

Mary Gertrude Spencer Stanhope (1857–1944)

Tracey Hebron introduces an artist from the Spencer Stanhope family who resided at Cannon Hall.

Mary Gertrude Spencer Stanhope (known as Gertrude) was the daughter of Elizabeth Julia Buxton and Sir Walter Spencer Stanhope of Cannon Hall. The eldest of eleven children, she was born in London on 18 October 1857, and baptised in Cawthorne near the family home. Her parents owned Cannon Hall between 1873 to 1911 and led a very public life, entertaining prominent guests, wealthy neighbours, powerful friends and enjoying extravagant banquets. Sadly, Gertrude's mother Elizabeth died in 1880 aged just 49. Greatly admired by the locals, a card signed by 239 women before her death indicates the local popularity of the family.

Gertrude was home-schooled by a governess as many young girls were at that time, having lessons in maths, languages, and drawing. The family were known to encourage artistic endeavours and would put on many amateur theatrical productions in the grounds, in which they often starred.

Gertrude's uncle was John Roddam Spencer Stanhope, the Pre-Raphaelite artist, and it is believed he encouraged her artistic skills from an early age, along with her sister Freda and cousin Evelyn De Morgan. Soon she developed a love of painting and had a huge talent for sculpture. She began sculpting in bronze and terracotta. Gertrude was unusual in focusing on sculpture as this was considered by many at the time as being too technical and physical for women. Also, due to the moral restrictions of society, women like Gertrude would find it hard to get models to draw from. Often, they would be asked to stick to 'feminine' subjects like that of fruits and flowers, but a determined Gertrude instead became inspired by mythological themes and stories from the Old Testament. From the 1880s onwards, she focused on



exhibiting her work in many galleries around the country, including the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool and numerous galleries in Birmingham and Manchester. An ambitious woman, she wanted to see the world and travelled to Egypt. Her work continued to be exhibited throughout the early twentieth century. She enjoyed success as an artist, not only creating sculptural works such as bronze figures, but also exhibiting paintings at London galleries between 1886 and 1909. Two bronze sculptures Pan and Orpheus were exhibited around the country before fittingly becoming part of the permanent displays at Cannon Hall Museum, where they are still displayed today in the De Morgan galleries on the upper floors of the museum.

Gertrude spent the greater part of her life in Italy, frequently visiting her uncle Roddam in Florence, where he lived in his later years. She continued to spend time in Florence after his death, and died there herself, on 7 October 1944, having never married. She left a bequest to the Royal Marsden Hospital and to the Holy Trinity Church. She was buried with her uncle in the Allori Cemetery in Via Senese, south of the River Arno near Florence. She left a legacy in sculpture and in the history of women in art, achieving great expertise in her artistic endeavours and paving the way for future artists. ■