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BROTHERS AT ARMS

Long overshadowed by his famous brother, Stanley, the work of Gilbert Spencer is the focus of a new book and exhibition, including his wartime evacuation to the Lake District with the rest of the Royal College of Art. Artist and curator Deborah Walsh reports

When students returned to the Royal College of Art (RCA) in September 1940, they found it closed, its windows blown out, and a note on the door stating that it would reopen 'in the near future, somewhere in the country'. Staff were adamant that it must continue despite National Service having significantly reduced student numbers, and the loss of tutors, including Paul and John Nash, Eric Ravilious and Edward Bawden to employment as official war artists.

Above Gilbert Spencer (1892-1979) *Protective Covering*, 1941, image courtesy of Liss Llewellyn Gallery

Three months later some 150 students and staff pitched up in the Cumbrian village of Ambleside to reopen the school. One of them was their professor of painting, Gilbert Spencer (1892-1979), 13 months the junior of his more famous brother, Stanley.

A new exhibition this summer at Abbot Hall in Kendal celebrates Gilbert's six-decade career, for the most part of which he was viewed as one of the leading artists of his "golden" generation, and every bit on a par with his more illustrious sibling.

The good news for art collectors is artwork by the junior Spencer presents an enticing prospect. When Stanley's *The Crucifixion* broke the £1m barrier at auction in 1990 (later selling for £1.75m in 2011), Gilbert's record was just £5,000. Stanley's record is now more than £6m, with Gilbert's just £37,500 for a 1932 painting, *Man at a Sluice Gate on the Thames*, on show at the exhibition.

Glittering set

The rural Lake District village was a far cry from Spencer's inter-war years. After a spell with his brother at the Slade School of Art (where the school's professor, Henry Tonks, described Stanley as "the most original mind of anyone we have had here") Gilbert went on to teach at the Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford.

Here he mixed with a glittering set of artists, writers, and poets including TS Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Siegfried



Above left Sir Stanley Spencer (1891-1959) *The Crucifixion*, sold for £1.75m in 2012, beating its guide price of £1m-1.5m, image courtesy of Christie's

Sassoon to whom he was introduced by the hostess and patron of the arts, Lady Ottoline Morrell, who helped Spencer to settle in the nearby village of Garsington.

When war broke out in 1939 Spencer was aged 48 and a senior RCA tutor commuting into London three days a week. At the time he and his wife, Ursula, were living with their young daughter, Gillian, in a 17th-century cottage in Upper Basildon. Life in the idyllic Berkshire countryside, which inspired so many of his landscapes, came to an abrupt end with the school's relocation to the Lakes.

Initially students were billeted to the village's two hotels: the Queen's Hotel and The Salutation Hotel where

Above right Gilbert Spencer (1892-1979) *Shoeing 'Orses*, 1941, pencil, pen, ink and watercolour on paper, image courtesy of Liss Llewellyn

Below Gilbert Spencer (1892-1979) *Trench Digging*, 1941, image courtesy of Liss Llewellyn



“The college would be based in Ambleside for the next five years and the clash of cultures is easy to imagine, with reports in the local newspaper describing the students “as being somewhat strangely garbed” with young men “sporting wild and woolly beards”



Home Guard

Encouraged by a patriotic talk at the college by an Air Raid Precautions Officer from Liverpool, Spencer along with a number of others joined the local Local Defence Volunteers (LDV), later dubbed the Home Guard. The citizen militia was for those men who were too young or too old to join the regular armed services (regular military service was restricted to those aged 18 to 41) and those in reserved occupations.

The war-time government had expected 150,000 men to volunteer but by the end of the war around 1.5 million recruits had signed up.

Launched without any staff, funds, or premises and initially poorly equipped with only shotguns and air rifles with knives or bayonets welded on the end, the LDV practised their own versions of military drill.

Gas works

In Ambleside the Dads' Army was charged with defending the key positions in the area, including the water works and the gas works.

Spencer had previously joined the LDV at his home in Upper Basildon, Berkshire, and soon found himself, as he wrote: “patrolling the village reviving memories of my smartness and efficiency in the First War”.

Of his activities with the Grasmere Home Guard, he wrote: “No words can describe my own pride at being able to crawl a hundred yards without my behind showing above the skyline. I stormed the heights of Nabscar, helped restore the defences of Windermere when knocked down by the sheep, relived my moonlight walks in London patrolling the fells above the lakes below, and found myself shying live hand grenades at the side of Loughrigg.”

they were to remain for the next five years. The clash of cultures between the artistic southerners and bluff northerners is easy to imagine, with reports in the local newspaper describing the students ‘as being somewhat strangely garbed’, with young men “sporting wild and woolly beards”.

Under Principal Percy Jowett, Spencer was joined by teachers Percy Horton, Charles Mahoney and Francis



Helps. Fred Brill was one of the painting students. The school of engraving was run by Malcolm Osborne, assisted by Robert Austin, with Richard Garbe running the school of sculpture, assisted by Herbert Palliser.

Making the best

If living arrangements were sometimes difficult, working conditions were even more challenging, with materials in short supply, freezing studios in a variety of converted buildings, and poor lighting.

Etching and engraving were taught in The Salutation, with painting on the second floor of the Queen's Hotel. A particular hazard here was the resident mouse population, which ate paintings containing powdered egg. The Salutation was also used for architectural studies as well as lettering and calligraphy, although it was often so cold students worked in overcoats and woollen mittens, making it almost impossible to handle compasses, T-squares and calligraphy pens. A sculpture school was set up in a large unheated garage,

While the difficulties were great, the achievements of the Ambleside years were also notable, emerging from the proximity of the various schools, breaking down barriers and encouraging a cross pollination of ideas and practices. Many of the students who emerged from these years went on to become highly successful professional artists and designers or influential teachers. Their legacy continues in art schools throughout the country.

Hard times

Spencer and his family arrived later than the rest of the school necessitating a brief stay in the Queen's Hotel over Christmas 1940. It was a miserable period, and he complained bitterly about the conditions which saw some 60 students sleeping "three to five to a room with no fire in bedrooms. No means of drying clothes if they get wet. No matron." The Spencer family was confined to bed with temperatures, with Gilbert required to bring their food from The Salutation or cook on the fire in their room.

The situation didn't last. While students made the best of the local hotels, the Spencers were soon invited to stay at Ladywood, the Grasmere home of the academic and Wordsworth scholar Professor Ernest de Selincourt, with views over the south end of Grasmere lake, to Loughrigg and the great crags of Wetherlam beyond.

Above Gilbert Spencer (1892-1979) *Trees at Garsington*, mid 1920s, image courtesy of Liss Llewellyn, Abbot Hall

Below right Gilbert Spencer (1892-1979) *Girl in Yellow* (probably Theodosia Townshend), 1920, image courtesy of Liss Llewellyn, Abbot Hall

Alien surroundings

Despite the pleasant surroundings, Gilbert was not keen on his new lifestyle, early on writing: "We had three very happy weeks here although I don't feel a bit at home in this lake district and the place is full of awful people."

A year later he is no more reconciled to the new surroundings, writing: "We are all hating being up here with one accord and I am coming back to England for a month on Aug 20th".

The Lake District clearly felt very alien to him; the landscape was too hard and the country people less tractable than he was used to.

However, by January 1943 he writes with a more positive note: "We are getting through the winter excellently although there is little to do but paint, go for walks and sleep". He later concedes that, "Slowly I disciplined myself to take an interest in the life and lovely surroundings of Ladywood. I never came to terms with the mountains and treated them as sky, but in this I managed to paint Redbank from the balcony and other landscapes from and around the garden."

War record

It may be that much of Spencer's disenchantment during the Ambleside years arose from a sense of futility. As he writes in his autobiography, at the same time he was creating a makeshift art school in Ambleside, not far away Liverpool was in flames.

It may have caused him to reflect on his own war record in WWI when both he and his brother, Stanley, had served in the Royal Army Medical Corps, initially at the Beaufort War Hospital in Bristol before being drafted to the Macedonian front, serving in Salonika and later transferred to serve on hospital ships in the Mediterranean, and then to North Africa for the duration of the war.

While in Ambleside the Imperial War Museum





commissioned a number of pieces from Gilbert. The first, commissioned in 1941, was of *Troops in the Countryside*, followed by a portrait of John German. He also produced a series of 12 comic drawings of the life and times of the Home Guard. These drawings, produced between 1940-1943, are satirical but affectionate accounts by one who joined the LDV at its outset and represented it as a living experience much in the tradition of the 18th- and early 19th-century caricaturists.

After the war

Following his time in forced exile Gilbert's peacetime career resumed. Between 1948 and 1950, he was appointed head of department at the Glasgow School of Art and in 1950 was elected an associate of the Royal Academy. The year that he was made a Royal Academician. In 1959, both his wife and his brother Stanley died.

Retrospective exhibitions of Gilbert's work took place in 1964 at Reading and 1974 at The Fine Art Society in London. In 1970, at the age of 78, he moved to a farm cottage in Walsham-le-Willows in Suffolk where he spent the remainder of his life. Today his work is in several public collections including the Tate, Victoria and Albert Museum, Imperial War Museum and Manchester City Galleries.

Deborah Walsh is an archaeologist, curator and writer living and working in Ambleside. Gilbert Spencer, in association with the gallery Liss Llewellyn, is on at Abbot Hall, Kendal, Cumbria, LA9 5AL until June 29. For more details go to www.lakelandarts.org.uk

'Gilbert also produced a series of 12 comic drawings of the life and times of the Home Guard. These drawings, produced between 1940-1943, are satirical but affectionate accounts and represented as a living experience much in the tradition of 18th-century caricaturists'

Above Gilbert Spencer (1892-1979) *Ploughed Land Garsington, 1923*, image courtesy of Liss Llewellyn, Abbot Hall

Below right RCA student Gordon Ransom's mural of Ambleside Rushbearing which can still be seen today in Ambleside's St Mary's church, image public domain

Bottom right Gilbert Spencer (1892-1979) *Cookham Barns, 1925*, image courtesy of Liss Llewellyn Gallery, Abbot Hall

SOCIAL LIFE

Acceptance of the RCA as part of Ambleside village life evolved gradually, with theatrical performances by artists helping to win over the inhabitants. When the play *Ladies in Retirement*, a thriller based on a real murder that took place in the village in the 1880s, was staged by the student's theatre group it was a roaring success.

In fact, the college's annual exhibition of 1941 attracted 1,000 visitors, far more than at its pre-war London showings; the number doubled in 1942.

Mural paintings appeared in a number of local buildings, including one in St Mary's church in Ambleside by Gordon Ransom depicting the Ambleside Rushbearing which used local children as models.

Inevitably the students spent much time in the local hostelries. The White Lion, across the road from The Queen's Hotel was much favoured after Sunday dinner. In the summer the students walked, cycled and bathed in the lakes. By the time peace had come to western Europe and the students of the RCA were preparing for their return to London they had become an accepted and welcome part of village life. They had brought colour to the grey Ambleside streets, painted their way into Lakeland folklore and would be remembered with a wry smile, for many years to come.





Q&A

We asked art specialist Paul Gough, the author of a new book on Gilbert Spencer, for his insights into the artist and his relationship with his more famous sibling



Q What is most compelling about the work of Gilbert Spencer?

A I admire his sheer range and variety of output as a painter, illustrator, writer and academic.

The quiet, poetic realism of his landscapes, and the lyrical and idyllic sensibility of his mid-period (1950s in particular), underpinned his natural empathy for those who worked the land.

Gilbert's renditions of farm machinery, carts, and wagons displayed a real understanding of the structures of agriculture, its intrinsic architecture, but not in a mournful or nostalgic way – he was too robust a painter to become teary-eyed.

He was realistic about the arduous business of rural labour, and strongly empathised with the steadiness and skill of the agricultural worker. No other English landscape painter could paint chickens, hens, and cockerels so brilliantly – poultry in motion.

However, it was not all wistful pastoralism, he was also an astute portraitist.

Q Describe the relationship between the siblings Stanley and Gilbert.

A They were at times the dearest of friends (“chief companions”) but at times also rivals in art and in love; they were both pursuing Hilda Carline in the early 1920s. Despite Gilbert's early advantage, Stan relentlessly courted Hilda, delivering the knockout line: “It's no good: she prefers me”.

Following the rebuff, Gilbert enmeshed himself in the artistic circle of firstly Carline's Hampstead and later Garsington Manor.

He fathered an illegitimate son, Peter (much to the astonishment of the sexually naive and inexperienced Stanley) who was to make many shadowy appearances

in his paintings and drawings.

There is a danger to think that Stanley always eclipsed Gilbert but that was not the case, nor how they saw it.

In the 1920s, critics and reviewers regarded them as very distinctive painters and rarely wrote them up as “the Spencer brothers”, just as Paul and John Nash were invariably reviewed as a collective but regarded as individual talents.

In the 1930s, when Stanley's domestic travails aroused public criticism (Hilda divorced him after he fell in love with, and later married, Patricia Preece, an openly gay woman who refused to leave a same-sex relationship to be with him), Gilbert was considered the “gentle, placid painter of well observed landscapes”, unlike his “eccentric and difficult brother”.

Q How broad were his skills and how did they change over time?

A Gilbert was remarkably versatile as a landscapist, portrait painter, muralist and inventor of complex – often enigmatic – figure compositions.

In 1920, at the invitation of Henry Lamb, he visited Dorset and seemed to find his vocation, working long hours *en plein air*, exposed to the shifting light and graceful topography of the county.

At this point, Stan also recognised the skills of his younger brother, with Lamb warning him “Watch out, the young 'un is catching up on you.”

Stan rushed back to Cookham in 1920 to realise his visions; Gilbert never went back.

Q Did Gilbert choose to make a career teaching?

A Gilbert emerged as his own man and painter in the 1920s and 1930s, rarely reviewed alongside Stanley, but regarded as an emerging force in landscape and portrait painting, which was recognised by his appointment in the mid-1930s as professor of painting at the RCA.

Like many professional painters at the time, he

Above left Gilbert Spencer (1892-1979) *Japp's Farm*, sold for £8,750 in 2012, image courtesy of Bonhams

Above right Gilbert Spencer (1892-1979) *Trees at Garsington* signed (lower right), oil on canvas, estimated at £3,000-£5,000 sold for £5,800 in 2018, image courtesy of Mallams

Right Gilbert Spencer (1892-1979) *Garsington Roofs*, sold for £22,500 in 2014, image courtesy of Bonhams



regarded teaching as a means of sustaining a living, meeting other artists, and nourishing the academy. Some of his students went on to become the next generation of academicians. Although to be truthful, my book reveals he was a somewhat reluctant teacher as it held him back from his painterly passions, including his mural work of the 1930s.

Q How does his wartime experience compare with that of Stanley?

A Stanley was commissioned by Kenneth Clark's War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC) while Gilbert joined the Home Guard putting his escapades at the heart of his paintings, exhibiting great strength as complicated figure compositions.

The largest of these, *Grasmere Home Guard* (also known as *The Home Guard*) is now in the Imperial War Museum and he was also commissioned to make drawings of notable individuals.

When his war work was toured during the conflict it received very favourable notices.

On balance, both painters saw the war as an interruption in the evolution of their art, even though it resulted in some memorable pieces.

Q What tips would you give collectors hoping to start a collection of Gilbert's work?

A Gilbert's prices are still relatively modest, added to which he maintained a formidable work rate.

I am working on a complete catalogue of Gilbert's oil paintings (for online release this summer) and have some 430 listed so far.

This suggests he completed one oil painting every fortnight during his most productive periods.

Gilbert also produced hundreds of drawings, many of which are available at reasonable prices.

His oils are gaining in value and will continue to do so with the publication of my biography (the first publication since the Fine Art Society exhibition catalogue in 1974).

When the catalogue is completed and the shadow of Stanley (a perceived rather than an actual one) is lifted, Gilbert's work will be ready for fuller



Above Gilbert Spencer (1892-1979) *The Man at Sluice Gate on the Thames, 1932*, image courtesy of Liss Llewellyn, Abbot Hall

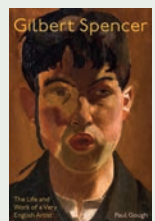
Left One of a group of 11 Christmas cards, dated from the '30s to '60s, including two etchings signed by Gilbert Spencer and photolithographs in various sizes. Expected to make £150-£200, it sold for £470 this February, image courtesy of Cheffins

assessment and appraisal.

I expect Gilbert's paintings from the 1920s, including his period at Garsington, will gain in value. Works from this period, like *Garsington Roofs* (left), which sold in 2014 for £22,500, have a quality of light, assured painterly manner and adept touch that marks the artist out as unique.

Recent portrait drawings at auction are fetching between £100-200; prints are occasionally available as are his rather charming, limited-edition Christmas cards, produced from the 1930s.

Professor Paul Gough is a painter, writer and broadcaster and a regular speaker on the Spencer family. He is also Vice Chancellor of Arts University Bournemouth. His new book Gilbert Spencer: The Life and Work of a Very English Artist is published by Yale University Press priced £30.



'Gilbert was realistic about the arduous business of rural labour. No other English landscape painter could paint chickens, hens, and cockerels so brilliantly – poultry in motion'