

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND THE ART OF EL GRECO AND STANLEY SPENCER

- WHAT WOULD JAMES, STACE, OTTO, GREELEY AND SWINBURNE SAY?

Rudolph Otto used the word 'numinous'. He said it was meant to describe *'The deepest and most fundamental element in all strong and sincerely felt religious emotion.'*

It may be peaceful and *'come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship'* or could be faster moving *'thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its 'profane', non-religious mood of everyday experience'*

William James used four words to describe features of religious experience. These were *Ineffability*, *Noetic*, *Transiency* and *Passivity*.

Ineffability is the inability to describe an experience as it is so amazing.

Noetic is knowledge gained through intuition. The opposite of this is empirical which means that it can be proven with facts.

Transiency is a brief experience.

Passivity is not being in control.

W.T. Stace believed that there were eight core features of religious experience. *Unified vision* is the idea that all things live together in harmony. *Feeling beyond time and space* is an experience which may seem as if it is detached from the world. The *Sense of reality* is when life feels as if it is more real after the religious experience. *Blessedness* is when someone feels joyful or happy. *Paradox* means that normal rules of logic or science do not apply in certain circumstances. Along with Rudolph Otto, Stace also believed in *Ineffability*. *Loss of sense of self* is when a person's own priorities weaken and those of others grow.

Domenikos Theotokopoulos settled in Spain but was originally from Crete.

He was given the name *El Greco* which means 'the Greek'. He was born in 1541 in Candia.

A painting by *El Greco* called 'Laocoön' consisted of naked figures, one of these was a woman with two heads. After his death in 1614, the second head was painted over and the front naked figures were given loin c lothes. Years later the painting was restored to it's original state.

The naked bodies remind us of nature. There are also serpents in the painting which seem somewhat small and feeble especially compared to the macho and muscular men. It may seem slightly confusing as to why the men do not seem to be able to overpower these snakes. This is seen as a metaphor for evil and temptation working to takeover the unprotected or *naked* bodies of mankind.

This mirrors a story in The Bible of Adam and Eve. The serpent tempting Eve to eat the forbidden fruit.

It seems that much of *El Greco*'s work was influenced by biblical references.

Another example of this is *Mount Sinai* which was painted in 1570-72.

The unnaturally long figures in his paintings create a haunting image for spectators of his work. The painting shows the peaks of Mount Sinai, a place sacrosanct to Judaism and Christianity, of special importance for Eastern Orthodoxy, and revered by Muslims. At the centre is Mount Horeb, where Moses received the tablets of the Ten Commandments from God.

El Greco was asked if he would paint a picture for the king of the Martyrdom.

Unfortunately it was not gruesome enough for the king and he turned it down.

El Greco refused to paint it how the king wanted and lost out on a lot of money. This gives the indication that he didn't just paint to earn money, but because he felt that art in religion was so important. By not painting what the king wanted, he risked his reputation which could have cost him further jobs. El Greco in "The Adoration of the Name of Jesus" includes Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory as well as members (all male) of the Church on earth. This may have been seen to be controversial as Purgatory is a Catholic idea and other denominations would not have agreed with it.

Stanley Spencer was born on the 30th of June 1891 in Cookham-on-Thames and was the eighth surviving child of his family. He studied art at Maidenhead Technical institute before becoming a student at the Slade school of Art. His contemporaries included Paul Nash, Roberts, and Bomberg. He got married to Hilda Carline in 1925 and had two daughters, Shirin and Unity. He did the first one-man exhibition at Goupil gallery and created a lot of controversy with his painting of *The Resurrection*.

In 1935 he resigned from the Royal academy after two of his paintings were rejected. In 1937, *Spencer's* marriage to Hilda ended and he married Patricia Preece four days later, but separated almost immediately. In 1945 he painted the *Port Glasgow Resurrection* series. He died on the 14th December 1959 having been knighted 6 months earlier.

Spencer's work can be seen to be very contradicting, as his paintings may seem naive and knowing, spiritual and sexual, realistic and archaic, buoyant and pessimistic, all at the same time.

Spencer is often compared to Lucian Freud who was an artist after him although Spencer is seen as the more daring and inventive of the two.

His eccentricity makes it so that his paintings are not easily understood on first viewing.

Spencer has much in common with Benton in the disconcerted, exaggeratedly baroque twists of form, which in Spencer's hands, suggest mental and emotional torment, spiritual aspiration and visionary adoration, linking him very closely in spirit, if not in style, to *William Blake*, *Matthias Grunewald* and *El Greco*.

Picasso seems an important concealed element, as Spencer, too, seeks to stretch the boundaries of matter, to rise above the restrictive conditions of existence and mankind's predictable monotony of awareness, which fails to see the incredible in the mundane.

Following his World War I experiences as medical corpsman and infantryman in the British army, Spencer felt that he had lost the feeling that no matter how humble or ordinary, all things in life, were full with spiritual significance and religious strength.

Spencer didn't just paint but had religious experiences in the process. Talkin of the procedure of one of his paintings, he says "*Before the War, the drawing or painting of the thing was the experience of heaven; it would have been unthinkable that I would or might find snags or hitches.*"

When Spencer married Hilda, despite being in his mid -thirties, it was said to be his first sexual experience. While their marriage was not without differences, it was the one satisfying relationship within his life. Even after their divorce in 1937, his unfortunate short -lived second marriage to Patricia, and Hilda's death, Spencer continued to write long, unmailed letters to Hilda, and paint images of remembered, idealized domesticity.

Spencer's "The Resurrection," (1923-27), reminds us that outdoor representations of praying figures in Western Christian culture are most often found in cemeteries. Some of the figures are rising from their tombs in the posture of prayer in which they have been stuck for centuries

Visual imagery is one part of the Christian imagination and has been expressed in a multitude of forms. Throughout the Christian past, visual imagery has served a variety of purposes and has primarily proven to be a powerful tool for spreading the Christian message. furthermore it has prompted followers to imitate Christ while embracing a moral life almost literally in the image of Jesus.

Some people believe that there is a dual meaning to Christian art. On one hand, images serve to bring past events into the present. On the other hand, images provide hope for the future.