

Spencer Down Under

In August I was flown (courtesy of Singapore Airlines) to Adelaide, South Australia, as keynote speaker at a study day held in connection with Carrick Hill's *Stanley Spencer: A Twentieth Century British Master*, the largest Spencer exhibition ever held in Australia. The historic house, art collection and garden at Carrick Hill were gifted to the people of South Australia by Sir Edward and Lady Hayward and the exhibition celebrates the 30th anniversary of its opening by the Queen in March 1986. The only previous show in Australia devoted to Spencer was held at the Adelaide Festival of Arts in 1966. On that occasion the Stanley Spencer Gallery lent *The Last Supper*. For this show, the 'SSG' is a Cultural Partner of Carrick Hill.

Bill and Ursula Hayward amassed what was then the best private art collection in Australia which, until the 1960s, included 14 works by Spencer. They were regular purchasers from Spencer's dealer Dudley Tooth, but also visited the artist in Cookham. At their first meeting they encountered him near his house, wheeling his painting equipment in a pram. As Ursula recalled, it looked eccentric, but was very practical when you came to think of it. Since in 1948 a French painting showing pubic hair had been banned from exhibition in Brisbane, it was thought politic for the artist Nora Heysen to smuggle Spencer's *Beatitudes of Love: Seeing* through customs into Australia, concealed in a roll of her flower paintings. The picture was described by well-known Australian artist, Jeffrey Smart (with whom my father used to paint) as 'wildly indecent' and later destroyed in a fire in the UK.

Richard Heathcote, Director of Carrick Hill, gave a well-received talk at the Stanley Spencer Gallery in May. He is the driving force behind the exhibition, together with its excellent accompanying book and film. Within about three hours of my arrival in Adelaide, I was interviewed by ABC television, followed by a radio broadcast.

The exhibition assembles a stunning collection of works by Spencer. Tantalising for any visitor from Cookham, is *Christ Evicting the Money Changers*, the horizontal central panel in the triptych of 1921, for which the left and right wings are the SSG's *St Veronica Unmasking Christ* and *Christ Overturning the Money Changers' Table*. Two of the pictures from the Carrick Hill collection are views from windows in Spencer's house, Lindworth. I knew the paintings well from photographs, but to see the originals, which are amongst the finest of his Cookham scenes, was a particular thrill. *From the Artist's Window, Cookham* 1938 shows a view over roofs of red tiles or grey slate to the High Street, and the shop front of Mr Francis's bakery. In the upper left-hand corner, less likely to be seen in photographs, is the tower of Holy Trinity church. To the right is a more distant view towards Hedsor, where Spencer's father was organist. But it was when I came to examine the painting in detail, that I discerned part of another building that was such a formative influence on the artist, the former Wesleyan Methodist chapel, now the Stanley Spencer Gallery. Amongst a closely-packed series of buildings on the right, one can see a section of its west wall (with a lancet window) and the long roof towards Sutton Road. An even closer link between Carrick Hill and the SSG than I think any of us had envisaged.

I received much hospitality from Carrick Hill and from curators in galleries such as the Art Gallery of South Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria and the Heide Museum of Modern Art, where they showed me pictures and drawings behind the scenes, and took me to Melbourne's ground-breaking *Degas* show. It was also another opportunity to see Australian art, including works in national collections by various members of my family. I re-visited the studio of a cousin, who sculpted a portrait head of me as a child the last time I was in Australia. I remember being wary of her tame magpie, which pursued me around her courtyard. Clearly it knew it had the upper hand so far as I was concerned. Rediscovering my roots and my 'rellies' - I was actually born in Melbourne - was a heady experience. The Danish brothers who sailed to Australia during the Gold Rush took to brewing Australia's first lager beer, whereas my great-grandfather from Hertfordshire, after an unfortunate contretemps with gamekeepers, when caught poaching pheasants on Christmas Eve, was transported to Australia for fifteen years.

Carrick Hill, with its excellent garden (and café!), is set in nearly 100 acres in the foothills of Adelaide. Should you be going to Australia, a visit to the Spencer show, which is on until 4 December, is highly recommended.

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