



Stanley Spencer

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Introduction

Stanley Spencer (1891–1959) was an English painter born in the village of Cookham in Berkshire, UK. Spencer rose to prominence during the 1910s and is now recognized as one of the most important British painters of the twentieth century. He is known principally for religious subject paintings in modern dress set in and around his native Cookham, and a number of his most ambitious works were based on the general resurrection. He frequently couched his practice in his own idiosyncratic concepts and interpretations of Christianity using a modernist aesthetic, and conceived a never-realized church to house his complete body of works, with the Last Day the unifying subject of many of his 'visionary' paintings.

Life and work

Spencer was the eighth surviving child of Annie and William Spencer. From a young age he attended services at both the village's Methodist chapel and an Anglican church (Annie was a Wesleyan Methodist while William was the organist in the Anglican church). His sisters Florence and Annie largely took responsibility for his education, having set up a small school in the village, and provided a syllabus focused on reading the Bible, music, and nature. After demonstrating an aptitude for drawing, Spencer attended Maidenhead Technical Institute, going on to study at the Slade School of Fine Art in 1908; there he acquired the nickname 'Cookham' owing to his love of the village and his daily commute for classes. His artworks soon gained critical recognition; his painting *John Donne Arriving in Heaven* (1911) was included in Roger Fry's Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in 1912 alongside works by Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso among others. Spencer later recalled:

When I left the Slade and went back to Cookham I entered a kind of earthly paradise. Everything seemed fresh and to belong to the morning. My ideas were beginning to unfold in fine order when along comes the war and smashes everything ... Nothing was ever the same again. (Rothenstein 1956, 165.)

Spencer enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps in the Great War and was posted to Beaufort Hospital near Bristol in 1915. It was his first experience of being away from his family and Cookham for an extended length of time. He was subsequently posted to the Macedonian front in 1916, transferring to the infantry the following year. In April 1918 Spencer received an Official War Artist commission. He painted one major work, *Travoy's Arriving with Wounded at a Dressing-Station at Smol, Macedonia, September 1916* (1919), before resigning in early 1919, alleging that the task at hand failed to inspire him and that he should not be forced to do it (Carline 1978, 112).

In 1925, Spencer married the artist Hilda Carline (1889–1950), sister of his friend and fellow artist Richard Carline, and in 1927 they moved to Burghclere, Hampshire, where he commenced work on a scheme of nineteen paintings at the Oratory of All Souls (Sandham Memorial Chapel). In 1927 he also held his first solo exhibition in London, where he exhibited *Resurrection, Cookham* to critical acclaim. This work depicts bodily resurrection in the Berkshire village of Cookham, specifically in the Holy Trinity Church's graveyard. Spencer was elected as an associate of the Royal Academy on 3 December 1932, and the same year he moved back to Cookham with his two daughters and Hilda. There they established a friendship with the local aspiring artist Patricia Preece (1894–1966), who posed as a model for several paintings by Spencer and others by Hilda; however, Spencer soon became infatuated with Preece. Personal and professional difficulties overshadowed the rest of the decade. A greater emphasis on and exploration of sexuality and love in his paintings proved controversial. In 1935 the Hanging Committee of the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition rejected two of the five canvases submitted by Spencer. Outraged, he resigned from the Academy on 23 April 1935, publishing his correspondence with William Lamb, the Royal Academy's secretary, in *The Times*. Spencer's infatuation with Preece resulted in divorce from Hilda in 1937. Four days later, he married Preece; however, their marriage was an immediate failure. Preece remained in a relationship with another artist, Dorothy Hepworth, who attended the honeymoon in Spencer's place while he remained in Cookham finishing a commission. Spencer spent the night with Hilda and allegedly proposed a *ménage-à-trois*—with both Hilda and Preece as muses inspiring his art. Although Hilda rejected this proposition, she acknowledged that the visit 'seemed to wipe away all the last few years and to have put things right between Stanley and Me' (Thomas 1999, 40). Spencer and Preece's marriage was never consummated. He fell into financial hardship owing to his own financial mismanagement, his declining sales, his responsibility to Hilda and his two daughters, and his support of Preece (and Hepworth). He was evicted from his home in 1938, having signed it over to Preece, from whom he was now estranged. Hilda suffered a breakdown in June 1942 and was admitted to St Pancras Hospital before being moved to Banstead Mental Hospital for nine months. Spencer visited every Sunday afternoon, and he and Hilda exchanged letters written to each other during the week. She was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1947 and died on 1 November 1950. Spencer continued writing to Hilda even after her death.

In 1940 Spencer had received a second commission as a war artist and been tasked with painting the shipbuilders on the River Clyde. The result was the eight-painting series *Shipbuilding on the Clyde* (1940–46), which was designed for display like an altarpiece. While working on the commission, Spencer began a second related series reprising the theme of the general resurrection: *The Port Glasgow Resurrections* (1947–50). The success of both Port Glasgow schemes revitalized Spencer's career for the last ten years of his life. He was re-elected an associate of the Royal Academy on 17 January 1950 and, following a failed police prosecution for obscenity initiated by the outgoing president of the Royal Academy, Sir Alfred Munnings, made a full academician on 14 March 1950. Spencer was awarded a CBE in 1950 and knighted in 1958. He was diagnosed with cancer in 1958 and died in 1959.

Spencer's life and art largely revolved around Cookham. The elevated status that the village had in his imagination would lead him to describe it as belonging to heaven in the title of one painting (*A Village in Heaven*, 1937). In 1954 he formed part of a British cultural delegation to China, during which he waxed lyrical about the village to the Chinese and declared to Chinese leader Zhou Enlai, 'We ought to know China better. And the new China ought to know China better. I feel at home in China because I feel that Cookham is somewhere near' (Wright 2010, 68). Cookham was bound up with Spencer's religious feeling. His religious beliefs were largely informed by Wesleyan Methodism and Anglicanism. He did not, however, adhere to the organized institutions of Christianity, and rebuffed the attempts of his friends Desmond Chute and Eric Gill to proselytize him to the Roman Catholic Church. During the Great War, Chute had given Spencer a copy of St Augustine's *Confessions*. From this Spencer took the idea that even the smallest and most menial tasks are acts that glorify God. His paintings subsequently demonstrated an acute attentiveness to the minutiae and the mundane.

Apocalyptic and millenarian subjects

Spencer's engagement with apocalyptic and millenarian scripture and subjects manifested in his artwork via the two overlapping themes of the general resurrection and the Last Day. His first known work on the former subject was painted over with another work, *The Apple Gatherers*, in 1913, and he produced his most theologically conservative interpretation of the subject prior to enlisting in the Great War: *The Resurrection of the Good and the Bad* (1915). The diptych is tied to scriptural judgment; it depicts the dead rising from their graves, with near equal numbers of good and bad divided across the left and right panels respectively. It is inferred that they are about to receive divine judgment, as anticipated in Revelation 20:11-15. On returning home from his service with the infantry in the Salonika campaign during the Great War, Spencer received the news of his brother Sydney's death. He wrote, 'I had buried so many people and so many dead bodies that I felt that death could not be the end of everything' (Carline 1978, 66). With this increased understanding of life in respect to Christian promise, Spencer started painting the theme of the reconstituted body at the general resurrection in earnest in the years after the Great War. The resurrection and related events at the eschaton, such as the reunion of families, became the most prominent religious subject in Spencer's subsequent career; however, his images were almost entirely divorced from eschatological judgment. After *Resurrection, Cookham* the subject was next reprised in *Resurrection of the Soldiers* (1929), which depicted the general resurrection in the former battlefields of Macedonia, followed by *Parents Resurrecting* (1934). The location of the latter is again Cookham churchyard, with the subject focusing on the domestic reconciliations in the universal context of the general resurrection. Two gatherings of figures divided by a white spiked chain dominate the foreground; three youths in the realm of the living have stopped to watch the unfolding resurrection from one side of the fence. On the other side of the fence are four paternal figures in Victorian garb and three maternal women who have all resurrected (Johnstone 2007, 156). It is important to note that Spencer's idea of resurrection is not necessarily an end-time event, as is evident in the converging worlds of the living and the dead in *Parents Resurrecting*. The series *The Port Glasgow Resurrections* similarly converges both worlds and depicts the mourners alongside the risen dead. These images are almost mundane interpretations in comparison to the dramatic and vivid iconographic tradition, with 'no hints of harps for the blessed and tortures for the damned' (Wilenski 1951, 2). Instead, Spencer presents a very personal general resurrection that is appropriate for an artist who sought to love all things.

The subject of the Last Day developed concurrently with Spencer's nascent idea of a 'Church-House' (rather than gallery) in the 1930s. This building would combine traditionally sacred and domestic spaces, including toilets; he envisioned that his schemes of thought could be unified in specific rooms in the Church-House, with various chapels dedicated to his wives (Preece and Hilda Carline) and his lovers (Daphne Charlton, Elise Munday, and Charlotte Murray) all included, as well as three main sequences of religious subjects: *The Pentecost* (depicting saints and angels in Cookham, started 1933), *The Marriage at Cana* (started 1935), and *The Baptism of Christ* (started 1935). These were loosely collected under the title 'The Last Day', with the scheme centred on 'love in its boundless, eschatological future' (Hyman and Wright 2001, 31) and 'imagined as a public-love making, pivoted on Cookham War Memorial' (180). In Spencer's own words: 'The Last Day is in my treatment of it, a record of all that to me I love' (Leder 1976, 24). Spencer visualized the absolute finale of the divine plan: the dead resurrect and receive general judgment, after which the New Jerusalem will be established. His rejection of judgment revises the event as resurrection into paradise. Accordingly, his idea of the Last Day is anachronistic, with disparate events from history, scripture, and modern-day Cookham conflating and condensing time into a single atemporal location.

Spencer's biographer Maurice Collis (1962) identified that 'it was his belief that the golden age was just around the corner ... We could enter upon the millennium tomorrow if we put away hatred, fear, suspicion, cruelty, lust for power, pride and especially the feeling of otherness' (198). This idea was inextricable from Spencer's idiosyncratic Christian faith, which fundamentally informed his artwork throughout his mature career; he was not constrained by the Christian tradition, however. He had been introduced to faith traditions beyond Christianity through his friendship with the Carline family. These other traditions had a profound impact and elevated the status that love (in all its forms) took in his outlook; his developing philosophy was best articulated in an essay on 1 John 4:8 in the book *Sermons by Artists* (1934). Here Spencer (1934) identified that 'the Love of God includes all our instincts and desires' (47). Love equates to a heightened level of understanding; 'the intellect and imagination move continually towards the closer and more accurate identification of their objects. Love, even in its lowest or most secular form does the same thing in another manner' (48). Secular life, meanwhile, divorces 'one's feeling and emotions and desires' from God; it castigates these as 'mental disease or a disgusting obsession'. The guilt associated with these feelings hinders one's ability to appreciate them (49). Spencer offered a breakthrough, heralding beliefs and practices from outside his own Protestant heritage, and proposed that, 'when Roman Catholics, Mohammedans, or Buddhists, are indulging in whole orgies of experiences ... one is nearly blinded with the magnificence of the result' (50). The result was an unflinching exploration of love in all its forms.

Spencer's religious philosophy of love also had a precedent in metaphysical poets such as Richard Crashaw and, particularly, the poet and clergyman John Donne, who drew comparisons between sexual love and religious experience. Similarly, Spencer conceived love as the ultimate state of being through which we can apprehend our relation with God:

During the war, when I contemplated the horror of my life and the lives of those with me, I felt that the only way to end the ghastly experience would be if everyone suddenly decided to indulge in every degree and form of sexual love, carnal love, bestiality, anything you like to call it. (quoted in Robinson 1979, 53.)

Spencer's theological references, Donne and Augustine, both distinguished between two resurrections. In particular, Augustine differentiated between a spiritual and bodily resurrection. The former is the first resurrection that precedes the millennium upon earth, which refers to the spiritual awakened condition. They will be spared 'second death'—and only they will receive the final, bodily resurrection. Spencer accepted a similar distinction between bodily and spiritual resurrections while rejecting judgment. Meanwhile, *Spencer's Resurrection, Cookham* was profoundly shaped by Donne (Bell 1980, 92). Donne proposed that the particular resurrection is the rising of a soul after bodily death, while the general resurrection is when body and soul reunify in an overture to judgment. Spencer (2001) conceived the general resurrection as 'the final perfecting of all things', suggesting that everyone in *Resurrection, Cookham* 'is rising into a world which is just the kind of world he or she wanted' (126). Thus Spencer rejects the relationship between judgment and general resurrection. He recognizes spiritual resurrection as independent from mortality; it could therefore sequentially precede the Last Day. Thus, spiritual transcendence can be an earthly event achieved by awakening (through love) to the divine within all things. Spencer wrote with regard to *Resurrection, Cookham* that:

No one is in any hurry in this painting. Here and there things slowly move off but in the main they resurrect to such a state of joy that they are content ... to remain where they have resurrected. In this life we experience a kind of resurrection when we arrive at a state of awareness, a state of being in love, and at such times we like to do again what we have done many times in the past, because now we do it again in Heaven. (Carline 1978, 172.)

In the 1930s, Spencer was in pursuit of spiritual resurrection. His iconography shifted following the Burghclere scheme's completion in 1932; by 1934 a clear emphasis on love and spiritual resurrection had emerged. Spencer suggested, 'In this life we experience a kind of resurrection when we arrive at a state of awareness, a state of being in love' (Pople 1991, 227-28). He did not differentiate between universal and sexual love, suggesting that love in all its forms and religion both stimulated the same feelings within him. According to Spencer, artists have a unique capacity:

It is a kind of redemption that the artist really seeks: redemption from ugliness, meaningless ... Nothing is real until its physical & its spiritual revelations are both apparent ... The only thing in this world that has the power to reveal and make real this second and more wonderful realness is love ... It is like the Resurrection happening every moment of one's life. (Richard Carline, extracts from lectures by Stanley Spencer, c. 1920s, TGA 825.22, Tate Gallery Archive.)

In a letter to Chute, he alleged that 'what an artist does comes from the stem of Jesse' (Spencer 2011, 126). Yet Spencer also identified a theological purpose to his personal practice, suggesting that he was unique among artists and in possession of a profound status and message:

[I am] a new kind of Adam, and joy is the means by which I name things; that is, define my wishes through knowing as a part of God. (Gormley 1976, 23.)

It is unclear how serious Spencer was with some of his hyperbolic claims; elsewhere he identified with Moses, claiming that he saw burning bushes wherever he looked (Spencer 1934, 50).

Some of the more eccentric aspects of Spencer's personality and art have been brushed aside by writers and art historians. Spencer's reputation declined significantly following his death, in part owing to Maurice Collis's (1962) biography, which addressed sides of Spencer's personality and psychology that were deeply controversial within the mid-twentieth-century context. Kitty Hauser (2001) attributes the fluctuation in critical opinion

to the broader fortunes of figurative painting and narrative art. Until the 1970s, his wilful parochialism meant that writers could only accommodate him into an art history dominated by modernism, by aligning him with a lineage of visionary 'outsiders' in British art, notably William Blake. (9.)

The past four decades have seen a resurgence in his popularity. He now stands as one of the major British artists of the twentieth century, with his unflinching exploration of his own life and psychological dispositions foreshadowing later artists such as Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud. Rather than being at the peripheries, he is accepted as a vital figure in British figurative painting of the twentieth century. Yet his theology and his apocalyptic inclination have until recently remained at the very fringes of scholarly attention.

Spencer (1934) alleged that art had no special significance to him in itself; rather, art was 'the only thing that revealed Heaven' (51). Thus, he identifies prophetic purpose to his artwork, with resurrection—a concept underlying and unifying his practice—central to his theology; it gives meaning to the world, while his art communicates the significance found within all things. Spencer consciously intended to represent divine immanence, which he conceived through his theology of resurrection (Rapport 2016, 245). He had a missionary zeal and followed the archetype of the apocalyptic seer: he sought to paint and communicate this revelation of the divine message, while professing visions that unveiled knowledge about resurrection and divine presence (Bromwell 2019, 108). Indeed, he was so compelled to depict the resurrected state that when his attention returned to the subject, he jested that he was 'back to the bottle again' (Rothenstein 1956, 119). While Spencer's religion and artworks are highly subjective, they are universal in orientation. Through these religious paintings, Spencer proposes that all Creation will find harmony and union, and thereby arrive at a conception of apocatastasis: the teaching that all Creation—good and evil—will share the grace of salvation (Bromwell 2019, 108).

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