In April 1958, at the age of 92, the artist Charles Spencelayh hand wrote his Last Will and Testament. In a spidery hand he painstakingly itemised his possessions and legacies. Among the household linen, a grey bedroom carpet and his wearing apparel are ‘the two silver framed Royal letters’. Written in the hands of Queen Mary and Princess Marie-Louise, the personal letters acknowledge his contribution in the early 1920’s to the celebrated Queen Mary’s Dolls House. Instigated by Princess Marie-Louise and inspired by Queen Mary’s love of miniature objects, she acted as intermediary between the Queen and the many skilled British artisans who were commissioned to make the fixtures and fittings for the breathtaking dolls house designed by Edwin Lutyens, which can be seen at Windsor Castle. Spencelayh’s postage stamp sized portrait of George V is in perfect 1:12 scale.

‘Our King’ – an elderly gentleman admires a larger version of the picture of George V that Spencelayh painted for Queen Mary’s Dolls House. A picture within a picture technique that Spencelayh often used. (reproduced courtesy of the Guildhall Museum, Rochester).
Queen Mary was an admirer of Spencelayh’s work, buying works at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibitions and commissioning at least one painting, which he titled ‘The Unexpected’ due to his surprise at receiving the request. In 1954 the Victoria and Albert Museum staged an exhibition of items from Queen Mary’s collection and Spencelayh’s ‘The Three Queens’ hung in the entrance into the Main Gallery.

Despite never being made an Associate of the Royal Academy, Spencelayh was popular with visitors to the Summer Exhibition including the novelist Evelyn Waugh who was influenced by ‘Why War?’ (1939) and is said to have based his character John Plant senior in ‘Work Suspended’ on Spencelayh.

Born in Rochester in 1865, the youngest of 11 children, he was bought up by his mother Elizabeth as his father Henry died before Charles was born. Henry Spencelayh was an engineer and was said to have known Dickens. Charles was eight when he was given his first set of paints and was soon copying Old Masters. If canvas was not available he would use old scraps of wood or even table tops and some of these early works have survived. He attended The National Art Training School in South Kensington and became a founder member of the Royal Society of Miniature Painters, joining in 1897. He also trained and exhibited in Paris around the turn of the century. An all round artist, Charles worked in various mediums including oil, watercolour, drawings, copper etchings, prints and sculpture.

Intaglio etching on copper based on the painting ‘Listening In’. (Private collection)
Charles married Elizabeth Hodson Stowe at St. Paul’s, Penge in 1890. They started married life in Chatham and Elizabeth’s occupation is shown as a tobacconist in the 1891 census, a change of career from that of governess prior to her marriage. Elizabeth’s early life is something of a mystery; she is described as a ‘nurse child’ to a ‘bedridden’ lady (who later adopted her) according to the 1871 census return for Olney, Buckinghamshire, where she was born in 1864. He painted her many times – a study entitled ‘My Pet’ shows a young Elizabeth in profile holding a dove and is a superb example.

The couple had one child, Vernon born in 1891, who became an accomplished artist in his own right. He was taught by his father and in his own words was “saturated” by his style. Vernon served as an officer in WW1 and was held as a prisoner of war in Germany. A fine portrait by Charles of Vernon in uniform is owned by The National Army Museum.

Photographs of Elizabeth and Charles Spencelayh at the time of their marriage in 1890 (Private collection).
The years between the Wars were the pinnacle of Charles’ career. He spent the 1920’s under the patronage of Joseph Levy, a wealthy Manchester cotton merchant. His main output during his ten years in West Didsbury were portraits of Levy’s circle of Jewish acquaintances. In 1924 he painted an intimate portrait of Joseph’s wife titled ‘Rosie Levy taking afternoon tea at the Midland Hotel Manchester’ which shows his skill in capturing rich fabric and reflective surfaces.

In the early 1930’s the Spencelayh’s moved south to Lee, but Elizabeth sadly died in 1937 and was buried four miles away in Chislehurst Cemetery. Charles remarried, another Elizabeth and in 1940 while living in St Mildred’s Road, Lee they were made homeless during a bombing raid. Many paintings were destroyed which makes a catalogue raisonné of his work virtually impossible, plus he had the confusing habit of reusing titles. After a brief time in his first wife’s hometown of Olney, they settled a few miles away in the Northamptonshire village of Bozeat, where they spent the rest of their lives as popular members of the community. Always the Victorian gentleman, Charles is remembered as acknowledging ladies in the street with a tip of his hat.

The Bozeat years of his long career are characterised by some of his best known works, typified by elderly Bozeat residents who cheerfully posed for the promise of a home cooked dinner. Charles would build room sized screens in his studio complete with patterned wallpaper and ‘dressed’ from his collection of ‘props’. Travelling by bus to the nearby market town of Wellingborough, Charles would stock up on art materials and bid for yet more objet d’art at the local auction house. Toby jugs – stuffed birds – Windsor chairs – clocks and cheap watches vie for attention with his favourite patriotic pictures of Nelson and Royalty which he used repeatedly in his themed and titled compositions.
Despite his work finding favour with Royalty he never lost ‘the common touch’. Visitors would leave with what he called ‘bread and butter pictures’ for cigarette money. During the war years in Bozeat he would offer to paint the winner of fund raising raffles. His work was reproduced on popular calendars and he undertook commissions for advertising posters such as Goddard’s Metal Polish.

Detail below from ‘Nothing Like Leather’ painted when Spencelayh was 88 years old in 1954 and exhibited at the RA the same year. This large work is thought to be his homage to the Northamptonshire footwear industry where many of his Bozeat sitters had spent their working lives. After spending over fifty years in Canada (Charles had an agent in Vancouver) it is now back in Northamptonshire.

A lifelong smoker, Charles would greet visitors with cigarette ash covering his waistcoat and invite them to use the floor of his studio as an ashtray. A reporter from the Northampton Mercury quipped “this season Mr Spencelayh is wearing Players”. He would even include the spent matches littering the carpet in his compositions; such was his meticulous attention to detail. An airmail letter to George Nuttall, his agent in Vancouver, has tell tale burn marks; given the potential fire hazard and the often toxic nature of traditional artist materials it is remarkable that he survived into his nineties.
By the late 1950’s his eyesight was failing but he continued to paint and had three pictures ‘on the line’ at the 1958 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, including a poignant work titled ‘The Faded Rose’. He first exhibited a miniature ‘Mrs Robins’ in 1892 and became one of the most prolific artists to show at the RA. Despite this he was never made an Associate of the Academy, the reason for which is unclear. Charles had his own theory which he jokingly shared with his Canadian agent George Nuttall in a letter dated November 1956 “I do not know, unless I am not old enough, or work not sufficiently good, which is my aim to yet improve although I cannot wear glasses to paint eventually this will stop my efforts I’m sure of it”

He died in St Andrews Hospital, Northampton in June 1958 and after a funeral service conducted by his friend and executor the Reverend W.C. Knight in the 12th century church of St Mary the Virgin, Bozeat he made his final journey back to Kent and was buried with his first wife in Chislehurst Cemetery.

Examples of his finest work such as ‘Stalemate’ - ‘Smile’ and ‘The Old Dealer’ found homes in provincial galleries and private collections, but his name began to fade from popular memory during the 1960’s as his cluttered Victorian interiors became unfashionable. In 1978 Aubrey Noakes published an illustrated hardback ‘Charles Spencelayh and his Paintings’ which began a revival in interest for this most prodigious British artist. Once again appreciated, his work commands strong prices at auction and has found a new generation of admirers via the Internet.
Acknowledgements and sources:

www.uk.pinterest.com

www.ancestry.co.uk

Guildhall Museum, Rochester

Aubrey Noakes ‘Charles Spencelayh and his Paintings - Jupiter Books 1978

Anecdotal snippets from conversations with residents of Bozeat who knew Spencelayh between 1941 and 1958

Helen Norman
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