

## Artwork of the Month February 2025

### Stanley Spencer, *The Deposition and Rolling Away of the Stone* (1956)

Oil on canvas, 110.3 x 57.2 cm, York Art Gallery, YORAG 1031,  
gifted 1963 by Eric Milner-White, Dean of York

[Click here to view the painting on Art UK](#)

*Lauren Marohn, this year's MA Bursary Holder, has a special interest in modern religious art. Here she writes about one of the Gallery's most striking images.*

Stanley Spencer (1891-1959), born and raised in Cookham, a small village in Berkshire, was a painter known for his eccentricity and explorations into the religious and the spiritual. Spencer had a unique childhood: he was one of eleven children, was taught at home instead of attending a local church school, and during this period never once left Cookham. Eventually he more or less left his hometown, and between 1908 and 1912 attended the Slade School of Art, commuting each day from Cookham to attend classes. He became a well-respected artist, winning various awards and befriending many fellow artists, including Paul Nash, Richard Carline, C. R. W. Nevinson, and Desmond Chute. From 1912, he began to paint daily scenes of his hometown, and also became infatuated with painting biblical stories. In 1914, at the outbreak of the World War, he was forced to halt his career in the arts. He enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1915, and left Cookham officially for the first time, having been stationed at Beaufort War Hospital, in the suburbs of Bristol. A year later he was sent to Macedonia, and in 1917 went to the front line.

Following the war, in 1923, Spencer was commissioned by John Louis and Mary Behrend to paint the interior walls of Sandham Memorial Chapel in commemoration of Mary's brother, Henry Willoughby Sandham, who served in Macedonia and died from malaria after World War I. The Chapel houses a collection of Spencer's best-known and most prominent works. The works in the Chapel are unique in that they represent not necessarily the broad horrors and actions of war, but rather the day-to-day life that Spencer experienced at Beaufort and in Macedonia. He combines the mundane lives of soldiers with religious allegory, famously painting *The Resurrection of the Soldiers*. The Chapel proved an early

example of Spencer's interest in religious scenes situated in the everyday, showing that his treatment of such subjects is far from conventional.

This attraction to the religious precariously situates Spencer within the modern age of painting, since he pursued spiritual subjects in a time of increasing secularism during the crossover from the Victorian to the modern era. This period was influenced by 'new industrial wealth, scientific erosion of religious belief and idealism for social and aesthetic betterment,' when traditional styles of artmaking were starting to be questioned by artists and consumers alike.<sup>1</sup> Spencer explored religious themes, something that led him to synthesize conflicting modernist and religious subjects and ideas in his paintings, while ignoring the traditional timeline of art history. The duality of such subject matter in his compositions corresponds to Spencer's rather eccentric claim that there existed two versions of himself, versions which existed simultaneously. One was his 'real' life, and the other was his creative life. His real life was his 'down-to-earth' or secular life, and his creative life was what he called his 'up-in-heaven' life. These ideas of Spencer's existence can be understood as 'physical' and 'metaphysical,' the latter being for Spencer the metaphorical in terms of biblical iconography.

Before focusing on specific details of our painting, I will first explore some important themes and ideas that are continuously present in Spencer's works throughout his career. Spencer was interested in what he conceived as complete integration and proper expression, meaning the 'reconciliation of the local circumstances of everyday life with a sense of heaven which pulls the local into something much greater than itself but which also uses the local as a window on heaven.'<sup>2</sup> This fusion of the heavenly and the earthly is present in many of his works, such as *The Last Supper* (1920), *The Resurrection*, *Cookham* (1924-27), *Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta* (1952-59), and not least in this work, *The Deposition and the Rolling Away of the Stone*. Additionally, Spencer's immense interest in Christian iconography and themes coincided with his devotion to his hometown of Cookham. He maintained in his writings (which have been increasingly documented and published in recent years) that 'In a way all the things that happened at Cookham happened in the Bible.'<sup>3</sup> The combination and intersection of the local and the heavenly for Spencer goes hand-in-hand in his understanding of what it means to be human and to embrace oneself. He believed that being human meant standing in opposition to secular division, instead accepting and absorbing the self in the presence of others, the singular in the plural, the outside in. His works reflect these beliefs, in that Spencer, in most of his works that

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Pople, 'Modernism,' in *The Art and Vision of Stanley Spencer*. <https://www.stanleyspencer.co.uk>

<sup>2</sup> Keith Tester, 'The Enchantment of Stanley Spencer,' *New Blackfriars* 91, no. 1034 (2010), 370-85: 376.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Pople, *Stanley Spencer: A Biography* (Collins, 1991), 77.

depict religious or biblical stories, paints humans as social beings in relation to one another, something that we see in *The Deposition and the Rolling Away of the Stone*.

From a formal point of view, an element of Spencer's work that has attracted increasing attention is the way in which Spencer distorts and shapes the human figures in his paintings. The figures in many of his portraits and depictions of social life are grotesque and carnivalesque, twisting in contorted ways, defying proportional logic, and changing concepts of perspective. This figural distortion for Spencer is a way, as many scholars have argued recently, of reinventing his own Christianity and conception of Biblical stories, connecting his appropriation of sacred texts with the changing character of modern painting. This distortion is also representative of his love for those Italian 'primitive' painters who influenced him, such as Giotto, whom, alongside Botticelli and Piero della Francesca, Spencer viewed as his contemporaries.

Spencer created this painting after nearly 40 years as a professional artist. He had survived two world wars, and dealt with various personal difficulties in his marriages and relationships, all the while remaining steadfast in his spiritual and religious beliefs. This painting is a reflection of his long painterly career, and represents a unique point in his spiritual life and the era of modern painting. His obsession with religious narratives and themes is also placed in direct conversation with the past. The colours in his religious paintings often reflect the palettes of Flemish art. His works are reminiscent, for example, of Pieter Breughel the Elder's paintings, with their interest in the social relationship of the figures in a contemporary, local setting. Besides Flemish traditions, the most common comparisons from scholars and Spencer himself are between him and Italian Renaissance painters. For example, Spencer used Giotto's Arena Chapel in Padua as inspiration for the Sandham Memorial Chapel. He admired the way early Italian painters continuously situated stories in sacred texts in their own local cities, villages, and mountains, forming 'proper expression' through the inseparable combination of method and meaning; Spencer even went so far as to criticize Michelangelo's paintings in contrast. In our painting Spencer not only depicts the biblical story of the Deposition but also brings in inspiration from Italian altar pieces by incorporating a predella, the lower panel of an altarpiece, which literally means 'altar-step' or 'platform'. He follows the traditional composition of an altarpiece: the upper portion focuses on a scene with large figures, while the predella exhibits small-scale narratives.

Spencer's Renaissance-inspired painting in the manner of an altarpiece exhibits many of the aspects, ideals, and themes I have previously discussed, from the combination of the local and universal, secular and religious, to the distortion of bodies. I will look first at the upper

portion, which, as I have said, shows the main narrative, the Deposition of Christ. At its centre, Christ is on the cross, surrounded by a number of people: three holy men beginning the process of removing nails from his body, the Virgin Mary shrouded in a blue mantel decorated with white stars, and St John the Evangelist, semi-concealed, standing behind Mary and lifting her up. The scene is crowded, with bodies squashed together and distorted to fit within the frame. The dominating colour in the painting is one of flesh, emphasized by the near-naked bodies of Christ and his followers, with the only exception being a bright blue starred garment worn by Mary and various red loin-clothes on the men in the painting. Accompanying this upper portion is the previously mentioned predella. Here the small-scale scene is of the rolling away of the stone from Christ's tomb. We see two angels pulling back the stone to reveal a recumbent Christ. Surrounding the tomb are circular, rolled-up individuals – often interpreted as either disciples curled up in their grief or sleeping soldiers.

In his depiction of a Deposition scene and incorporation of the figures of Christ, Mary, St. John, and the holy men, Spencer mingles the religious and the everyday, by making Cookham the setting of the work as well as a representation of heaven on earth. This is a painterly tradition that many artists from the Italian and Northern Renaissance called upon when depicting scenes from the Bible, making the religious and holy something accessible and attainable in everyday life by placing such stories in their hometowns. In creating Cookham as a biblical setting, Spencer not only sets himself apart from his contemporaries in his overtly religious subject, but he also positions himself within the rich tradition of situating the heavenly in local spaces. The combination of Cookham and the Bible in this painting is a method for Spencer to combine his two lives, his 'down-to-earth' life and his 'up-in-heaven' life. This is part of what Spencer describes as complete integration and, more broadly and importantly, 'proper expression' within his paintings. In around 1939-40, Spencer wrote in a notebook entry: '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.'<sup>4</sup>

In addition to this situating of the religious in the local, Spencer's composition is divided into two, evoking a Renaissance altarpiece with a predella panel. It is in the predella panel that Spencer makes his clearest and most demonstrable references to Cookham. While it is assumed by the long tradition of Spencer's situating biblical stories and Cookham together, supported by his writings on his dedication to such an incorporation, that these scenes are set in Cookham, there is further historical proof that this predella scene is modelled after day-to-day life in

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley Spencer, *Letters and Writings*, ed. Adrian Glew (Tate, 2001), 33.

Cookham. In the 1950s, Spencer witnessed the laying of the main drainage pipe along Cookham High Street. Here in the predella, Spencer has made Christ's tomb, which is traditionally shown as a limestone cave, into a futuristic-looking tomb echoing the cylindrical shapes of the newly laid Cookham drainage pipes.

When we examine the top portion of the painting, we see that Spencer has continued his practice of citation of past representations of this scene in combination with artistic innovations in his treatment of the body. An example of this is that, at the centre, Christ stands upright with his eyes open. The Deposition of Christ, or the Descent from the Cross, is an event that occurs after the crucifixion and death of Christ, making Spencer's decision to portray Christ as almost alive a unique choice for a scene that typically shows Christ at his weakest, folded over as he is removed from the cross. We see also another sense of 'aliveness' in the lack of wounds or blood. In reference to those whom he considered his contemporaries (the painters of the Italian Renaissance), this aliveness of Christ is completely unique to Spencer, whereas previous artists had purposefully painted the red blood of Christ. Spencer here makes the viewer question whether or not we are seeing Christ as really dead or rather as an embodiment of mystical aliveness. Christ's body is once again a focal point in the bottom portion. As the angels roll away the stone from his tomb, traditionally artists would depict the tomb as empty. However here the two angels reveal that the tomb of Christ is occupied by a now bearded Christ. His body has changed since his death, showing once again the mystical aliveness of the crucified Christ which Spencer also depicts in the upper portion.

Spencer's experimentation with biblical scenes is also seen in the combination of allusions present in the painting. St. John the Evangelist is historically shown in Deposition scenes as the person supporting a fainting Mary. Here he is doing just that once again, with John concealed behind Mary. John's presence can also be interpreted as Spencer inserting himself in this scene, with some scholars arguing that this is a self-portrait of Spencer as John, one of the closest followers of Christ. It has also been argued that the crucified Christ in this painting is also a portrait of Spencer, showing him unifying his ordinary life and his religious experience in this painting.

In formal terms and thematically *The Deposition and Rolling Away of the Stone* is a prime example of the type of work done by Spencer throughout his life and career. He references the past in composition and subject matter, while simultaneously approaching such themes in a distinctly modern way. He calls upon his hometown of Cookham with the memories and stories it holds, infusing it with his overt spirituality that consumed both his professional painting life and his personal life. Spencer

successfully if precariously situates himself between the past and present, blending the aesthetics, themes, and religious values of different periods into one painting. He brought the heavenly down to earth, combining his physical and metaphysical lives in a way that reflects his statement in the 1930s: 'I observe the most sacred quality in the most unexpected places.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Stanley Spencer, *Letters and Writings*, 164.