God's creation and the figure of Christ gives me a feeling that I can accept here, a mystery, namely that I am right in my feeling and at the same time rightly everything is a part of God's creation. It is the complete harmony of my feeling about Christ on all matters and makes me wish to do a picture where this perplexing contrast is seen, in a sense, in a state of harmony together, namely the gentle Christ and the awfulness of the world. The actual subject of the picture I have taken from 'And they answered and said unto Him, Where Lord? And He said unto them, Wheresoever the body is, thither will the eagles be gathered together'. There is something in the forcefulness of nature where an expression of the wonderfulness of passion can be revealed. For instance, the fact that all of the birds have gorged themselves so that there is gore on their fronts and that they are squatting back on their tails and the central eagle is flapping its wings to help it tear the flesh, and suchlike things help in my view to enhance the peace of the figure of Christ—in the birds' greed, or rapaciousness, something of the degree of feeling of the peace of Christ is revealed.

—STANLEY SPENCER, AS DICTATED TO HIS NIECE DAPHNE



CHRIST IN THE WILDERNESS: THE HEPTAGON

c. 1954

OIL ON CANVAS

560 x 560 mm

ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA, PERTH

In the roof of the chancel of Cookham Church there are a number of squares forming the roof. It is rather a sort of barrel shape. I was often looking up at these squares and wishing I could fill them all in some way. But it was not until more or less recently (1939) that I tried to work out a scheme of compositions that would be very simple, namely, each would have to have rather easy relationships to the other. And I suddenly seemed to tumble to the idea of trying to do the life of Christ in the Wilderness. I felt that because you have not anything much in the actual life in the wilderness except the temptation that one has an excuse for imagining what his life might have been like. And I rather liked the idea of Christ and Nature—simply. That, so to speak, he gives a sort of preliminary 'once over' to that particular aspect of his creation. It seemed very peaceful and it seemed a thing that, humanly, one would wish to do before entering some big life mission. In each of the squares one would have had Christ with his surroundings and something indicating his relationship with it. Just as you would have God creating Adam, so you might have Christ looking into a tree and seeing the birds' nests—a sort of 'check over'. In order to get some kind of 'slant', as one might say, on what, actually, he might have been doing all those forty days and forty nights. I am using the material such as one might get from his own utterances.

—STANLEY SPENCER, AS DICTATED TO HIS NIECE DAPHNE



WHEATFIELD AT STARLINGS 1947

OIL ON CANVAS

507 x 762mm

ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES, SYDNEY

Unlike many of Spencer's compositions, which used an elevated viewpoint suggesting a prospect from a window or hill, allowing a bird's eye view of the countryside, *Wheatfield at Starlings* looks directly from ground level. One writer has suggested that

Spencer's use of steep perspective, allowing a view into spaces that were not literally accessible from the artist's vantage point, served to compensate in painting for his own lack of height.²⁵ However, they are more likely to reflect the description given on several occasions by Spencer of the pleasure he had as a child imagining the worlds he would find on the other side of Cookham's high walls and hedges. Keith Bell writes:

In the best of Spencer's landscapes, the scenes are always supplied with an abundance of circumstantial and realistic detail, so that smoking factory chimneys and gasometers [as seen in the distance here] are painted with the same sensuous enjoyment of colour and texture that is lavished on flowering shrubs, trees and old farm buildings. Invariably, Spencer evokes a feeling of idyllic warmth and sensuousness: of flopping down in a field of wild flowers on a warm spring day ... of pausing to glance across open fields to distant lines of trees... Like a child, Spencer imposed no value judgement or moral considerations on his subject, and the paintings must have reminded prospective purchasers of endless summer holidays in the country.²⁶

—MK



PORT GLASGOW CEMETERY 1947

OIL ON CANVAS

500 x 760 mm

BRITISH COUNCIL COLLECTION

In the early 1940s Spencer was commissioned to do a series of paintings of Scottish shipyards. He chose to work in the Lithgow's shipyard at Port Glasgow, and created a number of works depicting the shipworkers going about their respective tasks. In a letter he recorded the discovery of the graveyard:

One evening in Port Glasgow when unable to write due to a jazz band playing in the drawing-room just below me, I walked up along the road past the gas works to where I saw a cemetery on a gently rising slope.... I seemed then to see that it rose in the midst of a great plain and that all in the plain were resurrecting and moving towards it.... I knew then that the resurrection would be directed from that hill.²⁷

Beyond it can be seen the river Clyde and the rolling hills on the far bank. The cemetery is also reminiscent of the churchyard in Cookham with its gently crooked tombstones. That evening walk was to spark *The Port Glasgow Resurrection Series* (1945-50), which also drew on a quotation from John Donne in a book of sermons which Spencer had been given in 1911, in which 'the risen dead are like a king climbing the hill of Sion [sic]'.²⁸ He felt that the slope looked like 'what the Arabian Nights call the mountain of the bereft', although in this case it was to 'become the hill of the blessed'.²⁹

—MK



THE RESURRECTION WITH THE RAISING OF JAIRUS'S DAUGHTER 1947

FROM THE PORT GLASGOW RESURRECTION SERIES

OIL ON CANVAS

768 x 1500 mm

SOUTHAMPTON CITY ART GALLERY

Both the living and the dead are shown as participants here, clutching objects associated with their particular life or occupation. Such a resurrection fits perfectly with Spencer's sense of wonder in the everyday, where miracles are as commonplace as children playing hopscotch. He wanted to site a resurrection in some suburban place, and composed the scene after seeing a photograph of a church standing at the junction of two streets. The window at the centre reveals a specific biblical resurrection, where Christ raises from the dead the daughter of Jairus, the president of a synagogue. The Gospel according to St Mark (5:22-43) describes how Christ hears Jairus being informed of his daughter's death, at which he tells the grieving father and the weeping crowd not to fear and that the child is not dead but sleeping. He then enters and takes the child by the hand, saying to her, 'Tal'itha cu'mi' (Little girl, I say to you, arise), and she gets up and walks.

In Spencer's vision, the girl sits upright on a striped mattress, while her father clutches the bedpost, unaware as yet of the miracle that has taken place. In the side wings, modern inhabitants resurrect through paving stones (a scene drawn from Fra Angelico's *Last Judgement*, Museo di S. Marco, Florence) while others arrive home like 'soldiers returning from war'.³⁰ The circular flower-bed and black and red paths of the village are shown in the top-right corner of this work, below which Spencer, wearing a strange metallic coat, is reunited with his first wife, Hilda, who wears a flowered pink and white blouse.

—MK





DAPHNE BY THE WINDOW, NORTHERN
IRELAND 1952

OIL ON CANVAS

604 x 684 mm

COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND TE PAPA
TONGAREWA

Tenderness and tact are the keynotes of all three portraits Spencer painted of his niece Daphne. Daphne Spencer (now Robinson) is the daughter of Stanley's elder brother Harold, whom Spencer visited in his home near Belfast in the early 1950s. (Daphne's transcriptions of Spencer's commentary on the *Christ in the Wilderness* paintings appear elsewhere in this catalogue.) One can glimpse, through the slice of window in this painting, the glasshouses and foliage seen in another work made at this time, *Merville Garden Village, Near Belfast* (p. 65). (Because Spencer often worked his way around favourite spots on foot, mapping adjacent views together in this way is one of the incidental pleasures of looking at his paintings.)

Daphne by the Window is one of the many paintings Spencer made of family and friends when he was not busy with 'imaginative' works. In his portraits, as in his landscapes, he would forgo his trademark visionary effects, surrendering 'spiritual eyesight' for the merely physical kind. As always when Spencer denigrates his realist works, it would be wrong to grant too much weight to that 'merely'. In *Daphne by the Window* Spencer's patient and undramatic style seems to mirror and to dignify a quality of reserve in the sitter. We see Daphne clearly in the northern light, yet she is allowed to keep her secrets.

In 1922 Spencer wrote that 'No man loves anything until he can exactly express what it is he loves'.³¹ The statement could be the credo of an artist whose visionary distortions and wild imaginative flights were always underwritten by his ant-crawling acquaintance with the seen world. Here he gathers in the scene stitch by stitch, from the laddered patterns on the couch (a calmer version of the riotous patterning in *Hilda Welcomed*) to the fall of light on Daphne's temple and cheek. If exact expression is an index of love, it seems fair to call this a loving portrait.

—JP



MERVILLE GARDEN VILLAGE, NEAR
BELFAST 1951

OIL ON CANVAS

595 x 910 mm

COLLECTION DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART GALLERY, NEW ZEALAND

PURCHASED 1952 WITH FUNDS FROM THE DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART
GALLERY SOCIETY AND THE NATIONAL ART COLLECTIONS FUND

Painted on-site while Spencer stayed with his elder brother Harold, *Merville Garden Village, Near Belfast* compels us to do what Spencer loved to do: climb to vantage and peer over at 'ungetatable' places.³² For Spencer mystery was always within hearing range, just over the wall or through the hedge. Even when painting far from his home ground, he sought some equivalent of the brick-walled, close-horized world of Cookham. *Merville Garden Village* is a fine example of how Spencer used walls and hedges to make the outside feel like an inside, and turn landscape into a kind of interior.

Like the sheds and walls it describes, *Merville Garden Village* is plainly and satisfyingly built. It's a painting you can trace an imagined path through, from the curve of sunstruck road at top right to the doorway at left, and on through the garden to the slab of foreground wall. Spencer likened painting to bricklaying, and the metaphor was never more apt than in 'straight' paintings such as this, where the painter-plasterer slowly builds his view from fiercely attentive dabs. The boxy buildings, the bare ribs of the glasshouses, the green foam of ivy—Spencer takes it all down, as if following his old hero John Ruskin's advice to reject nothing and scorn nothing.

Or *almost* nothing: Spencer paid surprisingly little attention to skies. He was uninterested in heavenly turbulence—the scud and billow of God-in-nature. By hoisting his vantage-points higher than usual, Spencer pushed the sky off-screen and opened newly enlarged foregrounds in which to hoard his visual riches. It is as if, in this garden near Belfast, Spencer is offering a pointedly scruffy echo of the paradise gardens found in fourteenth century painting. This unpromising view is full of promise.

—JP



THE MONKEY PUZZLE, WHITEHOUSE, NORTHERN IRELAND 1952

OIL ON CANVAS

508 x 700 mm

CARRICK HILL TRUST, HAYWARD BEQUEST

Spencer painted a number of works in Northern Ireland in 1952, including *Daphne by the Window*, *Northern Ireland* (p. 63), *The Foreshore at Whitehouse*, and *Garden at Whitehouse, Northern Ireland*. The eccentric form created by the sharp-pointed, scaly leaves running along each of the interlacing branches of the exotic Monkey Puzzle tree (*Araucaria aracana*) must have appealed to the artist, who had a keen eye for pattern and detail. In the painting the tree is shown against a flower-covered fence reminiscent of the floral hedges that appear in both early Renaissance and Pre-Raphaelite paintings. When associated with the Virgin Mary such a hedge is a symbol of the *hortus conclusus*, or enclosed garden, symbolising her purity. Spencer practised tapestry in his spare time, which may also have added to his pleasure in this kind of frieze.³³ The Haywards, who acquired this painting, planted a Monkey Puzzle tree in the rolling gardens of Carrick Hill, South Australia, but whether it was before, or after, the purchase of this work is unknown.

—MK



CHRIST IN COOKHAM 1952ALSO KNOWN AS **CHRIST CALLING THE APOSTLES**FROM THE SERIES **PENTECOST, LAST JUDGEMENT 1951-1952**

OIL ON CANVAS

1270 x 2057 mm

WALTON BEQUEST FUND 1952

ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES, SYDNEY

Although *Christ in Cookham* is a relatively late painting, Bell has suggested that it may be based on earlier studies. It shows Christ, seated in the foreground in a wicker armchair, with his disciples seated in two rows behind him. Many have their arms crossed high on their chests, while others sit hands on knees, one idly scratching his elbow. Spencer referred to Christ and the Apostles as 'J.C. & Co.,' which was said without a hint of irreverence. 'I want to paint J.C. & Co. like a football team, don'tcha know, sitting there in two rows with their arms folded like this, and looking tough.'³⁴ To the right, figures in old-fashioned clothing kneel in adoration, as if they are from an earlier generation who have been freshly resurrected, and 'have walked up the High Street to pay homage to Christ'.³⁵

In the background, children are playing hopscotch, unaware for the most part of the events taking place. One child, however, has turned her head to gaze at the blinding light which rakes across the playground, creating stark shadows on the asphalt. One of the disciples also turns to gaze into the distance, possibly at other figures who have risen from the grave and are making their way toward Christ. This use of strong light is unusual in Spencer's work. In the background a figure moves away from the scene carrying baskets, possibly referring back to a painting Spencer did early in his career, *Apple Gatherers* (1915), in which Cookham served as a blissful Eden before the Fall.

—MK



HILDA WELCOMED 1953

OIL ON CANVAS

1410 x 948 mm

ART GALLERY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA, ADELAIDE

MORGAN THOMAS BEQUEST FUND 1939

Each picture in the Church-House was to add to the overall theme of the Day of Judgement, when all would rise again. *Hilda Welcomed* depicts the moment when the newly resurrected Hilda walks into the old family home of Fernlea in Cookham, where Spencer had been born, to be greeted by her two daughters, Shirin and Unity, their father and two other women. Bell assumes they are Patricia, Spencer's second wife, and Charlotte Murray.³⁶ There is a strong resemblance in this composition to Giotto's *Meeting at the Golden Gate* (Arena Chapel, 1306), which shows Anna and Joachim in an embrace, so that their bodies form a gothic arch. Although the figure of Stanley is positioned behind Hilda, rather than viewed from the side, the same compositional form is used.³⁷

The other works for the chapel were to show Hilda and Stanley in the environs of Hampstead where she had lived and where he had courted her before they married. After Hilda died in 1950, Spencer 'began to think of their union in spiritual terms, a kind of remarriage of the soul, which he had been unable to achieve when Hilda was alive'.³⁸ The painting allowed him to realise what for him had been a long-held dream, of Hilda and the other women that he loved living together in harmonious redemption, with him at their centre. The most important thing for Spencer was that on the Day of Judgement no one was condemned to eternal punishment—everyone was saved.

—MK



MARRIAGE AT CANA 1953ALSO KNOWN AS **THE WEDDING CAKE**

LITHOGRAPH 50/75

628 x 525mm

COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND TE PAPA
TORANGA

M

uch of Spencer's later life was taken up with a project that was never completed, a Church-House in which he wished to create a 'marriage' of the sacred and profane, with chapels dedicated to the women in his life. The

Hilda Memorial Chapel celebrated his first wife, Hilda Carline, who died in 1950. This lithograph, taken from the painting done in 1953 (intended for the Church-House but now in Swansea) of *The Marriage at Cana*, was a rare attempt at printmaking, and carried out under the supervision of Henry Trivick.³⁹

The traditional theme deals with the miracle Christ performed when the hosts at a wedding ran out of wine. Christ ordered water to be drawn and then turned it into wine of the best quality, causing the guests to assume that the best wine had been left till last. For Spencer, the central event was the wedding feast itself, which symbolises the blessing of the state of marriage by God. As with so many of his works, the religious aspect appears overshadowed by the attention paid to other details. The tiered wedding cake looms drunkenly to the left, while the groom (Stanley) sways backward with the effort of pulling out a chair for his bride to be seated. Attention is drawn to the bride's hands smoothing down her skirt prior to sitting. The scroll pattern on her blouse reappears in bands on her cardigan in *Hilda Welcomed* (p. 71), which was also to be part of the Hilda Chapel.⁴⁰ The artist believed the paintings contained all the things he had failed to attain in his real life marriage. This spiritual union, which he maintained through copious letters to his dead wife, sustained his later years.

—MK



MARRIAGE AT CANA. STANLEY SPENCE

SELF-PORTRAIT 1959

OIL ON CANVAS

510 x 406 mm

TATE GALLERY, LONDON; PRESENTED BY THE FRIENDS OF THE TATE GALLERY 1982

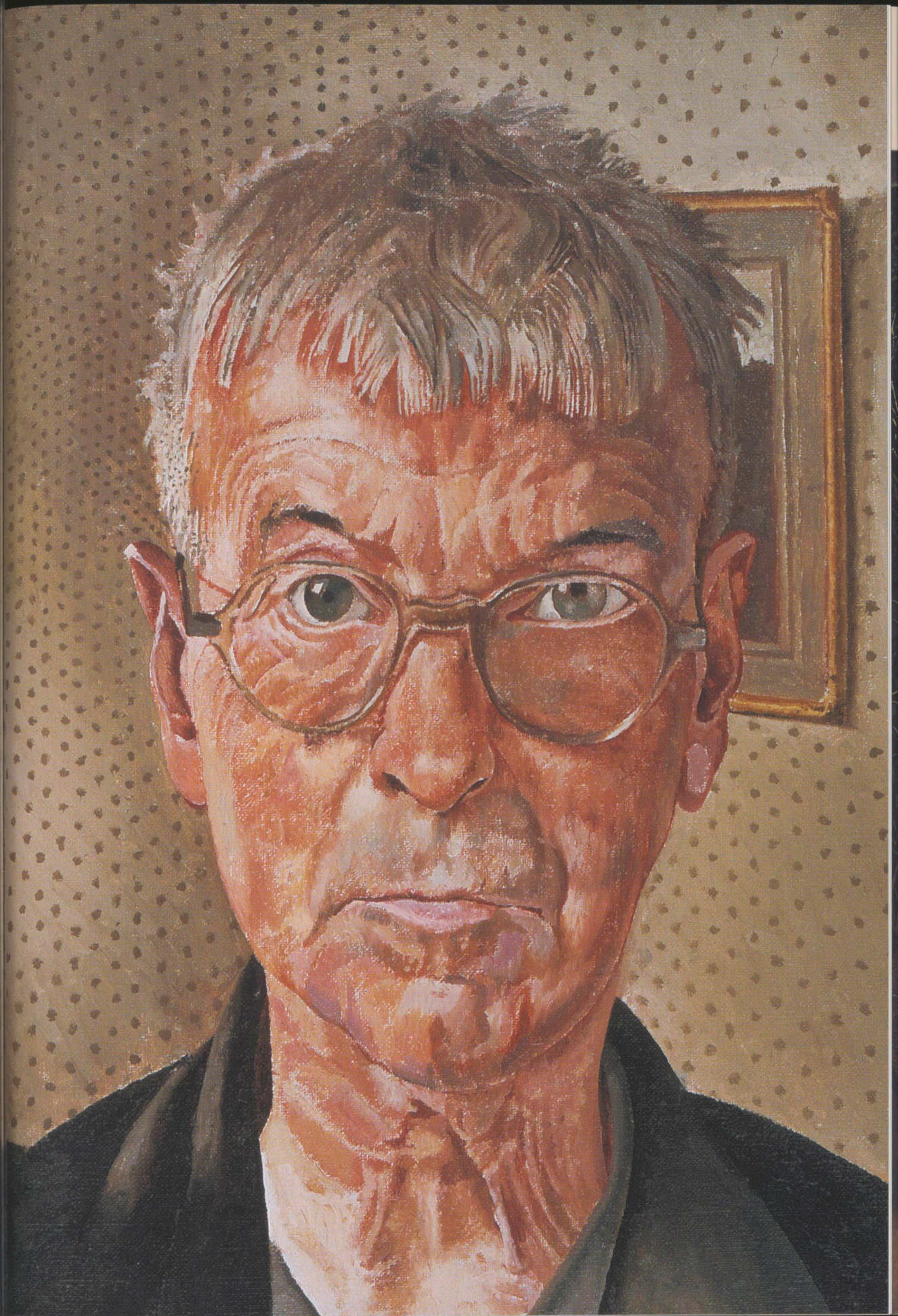
Spencer revelled in his many and contradictory selves, which he once said he wished to gather around him like objects in a museum. The fall of the light and the framing of the face in this self-portrait suggest that Spencer intended it to stare back across half a century at his 1914 *Self-Portrait*, and so to round out that imaginary museum. Few careers are bracketed so satisfyingly.

Spencer became Sir Stanley Spencer in the year this work was painted, but he depicts himself as he always did: avid, scruffy, unbeknighted. Working for a week in a friend's room, he took the measure of his aged face with the same patience he accorded brick walls and backyards. Short dry dabs of paint itemise the wattled neck, the schoolboyish bird's-nest of his hair, the skew-whiff spectacles. His right eye stares with riveting force. The other looms through a thicker lens, like a fish swimming past aquarium glass. Behind him the wallpaper pattern warps and flexes, so that we see a world altered by the intensity of this gaze. For all their differences, both the 1914 and 1959 works are paintings of Spencer as someone who *sees*, wholly and steadily.

The artist seen in this painting is in his sixties. He has recently undergone surgery for cancer. He is aware that he is going to die soon. And he has emerged, after the tumult of the 1930s, into a calmer life. (Spencer underwent psychoanalysis later in his life, and Keith Bell suggests that this painting shows us a calmer man than, for instance, the hapless paramour of *Self-Portrait with Patricia Preece*.) But one need not know any of these details to guess that the man who made the painting has lived a full life. There is nothing self-congratulatory about the steadiness of the gaze, none of the self-conscious 'toughness' that is in fact another kind of sentimentality.

About four months later Spencer died in the Canadian War Memorial Hospital. On his last night, his friend Michael Westropp, Vicar of Cookham, was with him and after an hour said 'You are tired. Shall I leave you?' Unable to speak, the artist wrote quickly 'I most certainly am not. I am never weary, never bored. Why should you think I am. Sadness and sorrow is not me.'⁴¹

—JP



CHURCH-HOUSE VIRTUAL REALITY PROJECT

CURATED BY ADRIAN GLEW, ARCHIVE CURATOR, TATE BRITAIN.
CONSTRUCTED BY THE CENTRE FOR THE ADVANCED STUDY OF
ARCHITECTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BATH. ARCHITECTURAL
INTERPRETATION BY PROFESSOR ROBERT TAVERNER AND
COMPUTER-MODELLING BY HENRY CHOW.

Created by Tate Britain for its 2001 exhibition of Stanley Spencer's art, this unique project offers a virtual tour through one of Spencer's most ambitious and sustaining ideas—his Church-House or 'Church of Me'. An easel painter who dreamed of fresco, Spencer longed to recreate the old, sacred relationship between art and architecture. Giotto's Arena Chapel at Padua was a lifelong touchstone, and even the pallid, in-filled paint on Spencer's late works seems an approximation of fresco technique. Series such as *Christ in the Wilderness* offer partial glimpses of Spencer's constant desire to expand and encompass—to extend his themes in time and space. In the Sandham Memorial Chapel at Burghclere, and in the vast series *Shipbuilding on the Clyde*, Spencer found subjects—war, labour—large enough to fire and discipline his own large and unruly talent.

Mentioned in Spencer's writings as early as the late 1910s and tirelessly revised in later years, the Church-House was the space within which Spencer hoped at last to marry sacred and profane in an enfolding painting—a walk-in vision of his 'sort of heaven'. 'The subject matter of the main pictures of the church is to consist of religious subjects namely Gospel stories, etc. taking place among secular subjects & in this I hope to show how near in spirit to each other these different emotions are.' Here all his loves (Hilda, Patricia, Stanley, God) could be gathered under one roof, on the sacred ground of Cookham. The saintly lovers of the *Beatitudes* would touch and swoon in twelve side chapels. Christ would see out his fast on the ceiling. One section (Cana) would celebrate the holiness of mundane acts such as the sewing on of a button. Another would unfurl a benign Spencerian version of the Last Day—one without sinners or suffering.

—JP



¹ MS. Harleian, British Library, quoted in John Ruskin, *Giotto and His Works in Padua*, p. 65.

² Quoted in Keith Bell, *Stanley Spencer: A Complete Catalogue of the Paintings*, 1992, p. 386.

³ Quoted in Kenneth Pople, *Stanley Spencer: A Biography*, 1991, p. 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Quoted in Bell, p. 362.

⁶ Quoted in Bell, p. 427.

⁷ Quoted in Jane Alison, *Stanley Spencer: The Apotheosis of Love*, 1991, p. 59.

⁸ Quoted in Timothy Hyman, *Stanley Spencer*, 2001, p. 180.

⁹ Quoted in Maurice Collis, *Stanley Spencer: A Biography*, 1962, p. 142.

¹⁰ Quoted in Bell, p. 461.

¹¹ Hyman, p. 32.

¹² Quoted in Adrian Glew, *Stanley Spencer: Letters and Writings*, 2001, p. 182.

¹³ Hyman, p. 138.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-29.

¹⁵ Collis, p. 227.

¹⁶ Quoted in Collis, p. 156.

¹⁷ Only one painting in the current exhibition (*He Departed into a Mountain to Pray*) dates from the Adelaide Rd period.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Quoted in Collis, p. 154.

²¹ Quoted in Pople, p. 399.

²² Kitty Hauser, *Stanley Spencer*, 2001, p. 36.

²³ Quoted in Duncan Robinson, *Stanley Spencer*, 1990, p. 84.

²⁴ Quoted in Alison, p. 64.

²⁵ Quoted in Robinson, p. 41.

²⁶ Bell, p. 300.

²⁷ Quoted in Royal Academy of Arts Catalogue *Stanley Spencer 1891-1959* (hereafter RA), 1980, p. 207.

²⁸ Robert Upstone, in Hyman, p. 79.

²⁹ RA, p. 196.

³⁰ David Fraser Jenkins, in Hyman, p. 219.

³¹ Quoted in Glew, p. 120.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³³ Shirley Cameron Wilson, in *The British Collection at Carrick Hill*, 1991, p. 44.

³⁴ Quoted in John Rothenstein, ed., *Stanley Spencer, the Man: Correspondence and Reminiscences*, 1979, p. 136.

³⁵ Bell, p. 496.

³⁶ Bell, p. 258. Charlotte Murray was a German psychiatrist, married to Graham Murray, at Port Glasgow. She fell in love with Spencer when she met him at an amateur music group that she and her husband attended.

³⁷ In discussion with Henry Trivick, his lithographer, Spencer also talked about Giotto's *The Kiss of Judas*, drawing his attention to the part where Christ is embraced by Judas—their noses close together, the four noses making a very important part of the composition. 'This painting was the result of Giotto's great belief in what he did; it was divine inspiration of a very great artist, it could not be achieved in any other way', was Spencer's comment. Quoted in Rothenstein, p. 113.

³⁸ Bell, p. 499.

³⁹ The print was originally issued in an edition of thirty. The current, unsigned print is one of a posthumous edition of seventy-five from the same plate. Thanks to Natasha Conland of Te Papa for clarifying these details. Apparently, while he was drawing on the plate, Spencer made a mistake, and had to turn it upside down and start again. The error can be seen quite clearly in each of the prints. Rothenstein, p. 114.

⁴⁰ In one of his Notebook writings (quoted in Glew, p. 20), Spencer described how he and his brother Gilbert used to pore over an out of date wallpaper book, murmuring in amazement at the different patterns. The juxtaposition of different patterns is a major part of many of his paintings.

⁴¹ Collis, p. 239.

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