Robert Spencer was born in 1879 at Harvard, Nebraska. His father was a Swedenborgian clergyman who moved his family several times while Spencer was growing up. He graduated from High School in New York and decided to become an artist. He studied at the National Academy of Design and the New York School of Art. After his marriage in 1914, he and his wife, Margaret, settled in New Hope, Pennsylvania, where he died in 1931.

Robert Spencer is considered one of the major figures of the Pennsylvania School of American Impressionist painters. He became known for his mill series and "Grey Mills" is considered one of the finest examples in the series. The building on the right is William Maris' silk mill. Built in 1813, it was originally intended for use as a cotton yarn mill; Simpson and Company converted it into a silk weaving mill in 1896. The building on the left is Heath's Mill. Built in 1702, it had become exceedingly rundown by the time Spencer painted it over two centuries later.

"Grey Mills" was a gift to the University, in 1953, from A. Carson Simpson and Peggy Simpson Carpenter. Their father, Alex Simpson, Jr., was a Trustee of Pennsylvania Military College from 1925 to 1929, and the painting was from his collection.

This painting has been included in several important traveling exhibitions organized by other museums and illustrated in two major publications on American art written by William H. Gerdts and published by Abbeville Press: American Impressionism (1984) and Art Across America: Two Centuries of Regional Painting (1990).
WHO WAS WHO IN AMERICAN ART

Compiled from the Original Thirty-four Volumes of
AMERICAN ART ANNUAL: WHO'S WHO IN ART
Biographies of American Artists Active from 1898–1947

EDITED BY
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ROBERT SPENCER:
IMPRESSIONIST OF WORKING CLASS LIFE

Essay by Thomas Folk
Guest Curator

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Firstly, I would like to thank Leah Sloshberg and Zoltan Buki of the New Jersey State Museum for immediately agreeing to sponsor this exhibition. Since Spencer lived in Frenchtown, New Jersey, and Point Pleasant and New Hope, Pennsylvania—places in close proximity to Trenton—it is a pleasure to be writing a catalogue which will reintroduce Spencer's art in this area. I would also like to thank Dr. William Gerdts of the City University of New York since this essay evolved from a paper I wrote while studying with him. I am indebted to Dr. Matthew Baigell of Rutgers University, who so freely gave of his time and ideas. I would like to extend gratitude to Robert Spencer's daughters, Ann Spencer Simon and Tink (Margaret) Spencer, for their cooperation in this project, as well as Barbara Mitnick, Robert Coyle, Martha Feyler, James Magill, Gene Mako, James Pomeroy Hendrick and Frederick Ramsey, Jr., for their valuable assistance. Since Spencer's work is rare, I am specially indebted to William L. Bauhan, Megan Moynihan, Robert Preato, Richard York and Alanna Chesebro for their help in locating some of Spencer's paintings.

T.F.
ROBERT SPENCER specialized in scenes of rural mills and tenements which he rendered in the impressionist aesthetic. He is the only major American Impressionist painter to dedicate much of his art to the life of the working class and their environment.

Unlike his colleagues, he often chose to depict the tedious aspects of daily existence. In *International Studio*, Frederic Newlin Price, the noted art dealer, recalled a conversation between Spencer, Joseph Rodefer De Camp, the Boston figure painter, and John Francis Murphy, a leading Tonal landscape painter. According to Price, De Camp turned to Spencer and asked, "Why do you paint back-houses? Why not castles?" Murphy replied, "He does paint castles. Those factories and gray houses, they are his castles. Stick to your back-houses, Spencer."

Although Spencer painted with an impressionist technique, his subjects were more closely related to those of the "Ashcan School" and its circle. John Sloan, George Luks, William Glackens, Everett Shinn and Jerome Myers depicted the life of New York's lower classes. However, as stated by Matthew Baigell, "Their celebrations of life were random ones. They were less concerned with social betterment than with conveying their excitement at simply being alive." Therefore, they rarely depicted the miseries of poverty. Spencer, at times, more sensitively portrayed the tedium and melancholy of the life of the poor than the artists of the "Ashcan School."

Spencer's art varies greatly from the art of other American Impressionists. Although Julian Alden Weir also depicted factories, they are merely elements in his landscapes, and he does not reveal an interest in the people who inhabit them. Other American Impressionists portrayed the life of the upper classes. For example, the Boston School, whose members included Edmund Tarbell, Frank Benson, Joseph Rodefer De Camp, William McGregor Paxton and Phillip Leslie Hale, interpreted the lives of beautiful but complacent society women. While most of the American
Impressionists were capturing the beauty of feminine sitters or pleasant beach scenes. Spencer was beautifying what was considered vulgar and unsightly.

Robert Spencer was born on December 1, 1879, at Harvard, Nebraska, to Solomon Hogue Spencer and Frances Strikler Spencer. He always took great pride in asserting that his first direct American ancestor was Samuel Spencer, a Quaker who settled in Upper Dublin Township near Philadelphia in 1698. In fact, all members of Spencer's family were Quakers, with the exception of his father and brother. Solomon Spencer was a Swedenborgian clergyman, who, according to Frederic Newlin Price, edited essays by George Inness dealing with aspects of that faith. Spencer admitted that as a boy, "father changed his parish so often—so I never had what is called a home town. I left Nebraska when I was three months old for Illinois." Spencer then lived in Missouri, Virginia, and finally settled in New York, where he graduated from high school in Yonkers in 1899.

It is difficult to determine exactly how strong the influence of Solomon Spencer's beliefs were on Robert. According to Emanuel Swedenborg, the founder of the Swedenborgian faith, the redemption of mankind was a deliverance from the domination of evil. The hells, which are the communities of the spirits of evil men in the spiritual world, were aspiring to enforce themselves upon men's minds, destroying their freedom to discern between truth and falsity and therefore between good and evil.

Robert Spencer did not belong to the Swedenborgian faith, but his boyhood was enlivened by a close association with his father and by their common love of reading and the classics. However, it appears that most Swedenborgian beliefs had a dubious effect upon him, for he stated:

"Things outside humanity—abstract theories—I have no stomach for. I never wanted to go to heaven as a kid. Because I was told that angels never ate. Never slept. Never drank."

After completing high school in 1899, Spencer felt that he was ready to enter the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York. Yet, Frederic Newlin Price noted that Spencer was an extremely poor student. However, Spencer decided to become an artist and began attending classes at the National Academy of Design in New York in 1899. This instruction continued until 1901 under such teachers as Francis Coates Jones, who taught still-life; George Willoughby Maynard, who taught composition; James Smillie, who taught etching; Edgar Melville Ward, who taught portraiture; Frederick Dielman, who taught perspective; James Smillie, who taught anatomy; Edwin Howland Blashfield, who also taught composition; and Robert Blum, who taught the Life Class.

From 1903 to 1905, Spencer attended classes at the New York School of Art, where his instructors included William Merrit Chase and probably Robert Henri. According to Price, Chase encouraged the young Spencer and stated, "You will be a painter, sir." Yet, as noted by Price, not all of Chase's criticisms were complimentary. In fact, Chase was known to have rather strong opinions on art. Spencer once wrote to Price that Chase told him that there were three ways to describe a good painting—firstly, "a fine picture," secondly, "a damn fine picture" and thirdly, "a God damn fine picture." In subject matter, Spencer seems to have been more heavily influenced by Henri and members of the "Ashcan School."

It may have been in 1905 that Spencer spent almost a year in a civil engineering office in New York as a draftsman and as a surveyor. He did not enjoy this work and never again deviated from painting as a career.

From 1906 through about 1910, Spencer lived in towns that are in close proximity to the Delaware River, such as Frenchtown, New Jersey, and subsequently, Point Pleasant, Pennsylvania.

It was probably at this time that Spencer first came into contact with Edward Willis Redfield, the noted impressionist landscape painter, who had a studio in Point Pleasant. Redfield was producing large, local snowscapes. Guy Pène du Bois described Redfield's landscapes by stating that they "present an expansive, rolling country.
frequently under a blanket of snow, studded with tall, straight trees and broken in the valleys by broad, slowly coursing rivers." In 1910, J. Nilsen Laurvik referred to Redfield as a "virile and thoroughly American painter." However, the imposing landscapes of Redfield were to have little influence on Spencer, and the two artists were not close friends. Yet, Spencer became an important member of the Pennsylvania Impressionist group—a group whose leader was Edward Redfield.

1. The Gray House
Du Bois found Redfield's painting to be "as bare of sentiment as a court calendar... It is a landscape bare of the particular incident, the familiar evidence of human occupation." Although Spencer was often categorized as a landscape painter, most of his landscapes include people and architecture. He originally intended to be a figure painter, but unconsciously drifted toward genreized landscape painting. Spencer stated:

"It is the human side that interests me... a landscape without a building or a figure is a very lonely picture to me. I love the cities, the towns—the crowds. The intimate contact with man is essential to me. It is a curious contradiction that I live in the country."

It was probably at about this time that Spencer came into contact with William Langson Lathrop. Lathrop was twenty years Spencer's senior, but they became very close friends, and Spencer gave his painting A Grey Day to Lathrop as a gift. At this time, Lathrop's style of painting was usually Tonal, and although Spencer and Lathrop were close friends, Lathrop apparently had little influence on Spencer's art. Lathrop had settled in New Hope in 1899 and was considered the "dean" of the Bucks County art colony. His art classes and Mrs. Lathrop's Sunday afternoon teas attracted other artists and visitors, until their home (and later, Phillips Mill) became the social gathering place of the area.

Redfield and Lathrop were two of the three most significant figures in the first generation of Pennsylvania Impressionist painters. Robert Spencer, Daniel Garber and Charles Rosen comprise the three major figures of the second generation. During the summer of 1909, Spencer studied painting with Daniel Garber, although Garber was one year younger than Spencer. That summer, Spencer lived with Garber at Garber's home and studio in the wooded glen of the Cuttalossa Creek, near Lumberville, Pennsylvania. Garber had earned a Cresson Traveling Fellowship two years earlier from the Pennsylvania Academy. In the spring of 1909, his painting, Horses, was awarded the first Hallgarten Prize by the National Academy of Design. Also at this time, Garber was asked to join the faculty of the Pennsylvania Academy. Although slightly younger than Spencer, Garber was certainly a much more recognized painter in 1909.

Of all the Spencer's previous painting instructors, none had so great an influence as Daniel Garber. Works prior to study with Garber already display Spencer's interest in local scenes. However, the flat, unmodeled figures in these paintings are reminiscent of the lower class people painted by Jerome Myers, and the imprecise architecture of the buildings contrast with Spencer's style after he had studied with Garber. For example, in Spencer's The Gray House (1910, Private New Jersey Collection, cat. #1), the influence of Garber's meticulous draftsmanship is apparent. Spencer, however, had already developed a highly individual impressionist style. The ground areas and the stone walls are separated into flecks of uniformly broken color. He employs an overall patterning which bears some similarity to the painting of Maurice Prendergast. Yet, Spencer rarely uses the scintillating color of Garber, and in many works, such as The Gray House, the mood as well as the colors are much more somber.

Eugene Neuhaus gave an accurate description of Spencer's mature style:

Spencer's technique and color no less than his fine sense of design are undoubtedly what have enabled him to create works of art out of the commonplace. Homely subjects under his hand become appealing and interesting to an unusual degree. His technical means are well adapted to the surface variations of the dilapidated brick structures, the outhouses he so loves to paint. With a playful and nervous touch he creates charming and varying surfaces that attract and hold one's attention like a beautiful embroidery. His color is personal and most distinguished; beautiful ranges of warm and cold grays, violets, blues and red harmoniously blend together the many different objects, which he includes in one canvas, and the atmospheric truthfulness of his work is a proof of his fine sense of observation, as well as his power to create fine color harmonies of very subtle quality.
Charles Rosen, one year older than Robert Spencer, had known Spencer from their student days in New York. Rosen had also studied at the National Academy of Design and at the New York School of Art. He moved to New Hope in 1903, and it is possible that Rosen may have first introduced Spencer to the area. Spencer and Rosen were very close friends and Spencer gave his painting, The Gray House, to Rosen as a gift. Some of Rosen's works painted in the years 1915 to 1918 reveal an influence of Spencer's technique. On becoming an associate of the National Academy of Design, Spencer was required to submit a likeness of himself either by his own hand or by another artist. As a result, in about 1914, Rosen created a portrait of Spencer for the Academy which was both intense and perceptive. It reveals a feeling of tension in the sitter, which is unusual in Academy portraits. In fact, it seems to anticipate Spencer's nervous breakdowns of the following years.

After studying with Garber, Spencer moved into the Huffnagle Mansion in New Hope, where he lived with another young artist, Charles Frederic Ramsey, the son of Milne Ramsey, the noted still-life painter. The infamous Huffnagle Mansion was built in 1707 by Richard Heath, Solebury Township's first landholder. Additions were made in 1812 by

Huffnagle Mansion, New Hope, Pa.
William Maris. Maris christened the residence “Springdale.” Later, Dr. Charles Huffnagle, the first United States Consul to India, purchased the house and added a library, a ballroom and a studio. He brought many strange objects to the house and held weekly receptions on Tuesday. The library contained over two thousand volumes and the washstands in the bedrooms were equipped with silver-plated faucets. There was a private graveyard on the grounds where some of the Huffnagle family were buried.23

When Spencer moved into the mansion, the place was in a state of ruin. Frederic Newlin Price stated:

> The plaster had fallen in spots, the grounds were a riot of licentious weeds, the giant trees about it had been shattered by storms. Into this gaunt and beautiful place Spencer moved, obligating himself for two dollars a month rent. The ballroom was to be his studio, and he varnished, puttied holes and cleaned and painted until it was a studio indeed.24

It was while living in the Huffnagle Mansion that Spencer produced a number of “potboilers,” which he felt would appeal to the general public. He signed these works “John St. John.”25 He even wrote a letter to Wanamaker’s Department Store in Philadelphia recommending John St. John to the buyer and signed it “Robert Spencer.” As told by Price:

> The buyer called him in saying he knew Spencer very well and did Mr. St. John know him? Naturally, Spencer admitted that Spencer was his closest friend. But the buyer bought none of the sketches—called them too advanced.26

While visiting William Langson Lathrop, Spencer met his future wife, Margaret Alexina Harrison Fulton, the niece of the painters Thomas Alexander Harrison and (Lowell) Birge Harrison, who spent the winters of 1914, 1915 and 1916 in New Hope. Spencer married Margaret Fulton on February 27, 1914. After staying in an apartment above a firehouse in Lambertville, New Jersey, the couple moved to their new and permanent residence at “Rabbit Run” in New Hope. Their marriage was far from ideal. Margaret Spencer took great pride in stating that in 1907, she was the only female architect at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and that she was earning higher wages as a draftsman in a large architectural firm in Philadelphia than Robert Spencer.27 According to their daughter, Tink (Margaret), Margaret Spencer would often state, “Anything a man can do can be done better by me.”28 Margaret Spencer learned painting from William Lathrop and Robert Spencer, and she specialized in painting floral still-life. She displayed her own works on the walls of their home, but often refused to allow Robert to hang any of his.29 In Spencer’s painting, Alarm Clock (c. 1928, Collection of Mr. Gene Mako, cat. #32), a scene from the couple’s daily life is depicted. In this work, both the alarm clock and Margaret wake the artist. It appears that Spencer is equating the ringing alarm clock to his nagging wife. The sour expression on the artist’s face seems to indicate that his marriage was not one made in heaven. The Spencers had two attractive blonde daughters, Ann and Tink (Margaret).

During the second decade of the twentieth century, Spencer became famous after he produced a number of paintings featuring workers. One of the most important and powerful of these works, Repairing the Bridge (1913, Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, cat. #7), employs compositional devices which he used repeatedly. Within the painting, a building serves as a backdrop to limit spacial perspective and to create a stage for his figures. Spencer must have been attracted to this subject, since, as noted above, he had spent almost a year in a civil engineering office in New York. The purchase of Repairing the Bridge in 1914 by The Metropolitan Museum must also have represented an optimistic turning point in the artist’s career.

During the first half of the second decade of the twentieth century, Spencer won many artistic awards in rapid succession. He exhibited his first painting at the Philadelphia Art Club in 1910.30 And in 1913, Spencer’s One O’Clock won an honorable mention at the Art Club of Philadelphia. In the same year, he was awarded the second Hallgarten
prize by the National Academy of Design. In 1914, he won the Jennie Sesnan and the Inness medal of the National Academy. He earned the Boston importantly, in that year, he won one of the gold medals offered by the Panan painting entitled *The Closing Hour*. In 1916, this work was described by Charl as depicting:
The operatives streaming out at the closing hour but [it] aims to present rather the beautiful side of
the operatives' life, the lyrical rather than the tragical, and with the old mill, the trees and lawns and
flowers and costumes of the workers presents a gorgeous pageant of color.31

However, the dominant color in many mill paintings by Spencer is grey, and the workers display a fatigued and
solemn attitude. Spencer executed a number of important paintings depicting local mills, such as The Silk Mill (c. 1913,
Private New York Collection, cat. #8), Five O’Clock. June (1913, Collection of Richard and Mary Radcliffe, cat. #3),
One O’Clock Break (c. 1913, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. T. Davies, cat. #6), and Grey Mills (c. 1913, Alfred O. Deshong
Museum, Widener University, cat. #4). Todd described The Silk Mill as:

A greyer version of the graver side of the mill operative's life. It is pay-day and they are comparing
envelopes and devising ways and means to make both ends meet with the weekly wage.32

Grey Mills is one of the finest examples in Spencer's mill series. It represents, as do most of Spencer's mill paintings,
the William Maris Cotton Mill and Richard Heath's grist mill in New Hope, Pennsylvania. The building to the viewer's
right is William Maris' silk mill. It was built in about 1813 by Maris. Originally, it was intended for use as a cotton yarn
mill, but in 1886, Simpson and Company converted it into a silk weaving mill. The mill was a five story structure which
was fifty feet wide and one hundred feet deep.33 Its gabled metal roof and two stone chimneys dominated the structure.
The building to the left is Richard Heath's grist mill, which was erected in 1702.34 A resident who remembers this area
before the Depression recalls that it was exceedingly poor and run-down.35 As depicted by Spencer, the mills provided
a source of employment for both women and children.

Regarding the mill as subject matter, Spencer stated:

I don't care whether the building is a factory or a mill; whether it makes automobile tires or silk
shirts. It is the romantic mass of the building, its placing relative to the landscape and the life in it
and about it that count. People ask me what is made in my mills. Damned if I know, and if I care.36

Spencer's figures in such works are usually diminutive and do not have individual features. We empathize for these
people through the dilapidated buildings they are forced to work in. Although Spencer became well known for depicting
the life of the working class, when confronted with the question of Socialism, Spencer stated:

Many people have made the mistake of thinking me Socialistic, a friend of the working man and that
sort of thing. Not at all. Socialism spells destruction, spells school-academy and so on. It is immaterial
to me whether a man lives on Fifth Avenue or on Baxter Street ...37

Regardless of this anti-Socialist statement, Spencer associated with members of the working class and deeply
sympathized with their plight.38 In addition to the mill, Spencer often painted backyard scenes, such as his White
Tenement (1913, Brooklyn Museum, cat. #9) or his On the Canal, New Hope (1916, Detroit Institute of Arts, cat. #11).
In both paintings, the flat, prosaic walls of the tenements are placed parallel to the picture plane, thus limiting
perspective. In the second painting, a number of figures go about their daily activities. Of Spencer's depictions of
backyards, Price stated:

A backyard may mean the fine, full naked arms of a woman washing clothes near a grey wall ... It
is the intimate side of life, the half dressed side, where beings are themselves. Backyards are genuine,
unpretentious.39

A comparison between Spencer's On the Canal, New Hope and Everett Shinn's The Laundress (1903, Frank
Collection) illustrates the similarities and differences between Spencer's art and that of the "Aschcan School."40 Both
are backyard scenes which share similar compositions, and both works feature laundresses. Although sensitive in its treatment of a low class scene, there is a sense of cheerfulness in Shinn's work created through his use of pleasant pastel colors and by the whiteness of a blanket of snow. Spencer presents a much more run-down and poignant view. The figures in On the Canal go about their work with a sense of drudgery and the buildings express a mood of deterioration. However, neither work truly describes the miseries of abject poverty.
In addition to the work of the "Ashcan School," Spencer may have been influenced by the photographs of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine. As stated by Matthew Baigell, these photographers showed greater sensitivity to the poor than the "Ashcan School." Spencer could have seen Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*, which was published in 1890. *Red Boat* (c. 1918, Corcoran Gallery of Art, cat. #17) is one of Spencer's finest paintings. On the left foreground, a canal boat, pulled by mules, glides slowly along the Delaware Canal. Two old dilapidated buildings flank either side of the work and several figures proceed with routine activities. In the background, Spencer blocks perspective with Richard Heath's grist mill and William Maris' silk mill. The canal was a major means of transportation, but most importantly, like the mills in the background, it provided industry in the area. A canal boat could transport as much as one hundred tons of coal, lumber or iron ore. Yet, both the mills and the canal represent a way of life which was rapidly becoming extinct, even while Spencer was creating this work. The Maris Silk Mill ceased operation permanently in 1930, and in October 1931, the last working canal boat made its final trip. Today, the Maris Silk Mill has been remodeled beyond recognition. In *Red Boat*, Spencer preserves the New Hope of old, as if he were anticipating the end of an era.

By 1916, Robert Spencer began to produce typical Pennsylvania landscapes, often Delaware River views, just as Redfield, Lathrop, Garber and Rosen had done previously. In such works as *River March* (c. 1918–20, Reading Public Museum and Art Gallery, cat. #15), architecture is treated again, but here it is secondary to landscape. Spencer's use of a high horizon line limits perspective. Such paintings by Spencer are very similar to Delaware River views by Charles Rosen. Although Rosen's style in the years 1915–18 reflects Spencer's technique, landscapes such as Spencer's *River March* and *Across the River* (c. 1917, National Academy of Design, cat. #14), resemble Rosen's earlier landscapes.

In 1916, six Bucks County artists formed "The New Hope Group" for mutual support and convenience. Margaret Spencer served as secretary and treasurer. The artists included Robert Spencer, Charles Rosen, William Lathrop, Daniel Garber, Rae Sloan Bredin and Morgan Colt. The significance of the group lies in the fact that these painters exhibited their work together and were representative of this school of landscape painting. Exhibitions sponsored by the group traveled to a number of cities throughout this country and abroad.

Spencer served as a juror at Annual Exhibitions of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1921 and 1925. In 1925, he served as an instructor at the Academy's summer school which was held at Chester Springs in Chester County, Pennsylvania. Spencer, however, did not enjoy teaching, because he felt that his students would "become little Spencers, mere copycats"; and for the same reason, he never taught his daughters to paint. Even the lessons he had given to Margaret had produced paintings which annoyed him.

During the third decade of the twentieth century, Spencer produced European scenes, such as *The Rag Pickers* (c. 1921, Union League Club of Chicago, cat. #21), which features imaginary architecture. Spencer did not travel to Europe until the summer of 1925; and, therefore, a scene such as the *Rag Pickers* does not relate to any real scene. Compositionally and aesthetically, it evolves from Spencer's own mill series. Indeed, most of Spencer's "European" scenes came entirely from his imagination and are unlike his Pennsylvania scenes of the second decade which depict specific buildings. Unlike the other Pennsylvania Impressionists, such as Redfield, Garber, Rosen and Lathrop, Spencer had not been in Europe as a young man. He was forty-six when he made his first trip and quite set in his style. Therefore, his 1925 trip to France, Spain and Italy appears to have had no discernible effect on his art.

A friend of Spencer's, James Pomeroy Hendrick, who accompanied him on this trip, recalls:

"Despite his love for the European atmosphere, Rob was as American as anyone I have ever known. Absolutely frank and honest and essentially simple in his tastes, except for the arts—arts of all kinds, including the delights of the French table. He had a completely American accent, and his endeavors to speak French were not at all successful."
However, regarding his painting, Hendrick expressed that:

Everyone who knew much about oil paintings would always remark about how European Rob's paintings were. Many would be convinced that they had been painted in Europe. But the fact was that Rob had never been to Europe before his first trip (summer of 1925). When we sailed into the harbor at Le Havre we were all on deck on a lovely morning, looking at the French landscape. "But that's what I always painted," said Rob. "I never saw it before but that's what I painted!"46

Spencer did no painting on this trip, but he stayed and painted in Paris for several months in 1927. Margaret joined him in late 1927 or early 1928.

The majority of Spencer's "European" scenes usually relate to and are exaggerations of ordinary Pennsylvania scenes. For example, Ship Chandler's Row (c. 1925, the Phillips Collection, cat. #24) resembles scenes of New Hope tenements which Spencer painted along the canal. Since, before 1925, he had to rely upon his imagination for many of these "European" scenes which often feature castle-like architecture, it may be possible that such works may have been somewhat inspired by the fantastic architecture of the eccentric Henry Chapman Mercer, who built a concrete castle
in nearby Doylestown, Pennsylvania, which he named "Fonthill." This became his residence in 1910, and in 1912 he erected a concrete, castle-like factory for the commercial production of pottery tiles. In addition, in 1916, he built a fantastic castle-like museum in his own honor. Although none of these eccentric buildings relate architecturally to European castles, they were the closest imitations of castles to be found in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Spencer must have been familiar with them; and although they are not specifically recorded in his works, castle-like structures reminiscent of these eccentric buildings are often depicted.

Spencer’s technique changed somewhat during the twenties. His draftsmanship became looser, and in scenes which include architecture, his figures are often more sketchy. In addition, color is often much less somber, and in the "European" scenes, in particular, tend to have brighter colors. By changing his palette, it may be that Spencer was attempting to make his work appear more contemporary. However, these changes can hardly be considered severe.

Of modern art, Spencer stated:

Modern abstract art puzzles me. I cannot understand how a young man . . . in the prime of life can do an old man's work . . . . When one is weary of the joys of the flesh—I can see that one may burn to abstract things. The modern painter to me seems very old—very weary and blase, when not degenerate. But if it interests him—why not? It takes all sorts to make the world.47

On occasion, Spencer would paint an abstraction in jest. He signed these "Trebor Recneps," which is his name spelled backwards. Unfortunately, none of these paintings have, as yet, come to light.

During the twenties, Spencer created a number of genre works; perhaps the finest of these is The Evangelist (c. 1923, the Phillips Collection, cat. #23). The itinerant preacher who is raised on a podium to face a crowd had great significance to Spencer, since his father was a Swedenborgian minister who traveled about this country and probably gave sermons to similar audiences. One may wonder then if the figure of the evangelist is modeled after Spencer's father. Nevertheless, the evangelist is a disturbing figure who looks toward the viewer, although his features are obscured in shadow. Ironically, even though the evangelist and his associates, supposedly the elect, are dressed in dark colors, the audience, or those needing redemption, are dressed in light colors. This is a highly personal work and appears to be deeply rooted in the memories of the artist.

After Duncan Phillips purchased this work for his collection, he stated:

There is no other painter, not even John Sloan or even Edward Hopper, more pungently American in expression. The Evangelist is a masterpiece of American genre. It would be difficult to find a picture in which a restless crowd has been represented with as much conviction and as little confusion. The contrast between the mellow lyric light of a summer afternoon and the austere silhouettes of the preacher and the platform is very poignant.48

During the late twenties, Spencer created a few revolt paintings such as Mob at Bay (c. 1927, Phillips Collection, cat. #30). These works always feature an agitated crowd and a central female figure. Sometimes with breasts bared, she is raised above the crowd by two male figures. These paintings appear to depict public unrest and suggest future violence. In a sense they prefigure protest scenes by the Social Realists of the 1930s. They also can be considered to be reminiscent of the paintings of Eugene Delacroix and Francisco Jose De Goya Y Lucientes. Since we know that Spencer’s wife was often antagonistic toward him, it is possible to speculate that the woman at the center of the revolt is his wife, Margaret. Beginning in the early twenties, Spencer suffered several nervous breakdowns. Indeed, these paintings indicate much mental anguish as do another small group of paintings in which he created modern interpretations of Biblical scenes.49 In Crucifixion (c. 1930, Private New Jersey Collection, cat. #34), the Jews of the New Testament have been depicted as Hasidic Jews in contemporary garb. The Roman soliders are now constables on
horseback and eight lamenting women, one of whom are recognizable as the three Marys, are depicted in modern dress. *Crucifixion* is a very powerful work that has little to do with the aesthetics of either American or French Impressionisms. At this time, Spencer began to experiment with glazing techniques, which indicates that he may have taken an interest in old master paintings. It is possible that Spencer may have identified with the suffering, tormented figure of Christ. Significantly, Spencer stated:

"The Whtte Tenement"
Cezanne was sick and did not know it; I am sick and know I'm sick. I could do quite some odd stuff now if I painted—probably create a sensation in a cheap way.50

After 1925, Spencer began to accept female portrait commissions. A few of these are portraits of actresses who had moved into Bucks County. His Portrait of Brenda Biddle (1926, Philadelphia Museum of Art, cat. #25) is stiff and uninteresting, although it is capably painted.

On July 11, 1931, Robert Spencer committed suicide. The New York Times described Spencer's death as follows:

Mr. Spencer went to his studio last night and wrote a brief note "to my friends" in which he asked them to spend only a few moments in his memory. His wife and daughters heard the report of a pistol and ran to his room where he was found dying on an armchair. A 45 calibre revolver was in his hand. Members of the family refused to comment . . . It was believed that a nervous breakdown caused by overwork prompted the artist to end his life. . . .51

According to rumor, Margaret had locked Robert out of his studio. He is believed to have broken in before he committed suicide. In the New York Times the Sunday before the fatal event, Spencer was interviewed by Edwin Alden Jewell. In this interview Spencer stated:

In these days of our super-mechanical age, there are still those who, despite modern efficiency, hard-boiled businessmen and correspondence schools, worship idealism and who work with a view of creating a beautiful thing regardless of whether it can be translated into dollars and cents or traded on the exchange . . . Civilizations come and go, different forms of government occur, morals change—birth control, divorce, trial marriage, fashions—yet art persists. And Cervantes, I am convinced, wrote Don Quixote with a deeper purpose than he has been generally credited with. At any rate, when we are all weary, tired of facts, tired of efficiency, we turn to romance and we find it more safely in pictures, in literature, in music—in short, in the arts.52

It is sad that a great many of Spencer's paintings have been destroyed on a number of separate occasions.53 However, we are fortunate to have many works which display his interest in humanity, the struggle of everyday existence, and the life of the working class in addition to an interest in a world of fantasy and reverie. Hopefully, this exhibition will demonstrate Spencer's unique position in American Impressionist painting, where he combines his vanguard style with a social concern.

NOTES


2. This conversation is quoted by Price, "Spencer—And Romance," 485.


4. Apparently, these essays edited by Solomon Spencer do not exist.

6. Robert Spencer's relationship with his father is mentioned in "An Artist of Our Time, Robert Spencer, 1879-1931," Public Ledger (Philadelphia), July 11, 1931, n.p. This clipping can be found in a folder devoted to Spencer in collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.


8. See the interview by Robert Spencer, De Witt McCollan Lockman Papers, Archives of American Art.

11. On the Canal, New Hope
9. Most biographical studies indicate that Spencer studied with Frank Vincent DuMond and Robert Henri. Both were instructors at the New York School of Art. But in 1902, DuMond abandoned his teaching position there and was replaced by Robert Henri. Since Spencer started his studies at the New York School of Art in 1903, it would not have been possible for him to study with DuMond there. He probably studied with DuMond elsewhere. However, it is most likely that Spencer studied with Henri there, although biographical studies do not give any information beyond stating that Spencer studied with Henri. For a discussion of the New York School of Art, see Bennard B. Perlman, The Immortal Eight, Westport, Connecticut, 1979, 87-93.


11. This correspondence can be found in the Frederic Newlin Price Papers, Archives of American Art.

12. Spencer’s future wife, Margaret, would work as a draftsman in a large architectural firm in Philadelphia. It is interesting that they both shared similar skills.

13. For a discussion of Edward Willis Redfield and his art, see Thomas Folk, Edward Redfield, Rutgers University Art Gallery, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1981.


19. The other significant figure in the first generation of Pennsylvania Impressionist painters was Walter Elmer Schofield.


25. I have not, as yet, been able to locate any “potboilers” signed “John St. John,” nor have I been able to find any reproductions of them.


27. The relationship between Robert Spencer and his wife, Margaret, is the subject of an unpublished manuscript by their daughter, Tink Spencer, titled “Mother Was A Problem—From Bucks County to Bedlam.” A copy of this manuscript is in the possession of the author.

28. This quote is taken from an unpublished essay by Tink Spencer, titled “Robert Spencer.” A copy of this essay is in the possession of the author.

29. Many of the problems in the marriage of Robert and Margaret Spencer appear in the essay by Tink Spencer, “Robert Spencer.”

30. The identity of this work is presently unknown.

31. See Charles Burr Todd, “A New Hope Painter Noted for his Color—Robert Spencer, A Distinguished Member of the Artistic Colony Up the Delaware,” The Philadelphia Record, October 29, 1916. This clipping is part of a scrapbook in the collection of William L. Bauhan.

32. Todd, “A New Hope Painter.”

33. Spencer’s painting, Grey Mills, does not seem to reproduce exactly the architecture of the William Maris Cotton Mill.

34. For a history of the Maris and Heath mills, see Richardson, Solebury Township, 109.

35. Frederic Ramsey, Jr., discussed this neighborhood with the author during a telephone conversation on April 4, 1981. Because many of the cotton workers had originally come from Manchester, England, this community in New Hope had become known as “Manchester.”


38. Spencer’s attitude toward the working class was conveyed to the author in a telephone conversation with Ann Spencer Simon, the artist’s daughter, on January 27, 1983.


40. The significance of Shinn’s early backyard scenes was brought to the author’s attention by Matthew Baigell.

42. See "New Hope Group of Great Painters." The Doylestown Republican, December 10, 1916. This clipping is part of a scrapbook in the collection of William L. Bauhan.

43. It is ironic that Redfield, the most prominent painter in Bucks County, avoided exhibiting with the New Hope Group, although Redfield did, on occasion, exhibit with a few of its members.
44. Spencer’s distaste for teaching is mentioned by Tink Spencer in her unpublished essay on Robert Spencer.


49. Another painting in this series, Exodus, is in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.


53. The cause for destruction has always been fire. In addition, on one occasion a number of clippings, letters and photographs were also destroyed. These had been in the collection of the family of the artist.

A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


“Spencer, Artist, Takes His Life, Suicide of Noted Painter At New Hope Home is Laid to Strain from Overwork,” The New York Times, July 12, 1931, section 2, 1.
