

Country Life and the Hunt: Burchfield's Scenic Wallpaper Design

In 1999 an extremely rare set of panels from Charles E. Burchfield's scenic wallpaper, *Country Life and the Hunt*, was discovered in an antique store in Vermont. Rolled up, the wallpaper had been stripped from the walls where it had originally been installed, probably more than seventy-five years ago. Thanks to a generous donation from Gail and John Greenberger, the Burchfield-Penney Art Center purchased *Country Life and the Hunt* and embarked on multi-year conservation project to restore the salvaged wallpaper so it could be exhibited in public and appreciated once again.

Having graduated from the Cleveland School of Art with a strong background in design and illustration, Charles Burchfield was hired by the M. H. Birge & Sons Company in Buffalo in November 1921. In addition to assisting the head designer Edward B. Sides in planning color variations of wallpaper patterns, Burchfield soon began designing his own. Rather than inserting isolated flowers on a flat or textured background, Burchfield preferred to approach his wallpaper designs the same way that he composed landscapes: with a dense, detailed cluster of naturalistic plants. Conceptually, his designs derived from the late nineteenth century Art Nouveau masterpieces by the British artist William Morris and his company, except that they were less ornate and stylized. Burchfield believed in extolling the beauty of common American wildflowers in more realistic, field-like vignettes. For example, *Thistles and Queen Anne's Lace* (c. 1922-27) displays much of the elegance of a Morris paper, but retains the down-to-earth quality that Burchfield cultivated. *Wildflowers*, also known as *Grasses* (c. 1926), depicts freely growing Cardinal Flower, Turtlehead, and Meadow Rue—hardly flowers considered regal enough for a formal bouquet. Burchfield also captured the magnificence of trees in his wallpapers such as *Modern French*, also known as *Willow Trees* (1924).

Sometimes Burchfield borrowed imagery directly from watercolors he had painted a few years earlier in Ohio, around his home in Salem and in the countryside surrounding Cleveland. He also employed similar strategies in his cretonne designs used for coordinating drapery and upholstery. His first wallpaper designed in 1921, *The Birches*, features young birch trees bearing spring catkins, sturdy cottonwoods and arching sumac branches. The scene is an excerpt from roadside Salem, painted as *Bluebird and Cottonwoods* in 1917. *Red Bird and Beech Trees*, from 1924, was based on his 1917 painting, *Song of the Red Bird*, which he expanded in 1960. The forest scene produces multiple vanishing points through side-by-side installation of the wallpaper strips, giving the pink woods a dream-like air of fantasy. As such, it serves as a precursor to panoramic, scenic designs. *Red Bird and Beech Trees* was the only wallpaper design that Burchfield installed in his home, in his pantry.

While it was certainly more rewarding to design one's own aesthetic compositions, the job of a wallpaper designer also required following the tradition of established tastes and patterns. During his eight years at the Birge Company, Burchfield was asked to design several scenic wallpapers, including *Chinese Garden* (1924-25), *The Riviera* (c. 1926-28), and a hunting scene that would be called *Country Life and the Hunt* (1924). Although he rarely recorded any entries pertaining to his job at the Birge Company, Burchfield's only entry on the commission, dated May 15, 1922, reads: "Sunday morning I spent in doing some studies for the hunt picture; but at noon when I went out to dinner, I knew indoor work was over for the day—" At the time, he was far more interested in preparing his apartment on Mariner Street for Bertha Kenreich, whom he would marry five days later.

Known as the makers of fine and exclusive wallpapers, M. H. Birge & Sons Company was founded in Buffalo in 1834. Around 1924, when *Country Life and the Hunt* was launched, Birge also had branches in New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and London, England. They specialized in modern designs that were hand-printed in the eighteenth century, hand-blocked method. *Country Life and the Hunt* was advertised proudly as a “Masterpiece of wall paper printing.” The complex design of twenty-eight strips composed two scenes: “The Call,” which features red-jacketed, equestrian hunters and their dogs trotting down a curved path, and “Full Cry,” in which an elusive fox leads the chase in the distance. The two scenes could be expanded to fit a room by using wooded scene extensions. Birge’s advertisement boasted:

COUNTRY LIFE and The Hunt is one of the most elaborate scenic wallpapers produced in America. After the original paintings were completed, two years of painstaking labor were necessary to make the blocks before a complete set could be printed. This decoration embodies the use of two hundred and fifteen blocks with four hundred and twenty separate hand printed color designations.

This scenic wallpaper stylistically follows in the tradition of French nineteenth century panoramic wallpapers, especially the work of Jean Zuber and his rival, Joseph Dufour. Zuber initially worked for Nicholas Dolfuss; then they became partners in Rixheim, Alsace under the name Jean Zuber et Compagnie (Zuber et Cie.). Zuber employed the painter Pierre-Antoine Mongin, who in 1804 designed *Vues de Suisse* (*Views of Switzerland*), the first of a series of scenic wallpapers without a repeat. Huge trees punctuate the design composed of sixteen sheets. Among Zuber’s other worldwide subjects was the series, *Les Vues de l’Amérique du Nord* (*North American Views*), including a view of Niagara Falls, which was issued in 1834 for sale abroad.

Joseph Dufour worked in Mâcon, then in Paris, and in 1820 took on a partner to become Dufour et Leroy. Dufour’s first panoramic wallpaper was also produced in 1804. *Les Sauvages de la Mer du Pacifique* (also known as *Les Voyages du Capitaine Cook*) designed by Jean-Gabriel Charvet was the beginning of numerous scenic landscapes representing other cultures, which included Greek, Italian, and Incan subjects.

The firm known as Jacquemart and Bénard, which had bought Jean-Baptiste Réveillon’s successful business after the French Revolution in 1791, produced a panoramic wallpaper in 1814 that could conceivably have been an inspiration for Burchfield’s *Country Life and the Hunt*. Twenty-five panels make up *La Chasse de Compiègne* (*The Hunt at Compiègne*), based on a painting by Carle Vernet. Huge trees dominate the sky, but the horses and redcoats are wooden, and bystanders cluster in the foreground of this early composition. Nevertheless, Jacquemart and Bénard’s treatment of leaf clusters and their shadows are comparable to Burchfield’s, suggesting his careful study of historic designs.

Country Life and the Hunt was sold exclusively in sets of twenty-eight strips, printed in just one color scheme. According to a Birge advertisement, “Each strip is fourteen feet high and has a printed width of twenty inches. One set covers forty-six feet eight inches lineal wall measurement. The greatest height of actual printed detail is six feet two inches.” The Burchfield-Penney Art Center acquired both primary vistas, as well as several extension panels that serve to enlarge the woods that separate the main scenes. Unfortunately, a small portion of the panel in “Full Cry” that links the fox and dogs is missing, either due to the original

installation around an architectural feature of the room, or from the later removal. Nevertheless, the narrative, in essence, is complete. In fact, upon close examination of "The Call," you can see that an almost identical panel exists without the animals to connect landscape motifs with the distance country village.

Restoring *Country Life and the Hunt* has been a major undertaking, conducted under the leadership of paper conservator Patricia D. Hamm, who has worked with the Burchfield-Penney Art Center since 1987. Ms. Hamm is a Fellow of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works and is the leading authority on Burchfield's materials and techniques. Eileen Saracino and painting conservator James F. Hamm have assisted her.

In her initial examination, Ms. Hamm discovered that the wallpaper had been mounted on plaster walls at an earlier date. Plaster fragments were still attached to the fabric lining, which fortunately helped to preserve *Country Life and the Hunt* by adding an extra layer of strength. According to the more elaborate methods employed to install fine wallpapers, cotton muslin was applied to the walls prior to application of a paper liner and the artistic wallpaper. Although originally providing support, the old fabric had to be taken off.

The surface of the wallpaper panels also had suffered damage from the removal process and subsequent storage. Creases and vertical tears, as well as small losses, surface dirt, and water stains occurred throughout. The acidic wood pulp paper liner that had been attached to the wallpaper, as well as the wallpaper itself, needed neutralizing. Non-water soluble inks were used in creating the wallpapers, but water-based treatments had to proceed cautiously.

Work in the laboratory followed a regimen of at least twelve procedures that had to be repeated for each of the twenty-one individual sheets, with drying and flattening time between each step. After each panel had been cleaned, the fabric backing and paper lining were removed and the acidity neutralized. Reconstruction involved carefully aligning and patching all tears with Japanese tissue and starch paste. Countless fragments were reinserted. A Japanese tissue lining preceded a fabric support. In-painting using a resin/water-based medium disguised small losses. Finally the wallpaper panels were mounted to Decolite 1208 panels, which are strong, moisture-resistant panels composed of an end-grain balsa wood core with fiberglass and polyester resin surface skins. This is the best support product to prevent warping, dimpling, or distortion during changing environmental conditions. It enables the wallpapers to be exhibited and stored with the greatest amount of support. Following the ethical practices of their field, the Hammes made sure all processes employed are reversible in the event that future technology uncovers different conservation techniques. The excruciatingly patient process yielded fine examples of Charles Burchfield's scenic wallpaper. *Country Life and the Hunt* is a stylized, decorative arts rendition of a country landscape that hints at the power of paintings yet to be created.

Nancy Weekly
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The conservation project was made possible by funds from the Edith and Frances Mulhall Achilles Memorial Fund, Gail and John Greenberger, and the Conservation Treatment Regrant Program administered by the Lower Hudson Conference, in association with the Museum Program of the New York State Council on the Arts.

An exhibition of the restored wallpaper, presented from April 6 through October 6, 2002 and this publication have been made possible by an important grant from the Charles E. Burchfield Foundation. Additional funding was provided by the James Carey Evans Endowment.

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