

# conversations on *Christ in the wilderness*

## Collection Policy

The Art Gallery of Western Australia has been collecting English paintings for nearly a century. However it was not until the 1960s and 70s that the backbone of the current Collection was established. During these two decades the acquisition of many excellent examples of 20th century British painting has made it possible to trace the development from post-impressionism in England to the major trends of the mid-20th century.

The Art Gallery decided to acquire key works by particular artists to demonstrate the depth and breadth of their art. In 1983, an important acquisition was made by purchasing the entire collection of British artist, Stanley Spencer's *Christ in the wilderness* paintings, together with the sixteen drawings. The assistant director of the Art Gallery at that time, Anthony Bond stated, 'This series of paintings represents a magic moment in the artist's career when he became a recluse and made a real effort to reconstruct his life' (The Australian, 30/6/83)

Stanley Spencer was a passionate man with a philosophy of life that he yearned to communicate through his art work. Spencer's personal identification with religious personalities and their locations within contemporary village life caused many to dismiss him as a crank or an eccentric. It is, however, his unique and personal vision of Christ in this series which makes these works so powerful.



*Christ in the wilderness: the hen*

This painting illustrates Matthew 23:37

'...how often would I have gathered my children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings...'

## Stanley Spencer (1891-1959)

A significant and eccentric British artist whose altering circumstances and condition are reflected in his artworks. His strong sense of place during his early years in Cookham and the sense of disorientation during World War II are both demonstrated in his very personal vision of *Christ in the wilderness* series. These works, which were painted between 1939 and 1954, may appear deceptively simple but on closer observation, they reveal a classical order where shapes and colours achieve a harmony. Spencer's communication of his religious beliefs often overrode the accuracy of his highly personal depiction of Christ.

This series was painted between 1939 and 1954 during a difficult time of personal conflict in the artist's life. In great penury, he sealed himself in a bare room in London to create his proposed forty square panels depicting each day that Christ spent in the wilderness. The original idea was that each work would be displayed in turn during Lent. Spencer completed just eighteen sketches, the Art Gallery acquired sixteen of them. Only eight paintings were completed, all of which are on display.

Spencer previsualised his works before he started creating them. These were often quickly executed as he knew what the final product would look like. The drawings were gridded up and transferred onto canvas. His level of concentration was so great that he could begin on the top left hand corner, finish each part without alteration until he reached the bottom right hand corner. This method of working is clearly illustrated in *Unfinished painting* of 1954 where the grid contrasts with the painted sections. It is because of this certainty of vision that Spencer was able to make his composition so powerful and dynamic. It was necessary for him to feel emotionally charged and deeply moved by what he created otherwise he was unsatisfied.

The series of *Christ in the wilderness* celebrates the unity of all living things with the material world and with God. It also demonstrates a revival in figurative painting and a return to the importance of content.

Art changes the way we see the world

Produced by the Art Gallery of Western Australia with the aim of making art more accessible for visitors

# conversation points

## **Consider the lilies** 1939

*'And why take ye thought of raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not neither do they spin; And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.'*  
Matthew 6:28-29

The bulky form of Christ which fills the canvas, is centrally placed amongst wildflowers, which are found in Cookham, Spencer's home town.



## **Rising from sleep in the morning** 1940

*'I will arise and go to my Father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before thee.'* Luke 15:18

In this work Christ appears like a flower opening, offering itself for pollination in the light of the new day. The circular composition of the figure is continued in the rocky lining of the pit in which Christ kneels.

## **The foxes have holes** 1939

*'And Jesus saith unto him, the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.'*  
Matthew 8:20

The strong structure of the work is demonstrated by the composition in which the triangle formed by the foxes is interlocked with the triangle of the figure which opposes it. Christ is seen living in complete harmony with nature.



## **Driven by the spirit into the wilderness** 1942

*'And immediately the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness.'* Mark 1:12

In 1916, Spencer served with the Field Ambulances in Macedonia. This experience had a profound effect on the artist, the memories of war infiltrated his spirit - the massive figure strides through a bleak and desolate land with the promise of resurrection in the figure of Christ.

## **He departed into a mountain to pray** 1939

*'And when he had sent them away he departed into a mountain to pray.'*  
Mark 6:46

Look at the simple but monumental composition where the enlarged arms and hands encourage the focus on the praying figure which fills the picture plane, pushing out the edges. Notice the similarity of the treatment of the robes and the altar which adds to the unity of the composition.



## **The eagles** 1943

*'For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.'*  
Matthew 24:28

There is a definite bitter note in *The Eagles* where Christ looks away while the scavenging birds peck at the carcasses. In the background a broken branch completes the pessimistic atmosphere. It also reflects the artist's over-riding acceptance and respect for all natural life.

## **The scorpion** 1939

*'Behold, I give unto you the power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you.'* Luke 10:19

The undulating surface of the figure relates to the hills seen behind, Christ is made one with the geology. Spencer marvelled at the empathy between such dangerous creatures as the scorpion and the power of love.



## **Unfinished painting** 1954

The unfinished work differs little from the others in terms of its style. It has a slightly smoother rendition of form which becomes, perhaps a little mechanical. It demonstrates that Spencer visualised the finished result and followed his drawing square by square from one corner of the canvas outwards.

The Scripture verses are taken from the King James version of the Bible