

# **Charles Burchfield : early water colors, April 11-April 26, 1930, Museum of Modern Art, New York**

Author

Burchfield, Charles, 1893-1967

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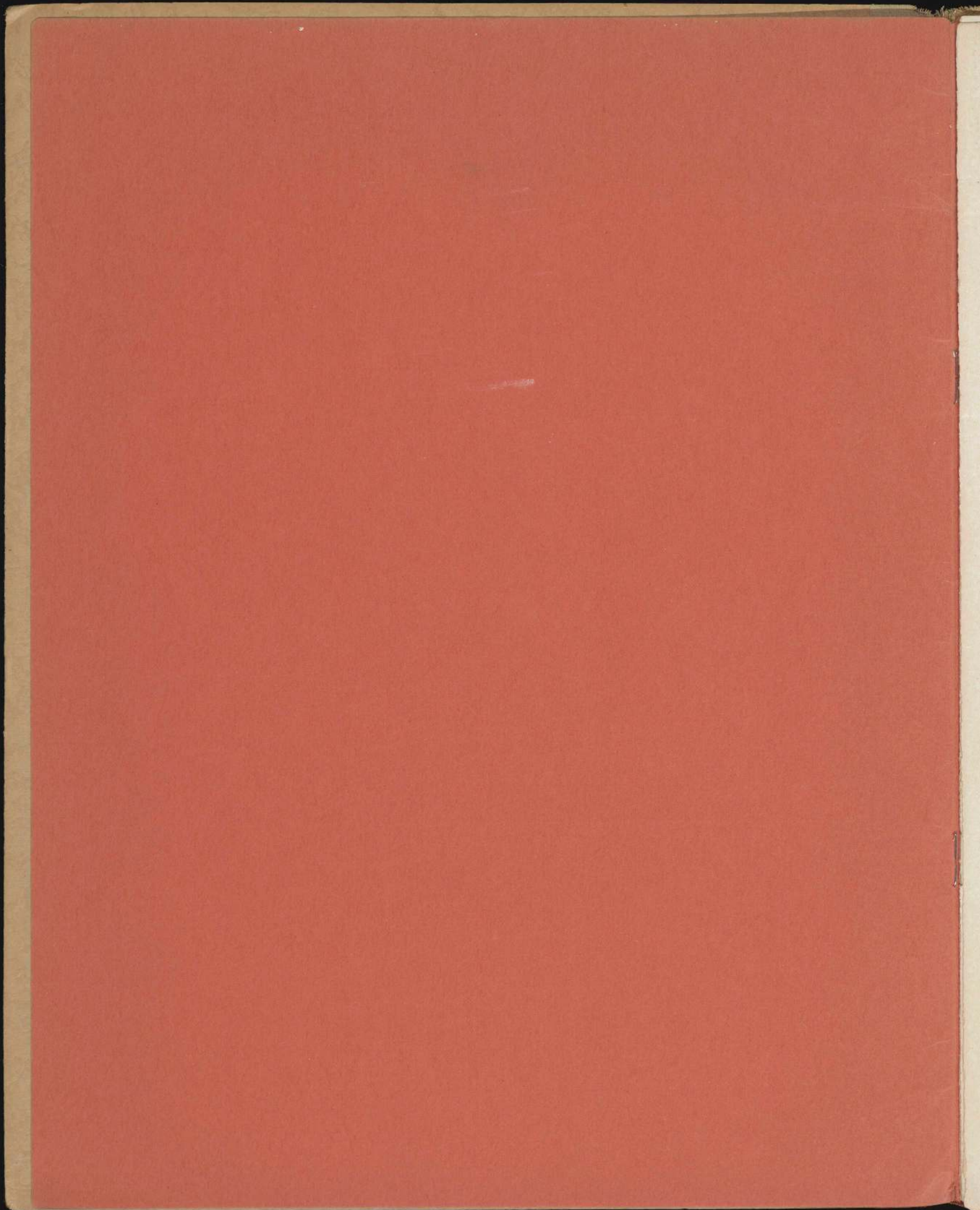
# **CHARLES BURCHFIELD**

**EARLY WATERCOLORS 1916 TO 1918**



**NEW YORK • 730 FIFTH AVENUE  
MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**





CHARLES BURCHFIELD  
EARLY WATERCOLORS

APRIL 11

1930

APRIL 26

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

730 FIFTH AVENUE

NEW YORK





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## INTRODUCTION

To those who are familiar with Charles Burchfield's mature style his early work now exhibited for the first time must appear surprising and even contradictory.

In his recent work which has placed him among the most interesting American artists Burchfield has examined critically the mid-western town: its houses, its railroad yards and eating places, its false fronted stores, Garfield Gothic churches, and telegraph poles confronting their reflections in main street puddles. Satire in which hate and wit are mingled is combined with the discovery of picturesque ugliness. In these gray, silver and black water-colors that authentically native movement which might be christened American-Scenism is seen at its pictorial best.

In his earlier work we find an astonishingly different spirit. Frequently the same objects appear—small town, post-Civil War buildings—but they are not so much satirized as eagerly accepted as material for romantic composition. A more essential similarity between his familiar later work and these early inventions lies in the very fact that in both Burchfield was thoroughly interested in subject matter at a time when interest in subject matter was generally discredited.

During this early Romantic Period Burchfield concentrated upon the expression of moods and emotions on the one hand, and on the other upon specific forces and even sounds and movements of nature. His method was neither vague nor spontaneous as is frequent in expressionistic painting, but deliberate and precise. Of the "Night Wind" (No. 26) Burchfield writes: "To the child sitting cozily in his home the roar of the wind outside fills his mind full of strange visions and phantoms flying over the land." In the painting the patterns which surround the house are of two kinds—the torn black silhouette suggests the terrific force of the wind blowing from left to right, while the white wave beyond tosses monstrous half-organic arms which threaten to overwhelm the child's home. These two abstract motives of force and fear were studied and re-studied in a long series of drawings before they reached completion in the finished picture. Similar and equally successful is the uncanny "Church Bells Ringing" (No. 17). In the sky are the same menacing waves. The church tower assumes a face like an African mask and sways with the swinging spiral motion and sound of the bells. Spiral and wave inflect the eaves and windows of the house. The whole scene rocks and quails before the horrid clangour. Again invisible sound and the resulting emotion are realized in visual forms.

More elegiac in mood is the "Garden of Memories" (No. 25) in which an aged woman sits



in the tired moonlight while colossal lunar flowers surge and droop about her. The "August North" (No. 14) is similar in mood but more direct in statement. In striking contrast is the "Song of the Katydid" (No. 18) in which the vibrations of heat, the monotonous vibrations of insects, are diagrammed. Houses and trees quiver beneath the hot feet of summer's noon.

Many of the watercolors are less dependent upon expressionistic devices. The haunted gloom of the swamp pervades "First Hepaticas" (No. 27) and the "Fallen Tree" (No. 9). In the "Rogues' Gallery" (No. 4) and "The Conference" (No. 10) we find a delightful feeling for the grotesquely humorous. "Summer Rain" (No. 1) and "Hot Morning Sunlight" (No. 7) which come early in the series are frankly decorative, more purely aesthetic in their interest.

It is impossible to discover any important external influence upon Burchfield's art. These watercolors were painted in Salem, Ohio, between 1916 and the early months of 1918. In the previous four years he had attended the Cleveland Art School where Henry G. Keller had encouraged him to use his imagination rather than to follow the conventional Impressionist methods of the period. He was almost completely ignorant of what had happened in Europe. He does not remember having seen a Cézanne before 1920. He saw his first van Gogh in 1929. He believes that Japanese prints may have had some influence upon his design but cannot remember any conscious admiration for Oriental art before 1918. One can only conclude that we have in this period of Burchfield's development one of the most isolated and original phenomena in American Art.

Several analogies of course suggest themselves. The patterns of "Night Wind" (No. 26) remind one of van Gogh's cloud structures. The vibrations which radiate from the sun in "Cat-tails" (No. 3) and from the trees in "Song of the Katydid" (No. 18) also suggest van Gogh's drawings as does the muscular activity of the "Beech Trees" (No. 21). But Burchfield's invention of abstract motives as direct visual symbols for invisible forces bring him close to the technical methods of Chinese and Japanese painting in which clouds, waves, and flames are transformed into linear formulae. It is but a short step psychologically from the wind monster with its saucer eyes (No. 26) to the more highly developed Dragon of water and air which appears half submerged in the torrential waterfalls of the Sung painters.

In several instances our closest analogies are to be found in German and English romantic art of the early 19th century. Samuel Palmer might have admired the "Garden of Memories"; Caspar David Friedrich the "First Hepaticas." In Burchfield's art the "Gothick" moods of melancholy and terror are re-born a century later. And curiously enough in such pictures as "Wheat field with Tower" (No. 11), "Church Bells Ringing" (No. 17) and most strikingly in



"Sunday Morning" (No. 12) one feels the influence of the silhouettes, the textures, the Spencerian flourishes, the very wall-papers and stained glass of the mid-19th century, assimilated (but not consciously admired as they were to be twelve years later in 1930).

Very curious too is Burchfield's attempt in his early twenties to re-create the sensations and emotions of his childhood: "The child stands alone in the garden—(No. 15)"; "The church bell is ringing and it terrifies me (the child)—(No. 17)"; "The child sits listening—(No. 13)." Much of 1917 was devoted to this problem.

The surrender to mood, the attempt to present sound and energy in terms of vision, the love of the "rustic," the "picturesque," the "melancholy" and the "terrible," the nostalgia for childhood, the use of "literary" titles, are all romantic qualities or vices—but there is also in Burchfield's art discipline, strength of design and a clarity of purpose which raises these youthful watercolors to a high level of original achievement even as formal inventions.

## CHRONOLOGY

- 1893 Born at Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio, April 9th.  
1898 Moved to Salem, Ohio, where he lived until 1921.  
1911-16 Studied at the Cleveland School of Art. Encouraged by Henry G. Keller. Worked during summers and until 1921 as costs accountant in automobile parts company.  
1920 First exhibition in New York made possible by Mrs. Mary Mowbray-Clarke. Has since exhibited in many American cities and in London (1923) and Paris (1925).  
1921-28 Worked as designer of wallpapers in Buffalo.  
Now lives in Gardenville, New York.  
1929 Winter. Work of the Romantic Period (1916-18) re-discovered by Edward W. Root.

*Other watercolors are in the following collections:*

BROOKLYN, MUSEUM OF ART

BUFFALO, ALBRIGHT ART GALLERY

CLEVELAND, MUSEUM OF ART

NEWARK, ART MUSEUM

NEW YORK, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

NEW YORK, MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

NEW YORK, WHITNEY MUSEUM

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS

WASHINGTON, PHILLIPS MEMORIAL GALLERY



# CATALOG

Notes on the pictures are by Mr. Burchfield

1 SUMMER RAIN

19 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 13 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches

Signed and dated lower right, Sept. 1916

Private Collection, New York

Raindrops like jewels hang on sunflower plants.

2 THE CITY

14 x 19 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Signed and dated lower right, 1916

Layer after layer of sections of the city extending out to the horizon like long rolling ocean waves, cut by the brilliant reflections of sun on polished slate roofs.

3 CAT-TAILS

14 x 19 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches

Signed and dated lower left, 1916

ILLUSTRATED

Cat-tails growing in front of a pile of mine refuse, the March sun shining—lacy trees.

Painted while home from school on a spring vacation.

4 ROGUES' GALLERY

13 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 19 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Signed and dated lower right, 1916

ILLUSTRATED

A rogues' gallery of sunflowers in the brilliant, dry sunshine of August.

5 DRIFTING DANDELION SEEDS

14 x 19 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches

Signed and dated lower left, 1916

Collection Thomas Metcalf, Boston

Winged dandelion seeds scattered obliquely across the overlapping layers of a hayfield by a fresh June wind.

6 DECORATIVE LANDSCAPE: SHADOW

19 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 13 $\frac{5}{8}$  inches

Signed and dated lower right, 1916

Collection Edward W. Root, Clinton, New York

Color notes are recorded on the painting.

7 DECORATIVE LANDSCAPE: HOT MORNING SUNLIGHT

13 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

Signed and dated lower right, 1916

Collection Edward W. Root, Clinton, New York

The air is heavy with humidity—the sky covered with a thick mist, on which the sun shines, seeming to turn it into brilliant steam; it is one of those oppressively hot mornings which always end in a violent thunderstorm in the afternoon.

8 PORTRAIT STUDY—IN A DOORWAY

25 x 29 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches

Painted January 1917

Collection Mrs. Alice M. Burchfield, Salem, Ohio

ILLUSTRATED

Not an attempt to produce a "bona fide" portrait, but merely a study of a mood in which the figure is simply one of many objects.

9 A FALLEN TREE

18 x 21 inches

Signed and dated lower right, Feb. 24, 1917

Private Collection, New York

A fallen sycamore tree sprawling over a frozen swamp pond with a wild, haunted marsh tangle behind.

10 THE CONFERENCE

14 x 19 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches

Painted March 3, 1917

11 WHEAT FIELD WITH TOWER

22 x 17 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Signed and dated lower left, June 1917

The last rays of the sun on a tower in front of a field of young wheat.

12 SUNDAY MORNING AT ELEVEN O'CLOCK (A recollection of a childhood mood)

21 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 17 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Painted June 1917

Collection Frank K. M. Rehn, New York

I had had a quarrel with my Sunday-school teacher, and had run outside. Wishing to avoid the embarrassment of having to explain at home my premature return from Sunday-school, I hung around in the church-yard until the class was dismissed. A still, hot June morning; the Sunday quiet had settled down over the town—trees stood motionless as if yearning toward the sun; the roses drooped in the heat; all things seemed blended in one harmonious whole; I only was out of harmony.

13 A MEMORY FROM CHILDHOOD

17 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 22 inches

Signed and dated lower right, July 28, 1917

Collection Mrs. Courtlandt D. Barnes, New York

Long summer noon hours in the woods—the dazzling white sun spreads fantastic shapes over the dark floor under the trees—the child sits listening to the hum of insects, dreaming of fairies.

14 THE AUGUST NORTH (A memory of childhood)

24 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 18 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

Signed and dated lower right, August 1917

In August at the last fading of twilight the North assumed to the child a fearful aspect (that colored his thoughts even into early manhood). A melancholy settles down over the child's world—he is as if in a tomb—he thinks all his loved ones are gone away or dead—the ghostly white petunias droop with sadness—unnamed terrors lurk in the black caverns under bushes and trees—as the darkness settles down, the pulsating chorus of night insects commences swelling louder and louder until it resembles the heart beat of the interior of a black closet.



15 THE INSECT CHORUS

20 x 15 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches

Signed lower right, 1917—Painted September 5

Collection Edward W. Root, Clinton, New York

It is late Sunday afternoon in August, the child stands alone in the garden listening to the metallic sounds of insects; they are all his world, so to his mind all things become saturated with their presence—crickets lurk in the depths of the grass, the shadows of the trees conceal fantastic creatures, and the boy looks with fear at the black interior of the arbor, not knowing what terrible thing might be there.

16 PORTRAIT OF MY AUNT EMILY

27 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 18 inches

Painted September 22–26, 1917

Collection Mrs. Alice M. Burchfield, Salem, Ohio

Aunt Em's home always fascinated me as a boy—the old grandfather clock with its slow, stately ticking—the naïve portrait of a black cat—the picture of old-fashioned flowers—the rag carpets, etc.

17 CHURCH BELLS RINGING—RAINY WINTER NIGHT

30 x 19 inches

Signed and dated lower right, December 1917

Collection Miss Louise M. Dunn, Cleveland

ILLUSTRATED

From a letter dated March 5, 1929: "It was an attempt to express a childhood emotion—a rainy winter night—the churchbell is ringing and it terrifies me (the child)—the bell ringing motive reaches out and saturates the rainy sky—the roofs of the houses dripping with rain are influenced; the child attempts to be comforted by the thoughts of candle lights and Christmas trees, but the fear of the black, rainy night is overpowering. When I think back on such things I know what R—— means by the 'pang in the middle of the night'."

18 THE SONG OF THE KATYDIDS ON AN AUGUST MORNING

17 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 21 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Signed and dated lower right, 1917

Collection Frank K. M. Rehn, New York

ILLUSTRATED

A stagnant August morning during the drought season; as the pitiless sun mounts into the mid-morning sky the insect chorus commences, the katydids and locusts predominating; their monotonous, mechanical, brassy rhythms soon pervade the whole air, combining with heat waves of the sun, and saturating trees and houses and sky.

19 CHILDHOOD'S GARDEN

27 x 18 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches

Signed and dated lower right, 1917

Collection Edward W. Root, Clinton, New York

A memory of childhood—an attempt to re-create the way a flower garden looks to a child.

20 THE WINDOW BY THE ALLEY

18 x 22 inches

Painted 1917

ILLUSTRATED

21 BEECH TREES

21 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 17 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Signed and dated lower right, 1917

ILLUSTRATED

22 THE SOUTHEAST SNOWSTORM

17 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

Dated lower right, 1917

23 THE BARN

14 x 19 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches

Signed and dated lower right, 1917

24 THE EAST WIND

18 x 22 inches

Painted January 1918

The East wind brings rain—to the child in his bed, the wind is a fabulous monster and the days of rain on the roof are frightful.

25 GARDEN OF MEMORIES

25 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 22 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

Signed lower right

Painted August-September 1917

Private Collection, New York

ILLUSTRATED

Crabbed old age sits in front of her black doorway, without hope for the future, brooding. Spiders lurk in dark corners; the dying plants reflect her mood. The romantic autumn moon rises just the same.

26 THE NIGHT WIND

21 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 21 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Painted January 1918

Private Collection, New York

ILLUSTRATED

To the child sitting cozily in his home, the roar of the wind outside fills his mind full of visions of strange phantoms and monsters flying over the land.

27 THE FIRST HEPATICAS

22 x 27 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Painted March 1918

ILLUSTRATED

It is late March; it has been raining. Walking along through the barren woods in the dusk, I come upon the first hepaticas; the drooping unopened buds, exquisite in their delicateness, present a striking contrast to the black, evil-looking tree trunks.



## ILLUSTRATIONS





3  
CAT-TAILS, 1916  
14 x 19<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches





4  
ROGUES' GALLERY, 1916  
13 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches





8

PORTRAIT STUDY—IN A DOORWAY, 1917

25 x 29 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches

Collection Mrs. Alice M. Burchfield, Salem, Ohio





17

CHURCH BELLS RINGING—RAINY WINTER NIGHT, 1917

30 x 19 inches

Collection Miss Louise M. Dunn, Cleveland





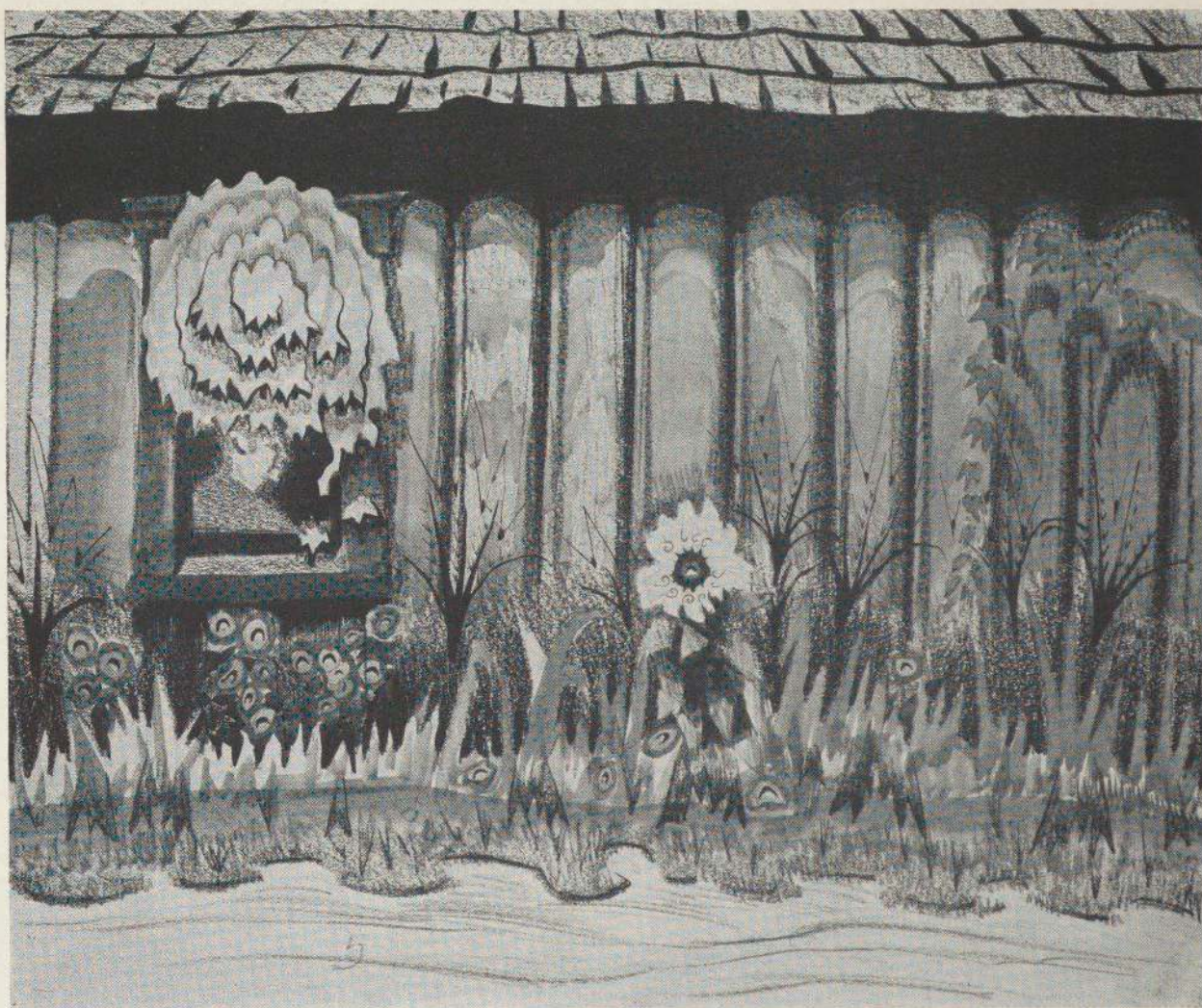
18

THE SONG OF THE KATYDIDS ON AN AUGUST MORNING, 1917

17 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 21 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Collection Frank K. M. Rehn, New York







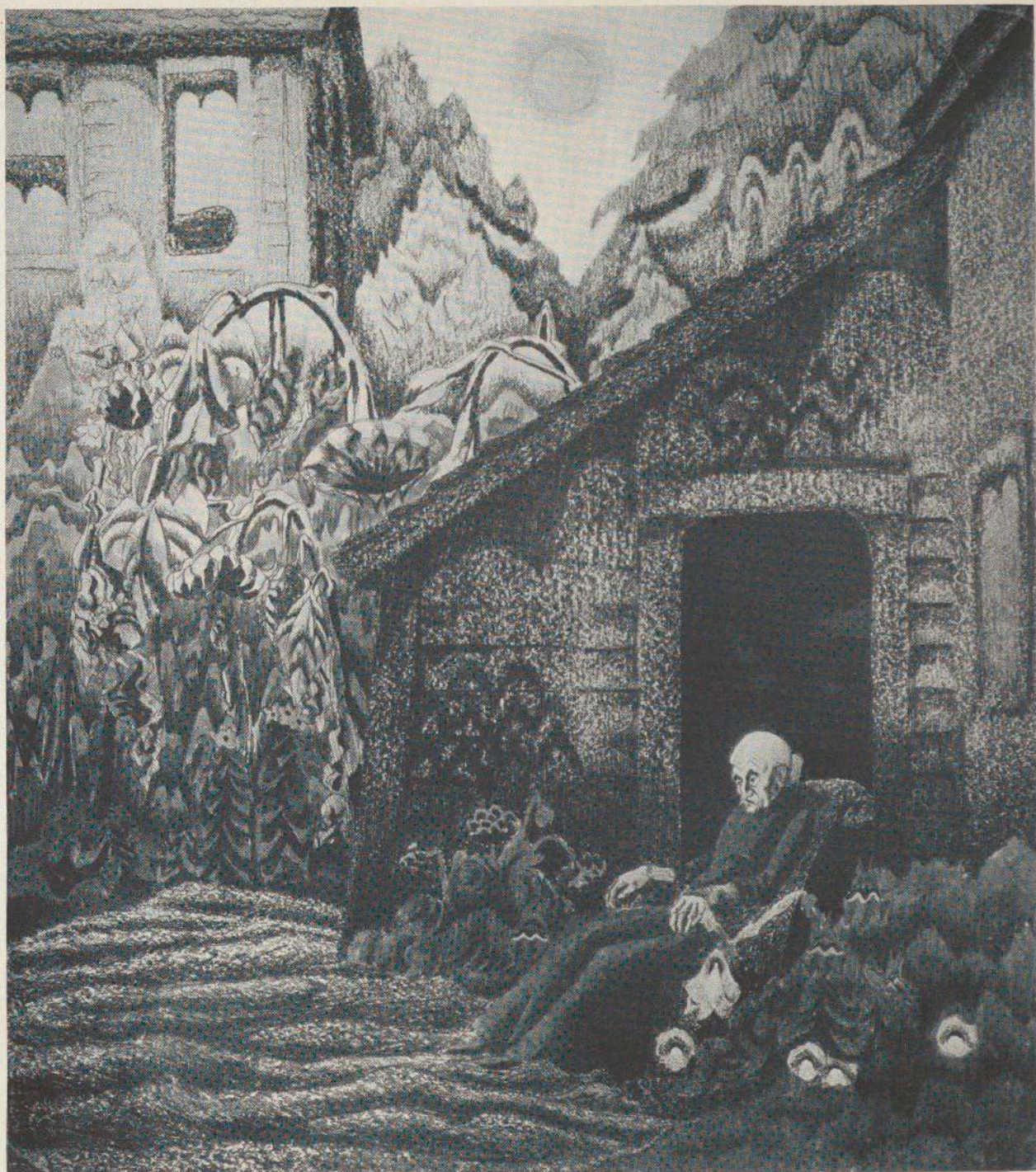


21

BEECH TREES, 1917

21 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 17 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches





25

GARDEN OF MEMORIES, 1917

25 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 22 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

Private Collection, New York





26

THE NIGHT WIND, 1918

21¼ x 21¾ inches

Private Collection, New York

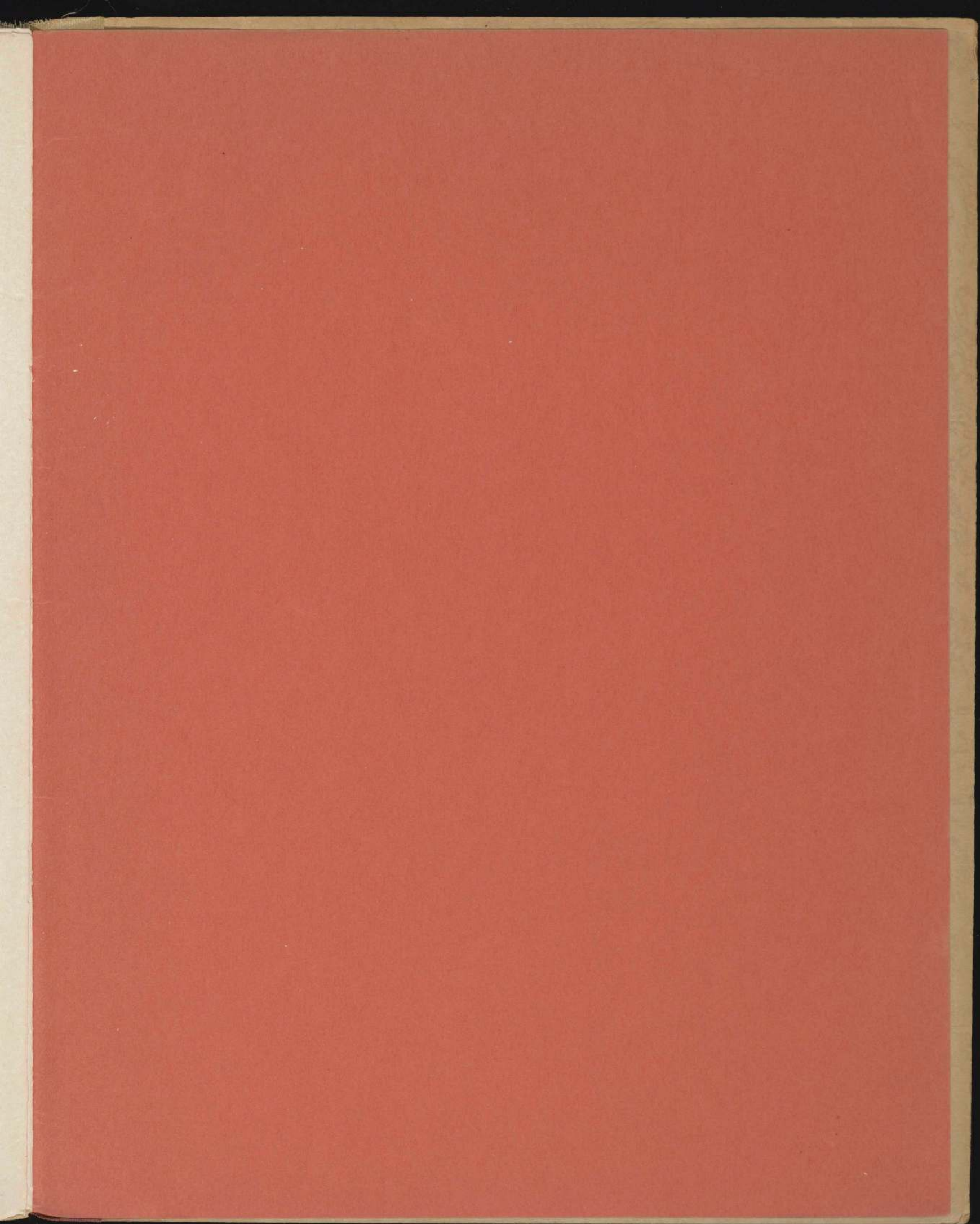






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