

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Sir Stanley SPENCER (Cookham 1891 - Cliveden 1959)

Houses at Cookham

Pen and black ink.

252 x 355 mm. (9 7/8 x 14 in.)

As the art critic David Sylvester noted, on the occasion of an Arts Council exhibition of Stanley Spencer's drawings in 1954-1955, *'In most painters' houses you will find hanging, or at least stacked away somewhere, a few favourites among their own canvases which they have withheld from sale. The only paintings of his own in Stanley Spencer's house are barely or not yet dry. On the other hand, the place is swarming with his drawings. There are stacks of them in every room – from highly elaborate and finished portraits and compositions to the sketchiest notes on scraps of paper – covering nearly fifty years' activity and numbering many thousands. Of this great hoard, only a tiny proportion has ever been publicly exhibited or reproduced, for all that the number of first-rate examples of his work which it includes far exceeds that of those drawings which have found their way into the hands of collectors and museums. Spencer's unwillingness to part with his drawings – either via the dealer or via the dustbin – suggests the immense personal importance they have for him.'*

Datable to c.1907-1909, this refined early pen drawing by Spencer depicts his home village of Cookham in Berkshire. The artist favoured the medium of pen and black ink, applied with a precise hatched technique, in many of his earliest drawings, several of which are set in and around his beloved Cookham, situated on the banks of the Thames some thirty miles west of London. As Andrew Causey has written, *'Stanley Spencer did not start out by wanting to become an artist, but by wanting to communicate something about his native village, Cookham. Later on he recalled how when he was young he had spent a lot of time drawing in different parts of the village, at first with no particular sense of purpose or even satisfaction. 'The moment I realized there might be a next step was when one day I was drawing old Sarah Sandall's cottage from her garden. I felt there was something there that was very much my business...'* Such was the artist's lasting devotion to Cookham, where he lived for most of his life, that he once referred to it as *'a village in Heaven'*.

In a list of his early works compiled by Spencer sometime around 1945 in an unpublished notebook, now in the Tate Gallery Archives, a total of thirty pen and ink landscape drawings are recorded for the years between 1905 and 1909. Among stylistically comparable drawings of this early date are

an Interior of a *Barn with a Sack of Potatoes* in a private collection, and *Liza's Cottage, Cookham*, drawn on a page from Spencer's first sketchbook, as well as *Roy*, a study of a young boy in the Holy Trinity church in Cookham, which is today in the collection of the Stanley Spencer Gallery there. Over the next few years the artist continued to apply this technique of fine crosshatched pen and ink lines in other youthful studies, notably for a handful of self-portrait drawings executed between 1912 and 1914.

Spencer was to return often to the subject of the houses and cottages at Cookham in his later landscape paintings, typified by such canvases as *Cookham Moor*, painted in 1937, in the collection of the Manchester Art Gallery, or the lost painting *Cookham Moor Posts* of the previous year, as well as *Cookham Rise* of 1938 in the Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum. As one scholar has pointed out, 'Later in his career Spencer made a point of dismissing his landscapes as 'pot-boilers.' Yet that fact belies the sense of place which is fundamental to his art...his early visions were inseparable from Cookham and its hinterland.' Another writer has observed that '*The topography of Cookham was indelibly imprinted on the artist's imagination. Through childhood walks and visits in the village, and through stories and gossip, Spencer had an intimate knowledge of its features and its inhabitants... The Cookham he carried with him in his head was a map where every spot had particular associations, atmospheres, moods and meanings deriving partly from events and meetings that happened in those places, but also from an indelible aura that suffused them...Such as the identification of Spencer with his home village, that we have known as 'Cookham' by his fellow-students at the Slade. Cookham was more than simply the place Spencer came from, and it was far more than the 'backdrop' of his most famous paintings...Spencer saw Cookham as a whole as a place with a unique flavour, the mystical source of his inspiration, and the yardstick of every other place he ever visited.'*

Artist description:

As a child, Stanley Spencer was a poor academic student but a gifted draughtsman, and from the age of around fourteen began making pen and ink drawings, often of fairy tale subjects. Following a year of artistic instruction at the Maidenhead Technical College, three miles from his native village of Cookham, he gained acceptance to the Slade School of Fine Art in London in 1908, at the age of seventeen. Taught by Henry Tonks, he studied at the Slade between 1908 and 1912, alongside such young artists as David Bomberg, Dora Carrington, Mark Gertler, Paul Nash, C. R. W. Nevinson and Edward Wadsworth. His drawings were much admired at the Slade; as Tonks later wrote to the Spencer family, 'In some ways he has shown signs of having the most original mind of anyone we have had at the Slade and he combines this with great powers of draughtsmanship.' A painting and two drawings by Spencer were included in the British section of Roger Fry's Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in London in 1912, alongside works by Vanessa Bell, Eric Gill, Duncan Grant, Wyndham Lewis and Fry himself.

At the beginning of the First World War, Spencer enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps and in 1916 was posted to a field ambulance unit in Macedonia, later transferring to an infantry unit. His involvement in the Great War had a lasting impact on him and inspired many of his later work, in particular the extensive decoration of the Sandham Memorial Chapel in Burghclere in Hampshire, composed of sixteen oil paintings and created in honour of the 'forgotten dead', which is considered one of his finest achievements. In 1925 Spencer married Hilda Carline, a fellow artist herself, and the couple settled in Hampstead in London. Two years later, in 1927, Spencer's first solo exhibition took place at the Goupil Gallery in London. The centrepiece of the show was one of the artist's largest oil paintings, *The Resurrection, Cookham*, painted between 1924 and 1927 and now in the Tate. The monumental canvas was much admired by critics, with the Times correspondent describing the work as 'the most important picture painted by any English artist in the present century...It is as if a Pre-Raphaelite had shaken hands with a Cubist.' In the early 1930s Spencer moved back to Cookham, and in 1932 became an Associate Member of the Royal Academy and showed several works at the Venice Biennale. He began an affair with the aspiring artist Patricia Preece, who also became a model for many of his works, which ultimately led to his divorce from Hilda. Spencer married Preece in 1937, but the marriage soon fell apart. Her demands, alongside his familial responsibility and his inability to manage his finances, meant

that Spencer was often short of money. His agent and dealer Dudley Tooth advised him to produce 'anything that would sell', and as a result, many landscapes and portraits were produced during this period of the artist's life.

During the Second World War Spencer was engaged by the War Artists' Advisory Committee to paint an extensive series of large works collectively entitled Shipbuilding on the Clyde, painted at the Lithgows Shipyard in Port Glasgow and eventually completed in 1946. Having earlier been made CBE, Spencer was knighted in 1958, the year before his death from cancer. Today, his works are held in numerous museum collections, including the Imperial War Museum, the National Portrait Gallery and the Tate in London, as well as the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and many other institutions, notably the Stanley Spencer Gallery in Cookham.