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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 watercolors 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 Katydids” (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 Katydids” (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.

Other watercolors are in the following collections:

BROOKLYN, MUSEUM OF ART
BUFFALO, ALBRIGHT ART GALLERY
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PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS
WASHINGTON, PHILLIPS MEMORIAL GALLERY
CATALOG

Notes on the pictures are by Mr. Burchfield

1 SUMMER RAIN
   19 3/8 x 13 3/8 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 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 3/8 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 3/4 x 19 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 3/8 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 3/4 x 13 3/8 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 3/4 x 19 3/4 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 29¾ 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 19¾ inches
Painted March 3, 1917

11 WHEAT FIELD WITH TOWER
22 x 17¾ 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)
21¾ x 17¾ 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
17½ 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)
24¾ x 18¾ 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.
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.

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

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’.”

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.

A memory of childhood—an attempt to re-create the way a flower garden looks to a child.
21 BEECH TREES  
21 1/4 x 17 1/4 inches  
Signed and dated lower right, 1917  

22 THE SOUTHEAST SNOWSTORM  
17 1/4 x 19 1/2 inches  
Dated lower right, 1917  

23 THE BARN  
14 x 19 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 1/4 x 22 5/8 inches  
Signed lower right  
Painted August-September 1917  
Private Collection, New York  
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 1/4 x 21 3/4 inches  
Painted January 1918  
Private Collection, New York  
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 3/4 inches  
Painted March 1918  
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.
CAT-TAILS, 1916
14 x 19 7/8 inches
PORTRAIT STUDY—IN A DOORWAY, 1917
25 x 29 3/4 inches
Collection Mrs. Alice M. Burchfeld, Salem, Ohio
CHURCH BELLS RINGING—RAINY WINTER NIGHT, 1917
30 x 19 inches
Collection Miss Louise M. Dunn, Cleveland
THE SONG OF THE KATYDIDS ON AN AUGUST MORNING, 1917
17 3/4 x 21 3/4 inches
Collection Frank K. M. Rehn, New York
THE WINDOW BY THE ALLEY, 1917
18 x 22 inches
BEECH TREES, 1917
21 3/4 x 17 3/4 inches
GARDEN OF MEMORIES, 1917
25 3/4 x 22 3/4 inches
Private Collection, New York
THE NIGHT WIND, 1918
21 1/4 x 21 3/4 inches
Private Collection, New York
THE FIRST HEPATICAS, 1918
22 x 273/4 inches
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