

CHARLES E. BURCHFIELD: JOURNALS INTO PAINTING

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Most art historians and critics agree that Charles Ephraim Burchfield had three distinctive periods of style during his life's work—early, middle, and late (Baigell, Baur, Fleischman, Townsend, and Weekly).¹ Nancy Weekly classifies Burchfield's early work as "fanciful nature studies," which develop into "uninhibited, experimental symbolism" by 1918 (10). Closer examination of these periods reveals that the middle style is more obviously "American," yet Burchfield abandons this in later years and returns to a more sophisticated and complicated rendition of his early work.

Burchfield progressed from his early work to realistic recording of subjects around him during his middle period in the natural fashion that often transpires in an artist's life as he/she matures. However, Burchfield became "stalled" in this particular manner of working and subsequently frustrated and dissatisfied with it. This happened because he forgot to rely on his primary motivation for making visual images, his love for nature. This love was built of memories and past experiences, which had their roots in sensory impressions that were triggered when he encountered or remembered a similar experience again. This, in turn, prompted him to make images, usually those that appealed to one or more of his senses. An examination of Burchfield's journal in conjunction with his paintings during the time periods will substantiate these claims.

Introduction

Burchfield was born in Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio, on April 9, 1893, the fifth child of six and was four years old when his father died. The death of his father left the family penniless, so Burchfield's mother moved them closer to her family in Salem, Ohio, when

Burchfield was five. In Salem, he played with other children his age, explored the wooded areas nearby, learned about nature, and grew into a young man.

From an early age, Burchfield displayed an unusual talent and interest in drawing, as well as writing. He was "set apart from his classmates... [because of] shyness and [a] deep reserve which made it difficult for him, throughout his life, to make intimate contact with others" (Baur 18).² About 1911, he began to keep written documentation about ordinary daily events, and recorded his personal interpretations and feelings. He continued this practice until his death on January 10, 1967.

After Burchfield's death, J. Benjamin Townsend spent fifteen years compiling and editing these writings. The result, Charles Burchfield's Journals: The Poetry of Place, was published in 1993 (xvii-xx). Here Townsend poetically describes both Burchfield's writing and painting as follows:

The dreams and waking fantasies recounted in Burchfield's journals, like many of his early and late watercolors, often share the characteristics of visionary art and religious or drug-induced hallucination. Both violate chronological time and defy conventional space, proportion, and perspective. Many of the images associated with visionary experience recur in the imagined worlds of Burchfield's dreams and painting: radiating spheres of supernatural light, the firmament rolled back, winged creatures, hugely magnified flora and fauna, and paradisiac landscapes. (105)

This published journal allows a closer look at the ideas and motivations behind Burchfield's life and work. It is filled with his records about outings, private assessments of these outings, descriptions of walks in the woods, prevailing weather conditions, personal observations about associates, as well as private thoughts, later evaluations of earlier entries, and visual sketches. Furthermore, outlined here too, is proof of his dissatisfaction and

frustration during his middle period, his excitement about the rediscovery of his former way of working, as well as his satisfaction with his work in his late period.

In 1993, Nancy Weekly organized a traveling exhibition to honor the 100th anniversary of Charles Burchfield's birth. Along with this exhibition, she published a well-researched essay and catalog, entitled Charles Burchfield: The Sacred Woods. Here, Weekly outlined Burchfield's spiritual growth from that of a small boy until the last years before his death.

Weekly believes that Burchfield's childhood memories of his grandfather, (who became an evangelical minister), along with his father's distaste for this man's ways, were initially instrumental in forming Burchfield's rejection of Christianity (13). He began his painting career as an agnostic, yet revered those aspects of nature over which no human being had control. Journal entries make such references to

...[his] ... daily forays: "So I go to Nature when I want sincerity. ...also innocence. And when on all sides I am beset with palaver and artifice, I feel the need of drawing a long breath, I ramble the fields." (qtd in Weekly 14)

In 1911, Burchfield graduated from high school as Valedictorian of his class with a college scholarship. He attended the Cleveland School of Art from 1912 to 1916, and at Cleveland worked under Henry G. Keller, Frank N. Wilcox, and William Eastman. During this time, a journal entry appears on December 29, 1914 that substantiates Burchfield's tendency toward pantheism, as well as further substantiating his attachment to nature.

...Is it blasphemous to love the drops of dew on the haze blurred branches more than some formal religious idea? I say it is not. It may be said these are my Bible, the visible evidence of God--If so, I do love Him. (409)

It is also during this time that Burchfield began to seriously paint outdoors. This launched his career in 1915 as a landscape painter primarily working with watercolor.

Burchfield's Early Period

Burchfield's early period is generally associated with the years 1915 to 1918. While he was inspired and influenced by factors from many sources, nature was probably the foremost. He sketched directly from it and developed what he termed "All-Day Sketches" in 1915 (Weekly 103 and Burchfield 370). He hated working with the human figure; therefore, it is rare to find any figures in his paintings. Baur believes that this revulsion may perhaps have been due "...to a deeply rooted Puritanism, which was certainly a part of his character,..." (26). Consequently, his fascination and devotion to landscape and those subjects related to and in the landscape would remain the main focus of his life's work from this time forward.

Paintings such as Trees and Fields, Noon Sunlight (Figure 1) and Eroded Sand Pits (Figure 2), both executed in 1915 and undoubtedly on site, are indicative of his earliest work. A closer look at Eroded Sand Pits indicates the onset of Burchfield's tendency toward repetition of form, stroke, color, pattern, and composition. This use of repetition is an aspect of his work that becomes much more evident and important as time passes.

In October of 1916, the Cleveland School of Art awarded Burchfield a scholarship to attend the National Academy of Design in New York City. He left after only one day of classes. Very little information can be found about this decision; he simply had enough of attending academic art classes.

Burchfield remained in New York City until the end of November, yet was desperate to return home. While there, he began to exhibit his work at the Sunwise Turn Bookshop run by Mrs. Mary Mowbray-Clarke. It is possible to take a close look at the young man who was



Figure 1. Charles E. Burchfield, Trees and Fields, Noon Sunlight, 1915. Watercolor on paper, 13 7/8" x 20". Munson-Williams Proctor Institute, Utica, New York. Edward W. Root Bequest.



Figure 2. Charles E. Burchfield, Eroded Sand Pits (The Sand Pit), 1915. Watercolor, 14" x 20".
Munson-Williams Proctor Institute, Utica, New York.

in New York City at this time, because Burchfield kept a sketchbook entitled New York Sketchbook. In it is a portrait, presumably of himself (see Figure 3, New York Sketchbook) dated 1916. This can be compared to a known self-portrait, (Figure 4,) Self-Portrait, also made in 1916. However, Figure 4, may have been executed in Ohio. These portraits further emphasize that he seldom worked figuratively, since they are the only exclusive figurative images to be found.

As time went on, severe homesickness continued to haunt Burchfield, as well as the fear of being labeled a failure if he returned to Ohio. Finally, he gathered the courage to ask his brother for a \$25 loan, the price of a fare home, and to return no matter how he was accepted. Coincidentally, the day before he left, a watercolor sold from the bookstore for \$25, exactly the sum he needed to repay his brother (Baur 51-57). Once home, everyone welcomed him, and he happily spent the first few days in the woods drawing. He returned to the Mullins Company where he had worked on and off since graduating from high school and remained there until July 1918.

Along with images of the tangible aspects of nature, Burchfield gave visual representation to those parts of nature not quite so obvious to the ordinary viewer, such as insect noises, see Figure 5, The Insect Chorus and Figure 6, Cricket Chorus in the Arbor, both painted in 1917. Burchfield made sound a "visible" subject, and often references to his awareness of sound are in his journal, which substantiates his reliance on senses other than sight for subject matter.

The year 1917 proved to be Burchfield's most prolific time period. He managed to paint an extraordinary number of paintings, while he continued to work full time, as well. "...Trovato catalogs 165 paintings, ... there were actually many more." Burchfield wrote in the "catalog of his exhibition at the University of Arizona" that 1917 was his 'golden year'.³



Figure 3. Charles E. Burchfield, **New York Sketchbook** (Self-Portrait?), 1916. Pencil, 11½" x 9". Unsigned. Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.

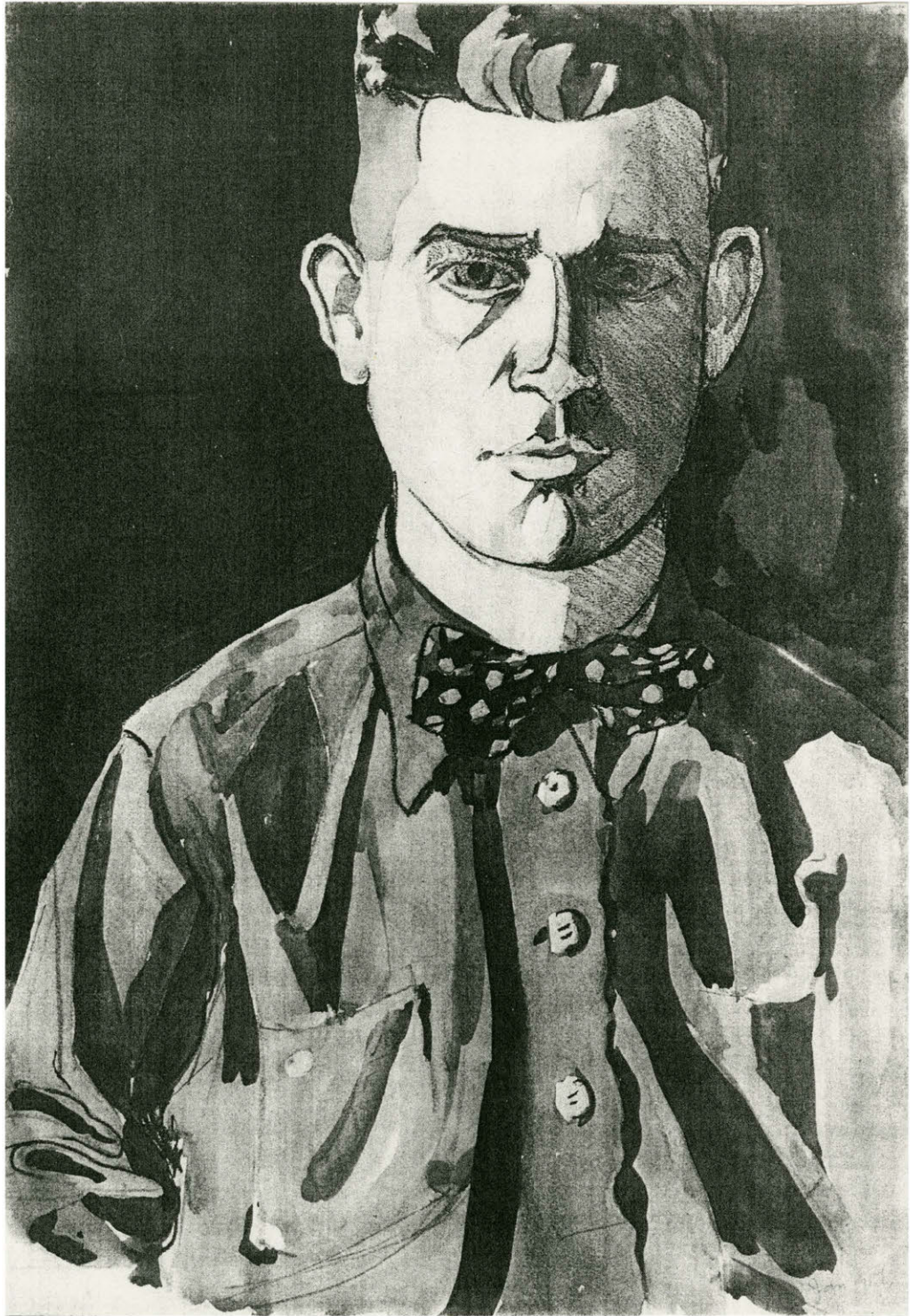


Figure 4. Charles E. Burchfield, **Self-Portrait**, 1916. Watercolor and conte' crayon, 19 3/4" x 13 5/8". The Charles Rand Penney Collection.



Figure 5 . Charles E. Burchfield, **The Insect Chorus**, 1917. Watercolor on paper, 19 7/8" x 15 7/8". Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York. Edward W. Root Bequest.



Figure 6. Charles E. Burchfield, **Cricket Chorus in the Arbor**, 1917. Watercolor on paper, 21 1/3" x 17 1/2". Collection John W. Straus, New York.

While years later he reworked many of the paintings he did during this time, just as many remain in their original condition. Paintings such as Bright Summer Sun (Figure 7), Sun and Snowstorm (Figure 8), The August North (Figure 9), and Childhood's Garden (Figure 10) were all executed in 1917, and clearly illustrate Weekly's description of Burchfield's early work as "fanciful nature studies" (10).

In 1917 Burchfield also developed a kind of graphic shorthand, which he termed "Conventions for Abstract Thoughts" (see Figure 11). These graphics or motifs served to give human emotions a visual representation, (Burchfield 437). Once again, evidence surfaces reflecting his desire to illustrate the intangible. Burchfield's use of the motifs in many of his paintings to enhance or express a mood documents Weekly's claim that his early work developed into "uninhibited experimental symbolism" (10). A close examination of The August North (Figure 9), and Childhood's Garden (Figure 10), as well as Church Bells Ringing, Rainy Winter Night (Figure 12) also painted in 1917, reveals many similarities to the motifs. In addition, the sketches (see Figure 13), for Church Bells Ringing, Rainy Winter Night make these similarities even clearer.

As briefly mentioned before, Burchfield had a tendency to use repetition in his work. Not only did this occur in his forms, strokes, colors, patterns, and compositions, but it also occurred in his choices of subject matter. Certain themes associated with nature, such as times of day, (see Figure 12), season changes, (see Figure 7), and weather changes, (see Figure 8) recur throughout his career. In addition, he returned over and over again to a mythical idea from boyhood that a "Mystic North" place existed. An early visualization of this can be seen in The August North (Figure 9).

A Gothic motif appears in his work about this time, too, which is repeated throughout the years, see Spring Silhouette 1916 (Figure 14), Trees Dancing in April Sunlight 1917



Figure 7. Charles E. Burchfield, Bright Summer Sun, 1917.
Watercolor on paper, 21" x 18". Sid Deutsch Gallery.



Figure 8. Charles E. Burchfield, Sun and Snowstorm, 1917. Watercolor on paper, 19½" x 27".
Collection John and Gerta Schwarz.

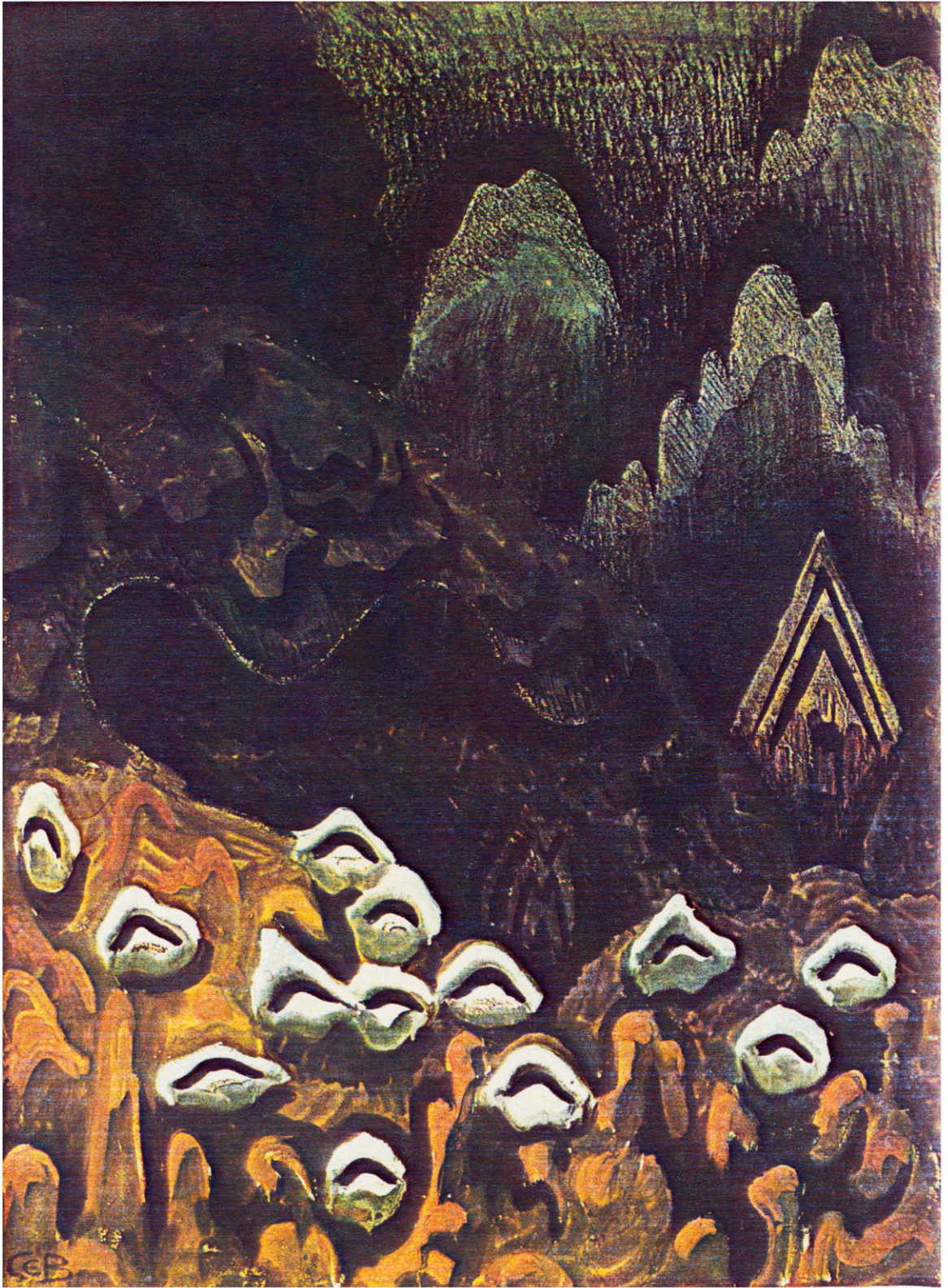


Figure 9. Charles E. Burchfield, **The August North**, 1917. (Drawing and watercolor?), 24" x 18 1/8". Collection Mr. and Mrs. William C. Janss.



Figure 10. Charles E. Burchfield, **Childhood's Garden**, 1917. Watercolor on paper, 27" x 18 15/16". Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York. Edward W. Root Bequest.

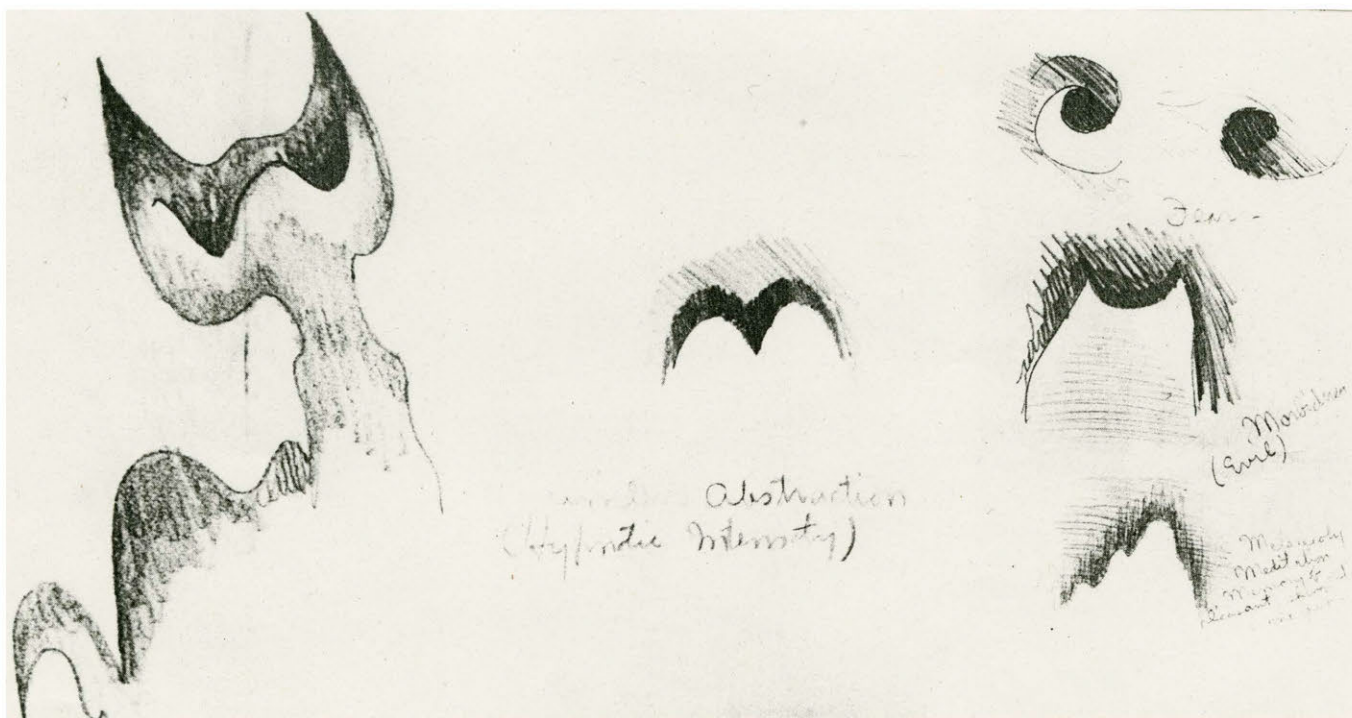
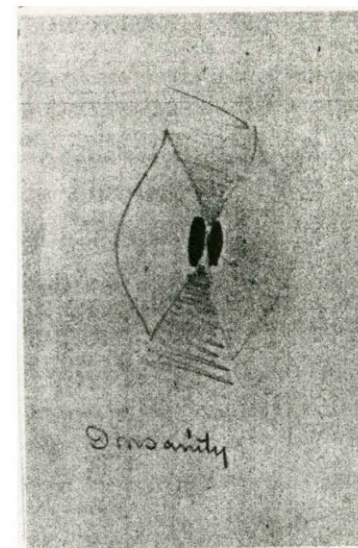
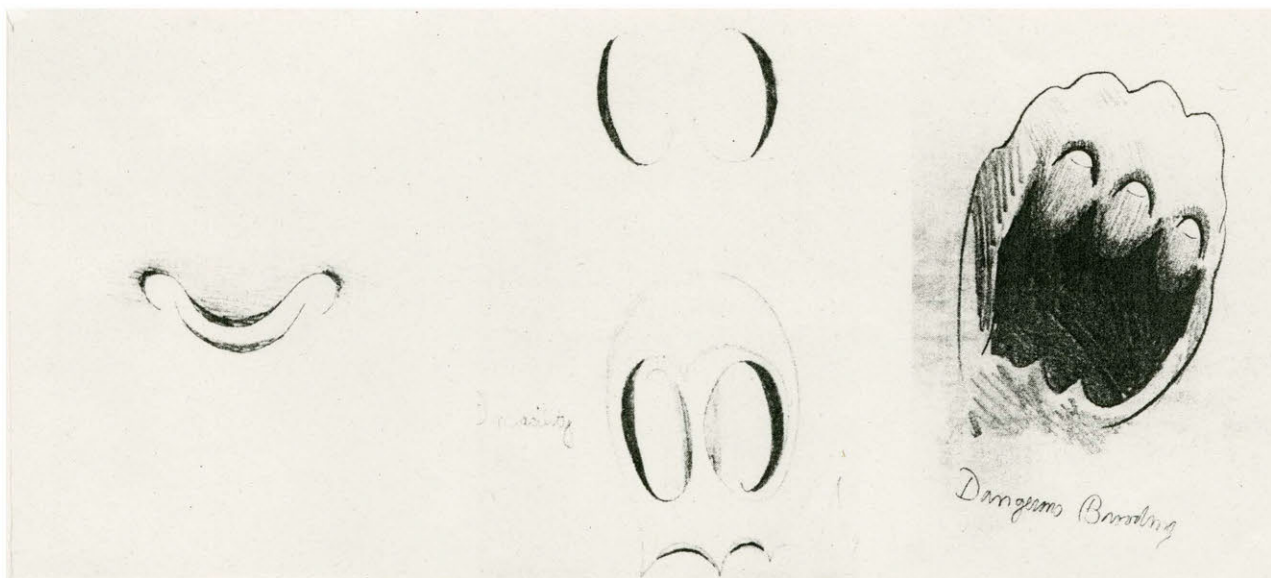


Figure 11. Charles E. Burchfield, **Conventions for Abstract Thoughts**, 1917. "Aimless Abstraction," "Dangerous Brooding," "Fascination of Evil," "Fear, Morbidity (Evil), Melancholy, Meditation, Memory...", "Imbecility," "Insanity," and "Untitled." Pencil, various sizes. Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.



Figure 12. Charles E. Burchfield, Church Bells Ringing, Rainy Winter Night, 1917. Watercolor on paper, 30" x 19". The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio. Gift of Mrs. Louise M. Dunn.

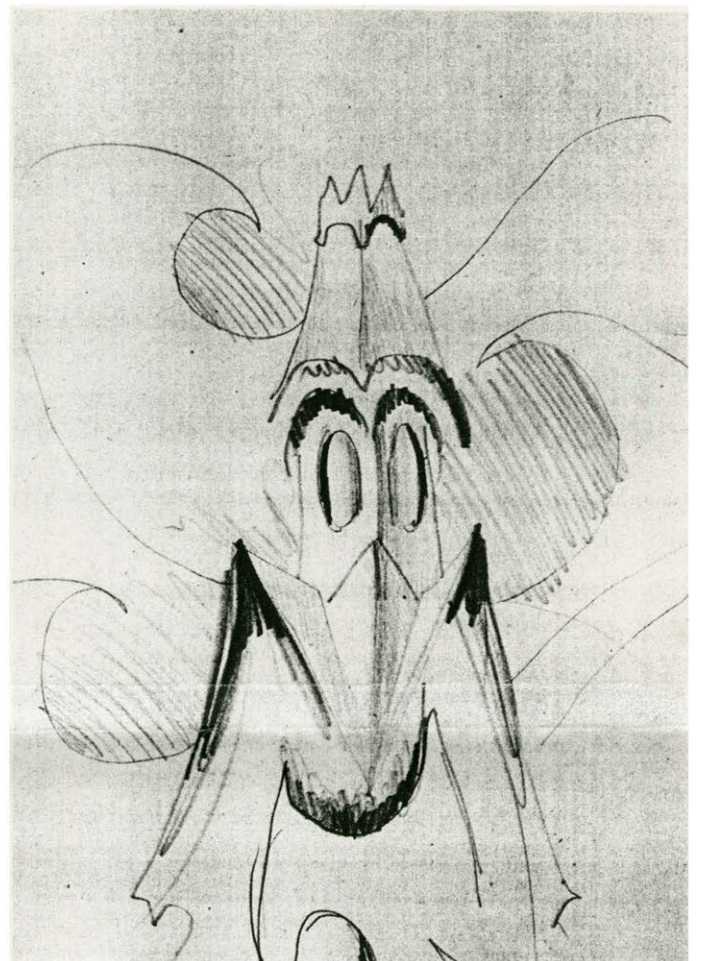
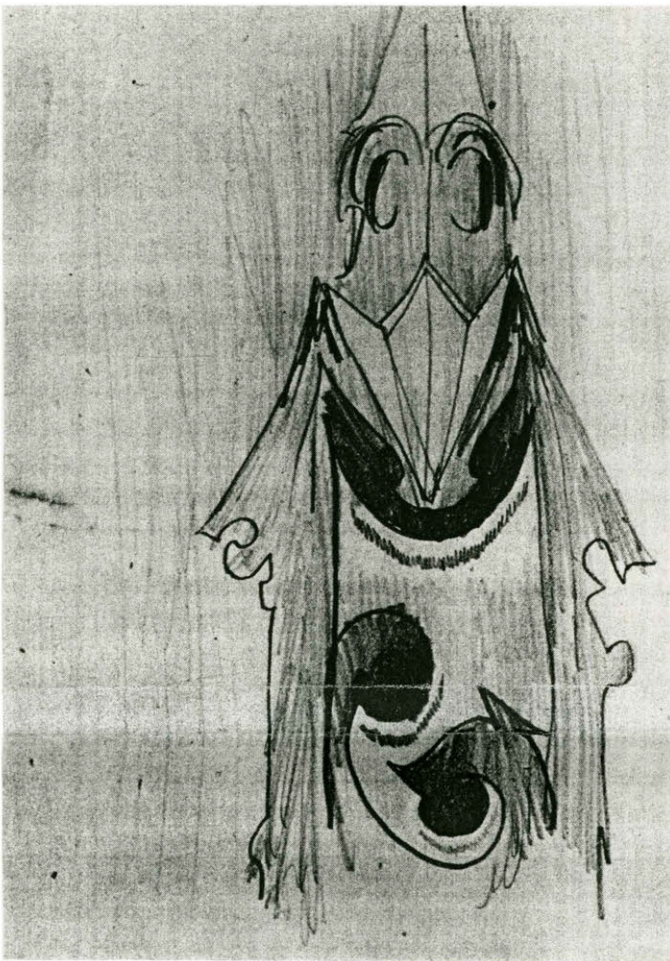
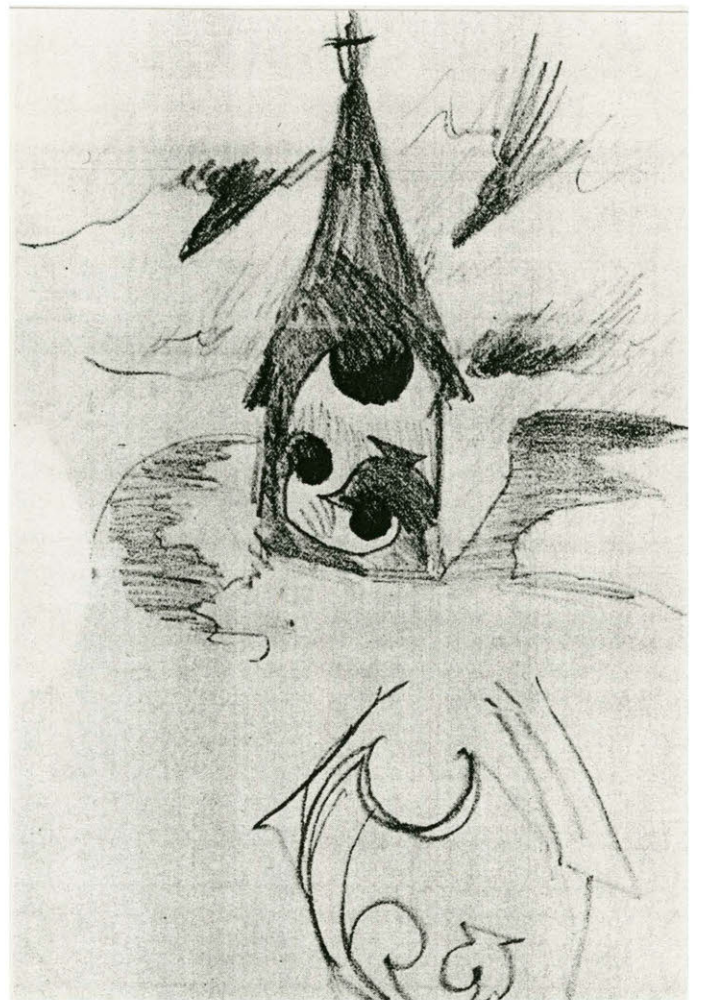


Figure 13. Charles E. Burchfield, Sketches for Church Bells Ringing, Rainy Winter Night, 1917. Pencil, various sizes. Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.



Figure 14. Charles E. Burchfield, Spring Silhouette, 1916. Watercolor over pencil sketch, 8 7/8" x 11 7/8". Burchfield Art Center, Buffalo, New York. Gift of Tony Sisti.

(Figure 15), and finally, Untitled [Gothic Window Trees] 1918 (Figure 16). He generally illustrates this theme with tree subjects and paints tall, interlocking branches in an arch shape.

Weekly suspects that Burchfield read:

Ruskin's essays on Gothic architecture when he created his Gothic motifs... When asked many years later about his representation of trees in the Gothic motif,

Burchfield explained: "If you'll observe, you will notice that trees have that natural tendency to grow together towards the top and form those [arches]. As a matter of fact, Gothic architecture was inspired by woods--interlacing of trees. That's [why] the Gothic architects used highly pointed arches that you see in medieval churches. [It] came from that incident in nature. ... I have just sort of exaggerated that and brought it out--that feeling of arches between the trees." (35)

The end of Burchfield's Early Period reveals that he did, indeed, create "fanciful nature studies" and drew upon childhood memories, as well. For instance, Childhood's Garden (Figure 10) was an illustration of one such memory, (Weekly 94) as is Church Bells Ringing, Rainy Winter Night (Figure 12), the source of which will be discussed in greater detail later. His attachment for the Mystic North will also be looked at again. Finally, these compositions illustrate he didn't need to stray far from home to execute them. Furthermore, he didn't have much time to do so, since he was still working full time.

Burchfield's Middle Period

July 1918 found Burchfield inducted into the United States Army and stationed at Camp Jackson, South Carolina. Following an honorable discharge in January 1919, he returned again to Salem, Ohio, to work for the Mullins Company.

The fact that Burchfield never strayed far from home became even more apparent in these "middle years" from 1918 to 1943. At this time, when artists all around him were



Figure 15.
Charles E. Burchfield,
Trees Dancing in April
Sunlight, 1917.
Watercolor on paper,
18" x 20". Kennedy
Galleries, New York
City, New York.



Figure 16. Charles E. Burchfield, Untitled [Gothic Window Trees], 1918. Watercolor with pencil, 14" x 10". Burchfield Art Center, Buffalo, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald A. Ross.

taking trips to Europe, Burchfield remained in the States, rejecting those European influences felt by most of his contemporaries. However, a painting entitled Spring Twilight 1920, (Figure 17) indicates that he probably thought about the Cubism movement, or perhaps looked at the work of the Precisionists, which had its roots in Cubism (Hunter and Jacobus 139-140), since the stylistic application of this work bears such a resemblance. However, this resemblance doesn't persist in subsequent work, suggesting this was only experimentation and a natural step in Burchfield's artistic growth.

In 1921, Burchfield lost his job with the Mullins Company, but fell in love. He was also affiliated with the Montross Gallery in New York City at this time. However, the income acquired from the sale of his paintings at the gallery was not sufficient to live on, and a recommendation from the dean of the Cleveland School of Art secured him a job with a wallpaper firm, M. H. Birge and Sons in Buffalo, New York. As usual, he was reluctant to leave home, Salem, Ohio, and move to a new location, but marriage meant he would need a reliable source of income. Therefore, he decided to move to Buffalo to work.

Spring was Burchfield's favorite season (Baigell 25). As a matter of fact, he said in a journal entry dated March 12, 1922: "I would like to be the embodiment of March--both in life & art--" (255), and in spring of 1922 Burchfield began his tenure as an assistant in the design department at M. H. Birge and Sons. It was also spring of 1922 that he married Bertha L. Kenreich. She was to become his lifelong companion, and the two of them always remained near Buffalo, New York, where they raised five children.

As mentioned previously, Burchfield had a tendency toward repetition in his work, not only in theme, but also in form. Designing wallpaper patterns surely emphasized this, as well as improving his skill of repeating identical forms. Figures 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, and 23 are examples of wallpaper patterns he designed for M. H. Birge and Sons. Figure 18 is his

Figure 17.
Charles E.
Burchfield,
Spring Twi-
light, 1920.
Watercolor
on Paper,
20½" x 26½".
Collection
Mr. and Mrs.
Mortimer
Spiller,
Buffalo,
New York.





Figure 18 Charles E. Burchfield, **First Wallpaper Design**, ca. 1922. Printed sample, 22½" x 18 3/4". (Back: First wall-paper Design I made--/Based on a water-color made in 1917--/The motif is cottonwood trees and sumac in front of a stone wall.) Private collection.



Figure 19. Charles E. Burchfield, Wallpaper Design No. 1, 1922-28. Gouache, 20" x 14". Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.



Figure 20. Charles E. Burchfield, Wallpaper Design No. 2, 1922-28.
Gouache, 20" x 14". Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.



Figure 21. Charles E. Burchfield, Wallpaper Design No. 3, 1922-28.
Gouache, 20" x 14". Kennedy Galleries, New York city, New York.



Figure 22. Charles E. Burchfield, Wallpaper Design No. 4, 1922-28.
Gouache, 20" x 14". Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.



Figure 23. Charles E. Burchfield, Wallpaper Study in Black and White, 1922-28. Ink, 15" x 19". (Monogram incorporated in design). Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.

very first design and Figure 23 is a black and white ink drawing design. Each of these designs was printed in various color combinations, over which Burchfield had no control.⁴

The year 1921 produced such images as Safety Valve (Figure 24), a forerunner of such works as Battleship, ca. 1930 (Figure 25) and Under the Viaduct, 1932 (Figure 26), all completed during Burchfield's "middle period." A close examination reveals a true sense of the American place, with a representational depiction of objects in their settings. These images are records of time and place. Again, an artist's natural progression can be seen, yet the sensory impressions related to the earlier landscapes are absent. However, Burchfield continues to write about these impressions in his journal.

For instance, an entry about the sound of church bells, is found in his journal on October 3, 1920. This entry also makes the purpose of the visualization of Church Bells Ringing, Rainy Winter Night (Figure 12) more apparent, and that purpose was his emotional attachment to the memories associated with that sound.

The church bells sound tonight as they did in childhood.

A vast lonely evening, with a tremendous overpowering melancholy; the child has vague remembrances of the terror of the Sunday School lesson of the morning in which fearful stress is put on the avenging wrath of God--

There is the unnatural constraint of Sunday over the town. For the time the child forgets where his mother is; there come to him unutterable foreboding of times when all protecting friends will be gone; the **cricket chorus** comes from black depths; the air opens up into a vast cavern, which the **mournful bell** swells larger & larger; the sky is about to fall--he is facing a vast valley-- (410)

On February 15, 1922, Burchfield mentions a longing for the past, and additional correlations with his journal entries and paintings surface. This entry refers to a painting

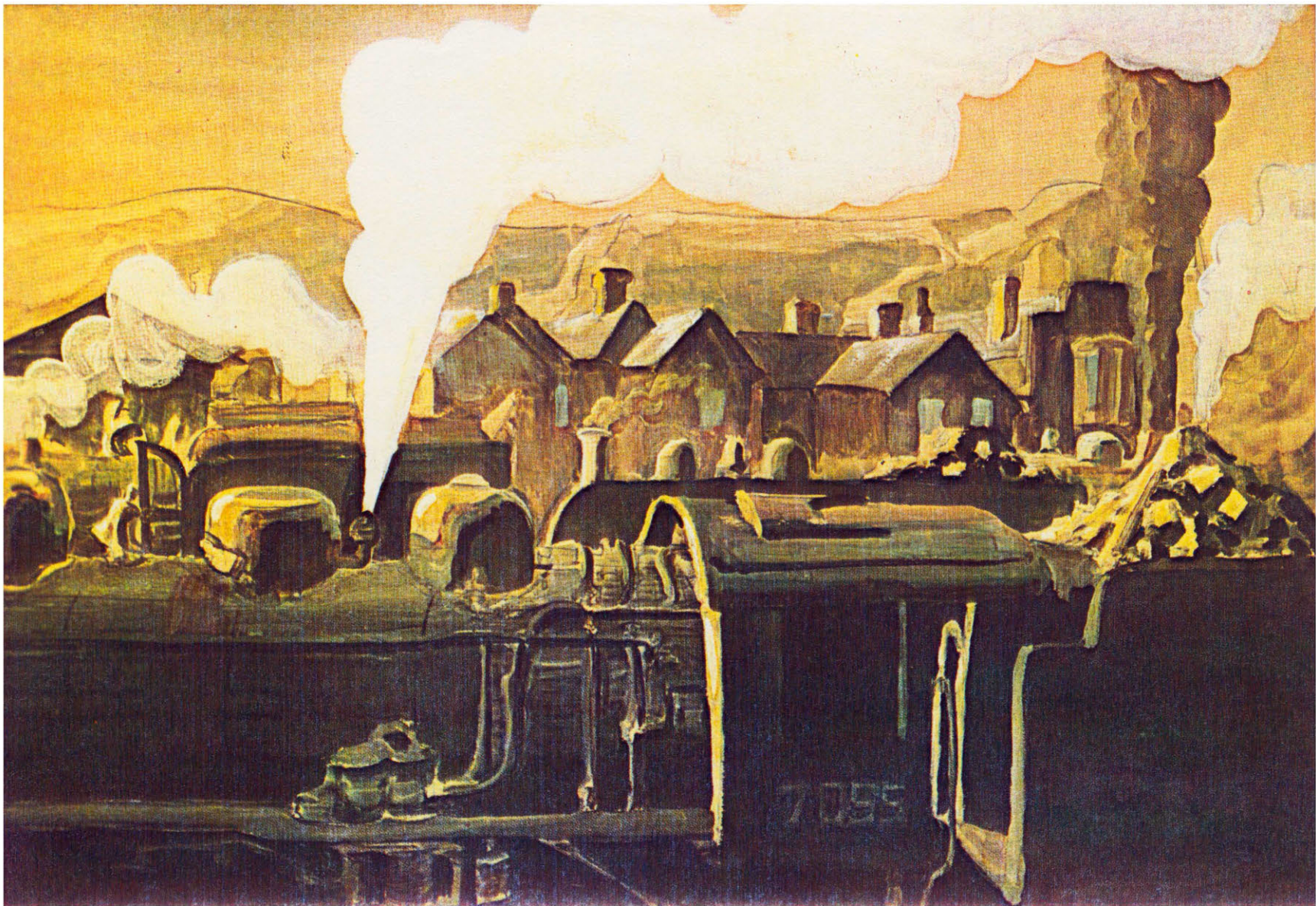


Figure 24. Charles E. Burchfield, Safety Valve, 1921. Watercolor on paper, 20" x 30". Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.

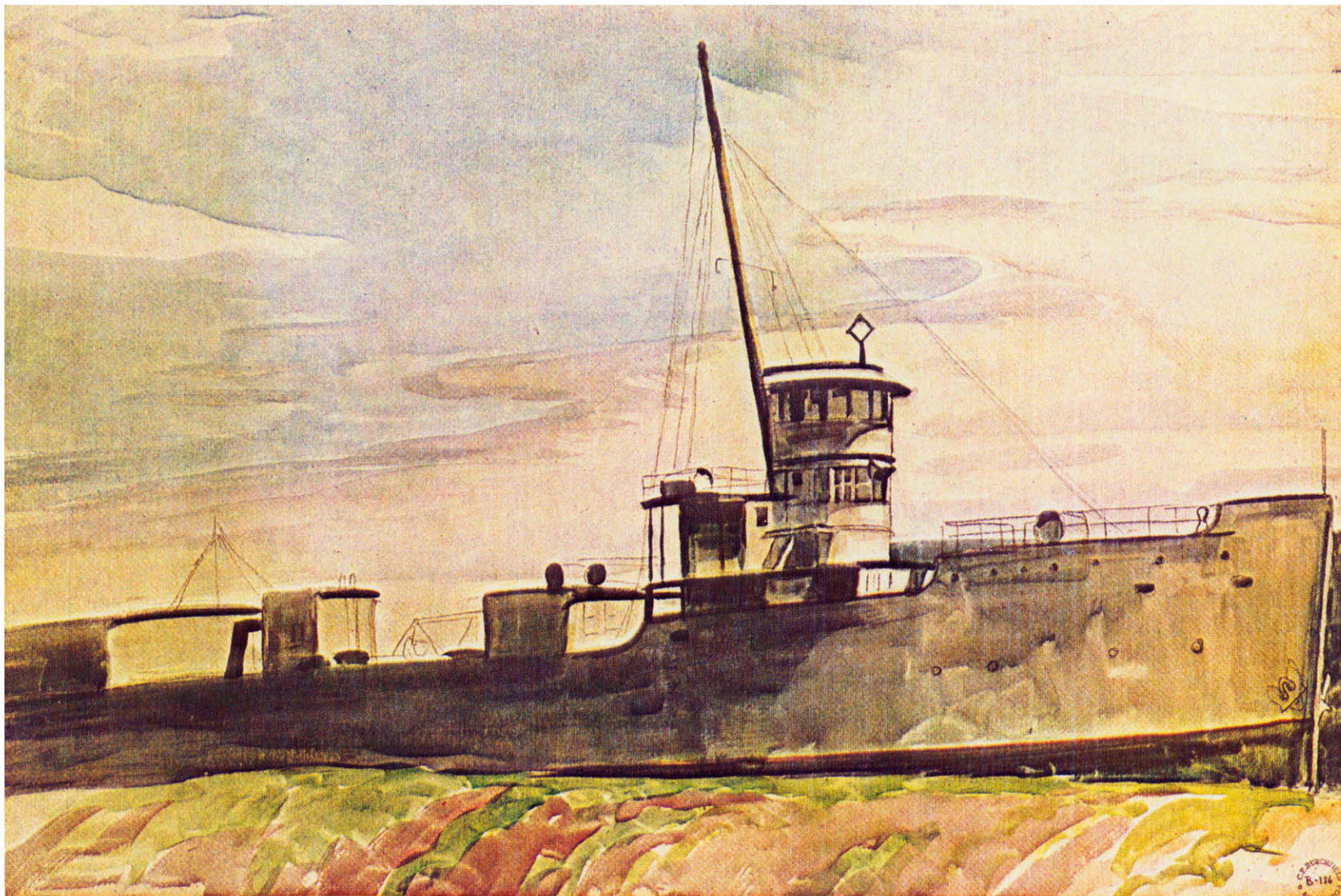


Figure 25. Charles E. Burchfield, **Battleship**, ca. 1930. Watercolor on paper, 20" x 30". Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.

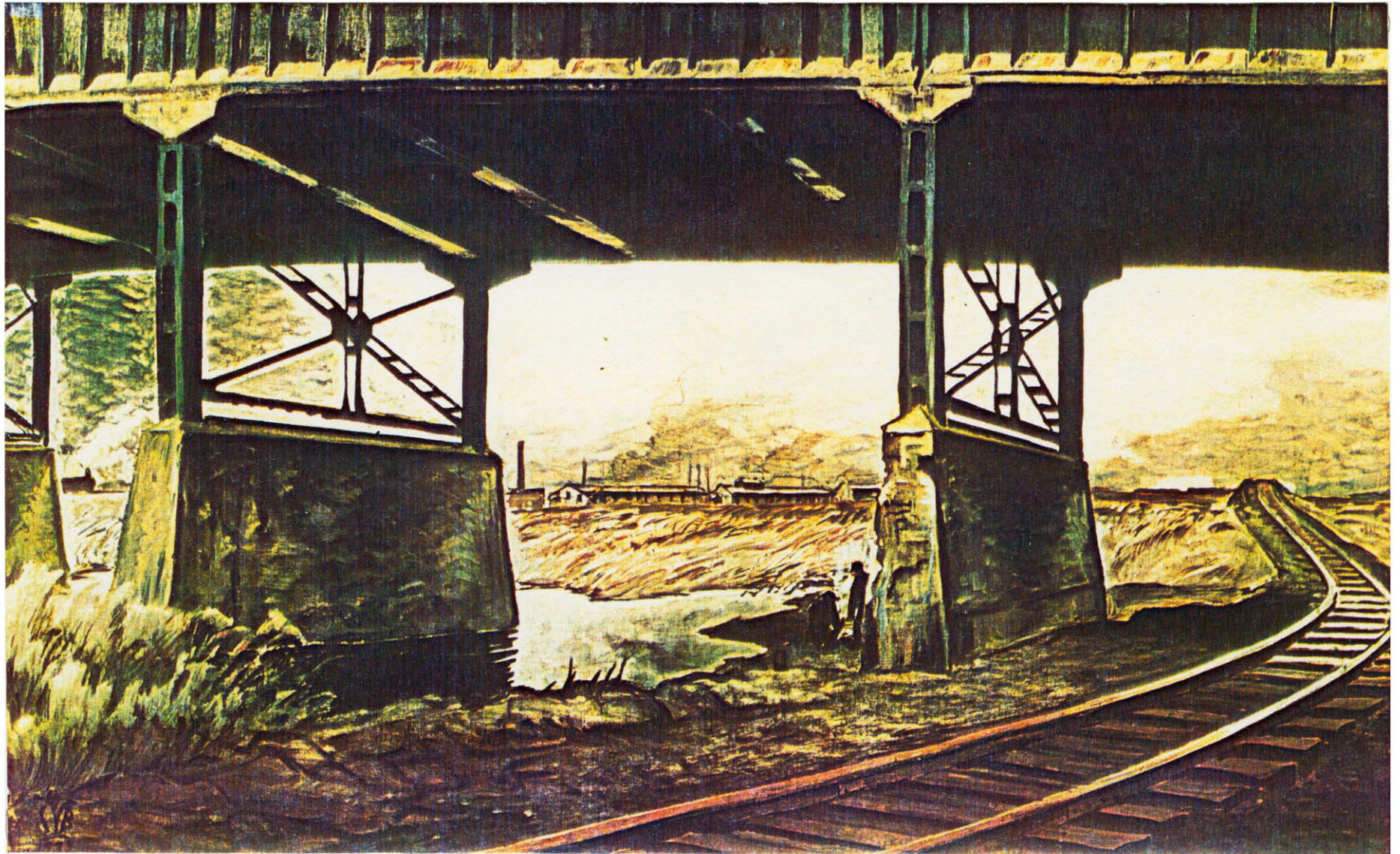


Figure 26. Charles E. Burchfield, Under the Viaduct, 1932. Oil, 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 47 $\frac{1}{8}$ ". Private Collection.

completed two years earlier, Burning Stump, 1920 (Figure 27). Furthermore, his reference to the act of "recording" the observed object gives credence to the theory that these images were actually only records of the time and place.

Most terrible longings for my old life has assailed me tonight--I packed some of my old sketches--and they filled me with longing for the odd little events of a carefree country life--the **record** of a burning stump, ... (456)

The very next day, February 16, 1922, Burchfield makes another significant comment:

Great changes in our lives are not made suddenly or dramatically; nor are we conscious always of making the change. It is only tonight as I look about my room at my early sketches that I realize that a phase of my life has closed forever. "Forever" is a terrible word. ... (456)

As the year progresses, this theme of unhappiness continues. On April 8, 1922, he writes about his sadness:

When I reached the harbor I was enveloped in a strange melancholy sadness that was at once painful and pleasant. I leaned against the stone wall aching both physically & spiritually. (40)

During this middle period, many entries indicate certain frustrations about past and present experiences. This one exhibits Burchfield's serious attachment to nature:

6/25/25--I cut the weeds in the front yard tonight. Regret came with the first blow of the sickle. ...My resentment grew as I went along--here I was ruthlessly cutting down some of my favorite plants, **plants that I associate with my boyhood--healthy homely plants, outlaws of the vegetable world, corresponding to the Huck Finns of the humanity.** I had to call Bertha to the window and express to her my feeling about the matter--she agreed with me that it was a shame...



Figure 27. Charles E. Burchfield, **Burning Stump**, 1920. Watercolor?, 32½" x 24½". Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.

...Like me they are despised weeds--outlaws in the cultural worlds. I decided I would cultivate them as some people do rare plants. (255)

On March 26, 1926, Burchfield writes, "... **Regret for all the sophistication & self-consciousness that has crept into my work came over me**" (175), yet it is in March, 1926 that he paints March Wind (Figure 28). While the fanciful animation of his early work isn't apparent, he has captured the sensation that is felt on a blustery, cold March day. In addition, this painting suggests the emotional torment felt by the artist. This torment is conveyed by the darkness that inhabits the top and right side of the image in large, diagonal shapes, which in turn expresses a feeling of heaviness. The painting doesn't necessarily communicate great sophistication and a self-consciousness on the part of the artist. However, this journal passage is a very important note about the beginning of Burchfield's dissatisfaction associated with his work.

More regrets surface on June 12, 1926, this time counterbalanced by Burchfield's memory of his love for nature:

Walking along filled with regrets over all the past misdeeds & mistakes of my life--all the mean, cruel things I ever did came up to haunt me--filled with regret over the misspent afternoon--tired & hungry--all at once off of the damp meadows comes the wonderful sweet moist odor of clover & fresh grass--it was like a blessing. (87)

Burchfield continues to make notes about those activities in his surroundings that affect his senses, amidst his regrets and dissatisfaction. On October 9, 1926, he makes an entry that indicates he is aware of the sounds that industry and progress make, and again records what he sees. Note his bracketed comment at the end.

On the car to city line--...

Waiting for the train at Hamburg--a shifting locomotive--While it was standing still,



Figure 28. Charles E. Burchfield, **March Wind**, 1926. Watercolor on paper 26½" x 39 3/4". The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio. The J. H. Wade Fund.

something in its mechanism made a shrill noise like a miniature "wild cat" siren--going up the scale & then down in exact inverted duplication--in regular rhythm like an animal breathing. [Pencil sketch of two engines, one approaching in the distance, another retreating in the foreground.] (42)

By December 26, 1927 Burchfield's regrets have turned to agony:

Oh the agony of longing for what is irrevocably past--I unpacked some of the pictures that were sent down, this evening--before I went in the shop I ... paused to look at the skies--to the east the December moon partially concealed by vague mists & wispy clouds that somehow expressed the torment of my mind; ... (80)

It's interesting to notice that he writes about how nature seems to express what is happening in his mind at this time.

On March 30, 1929, Burchfield writes that, "...a great surge of homesickness comes over me; and overwhelming hatred of my job closes down over me and I almost reel" (461). Subsequently, by the end of 1929, Burchfield quit his job at the wallpaper company. Perhaps the hatred he felt was in part responsible for his decision to leave; however, there were other factors as well.

While Burchfield didn't maintain a close relationship with many artists working during this time, he did maintain an association with Edward Hopper and Edward Root. Edward Root was a collector and a professor of art at Hamilton College. He persuaded Burchfield to leave the Montross Gallery in 1929, join the Frank K. M. Rehn Gallery, and finally leave the wallpaper company to pursue painting full time. Once affiliated with this new gallery, Burchfield remained with them for the rest of his life (Baur 126-131, 147-150).

It's not clear how the friendship between Burchfield and Hopper ensued. However, Hopper was also affiliated with the Frank K. M. Rehn Gallery (Baur 11-12), and

... it was Hopper against whom Burchfield intuitively measured his own success.

Although or possibly because they were 'at opposite poles of expression' and for the most part worked in different media, [they] preserved a lifelong admiration for each other's work... (549)

Burchfield was thoroughly against being considered part of any type of organized art movement, although his work had positively taken a realistic turn. Winebrenner said in 1963 that "... it was not a photographic realism, for his houses and urban scenes expressed some of the sensations that a child might have in looking at unfamiliar and newly seen objects" (2), yet it was of a decidedly American "flavor," similar to the images that Hopper produced. A group of painters known as the Regionalists were working at this time. These Regionalists, such artists as John Steuart Curry, Thomas Hart Benton, and Grant Wood, purposely rejected European movements and set about painting subjects unique to America in a realistic manner. It seems Hopper, as well as Burchfield, fell into this category.

Such paintings as Winter Twilight (Figure 29), Battleship (Figure 25), Under the Viaduct (Figure 26), and Black Iron (Figure 30) were truly realistic representations of American subjects, yet Burchfield still refused to be included with this group. While Leah Ollman states that "Burchfield eventually aligned himself in spirit and style with [them]" (7), Baur says:

As the Buffalo paintings...became more widely known through almost yearly exhibitions at the Rehn Gallery [and other shows]..., Burchfield's reputation grew. This was gratifying, but at the same time he was distressed by a widespread critical tendency to identify him as a regionalist and even to associate him with the "American Scene" group ... for which Thomas Craven was the principal spokesman. The chauvinism of the group was distasteful to him. (166)



Figure 29. Charles E. Burchfield, Winter Twilight, 1927-30. Oil on composition board, 27 3/4" x 30 1/2". The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, New York.

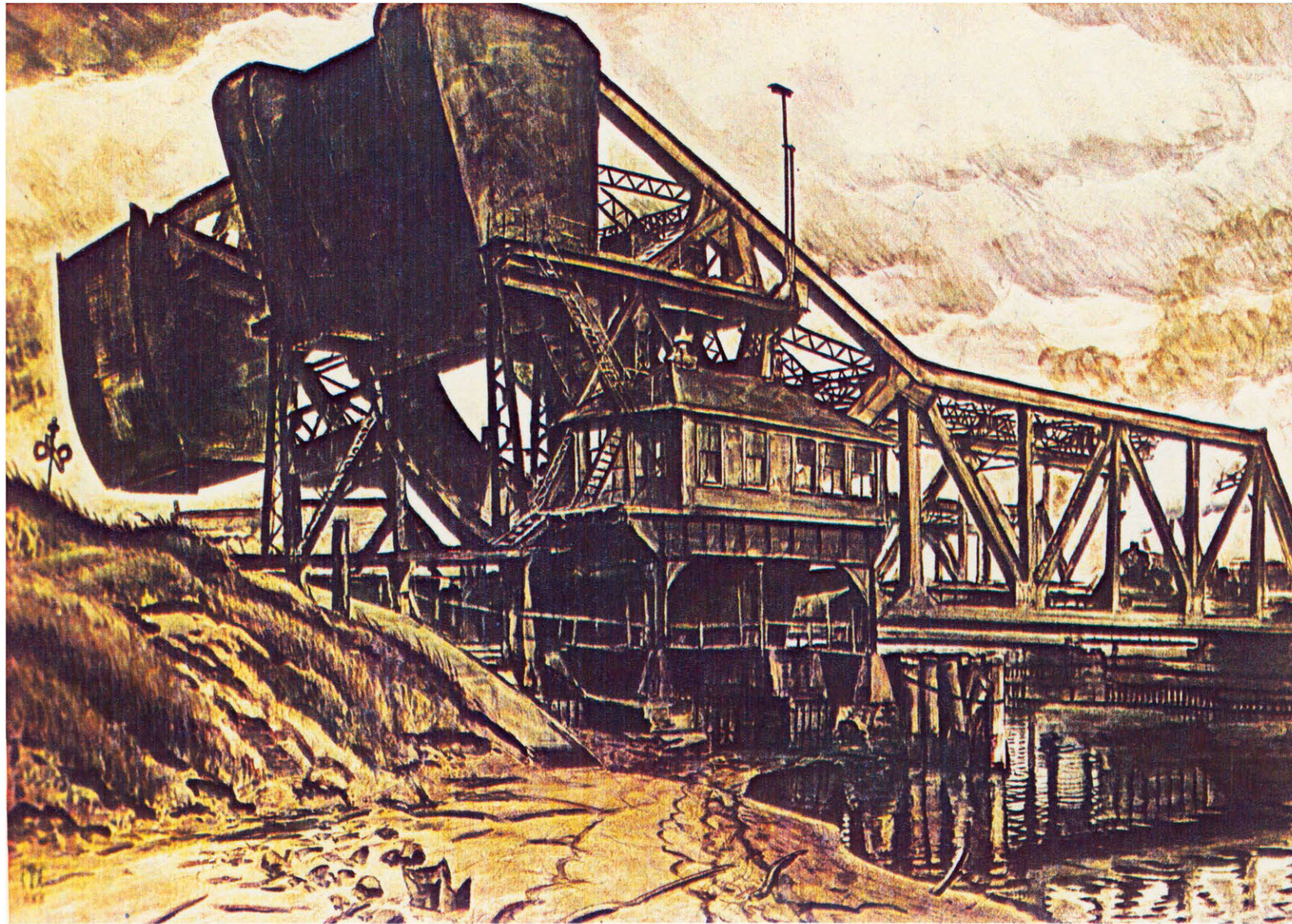


Figure 30. Charles E. Burchfield, **Black Iron**, (Erie and N. Y. Central R/R Bridges Over Buffalo River), 1935. Watercolor on paper, 29" x 41". Collection Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd.

Baur goes on to quote part of a 1935 letter from Burchfield to Frank Rehn as follows: "I notice of late my name has not been used so much with the Benton-Wood-Curry idea. If this is due to your efforts, a thousand thanks to you!" (167). These efforts didn't stop the association, nor Burchfield's displeasure, though. Baur's passage continues:

The theme recurs through the rest of the decade. Peyton Boswell "is an ass" for writing that Burchfield "'founded' the American Scene School--what tripe!" "I am not an Ohio, or a western New York artist, but an American artist--or should I say an artist who happens to be born, living, painting in America. If I paint for an audience, it is to anyone, anywhere who happens to be spiritually akin to me. 'Regionalism'--It makes me sick!" (167-169)

"Nevertheless," Baur ends the passage by saying, "... Burchfield was a regionalist ... if the term is understood in its broadest sense rather than a narrowly provincial one" (169).

The idea that Burchfield was motivated to make images because intangible sources affected his senses is further evidenced by his response to music. He loved the symphony and such composers as Bach, Beethoven, Handel, and Dvorak. However, Sibelius was his favorite (Baigell 25). Baigell says that,

In 1932, while musing about Sibelius' Finlandia, a work he [Burchfield] felt captured the spirit of an entire nation, the desire grew in him [Burchfield] to create a painting that would do the same for America. (124)

While, there is no one such work by Burchfield, many of his middle period paintings do speak exclusively about America. Furthermore, other specific motivations for his work during this time include commissions for Fortune magazine. Out of these commissions came images of train yards, (see Figures 31, and 32), and coal mines in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Texas, again realistic representations of America (Baur 171-174).

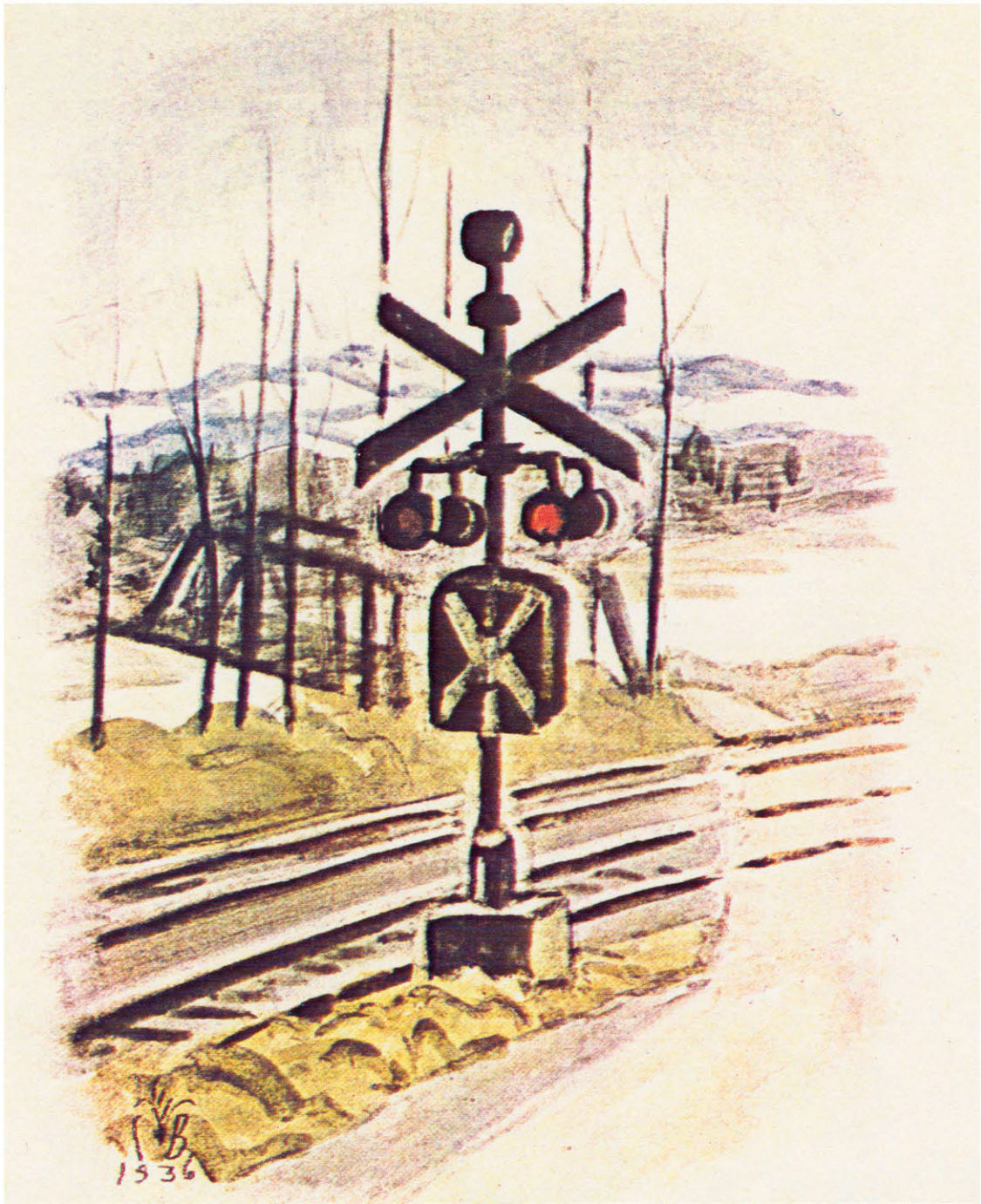


Figure 31. Charles E. Burchfield. Railroad Signal, 1936. Watercolor, 7 3/4" x 6 3/4". Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.



Figure 32. Charles E. Burchfield, **Freight Yards**, (The Hump, Hump, Operations), 1936. Watercolor, 18" x 14". Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art.

The aforementioned paintings are of manmade objects in landscape. However, it's also possible to introduce other paintings from this same time period that are pure landscape. The first one is entitled Cliffs and Waterfall (Figure 33), painted c. 1935 and the second one is Swampfire (Figure 34), painted in 1937. Notice that Burchfield's brush strokes are still heavy and gone is the "spidery," light-handed effect of the strokes in his early work. A certain "darkness" continues to prevail and is in keeping with the same style that appeared in March Wind (Figure 28), more than ten years earlier. This suggests that Burchfield still wasn't psychologically happy, and evidence of this comes to light over and over again in his journal.

The year 1932 proves to be the year of ultimate devastation for some of Burchfield's paintings. It begins on March 22, 1932:

Working yesterday and today on rearranging my studio and burning some pictures. I have too much "excess baggage"; the trouble is to get the courage to throw it irrevocably aside. [CEB wrote and then erased: "(You damned fool! 2/20/45)."]
(466)

and becomes complete on March 24, 1932:

To Studio--getting up my courage I burn many more pictures, and feel more light-hearted tonight.! (466)

This light-heartedness has a false sense of comfort, and the margin notation dated 1945 surely substantiates that.

In 1933, Burchfield's mother died. An entry on August 7, 1933 notes this and indicates that he still thinks about church bells and childhood.

On the morning of June 23 at 7:30 Mother died,...We are standing in the cemetery by the newly disturbed ground. Some friend has arranged the flowers on ...



Figure 33. Charles E. Burchfield, Cliffs and Waterfall, c. 1935. Watercolor, 22" x 30". Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.



Figure 34. Charles E. Burchfield, Swampfire, 1937. Watercolor, 21" x 30". Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.

grave[s],...like the pressure of a hand. **The mournful church bells, that used in childhood to frighten me, have died away into silence,...** (136)

The year 1935 finds Burchfield still lamenting his childhood days and still finding comfort in their memories:

May 1, 1935--...there seemed something magical about the simple remark "We went east on Clinton ..." ... the whole country-side had the glamour of things experienced from early childhood--the very names had magic, capable of calling to mind visions of late spring evenings, excursions into the dark woods for fragile spring-flowers, ponds with teeming life, and noisy toads & frogs--... ancient-ness of experience, as tho I had wandered in it as a boy. A great love of all things, all experience fills me tonight--
(53)

As Burchfield embraces the realism around him and documents this on May 23, 1936,

Like "barbelion" I am vexed in these early diaries of my preoccupation with Nature, instead of the more interesting human contacts, family activities, or office doings. The least reference to these latter is full of interest now, whereas my over-minute descriptions of natural events are tremendously tiresome. (4)

he is making images similar to this one, Gas Station, ca. 1937 (Figure 35).

The following journal reference on October 12, 1937 describes Burchfield's day of painting in Buffalo. In direct contradiction to the preceding entry, he writes about the phenomena that happens in nature, the changing sunlight. He even compares the smoke residue from blasting to clouds. The most interesting line is near the end, where he speaks of having a feeling that he did something similar in the past.

After breakfast, put my things in car & drive to Vats...I proceed to the S.W. end of the vats, but the lighting is not what I thought it would be, and there is no way to



Figure 35. Charles E. Burchfield, Gas Station, ca. 1937. Watercolor, 20" x 28". Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.

keep the sun off my work. So I pack up and go to the opposite end, where I find my picture. This opening facing N.E., the ends of the vats were already in shadow. This day of working here is like a dream. The whole side of the one vat was in full brilliant sunshine, an incredibly brilliant yellow. Blasting was constantly going on--a deep hollow muffled roar, and a great cloud of powdered sulphur (sometimes the wind blew it over me, and my eyes smarted)--**As often happens with a new experience, there was about this a feeling that long ago I had seen something like this, [sic] something about men working on the side of a hot white dusty hill-side.**

(474)

However, Burchfield's exuberance with his newly discovered interest in the realistic world around him begins to wane. During this decade he is also trying his hand at oil painting. The saddest part of this change is what he has begun to say about his painting:

June 17, 1938--The last three days on the Elevators picture.--It has become a prison at last, from which I seek in vain to escape. ... I long to be quit of it..., it is not without sadness and regret--it is the end of a long drawn-out dream; and the whistle of a tug in the distant harbor brings a pang: --the season has advanced, true summer is upon us, the lush green meadows of May are but a memory, and my dream, too, will soon be but a memory. (477)

Furthermore, he begins to suffer additional annoyances:

7/29/38--What added to the general confusion of this period was the great number of people who wanted to come and see my pictures, people that for one reason or another I could not refuse...I am completely sick of it; and it seems to have less value probably than it really has. (65)

He begins to question his life on February 5, 1939:

...I recall the loneliness of certain afternoons of my boyhood, ... desolate landscape,
 ... without an intimate friend, ... a young man, foregoing marriage--black loneliness.
 Is there something gone out of my life? (65)

This prevailing mood becomes darker on March 24, 1939:

I am depressed and bored; I haven't a single idea for painting and nothing seems worthwhile; in short, life seems insupportable. How to combat these black moods. Yet perversely, I seem to want to steep myself more & more in them. It is soul-destroying.

In my youth, there never was time enough to get painted the pictures that thronged my mind; now I go for weeks and months sterile. (487)

The time is now drawing near for Burchfield's rediscovery of his "old" method of working. He has abandoned the oils and returned to watercolors, yet seems to still be in despair and questioning what he does. Once again, he begins to rely more on nature for subject matter than objects in the landscape. A painting from this year, 1939, Woodland Scene (Figure 36), illustrates this reliance. It also indicates a tendency on Burchfield's part to return to some of his earlier patterning techniques, as well as the Gothic motif. However, the handling of the repeating patterns continues to be executed in a way that is heavier and darker than his earliest work or the paintings that are still to come. In addition, another one painted a year later, 1940, entitled Arching Trees (Figure 37) concentrates on the Gothic motif, too, but does have building forms in the distance. However, the placement of the "house" forms, as well as the title of the painting, indicates that they were not his primary subject. Furthermore, as mentioned before, this motif recurred throughout his career, and these works substantiate that it is one of his focuses even in his middle period.



Figure 36. Charles E. Burchfield, Woodland Scene, 1939. Watercolor, 22" x 28". Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.



Figure 37. Charles E. Burchfield, **Arching Trees**, 1940. Watercolor, 24½" x 30 3/4". Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.

During October 1939 Burchfield took a trip to Philadelphia and New York City to serve as a juror for a print exhibition and meet with his dealer at the gallery. He writes:

... the important result of the trip seems to be, that I began to see, almost as soon as I was away from home, that my whole life and outlook needed reorientation, a feeling that has grown steadily from day to day, until now I realize that in the past few years I have denied myself all that makes life worth living--vis--a leisurely enjoyment of everyday life; human contacts; belief in one's home, and one's own village; a cavalier attitude toward my reputation; the freedom to experiment, and do casual things--all these things and more have I denied myself in my anxiety to produce more pictures, and pictures that would increase my fame, or at least make it hold its own. Along this path lies only destruction for an artist. (102)

It is not his drive to "make more pictures" that is destroying him, but the fact that he has confused what it is that drives that passion. He is searching in the wrong place for the source of his satisfaction, and this has produced his anxiety.

While the world is experiencing the Second World War, Burchfield was:

1/3/41--... In studio studying pictures, and (later) reading in my journal of 1925 to 30--One should never cease keeping a journal. How invaluable to me now, with the present turmoil and disaster in the world, are my thoughts of those days--They bring me back to sanity;--and will provide the connecting link between one period of peace to [i.e., and] another. (5)

Later that same year, August 10, 1941 Burchfield writes:

... Thru all my career, I have been plagued by nostalgic yearnings for times & seasons that are past. There are good and bad points about this--it helps

retrospection, so necessary to interpretive painting--but it also hinders complete enjoyment of the present. (177)

Finally, what seems to be the brink of discovery, or maybe the lowest period of all, Burchfield writes:

1/21/43--...Walking along the road this afternoon, the realization came over me with overwhelming force that I am mentally asleep, and have lost all sense of true values--Wishing for milder weather so I can paint, I am blind to the beauty and power of this zero weather--To me, the artist, interested chiefly in weather--all weather is beautiful, and full of powerful emotion--This "icy blast" from the vast northeastern wastes--the monotone of gray and black and white--Trees seem to have grown thinner, taller, and shrink into themselves, as do houses and other objects--That I did not realize this shows that I have allowed myself to grow dull and insensitive thru the disuse of my faculties--my ability to enjoy whatever is going on in the world of nature, and the keen delight of writing it down.

I must search myself--how can I realize otherwise, whether I am drifting into the oblivion of the mediocre outlook--that outlook that the masses hold, and which is worthless--deadening. (104)

In 1943, Burchfield began to return to his former way of working. It was at this time that he realized he could take old paintings, add more panels to enlarge them, and create new, larger paintings. The Coming of Spring (Figure 38), is the culmination of this realization. He began with a work entitled Two Ravines (Figure 39), started in 1934 and then reworked a similar one begun in 1917 to create The Coming of Spring. Here is his journal entry:

4/19/43--Cold rain ... 1917 sketches sharpened my perception of nature, and I see the world with renewed youthful eyes.



Figure 38. Charles E. Burchfield, The Coming of Spring, 1917-43. Watercolor on paper, 34" x 48".
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, New York. George A. Hearn Fund.

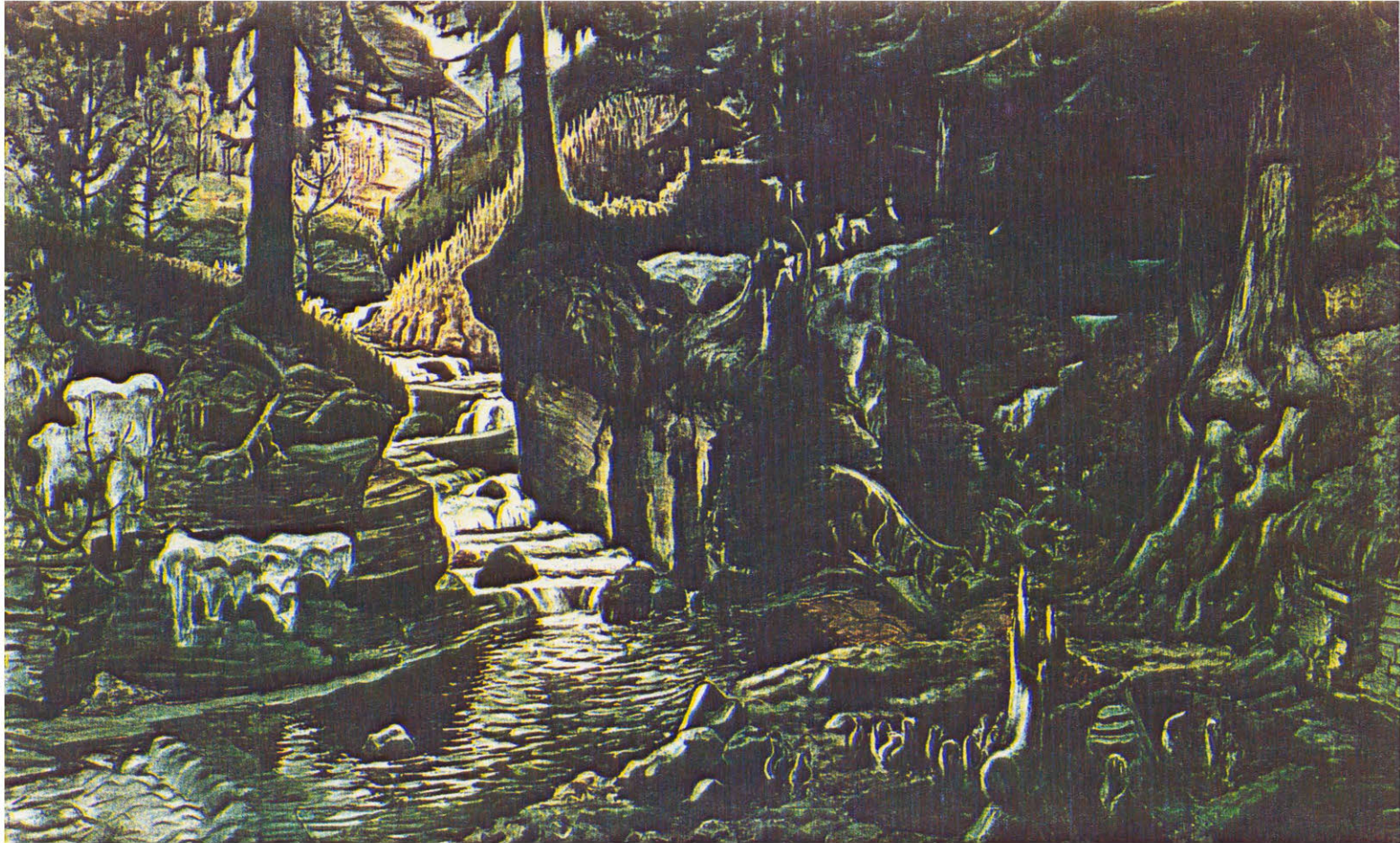


Figure 39. Charles E. Burchfield, **Two Ravines**, 1933-34. Watercolor, 36½" x 61 1/8". Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga, Tennessee. Gift of the Benwood Foundation.

Mounting a few more 1917 sketches, and studying both the 1917 and the 1934-43 versions of "Two Ravines," I now intend to finish the former, adding ... elements I would have put in at that time, and in the same manner. When I tried to restore this picture in 1931 (?) I made the mistake of trying to bring it "up to date" by adding tonal painting. What it needs is to be restored completely to the 1917 manner.

I have enlarged it from 30 x 43 to 34 x 48. (501)

Henceforth, he is always thrilled with his "successes." In 1948 he talks about a similar reconstruction:

3/2/48--Got out the "Winter Rain at Night" (a 1917 reconstructed picture that I mounted last year) and started drawing on it--all at once, it seemed to click and I felt an overwhelming desire to work on it (which I plan to do tomorrow--what will the day bring forth?) and at the same time ideas for conventionalizing natural phenomena [didn't he used to do this?] poured in on me. I thank God for this renewal of my creative power. (513)

The next day, he made another entry:

3/3/48--All day on the "Winter Night" picture (I think it must have a more descriptive title, such as "Thunderstorm on a Winter Night" or "The Night of the Equinox") [he chose the latter]--I worked with joy and exuberance, with a feeling of power such as I have not known for months--At the end of the day, exhausted mentally & emotionally I called B[ertha] out to look at it. She was completely "bowled over" by it, and declared it to be one of my best.

In a daze of happiness all evening. (516)

From now until the end of his life, more than twenty additional years, Burchfield continued to work in the style related to his paintings prior to 1918. It is also interesting to note that in

1944, after a long period of agnosticism and pantheism, Burchfield finally converted to Lutheranism, his wife's Christian Protestant affiliation, and remained loyal to this denomination the rest of his life (Baur Charles Burchfield 73.) The correlation of the time period between the release of the anxiety he experienced regarding his painting and his conversion to Christianity at this time is coincidental enough to mention. While he still maintained his love for nature, he had evidently developed spiritually enough to embrace additional beliefs and still feel comfortable.

Burchfield's Late Period

We have seen that Burchfield was full of anxiety, sadness, and agony during his "middle years," and that once he returned to this old method of working, he never deviated again. As mentioned earlier, Burchfield's later work is more closely related to his earliest paintings. A comparison of The Insect Chorus (Figure 5), and Autumnal Fantasy, 1917-44 (Figure 40) proves this to be true. As a matter of fact, Autumnal Fantasy is a reworked painting originally started in 1917. While he did continue to remember those places and experiences he had encountered during his "middle period," he forgot to rely on them for inspiration in his work, even though he continued to be successful. For instance, a journal entry on October 2, 1934:

At noon Bertha called my attention to strands of spiderwebs in the sky...the sight was thrilling. I looked until the brilliant light brought blinding tears to my eyes.

(276)

is the source of a painting entitled Spider-Web Tree, August (Figure 41). However, this painting was not executed until 1962. It is stylistically similar to The Insect Chorus (Figure 5) and Autumnal Fantasy (Figure 40) with its repetition of strokes, but is not a reworked image. The repeated patterning now produces a "whimsical nature," something that had been

Figure 40.
Charles E.
Burchfield,
**Autumnal
Fantasy**,
1917-44.
Watercolor
on paper,
37" x 52½".
Private
Collection.



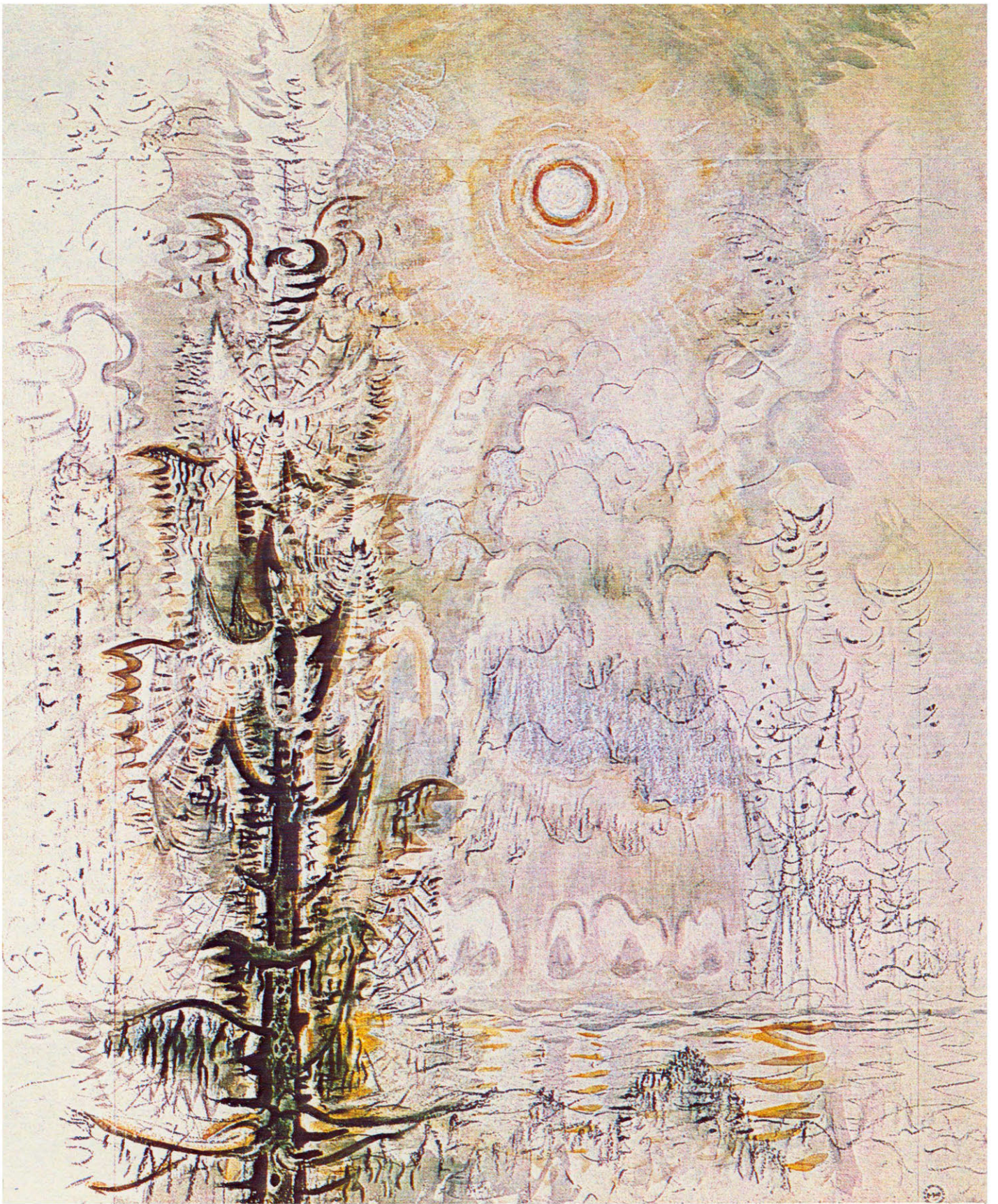


Figure 41. Charles E. Burchfield, **Spider-Web Tree, August**, 1962. Watercolor, 58" x 48". Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.

absent in his "middle period." Furthermore, before his "middle period," when a particularly interesting subject appeared in his journal, he did "get around" to making it. For instance, the result of the following passage was the Song of the Telegraph (Figure 42). Although the journal entry was made in 1915 and the painting in 1917, it was never truly completed until 1952.

1/29/15--Strange that I should have forgotten one of the trip's most memorable events;...I was accompanied by the "telegraph harp" which is the fitting music of such weather. I must always associate it with wide windswept fields in afternoon sunlight. While the humming of a pole just passed was still strong in my ears, the song of a new pole in higher or lower and sometimes a minor key, commenced. I heard the clipping of the clashing wires which was like the call of an unceasing katydid on an August night. (292)

This entry also indicates that Burchfield returned to his illustration of nature's intangible sounds. Actually, a couple years prior to this reworked image, he painted Brookside Music (Figure 43), this time giving a visual image to the sound of running water, as well as comparing it to music. It was not a reworked image either.

During his later years, Burchfield often re-read his journal and worked new images from entries made during his "early years," as well as reworking the old ones.

1/20/60--P.M.--Painted the memory of an incident that took place almost 60 years ago, but which seems still as vivid in my memory as the day it happened long ago. I had been to visit my grandfather with my Uncle Jim. On our return home a heavy wet snow was falling. Just as we neared the corner of Rose and Fourth, there was a flash of lightning and clap of thunder from out of the heavy clouds above. Never



Figure 42. Charles E. Burchfield, Song of the Telegraph, 1917-52. Watercolor, 34" x 53". Masco Corporation.



Figure 43. Charles E. Burchfield, **Brookside Music**, (Pussywillow, Song, Sparrow, Sunlit Stream), 1950. Watercolor, 26" x 40". Kennedy Galleries, New York City, New York.

having experienced such a thing before, to my childish mind it seemed like an impossible, a miraculous event. (328)

Some of the imagery related to Burchfield's repeated themes had been all but abandoned during his "middle period." One such theme was his constant search for the "Northland." Following are a few entries, all made after his "middle period," that illustrate how he remembers and continues this search until he is a very old man. The first one made on May 4, 1949, is particularly disturbing. He describes his beloved woods in a wonderful, enchanting fashion, and is suddenly confronted by the reality of the place where he finds himself:

A beautiful woods by a cemetery made me stop...The sound of a waterfall attracted me...

...explore the woods, Mostly maples, and all the underbrush cleaned out...hosts of trilliums and white violets, & a few squirrel corn. The feeling of coming into a North woods at twilight. It recalled some vague elusive memory of my boyhood;... I wish I could grasp the feeling better. A stream thru the woods...It seemed as if it could be a magic woods; as if crossing a certain invisible line, I would be in a land of enchantment, where would be growing in profusion all the flowers I love, mysterious glades, and dark cave with ice still inside. Once inside this land of enchantment, I would be forever a boy, enjoying only boyish delights.

When I emerged from the woods, the half-moon at the zenith... I now noticed the stones in the cemetery on the knoll were all exactly alike, ... [... number 4923], ... soldier's graveyard [?] ... Gradually then, it dawned on me that prisoners from the Attica State Prison were buried here. The whole aspect of the place changed swiftly. It seemed horrible and sinister that men were buried here, and were only designated

by impersonal numbers. The cold moon high above, sending down a wan light on the stones only seemed to make it more lonely and forsaken. (121)

Five years later, Burchfield is still searching for the "Northland."

7/27/54--...This romantic land of the imagination, the mysterious North, that has haunted me since I was a boy--it does not really exist, but how did it come into being? and is it possible some day I will wander through it as a spirit? (122)

Then finally, ten years later Burchfield writes:

3/30/64--...How slowly the "secrets" of my art come to me--It seems to me I have been searching all my life for this motif of Black North combined with the wind-cloud and snow-flurry; when I said this to Bertha, she said "Aren't you thankful that at 71 new secrets are being revealed to you?" And I certainly am. (543)

A close look at North Woods in Spring, 1951-64 (Figure 44), suggests that it is the result of this discovery.

A culmination of Burchfield's many years of studying all the seasons and how they affect the wooded areas can be seen in Four Seasons (Figure 45). Furthermore, a journal entry made shortly before his death illustrates how much Burchfield relied on his early references and what they meant to him in his later period.

6/22/64--Working on a drawing for "Lightning Bugs" based on memories of "froglegging" along the Little Beaver in June, and after studying my 1915 notes--
That rhapsodic summer of 1915--It was then my art career began to bloom--
(544)



Figure 44. Charles E. Burchfield, North Woods in Spring, 1951-64. Watercolor on paper, 56" x 40". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Keith Davis, Flint, Michigan.



Figure 45. Charles E. Burchfield, **Four Seasons**, 1949-1960. Watercolor, 55 7/8" x 47 7/8" sheet. University Purchase, Krannert Art Museum, Kinkead Pavilion, University of Illinois, Urbana, Champaign.

Endnotes

1. The chronological proceeding facts (unless otherwise specifically noted) can all be found in such works by Baigell, Baur, Weekly, catalogs published by Kennedy Graphics, as well as in Burchfield's journal publication edited by Townsend.

2. This notation was taken from The Inlander: Life and Work of Charles Burchfield, 1893-1967. From now on when encountering "Baur," it can be assumed the citation is from this same publication. However, if reference is made to Charles Burchfield by John I. H. Baur, (a 1956 publication), the citation "Baur Charles Burchfield" will appear.

3. As quoted in The Inlander, Life and Work of Charles Burchfield, 1893-1967, taken from the exhibition catalog, Charles Burchfield, His Golden Year, University of Arizona Art Gallery, 1965, p. 20 and Joseph S. Trovato, Charles Burchfield, Catalogue of Paintings in Public and Private Collections, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, 1970.

4. Dormer, James T. Personal interview. April 17, and 28, 1995. Dormer's initial theory regarding the connection between repeat patterns and wallpaper designing was conceived because of his employment as a textile designer. Dormer further confirmed his opinion after researching Burchfield's work for a thesis paper while studying at Pennsylvania State University in 1964. At this time, Burchfield was still living, and Dormer conducted an in-depth telephone interview with the assistant director at the Frank K. M. Rehn Gallery, New York City.

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