ART AND OCCUPATION

Sir Stanley Spencer, Shipbuilding on the Clyde: Burners 1940

Laid out in *bas relief* on hexagonal plates of steel are four cloth-capped burners. Three wear protective goggles and gloves, their cutting torches aflame, gas cylinders, connecting hoses and metal off-cuts scattered all around them. Rough trousers, coarse shirts and heavy boots embellish the dramatic *flagrante* pose of these pious ‘oxyacetylene angels’ [1]. In contrast, the diminutive fourth worker ‘legs akimbo’ is plonked indecorously on his bum. Temporarily and symbolically blinded by the light, having discarded his goggles, he shields his eyes with his cap. His casual country tweed jacket and waistcoat clash with the organized hectic industrial surroundings; his myopic confusion and wonder accentuate this miscasting; and his mop of dark black hair confirms the artist Stanley Spencer, as a ‘fallen angel’, whose complicated domestic life has left him broke, homeless and desperate for work. For the princely sum of £300 he’s been tempted to come down amongst the workers of Glasgow’s Lithgow Shipyards by the War Artists Advisory Committee (WAAC) to capture the soul of Britain’s shipbuilding industry. It’s 1940. The war is going badly and the country urgently needs propaganda and a flotilla of ‘Y’ class merchant ships for the North Atlantic convoys [2].

This oil on canvas painting, inspired by Pisano’s 14th century *bas relief* hexagons on Florence’s Duomo Campanile, is the central upright of a triptych with two elongated rectangular side panels. It was the first of eight such panels (some measuring 6 m in length): Burners, Riveters, Riggers, Plumbers, Welders, Furnaces, Bending the Keel Plate and The Template [1], which were to be displayed as a Renaissance fresco altarpiece [3]. *Burners* was completed in August 1940 at Spencer’s bedroom studio above The White Hart Inn, a Gloucestershire village.
Spencer took a further 6 years to complete the series at his studios in Gloucestershire, Epsom and finally Cookham. Over this period he visited the shipyard numerous times, ‘chaperoned’ by John Dodds, a foreman welder. He made many preparatory sketches, often on rolls of Bronco© toilet paper [2], which enabled him to capture in forensic detail the workplace’s dynamic complexities, tumbling perspectives and devoted workforce. He used the thinnest of pigments so that the paint dried quickly to reproduce a fresco finish [3], his simple realism and visionary sense of religious dignity encapsulating the mediaeval concept of work as sacred (laborare est orare). His idyllic workplace shows no conflict, grease or sweat, few managers and no machinery or women; yet the images are full of craft, community and character [6]; and Spencer pictures himself literally, metaphorically and perhaps metaphysically at its heart. Spencer was born in Cookham, Berkshire in 1891, the eighth surviving child of music teacher William and his wife Annie. After informal schooling at home with his multi-talented family he attended Maidenhead Technical Institute (1907) and then Slade School of Fine Art, London (1908), where he won several prizes. He joined the RAMC at the outbreak of WWI, was posted to Macedonia with 68th Field Ambulance but transferred to the infantry and was invalided out with malaria. He joined the RAMC at the outbreak of WWI, was posted to Macedonia with 68th Field Ambulance but transferred to the infantry and was invalided out with malaria. He was appointed an official war artist and painted Travoys with Wounded Soldiers (1919) and the magnificent murals at Sandham Memorial Chapel Burghclere (1927–32 [5]).

This pint-sized, saintly but often troubled artist frequently suffered bouts of fear, loneliness and frustration [7]. Art became his redemption and redemption became a recurring theme in his work, for example, Cookham Resurrection (1924), The Port Glasgow Resurrections: Reunion (1945) and the unfinished Christ Preaching at the Cookham Regatta (1952–59 [5]). In December 1958, he was diagnosed with bowel cancer, underwent a colostomy at the Canadian War Memorial Hospital, Cliveden and after returned to Cookham (February 1959). He was knighted in July and later stayed with friends in Dewsbury, Yorkshire where he painted his last self-portrait. He went back to Cookham but was soon re-admitted to the Canadian Hospital where he died the next month (December 1959). He was cremated at Reading and his ashes buried in Holy Trinity churchyard, Cookham [5].

Commercial acetylene is commonly generated by slowly adding calcium carbide (manufactured from coke and lime in an electric arc furnace) to water in a closed reaction vessel, then dissolved in acetone and transported in steel cylinders. It is still the most commonly used gas for cutting torches [8] but its instability makes its production, storage and usage a messy and potentially dangerous business [9]. Spencer’s Burners wins no prizes for health and safety but Shipbuilding on the Clyde is considered to be one of the greatest painting cycles of British art [3]. Now fully restored and reframed for the Imperial War Museum it can be enjoyed in its entirety as an everlasting hymn to Port Glasgow, its people and its industry [3].

References