



# Stanley Spencer

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## Notes for Teachers

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with an additional contribution  
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# Introduction

## Why bring your Students to Stanley Spencer?

Stanley Spencer's work is relevant to all key stages for many commonly studied topics – some of them cross-curricular. Themes that pre-occupied the artist throughout his career and which are also favourites with examiners are: the Self (viewed through events remembered from childhood as well as in the scrutiny of the self-portrait); Landscape, encompassing a sense of place (who better than Stanley Spencer to elucidate what is meant by that phrase?); War; Religion and Sex, and Writing. They are considered in that order and for each topic suggestions are made for ideas that can be discussed in class.

But his subject matter is only one part of his art. His skills as a draughtsman, admired by his teacher Henry Tonks at the Slade, make him the best possible guide for students who are engaged in observational drawing or using sketchbooks. And yet Spencer was by no means a slave to realism. The wilder flights of his imagination can also be inspirational.

## The Exhibition

The exhibition comprises a hundred and fifteen works, both oils and works on paper. It is organised chronologically within six rooms, with a strong emphasis on work made in the 1930s. The sequence of rooms is:

- Room 1 *Innocence*
- Room 2 *War and its Aftermath*
- Room 3 *Forsaking the Vision*
- Room 4 *Those Couple Things*
- Room 5 *The Church of Me*
- Room 6 *A Wonderful Desecration*

## Using the pack

Ideas for student discussion are outlined at the bottom of each page.

What emotionally charged events can you remember from early childhood? What setting would you choose to paint in detail in order to convince the viewer that what he sees is real?

## The Self-Portraits

Look at the *Self-Portrait* 1914 in Room 1.

Consider the following things:

- *Self-Portrait* 1914 is a rite of passage work. Very often artists paint self-portraits to assess themselves at moments of crisis. Spencer is about to leave one kind of life for a very different one.
- Spencer finished it as he was about to enlist, and the amount of dark paint, the shadows as well as his fixed gaze, may suggest that he is confronting the possibility of death.
- The painting is twice life size. The head fills the canvas, demanding our attention, and his gaze holds ours insistently.

# The Private World of the Self

## Stanley Spencer's Childhood

Stanley Spencer was born on 30 June 1891, in a house built by his grandfather, in the Thames-side village of Cookham in Berkshire. He lived there with his eight brothers and sisters and his schooling was limited to that provided by his two sisters in the school they ran in the garden next door. In cultural terms, however, Spencer was very well educated in music and literature, particularly the Bible, which his father (the church organist and a music teacher) frequently read out loud to his children. Stanley's brother, Gilbert, said that music "had become as much a part of our lives as breathing."

This mixture of childhood influences, intensely confined to the home but wide ranging in reading and musical interests, invested the Spencer children with contradictory characteristics. This paradox was reflected by someone who met Stanley and Gilbert regularly in the twenties and vividly described them as a "perfectly gorgeous kind of hatless 'farmer boys' with red cheeks, blue eyes and thick long black hair...who suddenly come out with clever remarks about Bach."

## Spencer in Context

Because of his unusual upbringing, and eccentricities such as his professed love of dirt, Stanley Spencer can easily be turned into a caricature - a naive English visionary cut off from the concerns and behaviour of the outside world. For more than a decade after Spencer died and while abstract art was in fashion, it was very easy to dismiss him as a quaint reactionary who, fascinated by religion and sex, refused to acknowledge form and colour as the be all and end all of art. Now that post modernism has focussed attention on diversity in form and content, we should be able to review both the nature of Spencer's interests and the way he gave them visual form.

Curator Timothy Hyman points out that far from being a village innocent, Spencer was fully aware of contemporary trends in art. At the Slade School of Art, he was inspired not only by Giotto and the Italian Renaissance but by

**Now look at the last *Self-Portrait* 1959 in Room 6, painted by Spencer when he knew he was dying of cancer. He is looking at his outer appearance, seeking to come to terms with his inner self. Perhaps the more closely he records the outer self as ineradicable fact, the more he (and we) will approach an understanding of the inner man.**

- **Compare it with the earlier portrait, done at the outbreak of war. What differences are there; what similarities? In both cases Spencer is facing up to death, but there is a difference in his expression. How would you define it?**
- **Look at the way he paints his eyes, magnified by the lenses of his spectacles. Does this wide-eyed gaze imply fear? Do you think that Spencer, who so often painted the resurrection as literal fact, really believed in life after death when he was facing his own extinction?**

**Having left the exhibition, you will be able to compare these paintings with other artists' self-portraits in the Tate collection *Painters in Focus* display.**

the more recent art of Paul Gauguin. He attended lectures given by artist and critic, Roger Fry, in 1909 during which Fry explained the importance of 'significant form' in the work of Cézanne and other Post Impressionists. By 1914 William Roberts and David Bomberg, fellow students with Spencer at the Slade, were producing their own geometric version of significant form (see examples of their work in the *City Life* collection display.) William Roberts said that 'we knew all about Cubism' and in December 1919, Spencer's work was included in a mixed show with work by Picasso and Modigliani.

Nor was Spencer's knowledge of contemporary trends confined to art. In the 1920s he mixed with artists and intellectuals who met at the home of the Carlines in Hampstead. It was there that he met Hilda Carline, also a talented artist, whom he would marry in 1925 (see her self-portrait in the *Painters in Focus* display).

### Paradise

"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," Spencer wrote. It is easy to understand why. Even today, his childhood village by the Thames can conjure up the tranquil life of bygone rural England. The depth of his love for it endowed his painting with a childlike intensity. In *Apple Gatherers* 1912-13 and *The Nativity* 1912 in Room 1, he combines images from the Bible (paradise) with scenes of Cookham (his earthly paradise). His departure from Cookham, made necessary by World War I, was like an expulsion from the garden of Eden. Ever afterwards he would try to recapture those early feelings and to translate them as before into the very way he painted, but he never felt that he had quite succeeded. All Spencer's later work can be seen as an attempt either to recapture his childhood feelings or to come to terms with present day reality.

Even for Spencer, childhood happiness was not unalloyed. In *The Centurion's Servant* 1914 in Room 1, Spencer is probably remembering childhood illness - a memory which combines in the picture with the expression of mental anguish. Very real details of the room and its furnishings make the emotionally charged figures seem convincing.

## Suggested Follow-up Activity

If teachers are studying themes with their class such as **Self-Image, Life Events** or **Ourselves**, students could think of the following when painting their own self-portraits

- Try to express not only the way you look to others from the outside but the way you feel inside. Use warm/cold colours to create emotional warmth or chill.
- What kind of brushstroke would best suit the mood of the painting? Are strong outlines best used to contain and control form (as they do in Spencer's last self-portrait) or would it be better to use a softer, more painterly touch to create a lighter, happier atmosphere?
- Should a place or objects be included as background or is the close-up face to provide the whole subject?

## The Portraits of Spencer's Two Wives

In the self-portraits, Stanley Spencer considered his own face in the mirror and tried to read what he saw there. In Room 3 you can see how he painted his two wives; his first wife Hilda, the mother of his two daughters, and Patricia Preece, the woman with whom he later became infatuated. It was a strange relationship because, although Spencer eventually married Patricia, he never lived with her and he remained devoted to Hilda for the rest of his life. Patricia Preece was in fact an impoverished lesbian who encouraged Stanley's interest in her for material gain. In his eagerness to secure Patricia, Stanley made over his house in Cookham to her and agreed to a divorce from Hilda. He then found himself homeless and penniless since, once she had obtained what she wanted, Patricia Preece continued to live in a partnership with her friend, Dorothy Hepworth, from which Stanley was excluded.

Look at *Hilda, Unity and Dolls* 1937 in Room 3, painted after Spencer was divorced from Hilda. In the picture, Hilda turns to one side to avoid the painter's gaze but his seven year old daughter, whose name 'Unity' must have seemed ironic at that unhappy time, stares dispassionately at him. Her very human-looking eyeless dolls (did she poke out their eyes?) increase the atmosphere of pain in the picture, with its suggestion of cruelty.



**Hilda, Unity and Dolls** 1937  
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- **Compare the way in which Spencer paints his two wives.**  
Although they were probably very good likenesses, these are also paintings of feeling, creating a sense of the emotional climate that existed between painter and sitter.
- **How would you describe the differences between the women?**  
How do you think the artist feels about each of them?

### Sex and Being British

Now look at *Double Nude Portrait: The Artist and his Second Wife* circa 1937 (also known as 'The Leg of Mutton Nude') and *Self-Portrait with Patricia* 1936 in Room 3. **Please note: this may only be suitable for GCSE and A level groups.**

The American art historian, Robert Rosenblum, has drawn attention to the "fabled discretion and good manners of the British" and to the paradox whereby "British twentieth-century art, perhaps more than that of any other nation, has dealt in countless and candid ways with the widest variety of sexual experience," focussing on the *Double Nude Portrait* as well as to paintings of nudes by Gwen John and Lucian Freud. So candid was Spencer about what sex meant to him that in 1950 he was prosecuted for obscenity. As a result, he probably destroyed one of his works, and kept the *Double Nude Portrait*, wrapped up under his bed, until he died.

Although Patricia is shown naked and an object of desire in so many images, the double nude portraits are emblems of yearning rather than fulfilment. Stanley Spencer examines his wife's naked body with scientific detachment as if - as he said about another nude painting - his brush were an ant crawling painstakingly over each inch of her body. Such an analogy is not unique to Spencer. In the poem *La G ante*, the nineteenth century French poet, Charles Baudelaire, imagines himself as a cat exploring the mountainous forms of a woman's body. The metaphor is used by the poet to enhance erotic feeling whereas Spencer's ant is as detached as a scientist.

Look at the way Spencer uses inanimate things (the gas fire, the leg of mutton) to evoke the emotional atmosphere between two people. See how colours also play a part - the hot orange in the gas fire is the warmest element in the painting - while the flesh, instead of being shown as attractive, is associated with the purple tones of dead meat and the striped cloth on which the would-be lovers lie.

#### Self-Portrait with Patricia 1936

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## Fantasy

Compare this image of an unsatisfactory sexual relationship seen from outside, with some of Spencer's fantasy pictures painted from inside, in which the strength of his emotions is expressed by the distortion of the forms. Look at *Passion or Desire* 1938 in Room 4. Spencer did not subscribe to commonly held attitudes as to what can be considered beautiful or ugly. A good looking man himself, he could view himself here distorted by passion, as if by a fairground mirror which creates the impression that our flesh has no supporting skeleton. If its underlying skeleton gives structure and order to our bodies, to remove it and leave only flesh, would be like removing the reasoning powers of the brain. Only sensation would remain. It is this condition of the body overwhelmed by the senses that Spencer evokes.

After you have left the exhibition, go to the collection display called *The Nude* to see comparable works by Gwen John and Lucian Freud.

Compare the chilly atmosphere in Spencer's double nude portraits with that in Gwen John's *Nude Girl* 1909-10. Gwen John described her model as having a "pretty little face but she is dreadful." Having initially been attracted to her model, the artist ended by feeling repelled by her - and it shows in the painting. In *The Nude*, you will also find Lucian Freud's *Girl with a White Dog* 1950-1.

- **What is the emotional atmosphere between Lucien Freud and his painted wife? Like Spencer, Freud emphasises line to contribute to the tense atmosphere. Its sharp definition seems to put us on edge.**
- **Consider the way in which Spencer and Freud paint the bodies of their wives with the objective detachment of an observational drawing.**
- **What is different about the way that Gwen John applies paint?**

## Landscape – A Sense of Place

When he listened to his father reading from the Bible, Spencer always visualised the events as if they were taking place in Cookham. The figures in *Zacharias and Elizabeth* 1913-14, in Room 1, are clearly imagined but their setting in a recognisable Berkshire landscape anchors them in the real. When Spencer became a student at the Slade, he was taught to draw factually by his drawing master, Henry Tonks, who apparently regarded the imagination as a disease. This training left its permanent mark on the artist. His ability to paint realistically, which had been developed at the Slade, was vitally important because it could make his visions seem credible.



**Zacharias and Elizabeth** 1913-14

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- Compare imaginative works like *The Resurrection*, *Cookham* and *Christ carrying the Cross* 1920, with those in Room 3 like *The Jubilee Tree*, *Cookham* 1936 or *Gardens in the Pound*, *Cookham* 1936. Be honest! Which do you prefer; the visions or everyday reality?
- How does his dislike of Brighton show in the work?



### Reality or Vision

In *The Resurrection, Cookham* 1924-7 in Room 2, accurately observed natural detail such as the profusion of flower and the ivy on the tombs, gives credibility to the fantasy described by Gordon Bottomley as “frightened little people pushing up the grass lids of their graves.” It is like those dreams from which you awaken, amazed that what you experienced was not real, such was the accumulation of everyday factual detail contained within them. Naturalistic description as an end in itself, however, had little value in Spencer’s eyes. “Everything that is not vision is mainly vulgarity,” was how he put it. He grumbled when he was forced to paint landscapes to make money at the time in the 1930s when Patricia Preece’s demands had left him almost destitute: “I do my landscapes with a great deal of application and care, but they are dead, dead,” he said. And yet these ‘pot-boilers’ were not only popular in his lifetime but are exemplars of the kind of observational studies that teachers and exam boards still require today!

In the gallery displays, look for other artists who attached great significance to their birthplace, rejecting other places simply because they were not so meaningful to them. Look particularly at the work of John Constable who said “painting is with me but another word for feeling.” Compare the expression of that feeling in his native *Flatford Mill ('Scene on a Navigable River')* 1816-17 with his painting of *Chain Pier, Brighton* 1826, a town which he did not like, but where he had to go for the sake of his wife’s health.

**The Resurrection, Cookham** 1924-7 © Tate 2003



## World War 1

"My ideas were beginning to unfold in fine order, when along comes the war and smashes everything." The outbreak of war tore Spencer away from the enclosed world of his childhood in Cookham. He was first posted to Beaufort War Hospital in Bristol and then, in August 1916, he travelled to Macedonia where he served with Field Ambulances before joining the 7th battalion, the Royal Berkshires, a year later. The impact of this drastic change and his exposure to very different events from those he had known in Cookham, gradually affected the way he painted.

Look carefully at *Swan Upping at Cookham 1915-19*. This painting was done in two distinct parts, before and after the war; the upper part when he was inspired by the paradise in which he lived and the lower part after he felt the vision had forsaken him. Are you able to make out the difference in his way of painting the upper and lower parts of the picture?

After the war he recollected his Bristol experiences in paintings such as *Soldiers Washing* 1927, focussing on everyday activities which continue even in time of crisis. The artist's strong Christian faith, fostered during childhood by his father, remained with him through his wartime experiences. In painting *Travoy's arriving with Wounded at a Dressing Station at SMOL, Macedonia, September, 1916* 1919 he wrote:

"the figures on the stretchers (are) treated with the same veneration and awe as so many crucified Jesus Christs and not as conveying suffering but as conveying a happy atmosphere of peace. Also like Christs on the Cross they belong to another world from those tending them."

At the same time, he worried that this picture which curator, Timothy Hyman, finds 'cold, without lyricism' was not completely successful. By the early 1920s, Spencer had become aware that the war had had a major effect on his work. Before it, "The drawing or painting of the thing was the experiencing of Heaven." Afterwards "I knew that I was changing or losing grip or something... I was I feared forsaking the vision and I was filled with consternation."



**Swan Upping at Cookham 1915-19**

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## World War II

Look at one of a series of eight paintings which Spencer did for the Ministry of Information while working in Port Glasgow during the Second World War: *Shipbuilding on the Clyde: Burners* 1940. Using simplified rounded shapes, Spencer shows men crouched in the dark hold of a ship with little space to move. As in his World War I paintings of soldiers in the Bristol hospital, Spencer celebrates the sanctity of everyday work, when it is engaged in with loving care.

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## Religion

World War I is the subject matter of the Sandham Memorial Chapel at Burghclere, which you can see in a film in the exhibition. Spencer views theology from an entirely human point of view. *The Resurrection, Cookham* is in part a festive gathering in which he and his friends - all still young - are re-united, having pushed their way out of their graves. Did he, at this stage, believe in the literal truth of the New Testament promises? Now look at *The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus's Daughter* 1947 in Room 6. It seems like a well-produced play where the artist acknowledges in his heart of hearts, that it is make believe rather than hard and fast reality.



**Travovs arriving with Wounded at a Dressing Station at SMOL, Macedonia, September 1916** 1919 © Estate of Stanley Spencer 2003. All Rights Reserved, DACS

When you leave the exhibition go and see the *War* display. Compare Spencer's war works with *Totes Meer (Dead Sea)* 1940-1 by Paul Nash, a fellow student at the Slade with Spencer, whose later work he criticised. Unlike Spencer, Nash considered that war had made him as an artist. It had shown him how to use war-damaged nature as a metaphor for human suffering. In contrast to Spencer's focus on humans, Nash invests his emotions in inanimate objects - German planes shot down over Britain which, when he saw them in a dump in Cowley near Oxford, made him think of a motionless sea.

- Which of these war works helps you best imagine what the experience of war might be like?

## Connections between Sex and Religion

Despite the unhappiness caused by his second marriage, Spencer believed in the sanctity of sex. "During the war I felt the only way to end the ghastly experience would be if everyone suddenly decided to indulge in every degree or form of sexual love...These are the joyful inheritances of mankind." For Spencer, sexual and religious fervour were closely allied. He knew of the Indian temple-complex of Khajuraho in which many of the nine hundred sculpted figures are making love in ecstatic groups and couples. Spencer felt that "A man raises a woman's dress with the same passionate admiration and love for the woman as the priest raises the host on the altar." In *Love among the Nations* 1935 and *The Adoration of Old Men* 1937 in Room 5, Spencer shows that love is not selective. It affects people of all races, whether they are ugly or beautiful, young or old.

His work at this time can be compared with that of German Expressionists like Otto Dix. But whereas we may tend to view Dix's strange characters as quite different from ourselves, Spencer does not distance himself from those he paints. His figures belong to the same great human family as he does and are seen, deformed by passion, as he saw himself in *The Beatitudes*.

Spencer turned to his faith for help when in 1939, he felt that he could no longer continue with his sexual themes. At that point he painted the *Christ in the Wilderness* series - see *The Foxes have Holes*, *The Scorpion* 1939 in Room 5. Exiled from Cookham and living in a small London room, he could strongly identify with Christ's exile in the wilderness. He compared his own position "among two chairs, a bed, a fireplace and a table" with "the great adventure that Christ had all by himself with leaves, trees, mud and rabbits."

### **The Adoration of Old Men** 1937

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- What do you think about Spencer's attitude to religion? Do you think he succeeds in making his faith credible by painting it in everyday terms?
- After you have left the exhibition, look at paintings on a religious theme by JMW Turner, Millais and Cecil Collins in the *Visionary Art* and *Word and Image* displays. Which of these works involves you most?

## Painting and Writing

Many of the greatest English painters have also been writers - think of William Blake and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. A collection of Spencer's writings, assembled by Adrian Glew, is published to coincide with this exhibition. When Stanley visited his first wife Hilda in mental hospital following her breakdown in 1942, the exchange of letters became an important ritual between them. This exchange is celebrated in *Love Letters* 1950 in Room 6. It was painted in the year that Hilda died. Writing to her had become so important to Spencer that he continued to do so even after she had died!

### **Love Letters** 1950

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- How easily can you 'read' Spencer's paintings? Are there some where you feel that a written explanation would help?
- Are there any paintings which seem to speak to you directly, where the reading happens quite naturally through colour, forms and composition?
- In which paintings are you most struck by the contribution of non-literary elements, like colour and texture?

Some people consider that, whereas in his early work the very way he applies the paint expresses his feelings, in later paintings, the treatment of the subject, rather than the paint, became the medium for his message.

Think about the difference between expressing yourself in paint and in words.

- Which comes most readily to you? Do you find that sometimes, writing seems more appropriate and at others, painting?

# Conclusion

Stanley Spencer put everything into his art; the people and places that he loved, the spiritual and the carnal, as well as his philosophy of life - what he felt was important in religion and the redeeming potential of love. He managed to be intensely personal and yet to involve all of us as viewers in the emotions he portrayed. He remains an example to writers as well as to painters as to how individual and universal can be reconciled.

## A Painter's Point of View

As a young Art student I was introduced to Stanley Spencer through a mural on the canteen wall at Wimbledon School of Art. This picture was, at the time, attributed to him, although a few years later, whilst I was a student at the Royal College of Art, it was denounced as a pastiche. It has long gone, but the seeds of my enduring fascination with his mind and work were sown then.

What does the work of Stanley Spencer mean to me as a painter? It is difficult to know how to give a simple answer to this question. There is a spirituality about his pictures, including many that are not on overtly religious subjects, that I find immensely attractive. He viewed painting, as I do, as an essentially spiritual, almost mystical, activity and believed that the act of picture making, if done with enough concentration or 'absorption' feeds and ultimately fulfils the soul. This 'absorption' he wrote of as 'a legitimate and proper thing for a painter to aim at...'

Because Stanley Spencer painted from the soul rather than the intellect it is possible to *read* his pictures accordingly. By means of contemplation and 'allowing the picture to look at you' his images can be encouraged to play on the psyche. This enables an understanding of them through feeling, which is wholly different from acquiring knowledge about them. To stand in front of one of his pictures, in silence, and for long enough to empty the mind of all information about it, lets the composition, colours, spatial relationships, interplay of lines and patterns and all the other elements that make up the formal aspects of a painting move sharply into focus. When this happens the picture becomes, for me, like a visual reference book that can be consulted when help is needed in the resolution of a problem in my own work. For this reason I tend to look at different paintings at different times for different purposes although I return to the picture *Swan Upping at Cookham* again and again.

There is an intriguing line part way down *Swan Upping* which crosses the canvas from left to right. It is there for a combination of interrelated reasons all of which fascinate me.

- 1 The picture remained untouched for three years between its inception and resolution
- 2 Stanley Spencer had a very particular approach to composition
- 2 The atmosphere, over time, has an effect on oil paint

Let me try to explain. It is known that Stanley Spencer created the top section of this picture in 1915 before he joined the Royal Army Medical Corps in the First World War, and the lower section three years later on his return to his Cookham studio. Because, as other pictures and some written evidence confirm, we know that he composed by completing each pictorial element in turn as he systematically worked down the canvas, it can be assumed that the top area of *Swan Upping* was more or less finished when he stopped painting for the war. For three years the pigments must then have 'settled', thoroughly dried and (although this will not necessarily have been visible) 'sunk' into the canvas. This process of change that happens with all oil paint is slow but continuous so that pigments applied at a later date never 'catch up'. The difference in effect on a picture, between paint applied on occasions a long time apart, only becomes apparent when abutting rather than overpainting, as in *Swan Upping*, has been required. The intriguing line part way down this picture is the result.

As I wrestle with an image in a process of adjustment and readjustment of forms, colours and tones from every part of the canvas until they are related into a satisfactory whole, I love to break off and visit this picture by Stanley Spencer. I look at the 'line' for it enables me to some extent to empathise with a painter who produced extraordinary images in a manner that is technically, to me, a mystery.

Stanley Spencer wanted people to let his pictures look at them. Try it.

**Judith Drury, London, January 2001**

# Stanley Spencer



front cover

Stanley Spencer 1891-1959

**Self-Portrait** 1914

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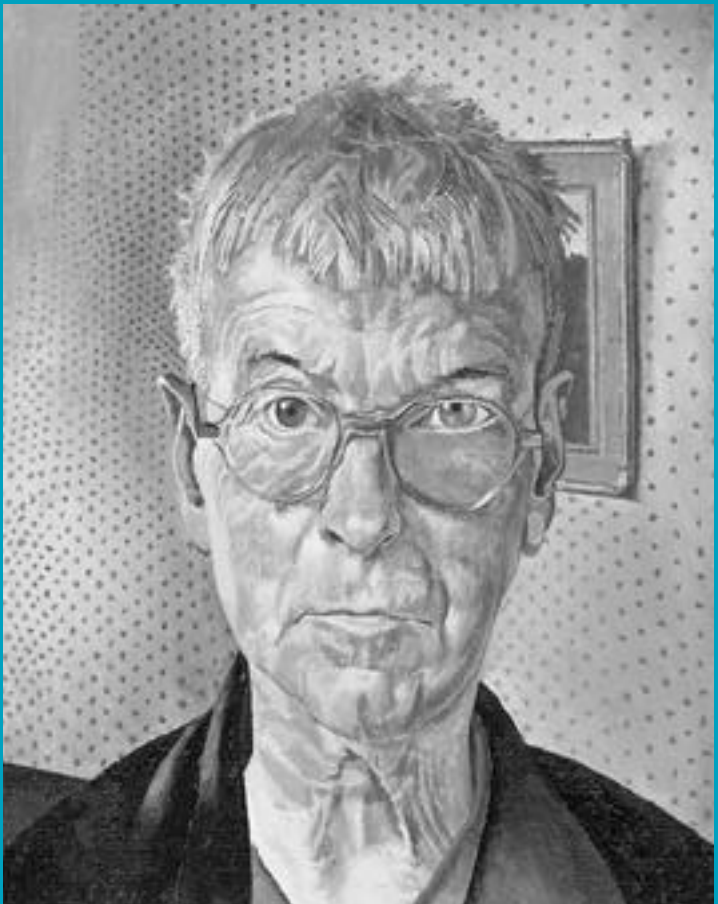
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Stanley Spencer 1891-1959

**Self-Portrait** 1959

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