

**The Constant Leaf (1960)**

Charles Burchfield (1893-1967)





Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967), Constant Leaf, 1960; watercolor and graphite on paper, 39 x 29 1/4 inches; Collection of the Burchfield Penney Art Center, Estate of Dr. Edna M. Lindemann, 2007

# LOOK...

at the 1960 painting *The Constant Leaf* by Charles E. Burchfield. Take a moment to study the painting. It's a watercolor of a lovely winter scene of Burchfield's neighbor's yard and a small strip of land along Clinton Street across the road overlooking Buffalo Creek. ... It is not difficult to locate the leaf in the title.

In a letter to his friend John Baur, Burchfield begins:

**"I must tell you about my oak leaf –  
in my neighbor's yard."**

The letter goes on to describe how that leaf inspired Burchfield during a time of illness. Seeing the leaf, day-after-day, gave him hope that he would get better as it helped him endure his illness and seclusion indoors. Burchfield's love of nature and the joy he felt when outdoors, made recuperating indoors a huge sacrifice.

Once spring had arrived, Bertha went outside to retrieve the leaf. She pulled it from the ground where the stem had embedded itself over an inch deep into the soil. Bertha and Charles put it in a book to flatten and dry it out before having it framed. This little leaf became a symbol of strength to Burchfield during a difficult time in his life.



## LOOK AGAIN...

This time, at the oak leaf...

This is the actual leaf that Burchfield first spotted through a window in his home during the winter of 1957.

It's the leaf that inspired the painting. Today, the leaf is stored in the archives of the Burchfield Penney Art Center. This leaf was a symbol of strength and perseverance for Charles Burchfield. He saw the leaf endure rain, snow and storms; it "stood" strong and steadfast.

# THINK...

What season is depicted in this painting?

What do you see that tells you this?

What colors did Burchfield choose?  
Why do you think so few colors were used?

What can you say about the leaf stuck in the snow?  
How does it feel out there in the cold?

What objects feel close and which ones seem far away?  
How was this effect achieved?

During this time of isolation and uncertainty, what could serve as a symbol for us?

# LISTEN...

to O. Henry's *The Last Leaf*.

It's a beautifully poignant story of an old artist who helps a young bedridden girl, during the pneumonia epidemic of 1907. Through her window, the girl sees a vine growing up a brick wall that is gradually shedding its leaves. She believes that when the last leaf falls, she will succumb to her illness. The artist intervenes, changing her fate.

Links to the story:

[http://www.eastoftheweb.com/cgi-bin/version\\_printable.pl?story\\_id=LasLea.shtml](http://www.eastoftheweb.com/cgi-bin/version_printable.pl?story_id=LasLea.shtml)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBi6Mi7yAjY>



# ...COMPARE & CONTRAST

How are story and the painting alike?  
And how are they different?

What does the leaf symbolize in each?

# ...ALLEGORY & SYMBOLS

An **allegory** is a work of art intending to be meaningful on at least two levels of understanding: typically, a literal level and an abstract, often moral level. An allegory uses literary elements such as extended metaphors (comparisons), and personification.

A **symbol**, on the other hand, is an object that stands for another object, giving it a particular meaning. This can be a material object, representing something abstract.

In the story, the characters of Old Behrman and Mr. Pneumonia could be interpreted respectively, as representing the forces of good (loving self-sacrifice) and evil (wanton destruction and suffering). Sue may be seen as representing dogged perseverance in her determination to save her friend, Johnsy. Initially, Johnsy seems to represent despair and hopelessness. (But this was to change)

The leaf is a symbol: It becomes a symbol of hope in both the painting and in story.

# WONDER...

Can you connect these works to our current health crisis?

As we struggle with the stress and the isolation of social distancing, have you found ways to uplift your spirits?

Nature and the Arts can have a positive effect on our attitude and provide comfort for us; have you connected to either? In what ways?

Why is perseverance a valuable quality to have? Why is it especially important now that we are fighting the Covid-19 epidemic?

Consider some ways that you could give someone a smile or do another kind act that would help calm or bring joy during this difficult time.

Did you ever consider that YOU are someone's CONSTANT LEAF?

# ...MAKE

**CRAYON RUBBING:** Step outdoors and gather up leaves that have survived the winter. Place a leaf under a piece of paper. Using the side of a crayon with the paper removed, rub the crayon across the surface to reveal the shape and texture of the leaf below. Fill the paper with additional rubbings.

**BRANCH DRAWING:** On a large piece of paper, make a BIG drawing of a branch you found outdoors. Does drawing it large, make it appear to be close-up? Draw or trace one of your leaves onto the branch. Add birds, caterpillars, or squirrels. Pick a season and add color to illustrate.

**VALUE STUDY:** Examine "The Constant Leaf." In marker, colored pencil, or paint, reproduce as many shades of grey as you found in the painting. Draw a landscape using only the light and dark values you discovered. Have you employed foreground, middle ground and background as Burchfield did?

**LEAF DESIGN:** Scatter a group of leaves across a sheet of paper. Slide them around until you've organized them in an interesting composition. Once satisfied, trace each leaf.

Add color, texture, or designs into the leaf shapes in the medium of your choice.

# MAKE...

**OBSERVATIONAL DRAWING:** On a sheet of paper, draw your leaf the best you can with a 5-minute time limit. Start with a contour, or outline drawing, then look for inside detail. For the second drawing, put your leaf out of sight and draw from memory, still keeping to a 5-minute time limit.

Which drawing was easier to do? Is it the first, because you had the leaf to look at or the second, because you had practice? What are your thoughts? There is no right or wrong answer here...

Draw your leaf one more time taking all the time you'd like. Look closely, trying to capture as many details as you can: veins, tears, lights, darks, shadows, textures...maybe add color if you like.

This practice in observing and drawing can be done with any object of nature such as a pinecone, a seedpod, branch, seashell, driftwood...the possibilities are endless.

**PAPER COLLAGE:** On colored paper rectangles, draw a variety of leaf shapes. Cut each one out, saving both the leaf you've cut out (positive shape) and the rectangle left behind (negative shape). Arrange both positive and negative pieces on a large background sheet, using overlapping and repetition as design elements. Once satisfied with the design, glue the pieces in place.

# ...CREATE

**A JOURNAL:** Keep track of something natural in your yard that can serve as a symbol for you during these weeks of social distancing. It may be a tree, a plant, or a flower. Log any changes, day-by-day, week-by-week. Make a drawing or photograph it over time, noting what you see.

Think about the leaf (or leaves) you drew. Where did you find it? What type of tree is it from? What kind of day or weather was it? Research the ivy leaf and describe it.

**A STORY:** Write your own story that teaches the lesson of strength and perseverance.

**A POEM:** Close your eyes and explore a leaf with your fingertips.

Are there ridges? Is it fragile and thin like paper or tough and leathery? Is the edge smooth or rough? Is there sound when you touch it? What does it smell like?

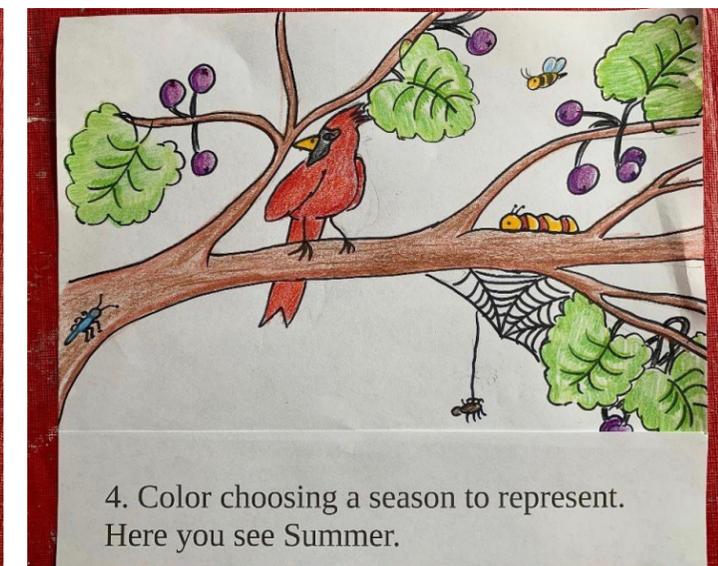
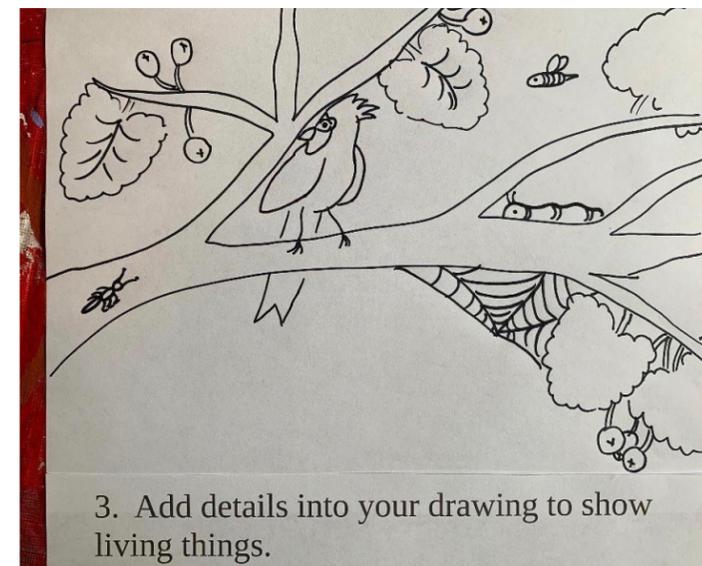
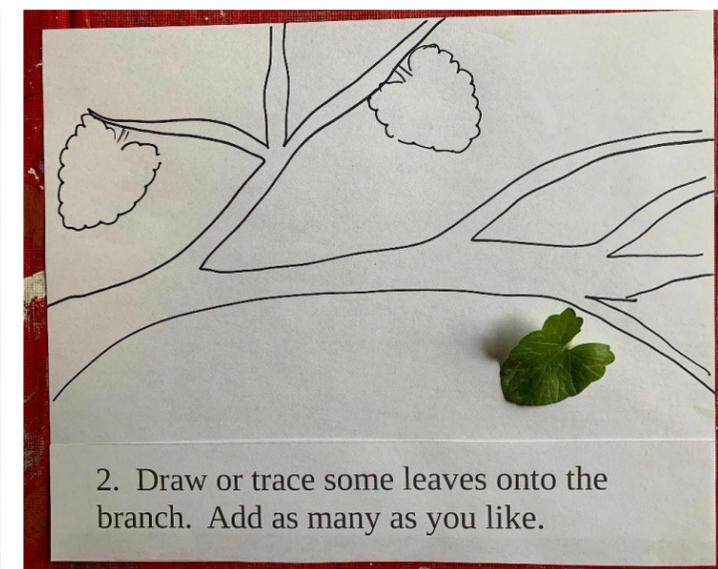
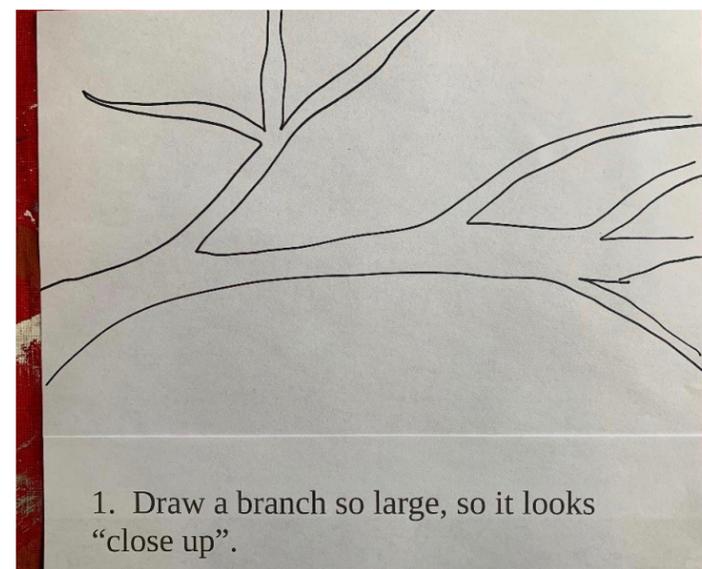
Write about all of these observations. How could these words be put into a poem?

# PROJECT EXAMPLES

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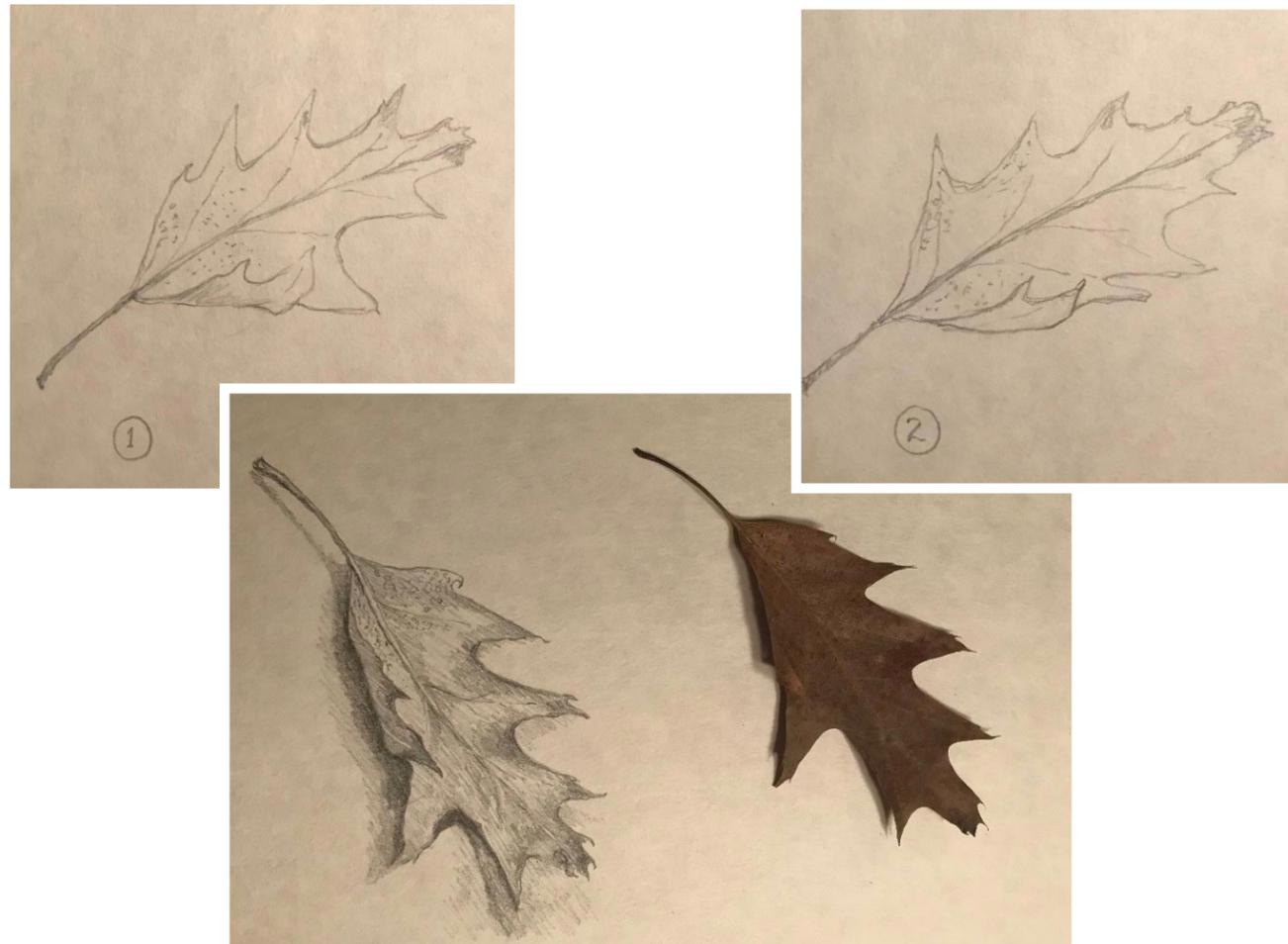
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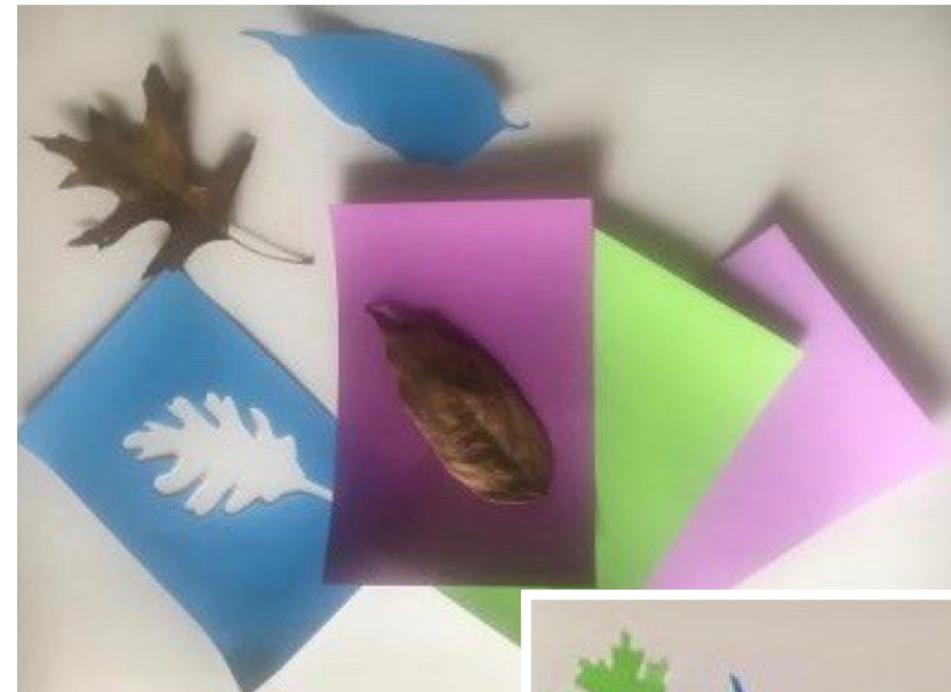
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# BURCHFIELD CONNECTS

## **Special Thank You to Docent Contributors:**

Gina Derrico  
Laura Glista  
Andrea Holden

## **Staff Contributions:**

Mary Kozub  
Nancy Weekly  
Michaela Worosz

*The Burchfield Penney Art Center at SUNY Buffalo State College receives public support from SUNY Buffalo State College, Erie County, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Institute for Museum and Library Sciences, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the City of Buffalo. Private support is provided by KeyBank in partnership with the First Niagara Foundation, The Cameron and Jane Baird Foundation, the Cullen Foundation, the Charles E. Burchfield Foundation, M&T Bank, The John R. Oishei Foundation, The Margaret L. Wendt Foundation, John and Paula Reinhold/Joy Family Foundation, The Western New York Foundation, the Elizabeth Elser Doolittle Trust, the Mary A. H. Rumsey Foundation, the James Carey Evans Endowment, and many additional individuals, corporations, foundations, and Burchfield Penney members.*