

The Wall Street Journal  
January 24-25, 2015

Masterpiece

Paintings in the Sandham Memorial Chapel (1927-32) by  
Stanley Spencer

War's Pain Redeemed Through Art

*Stanley Spencer's paintings in the Sandham Memorial Chapel fuse religious faith  
with secular reality*



Long an admirer of Giotto's fresco cycle in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Stanley Spencer had hoped to do something similar.

Photo: National Trust Images/A C Cooper

by Richard Cork

**Looking** at the modest facade of the Sandham Memorial Chapel, nobody would guess that the interior contains one of the most ambitious and impressive artworks ever painted in Britain. But enter this compact building and Stanley Spencer's paintings of World War I invade our eyes on every side. The austere interior is filled with images of vulnerable young men, either struggling to cope with their wounds at a military hospital or embroiled in the mortal dangers of active service on the Macedonian front. Spencer based these paintings on his own daunting experiences, first as a medical orderly and then with the Royal Berkshire Regiment. But that did not prevent him from giving these works the intensity of a compelling imaginative vision. Culminating in the vast and lofty "Resurrection of the Soldiers," covering the entire end wall, Spencer's paintings are filled with heartfelt insights into the prolonged trauma of conflict.

He was fortunate to find the patrons who commissioned him to create, over a demanding five-year period, such an elaborate summation of the war. Spencer had been working, with obsessive energy and concentration, on drawings of war—compositions placed in what he described as "a whole architectural scheme." Long an admirer of Giotto's 14th-century Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, he hoped to execute his own paintings for a similar building. To Spencer's astonishment and delight, John Louis and Mary Behrend, whom he had met by chance in 1923, decided to fund his chapel. It would be built in Burghclere, the village deep in the Berkshire countryside where the Behrends lived, and named for Mary's brother, Lt. Henry Sandham, who had died in 1919 from an illness contracted during the Macedonian campaign. When Spencer heard about the Behrends' generosity, he exclaimed: "What ho, Giotto!"

But Spencer—who had been trained at the Slade School of Art in London as part of an outstanding student generation that included David Bomberg, Paul Nash, C.R.W. Nevinson and Ben Nicholson—admired Gauguin as much as Giotto, and he soon arrived at a style of his own where deep religious faith became fused with the secular reality of daily life.

Spencer had witnessed suffering and carnage on a gruesome scale, and he was driven by a profoundly redemptive need when planning and executing his Memorial Chapel. The building, designed by Lionel Pearson with almshouses attached for poor people to inhabit, was dedicated in 1927. Spencer worked on the paintings until 1932, living mainly in Burghclere with his wife and family.

The paintings we encounter at eye level are the smallest, and they run like predella panels in an altarpiece down both the side walls. But their subjects are far from overtly biblical. Inspired mainly by the Beaufort War Hospital, a converted lunatic asylum, they start by emphasizing its dark, depressing drabness. Spencer called it "a vile place," and the first small painting shows a shellshocked soldier throwing himself down to scrub the grubby floor with manic determination. Colors become more cheerful in "Sorting the Laundry," where the men's vigorous manipulation of billowing bed-linen, blankets and spotted handkerchiefs is presided over by a kindly nurse. Yet gloom returns in "Filling Tea Urns," an activity carried out by patients who all seem

preoccupied with loneliness. And we recoil from “Frostbite,” where orderlies like Spencer himself try to scrape the feet of bedridden patients.

But Spencer had no desire to focus solely on the most grueling aspects of the life he had experienced. “Tea in the Hospital Ward” is a celebration of irresistible bread and jam. Piled in thick slices on a table, this delicious food was supplied with a generosity reflecting the matron’s desire to indulge Spencer’s own appetite. Even when he painted “Bedmaking,” based on a hospital ward in Salonika where Spencer was treated for malaria, he affectionately enlivened the scene with photographs on the wall of, among others, his father and wife.

The eight round-arched paintings above the predella concentrate mainly on Macedonia. But they begin, on the left, with a beefy warder at the Beaufort Hospital opening the gates to admit a convoy of wounded soldiers. These bandaged figures all look desperately young, and Spencer stresses their devotion to helping one another. This brotherly compassion strengthens in “Ablutions,” dominated by a careful orderly who paints a naked soldier’s body with iodine. The tenderness is movingly conveyed, and on the opposite wall soldiers gather water from a Macedonian mountain while their cloaks float in the air like angels’ wings.

All the same, Spencer never exaggerates the religious significance of these scenes. Time and again he concentrates on practical tasks like burning the grass to give the army camp a protective fire-barrier. He believed that spiritual resonance could be discovered in daily existence, and “Reveille” shows tired soldiers striving to get dressed under lifesaving mosquito nets. Their comrades lean into the tent like messengers, eager to announce that the war is over. And in a related painting on the opposite wall, “Dug-out (or Stand-to),” weary soldiers on the Salonikan front-line emerge from their trenches with a sense of wonder. Surrounded by weaponry and barbed wire, they cannot believe that the carnage has finally come to an end. The desolation of the scene contrasts tellingly with this sudden sense of hope, which Spencer described as the “marvellous moment” when “we found that somehow everything was peace and war was no more.” But he made sure that some of the soldiers also seem to be gazing at the chapel’s nearby east wall, where he painted a colossal image of a military resurrection.

Behind a small and simple stone altar, Spencer painted young men looking dazed when they find themselves rising up from the earth. White crosses, which once stood in orderly and poignant ranks at a cemetery, are now being pulled up and heaped in profusion. Yet in the foreground they also frame the resurrected soldiers, who stare at one another and shake hands with awe. On the left, they reach out and clasp their comrades’ bare arms, astonished to discover warm flesh again. Above them, a uniformed soldier struggles to remove barbed wire from his face, while in the center horses share the miraculous renewal enjoyed by human beings. A boyish cavalryman sits next to a couple of pale-skinned stallions, stretching his arm to comfort them with a gesture of reassurance.

Spencer emphasizes the stirring of life wherever we look. The soldier above the horses may be stretched out on the ground, but he is contemplating the significance of a crucifix placed beneath his body. Behind him, the white-robed figure of Christ himself stands in the middle-distance, receiving crosses from reinvigorated men who kneel, reach out and press themselves upon him. This feeling of tactile engagement runs through the entire cycle of paintings, made by an artist

who knew, all too well, how savage and merciless modern combat could be. Despite everything he had witnessed in the hellholes of war, Spencer was defiant enough to make this chapel reaffirm the undying power of love.

—Mr. Cork’s latest book, “The Healing Presence of Art,” was published in 2012.

Copyright©2015 The Wall Street Journal