**John Louis Sprinck, 1825–1896**

A painter and pastellist who was born in St Petersburg. He trained at the Academy there and his talents reportedly earned him freedom from military and other public service. He travelled to study and paint in Italy, Belgium, Austria and France and Belgian artists also reportedly called him ‘the Modern Rubens’. For some years he held appointments as Professor of Painting to the Imperial Court in St Petersburg and the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg, and his Danish-born wife Marie Wilhelmina (b. *c.*1848), known professionally as Madame Orfa (her maiden name) was a contralto prima donna in the St Petersburg opera. They had one son, Leon, also an artist, who was born in Paris in 1866 and at some point all adopted Norwegian nationality before John and his wife settled in England by 1875 and later became British citizens. By 1881 the couple, but not their son, were lodging in Gayton Road, Hampstead, and late-1880s advertisements show that John gave ladies’ art classes while his wife and son Leon (who rejoined them from Europe by 1886) gave classes for children and beginners (*Hampstead and Highgate Gazette*, 12 Feb. 1887 and 23 Oct 1886). Marie Sprinck-Orfa, also continued to sing at occasional concerts. The final family home was 28 Willow Road, on the edge of Hampstead Heath.

Sprinck was noted as a pastellist and wrote two small books on the subject. One was *A Guide to Pastel Painting*, published by George Rowney in 1889 with many later editions: by at least the sixth in 1910, his son Leon had added a chapter on ‘How to Paint a Head in Pastel’. Sprinck’s local obituary in the ‘*Ham and High*’ (8 Aug. 1896) says he published another such ‘pamphlet’ with Lechertier Barbe (possibly in Paris) and ‘spent many years on preparing an elaborate work on the theory of painting’ that was so near complete at his death that it had been read and praised by the artist Carl Haag and was expected to be published. There is no sign it was, however.

Though Sprinck clearly managed to live by his art or other means, he appears to have been somewhat eccentric, with a distinctive appearance and habits of almost exaggerated courtly politeness, but also such a perfectionist in his work that he avoided exhibiting or even attempting to sell much of it, though he was reported both an excellent portrait and landscape painter, the latter in a distinctive but Dutch-old-masterly style. Much was still with him when he died at Hampstead on 23 July 1896 and while an exhibition was mentioned as a possible outcome, no note of one has been found, or how the studio collection was dispersed. Nothing appears to be recorded as in public hands on Art UK.

Sprinck’s wife was apparently acting as ‘governess’ or at least an elder chaperone and friend to Alice Weir, elder daughter of Galloway Weir MP, when staying for her health in the Hotel Santa Caterina at Amalfi for Christmas 1899. On 23 December, both were among ten people killed when the hotel, and part of the old Capuchin Convent adjacent (also long in hotel use) collapsed in a massive landslide down the seaward-facing cliff, sinking several vessels moored close-in below.

**Leon John Sprinck, 1866–1948**

A portrait painter in oil and pastel who was born in the Rue St Honore, Paris, late in 1866, the son of John Louis Sprinck (1825–1896) and his Danish wife, Marie Wilhelmina (née Orfa, *c.* 1848–1899), who was a contralto prima donna in the St Petersburg opera. Leon began his art training in St Petersburg, then Moscow, but about the age of 20 (1886) was called to rejoin his parents, who had settled in England about 1875, where he continued tuition under his father. Both he and his parents had arrived as adopted Norwegian citizens, and early in 1898 Leon naturalised as a British one. In the third quarter of 1898, when his address was 9 Duke Street, Portland Place, he married in Hampstead to Emily Margaret Macdonald (1866–1949) of Netherhall Gardens there. She was daughter of the Scottish publisher Sir William Russell Macdonald, was also musical and a professional miniaturist and copyist who exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1908 and 1919 from 8 The Boltons Studios, Redcliffe Road, Kensington. This was also where her husband painted at that time and both from no. 10 there from 1920 up to at least 1924.

After marriage, however, they initially lived on the lower edge of Hampstead Heath at 28 Willow Road, with Sprinck’s widowed mother until her death on 23 December 1899. This occurred in a catastrophic hotel collapse while she was visiting Amalfi as chaperone to a younger friend, Alice Reid, who also died. The Sprincks’ later home addresses were 50 Antrim Mansions (*c.*1900–02) and 29 Lynecroft Gardens, Hampstead, (*c.*1905–07). At the 1911 census they were at 19 Friern Park Road, North Finchley, but on that occasion only he was there with their daughter Margaret Wilhelmina (later Woosnam, 1902–90) and son Hugh Leon (1904-75), though they also had an older son, Donald Bienfait (1900–85). In 1918 they were at 4 Redcliffe Gardens, Kensington, then 44 Pandora Road, Hampstead, from at least 1920 to 1926. By 1930 Sprinck, but not his wife, was on the electoral role at 10 Tadema Road, Chelsea, which was probably the studio he had been using since before 1927. It is therefore clear that for most of the time he kept work and family life separate, using west London studios in artistic areas easily accessed by his fashionable clientele.

Sprinck had his first and only portrait (‘Louis Ries Esq.’) hung at the Royal Academy in 1893, sent in from 4 Langham Chambers, Portland Place. In 1901 that year’s census found him staying with a prosperous couple, Gilbert and Louise King – possibly to paint them – at Charlestown, Roscommon, in Ireland. Although he is only known to have exhibited two other items at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, and one at the Royal Hibernian Academy up to 1903, he rapidly won a name as a prolific society portraitist, especially in pastels –for which his father was also noted – and notably those of children. A portrait of the Countess of Tankerville with her son, later Lord Ossulston, drew the attention of Princess (later Queen) Alexandra, who became a friendly admirer, having also seen Sprinck’s mother sing the part of Vania in Glinka’s opera *The Life of the Czar.* His first royal sitter was her husband, Albert Edward, Prince of Wales (Edward VII from 1901), but he also painted her, George V, Edward, Prince of Wales (briefly Edward VIII), many aristocratic figures, civic dignitaries and other notables. He was also a Freemason, enrolling in the Marylebone Lodge in 1906, and painted others who were. In the late 1920s, when his studio was in Chelsea, he developed a strong visiting American clientele and was reported as considering going there, though whether he did so is not yet known.

Sprinck died in mid-December 1948. It is not entirely clear if he was still living with his wife at the time though the registry district (Croydon) and her address of Beulah Hill, Upper Norwood, suggest that he was. She died there only six weeks later, on 29 January 1949, aged 82. His death age was given as 86, which may be why his birth is often stated as in 1862. His wife’s local obituary (*Norwood News*, 4 Feb. 1904) confuses him a little with his father and identifies their son, Donald, as continuing the musical talents of his mother and grandmother: he was then Director of Music at Merchiston Castle School and teaching at Herriot’s School, both in Edinburgh.

*Summarised from Art UK discussion and sources there cited on Leon John Sprinck’s portrait of Sir Arthur Carlton as May of Worcester, in Worcester Guildhall (November 2021)*

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