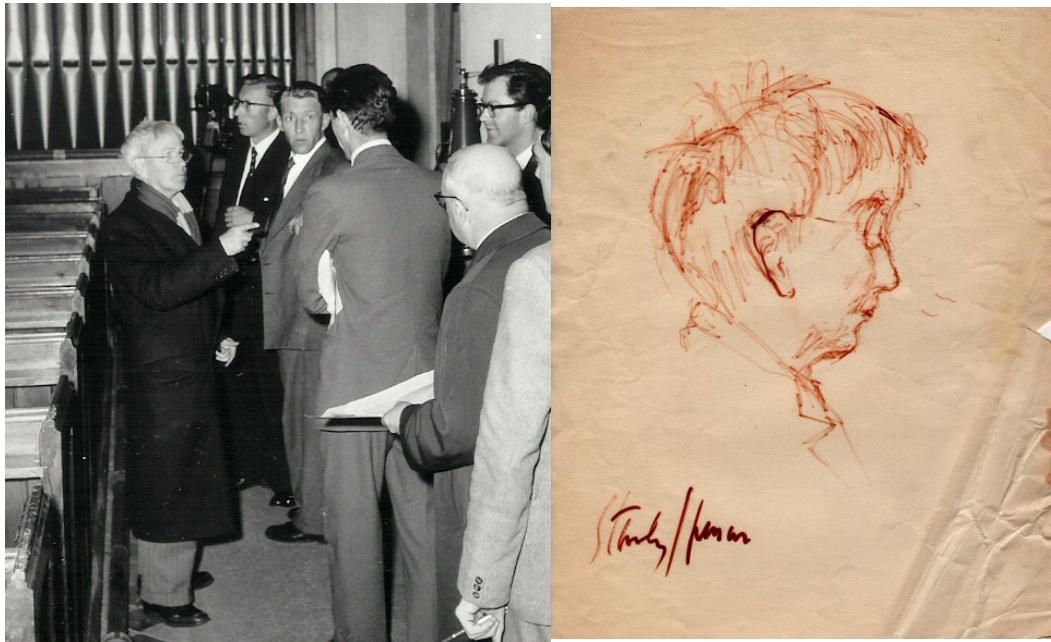


Bro. Jane Dorner

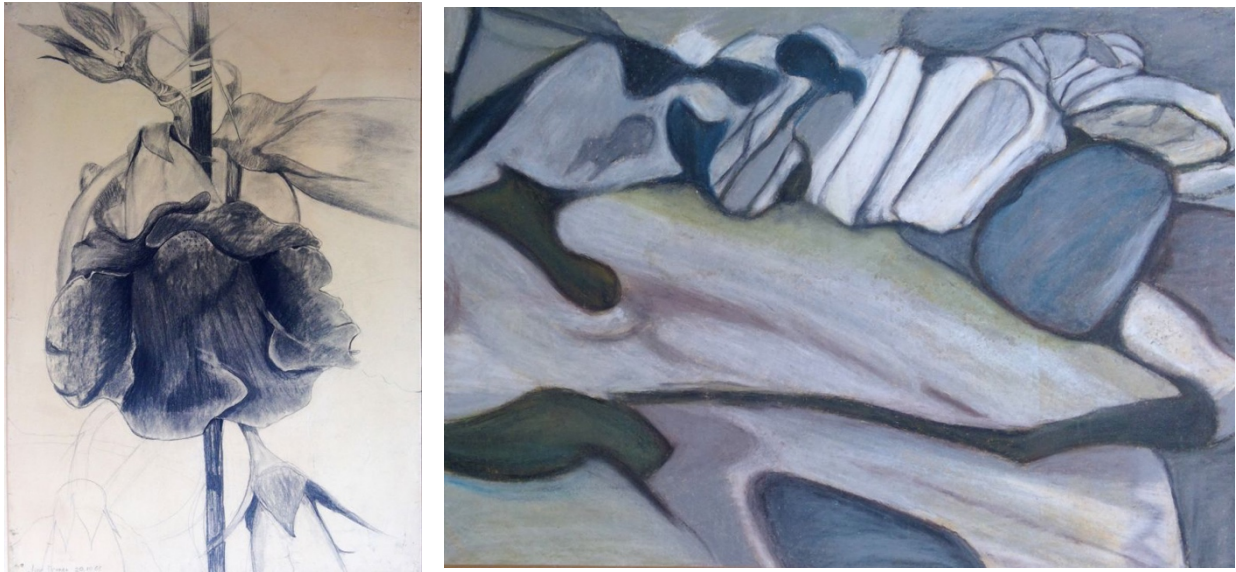


My drawing of Stanley Spencer, signed by him, and the artist in 1958 at the time of the exhibition

When Stanley Spencer had his one-man show at Cookham in 1958 he would be there every day interacting with the visitors. I was 13, keen on art and had recently won first prize in the *Girl-Eagle* painting competition (a Mediterranean cruise). I did a sepia flo-master-pen drawing of him, which he kindly signed, and then he said to me: 'Don't go to art school, my dear, they ruin you there'. I don't think I particularly listened to his advice, but other interests took over from art. I wanted to go to university. And after that I wanted to get into publishing.



Announcement in Girl after my Mediterranean cruise first prize for painting, with 'Mother Darling' which also won a top prize.



*Two studies done at Hornsey Art School in 1966:
left charcoal drawing of a lily; right oil pastel abstraction of a crystal*

It's not so easy to get into publishing and it took me six months before I finally got my first job – as an art editor at Longmans. During those six months I bowed to pressure from my mother who had always wanted me to go to art school in the first place, and I enrolled at Hornsey Art School to study jewellery under Gerda Flockinger – because of my university degree I was able to skip the pre-diploma year. It was the year before the famed students' protest sit-in, and there was an air of unrest about the place. I particularly remember that you had to clock in and clock out at the behest of some ex-sergeant-major administrator who operated in military style. After the freedom of university this went against the grain.

Besides, Gerda Flockinger and I did not see eye-to-eye. I learned a lot from her but when I saw her some 40 years later at Charlotte de Syllas's retrospective at Goldsmiths' (Charlotte was her star pupil and is a brother as well as a friend) she gave me a sharp look and said, 'Ah yes, we didn't like each other, did we!' I was surprised that she remembered me. By then I had been 40 years in publishing, and although I was constantly making and designing things, art activity was not mainstream.



*Gold, amber and pearl necklace made at Hornsey,
under the influence of Gerda Flockinger*

One of the things the student protest focussed on was that art and design constituted a discrete activity within higher education and should be considered separately from academic studies by virtue of the special character of art. By the time I went to art school again, leaving behind writing and publishing, I realised the protestors had lost that battle. The art school I went to – Farnham College of Art – was now part of a university complex called the University for the Creative Arts and I was on the MA course in 3D Design & Glass. Learning skills and techniques, having innate talent or building up the legendary 10,000 hours of practice towards the attainment of expertise were passingly regarded. What was valued was the ability to *write* about what you were doing, to evaluate and contextualise the processes involved. Self-reflection, critical appraisal, citation of back-up sources and an ability to string along high-falutin sentences with more style than meaning were prized. I could do that; my working life had been spent in writing and editing. It was not what I thought an art school should be about.

In the 1990s I had been on a panel of authors with Philip Pullman, and we had argued with some passion against the government's GNVQ (General National Vocational Qualification) in Creative Writing. You cannot qualify creativity, we said. We were successful, and it was dropped. The whole scheme has since been abandoned. But the university-isation of art schools took over from that trend in its suppression of the indefinable in favour of

assessment criteria that could be ticked off and counted. I wound up with the highest MA Distinction they had ever had, with a 96% tick rate of credits over the two years of assignments. But that did not make me a good glass maker – it wasn't even easy to get into the workshops to practice. I would have been better off apprenticing myself to a craftsman and sweeping floors for two years. Stanley Spencer had a point in his scorn of art schools.



Left: my final dissertation as an opera programme – to the university's credit, it accepted these as valid submissions realising that all their assessment criteria were ticked *Right and centre:* how I chose to present academic units such as Theoretical Discourse, Reflective Project, and so on for my MA degree at Farnham;

Yet it is clear from his work that he did indeed learn technique at the Slade. He learned to draw. At Farnham all new undergraduates were given four three-hour sessions in life-drawing. That was it: just four opportunities. Being a mature student, I was given permission to tag along to any life class that wasn't full – let's give Farnham some credit for flexibility – and I queued up with my charcoal and cartridge at every opportunity. But 18-year-olds aren't going to do that; life drawing is hard work and they need to be cajoled and syllabussed into doing it.

Hornsey – being a proper art school – had understood that and even vocational courses such as jewellery stitched in an full day of drawing once a week. At the jewellery benches we learned basic skills. Gerda Flockinger might have remembered me with irritation because I asked 'why' questions; I wasn't wise enough to realise that you learn by watching the master at work. In the intervening years I have been at the Art School of Life, and all my experiences together with an overwhelming number of things I have made over the years in courses and diplomas have given me a vocabulary in craftsmanship that would have eluded me had I stuck to one vocation. Some ways of doing things rub off on a neighbouring craft. It's as if one acquires a library of touch that enables dexterity in unexplored areas of making.

The problem with what has become of art schools in their current university status is that they have forgotten to value art and craftsmanship for its own sake. That it is a form of self-expression of equal value – if not more – than the written word. By forcing a cerebral approach, the degree structure devalues not just craftsmanship, but the force of the subconscious in creativity. Yet from that derives an ineffable quality in a piece of work that makes it possible for others to gain a deep, emotional response to it. The very abstraction from the accountability of focussed prose allows the onlooker to endow a piece with meanings from their own experience; often beyond the maker's original intention. My experience of higher education in art is that it focusses on 'grading descriptors' at the expense of encouraging a transformative process of drawing universal experience out of a personal situation. Perhaps that is a part of what Stanley Spencer meant too.



More or Less glass piece made at Farnham and exhibited in Stourbridge during the 2010 International Glass Biennale in Stourbridge