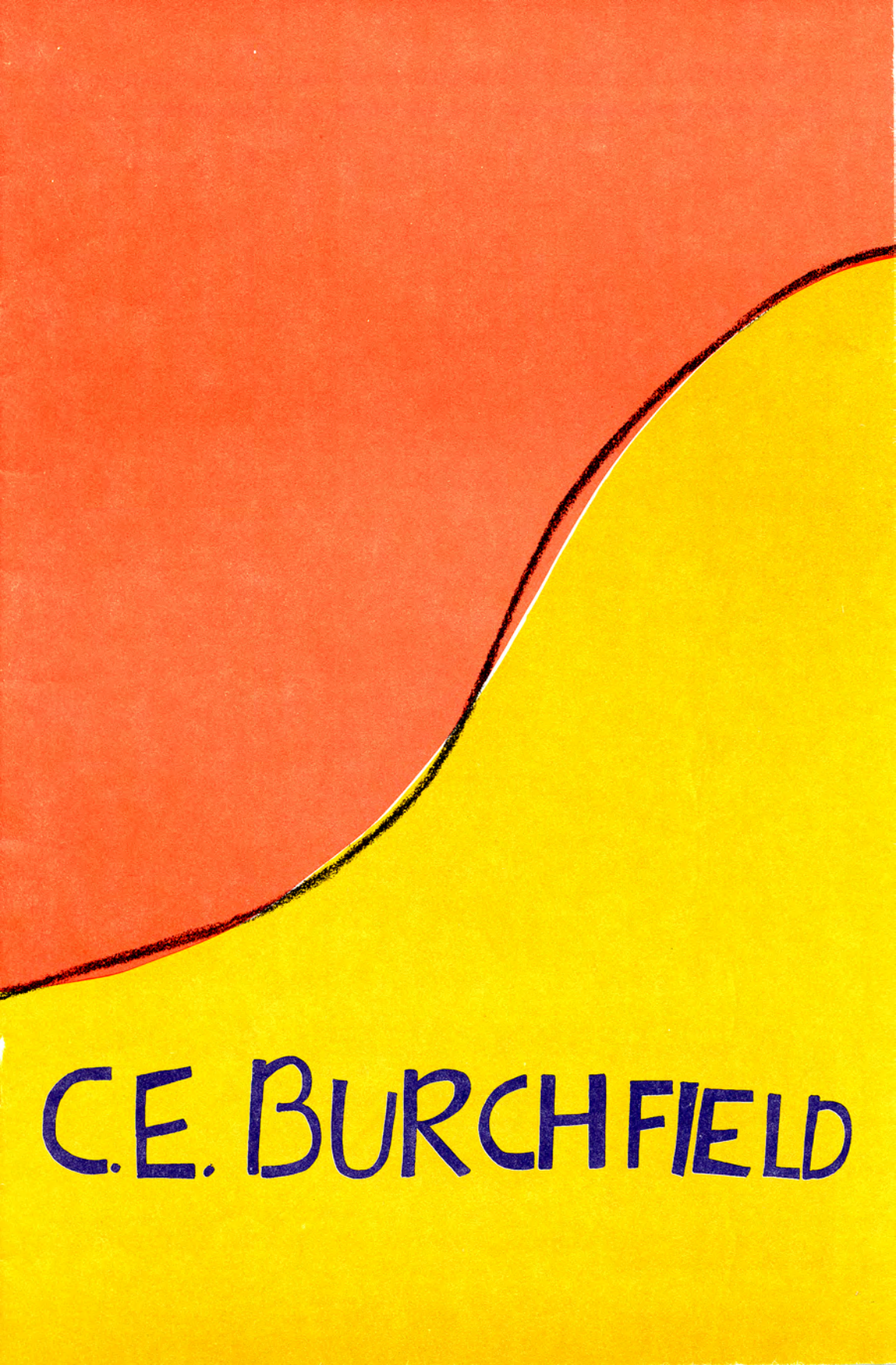


The background of the image is a smooth gradient from a deep red at the top to a bright yellow at the bottom. A thick, black, wavy line curves across the middle of the frame, separating the red upper half from the yellow lower half. The line has a slightly irregular, hand-drawn quality.

C.E. BURCHFIELD

BURCHFIELD CENTER Western New York Forum for American Art
1300 Elmwood Avenue, Buffalo, New York October 21 - December 9, 1979

2



THIS CATALOG AND THE
EXHIBITION IT ACCOMPANIES
HONOR ANTHONY J. SISTI
FOR HIS GENEROUS GIFTS TO THE
BURCHFIELD CENTER
IN MEMORY OF HIS FRIEND, NEIGHBOR
AND FELLOW ARTIST, CHARLES E. BURCHFIELD.

FOREWORD

┌

┐

19

WORKS BY CHARLES E. BURCHFIELD
A Tribute From Tony Sisti



4



11

FOREWORD

Throughout its thirteen-year history, the Burchfield Center has devotedly organized exhibitions presenting the art and life of Charles Burchfield. Periodically we have held as well exhibitions which feature the Center's most recent acquisitions, to share with the public the constant expansion of our Collection. Now once again we have the proud opportunity to mount an exhibition of newly acquired works by Charles Burchfield, an opportunity made possible by the exceedingly generous gift of these works by Burchfield's fellow artist and friend, Tony Sisti. Mr. Sisti, whose accomplishments as an artist are being presented and discussed in a companion exhibition and catalog, richly deserves the gratitude of the community for this major donation. The gift also identifies Mr. Sisti, one of our best-known local artists, as a long-standing patron of the arts. Our tributes fall short of expressing our gratitude.

5

The gift itself comprises twenty-six Burchfield watercolor paintings executed between 1915 and 1918 and seven drawings and sketches done between 1924 and 1966. The former are early, pivotal works painted at the outset of the career of one of our major twentieth-century artists, whose work, while remaining regionally based, has universal appeal.

This particular occasion is distinctive in several ways. First, it is the largest group of newly acquired Burchfield works yet exhibited at the Center. Secondly, it represents a major addition to the Center's collection of Burchfield's early work, thereby enriching tremendously one of the largest such public collections in existence. Thirdly, the works themselves will allow the Center's visitors to follow the artist's stylistic, technical and thematic development over a brief prolific period in the initial years of his professional career. And, finally, the gift itself includes several drawings and paintings which relate to major works in our own and other collections.

Works by Charles E. Burchfield, A Tribute from Tony Sisti, like its accompanying exhibition, *Works by Tony Sisti*, celebrates this major gift to the Burchfield Center Permanent Collection. The exhibition could not have taken place without the dedicated assistance and tireless effort of a number of friends of the Center. We are especially indebted to J. Benjamin Townsend, of the State University of New York at Buffalo, for his introductory essay, "Crisis and Renewal: Charles Burchfield, 1915-1916," and for his sustained assistance and invaluable advice in the organization of this exhibition. Our gratitude also goes to the Greater Buffalo Press, which has printed this and its companion catalog for the Burchfield Center.

Edna M. Lindemann,
Director



CRISIS AND RENEWAL: CHARLES BURCHFIELD, 1915-1916

by J. Benjamin Townsend

*We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;
But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.*
— William Wordsworth

I

Early in September 1915 Charles Burchfield ("Burchie" as he was then called by his cronies) returned from his summer vacation in Salem, Ohio, to a fourth and final year at the Cleveland School of Art. He was twenty-two years old. Salem at that time (and pretty much since) was a small manufacturing community of less than ten thousand, opening directly on to verdant meadows and woods, rolling hills, abandoned coal mines and numerous streams, ponds and swamps. As a boy and youth, fatherless but surrounded by a large, warm family, schoolmates and all that was familiar and comfortable, Burchfield had roamed this countryside during every spare hour, sometimes with a friend or dog for companion but mostly alone. To help support his widowed mother he worked after school and on Saturdays in a local drugstore and later at the W. H. Mullins Company, which manufactured machine and automobile parts. Every holiday and vacation during his last year of high school and four years of art school he passed working in one or another department of the Mullins plant.

At first Cleveland, only forty-five miles to the northwest on the shore of Lake Erie, might have been moons away. And although he became as familiar with its tree-lined streets (See "Euclid Avenue," no. 9, in the present exhibition), parks, lakeshore and rural environs as with his own hometown and leapt at the cultural offerings of the large city, by the end of his junior year at the Art School, Burchfield records, "the city had lost all the glamour of a new experience and I was assailed periodically by violent attacks of homesickness for the country. My journal was full of my longing for our back yard in Salem, the dusty roads and wooded fields near our home. The view from my bedroom window was the entrance to a romantic land, which hastened my return to the Valley of the Little Beaver."¹ In spite of working eight and a half hours every day in the Mullins factory during that last vacation summer of 1915, the young artist found time to explore zealously ideas that had been crowding into his head throughout the previous months. "I made hundreds and hundreds of studies of clouds, trees, fields, fieldflowers and -grasses, moonrises, sunsets and storms," he was to recall. "All the ideas and materials for a lifetime had to be gathered that summer or never." (Arizona Catalog, p. 15)

When he returned to the Cleveland School of Art that September, after a happy, fruitful summer at home, Burchfield resumed the busy, liberated life of the traditional art student. There were almost daily walks and sketching trips, outings with congenial companions to Little Italy, Cleveland's Wade and

1. *CB: His Golden Year. A Retrospective Exhibition of Watercolors, Oils and Graphics by Charles E. Burchfield.* November 14, 1965-January 9, 1966. Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1965, p. 15. Henceforth this publication will be referred to as "Arizona Catalog."

Rockefeller Parks, Gates Mills, and the city's pleasant suburbs. Lake Erie afforded boating and strolls along its shores during sunny days and on star-filled nights. He continued to make notes and sketches on the effects of weather, the time of day and season on water, sky and sand. And there was the occasional prowler at night in downtown Cleveland. For company he had that of his younger brother Joe, who also attended the Cleveland School (later Institute) of Art; friends like Frank Daniels, his closest; and Alice Bailey, a fellow student to whom he was romantically attached.

Among the authors whom he records discovering about this time were Yeats, whose symbolist verse plays, he writes in his journal, "thrill me like music;"² the American transcendental and ensemblist poets, Emerson and Whitman; the Indian mystic, Rabindranath Tagore, whose *Gitanjali* he found comparable to the Psalms of David and with whom he shared deep religious feeling, a strong sense of the beauty of earth and sky, and love of childhood; and finally Sir Lionel de Fonseca, whose long essay, "On the Truth of the Decorative Arts," advocated to the Western World a total, comprehensive art style that would decorate and enhance life. (Arizona Catalog, p. 17) Throughout this final year the young Burchfield was both expanding and honing his tastes in art, music, literature and even entertainment. Soon to abandon his rapturous enthusiasm for Wagner in preference for Sibelius, Beethoven, Brahms and Tchaikovsky, he heard music everywhere — in the color of trees, telegraph wires and the convolutions of a chestnut tree. His head was full of vast musical projects, including an opera on the legendary subject of Hiawatha, seeing it completely staged in his mind. And he debated taking up the piano by way of preparation. Already he had begun a lifelong addiction to movies, but vaudeville he found vulgar and disgusting, driving him back to the company of nature. Although he habitually avoided society, despising its vanities, pretensions and hypocrisy, hours were now spent in discussion and argument with close friends. Inordinately shy with girls, he continued his romance with Alice and appears improbably to have entertained thoughts of marriage. Caught up in this ferment of intellectual discovery, artistic growth and personal adventure, all should have been well with him. But like Matthew Arnold, the troubled, impatient student was soon to lament:

8 . . . the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain . . .

II

Endowed with exceptional vigor and inventiveness of imagination, and already committed to a nascent faith centered on a direct identification with nature, Burchfield must have been frustrated by the restrictions of academic curriculum and weary of the contrived pastoralism of city parks. He had been required during his first two years at the School to draw from casts and live models. Never excelling at figure drawing, he developed a lifelong distaste for the exercise. On the other hand, his evident talent for design, for which he won

2. MS. Journal, October 2, 1915. Sixty-four autograph journals, from 1909, Burchfield's sixteenth year, to 1965, two years before his death, are on deposit at the Burchfield Center. Subsequent citations to the journals will be indicated by date in parentheses in the text.

prizes, marked him for a career as an illustrator or commercial designer. The School course of study stressed preparation for just such a career, devoting the two final years of study to illustration. His journals for this period show Burchfield resisting a career in design and deciding "to be an artist and just paint pictures." And several of his teachers, notably Henry G. Keller, recognized his promise and encouraged him to become an independent artist. Ironically he was, of course, to earn his living as a wallpaper designer for M. H. Birge and Sons, Buffalo, from 1921 to 1929, when he determined to support himself and his family entirely by his art. But in 1915-16, uncertain as to his future, seeking direction in his painting, full of inner turmoil, Burchfield had not yet sufficiently developed his watercolor technique and imagery to keep pace with his emotional and professional yearnings. Mourning (at twenty-two!) the loss of boyhood innocence and its unmediated experience of nature, he sought to recover his old capacity for dreaming, idling and musing.

Signs of anxiety begin to appear in the journals in early October, barely a month after his return to school. After a day of classes he complained, "My attempt to attain more realism has choked up my imagination. But tonight, after school, coming thru the park in the high wind, I dreamed of walks along remote yellow-lit country roads, on a windy evening." (Journals, October 9, 1915) The next day he wrote, "I am not atune with nature - or rather am not sufficiently keyed up to it." Dreams, fantasies, visions always made up a large part of the watercolorist's emotional and creative life; but by the end of the following month self-doubts assailed him: "I have lost something. It is not in me to dream or idle any more . . . Think of having to learn to do either! Yet that is the task that confronts me." (Journals, November 20, 1915) A constitutional loneliness, social blunders real or imagined, self-questionings plagued him: "A period of depression is again come over me - I know of no manner how I could possibly be interesting to anyone. I have never learned to talk & have only *listened* to the trees." (Journals, November 28, 1915) Longing for solitude, he fantasizes in an unconscious, self-destructive impulse in the same entry "strange phantom lands, in which I wander as a half-insane carefree being . . . I see enormous moonlit cliffs with water roaring at their bases." (Journals, November 28, 1915) A "few hours of mingling with the mob & listening to conversations" only repelled him, reminding him that he had not "heard the wind in the treetops for months." (December 4, 1915) A deep, atavistic longing for some remote, primitive existence was set off by his recalling a tune he had used to whistle in primary school:

All my life I have yearned for some strange land of poetry and imagination, which is always beyond my reach. I can see it most plainly, oddly enough, when I have committed a sin & am filled with remorse.

. . . It came over me all at once how my life so far seems to have been but a repetition of this always unsated yearning. (Journals, December 7, 1915)

A longing for solitude in some vaguely realized dreamland of the subconscious continued throughout this final school year. Although it in fact never leaves him, this repressed death wish ultimately becomes sublimated or resolved in some of his finest paintings.

The lure of a far-off, never-never land can be attributed in part to the *Weltschmerz* of the introspective, young romantic. It was also a part of his nostalgia for an irrecoverable childhood, a major psychic force in the artist's creative development. Late in March of the following year he seems to have

recaptured this lost innocence and vision:

On the warm hillside I renewed old forgotten sensations which I cannot even now remember. I seemed to view life with the old romantic eye of boyhood, when love was a thing holy, and life contained nothing but musing on hilltops - Does it contain more now? Evil practical things were creeping in; a week more of such lolling in the sunlight & my song would become as innocent as the meadowlark's - (Journals, March 30, 1916)

But a few weeks later he confessed that he could not translate these half-remembered intimations into conscious thought: "I have experienced old & almost forgotten sensations of my childhood, yet my most *conscious* abstract mood fails to bring them up again." (Journals, April 24, 1916)

In mid-December 1915, returning home by train for the Christmas holidays, Burchfield became lost in a book on Hindu and Buddhist myths:

. . . I have realized since that that stage in the development of the human mind, when they first began to conjure supernatural beings, is to me the most vital & interesting, as their gods were the personification of natural phenomena, which strikes the main chord of my life. I have determined to recreate, in picture & design, the ancient mythologies. It has changed the world for me. (Journals, December 16, 1915)

10

It comes as no surprise that at about this time Burchfield contrived grandiose, epic projects: "a huge oriental procession which advanced like a terrific thunderstorm in August" and "a fairy fantasy," for both of which he designed the scenery and composed the music. (Journals, May 13 and 22, 1916). His most ambitious scheme was a large, neoprimitivistic work, "The Battle of the Winged Bulls," representing in the fashion of Moussorgsky and Stravinsky the "First Thunderstorm." (Journals, December 12, 1915) Other mythic visions — "my only solace in my uncongenial surroundings" — provided themes for "pictures I am to create. . . 'North,' 'South,' 'East' and 'West' have loomed up before me as well as 'The First Sunrise'; 'The primeval Spring, Autumn, Winter and Summer.'" Romantic authors like Maurice de Guérin and Victor Hugo, the music of Wagner and approaching paranoia were operating on the alienated youth with equal force. His vast epic projects at this time, of course, eluded his reach; he simply lacked the artistic means of translating them into the medium he was practising.

Worldly, materialistic anxieties only exacerbated his sense of a lost Eden and an illusory land of heart's desire. On a spring outing with Alice Bailey³ to Bedford Glens, a rolling rapids in a southeastern suburb of Cleveland, Burchfield exulted in the ocher, boiling river (See Untitled - "Waterfalls," no. 8); the green pines and the hepaticas, the mystical first flower of spring which features in so many of his works and which he sees now for the first time in his life:

. . . I sat spellbound gazing at the delicate flowers, listening to the booming roar of the rapids - I felt the world was beautiful after all - seeing a single hepatica blooming on a mossy boulder. I conceived a picture of this flower set alone in the midst of the

3. Throughout the journals of the Cleveland years, Burchfield has erased, not always indecipherably, the name or initial of Alice, substituting that of his friend, Frank Daniels, or in the present instance that of his brother Joe and changing all personal pronouns from feminine to masculine.

immense valleys & churning rivers - a momentary glimpse of heaven -

All this was suddenly lost as my mind, without warning, turned to a most materialistic worry & haunted me - all the wonderful poetry of the day came crashing down and was gone - . . . a sense of frustration came over me and I felt that all my idealism of art and love of nature were hollow shams, that I was only pretending to be something better than I really was. I foolishly communicated to Joe my desire to quit this life & [it] either oppressed him or received his contempt - Again I felt he thought my depression might relate to him - that perhaps I had preferred to come alone to the glens. (Journals, April 15, 1916)

The romantic idyl had vanished in the face of financial worries and a lovers' quarrel. Even so, his longings and dreams persisted. Working in life class one morning a few days later, he suddenly "thought of all the dreams I have ever had of wildflowers and unseen woods"; his yearning for the dream world returned and with it dizzy oblivion to his surroundings. (Journals, April 18, 1916) The next day he made a courageous, fateful decision. Learning with dismay that a plan by which he might have earned a living and gone on with his art had fallen through, he at first accepted stoically the fact that he must work at whatever turned up. Later, however, he calmly resolved to make whatever sacrifices necessary and "to become a 'martyr' to art." Thirteen years intervened before he was able to fulfill this resolution, but he had reached a crossroads in his destiny and chosen his path.

11

A swarm of problems and speculations continued to torment him: "In a seeming endless chain, my mind thrashes out landscape problems; the advantages of matrimony, what is the value of friendship, whether to make a sketch or not; the hatred of dogmas; should not an artist become a hermit; the futility of method; the sordidness in people's faces; self-detestation; composition of weird music; is there anything beautiful in love? - and finally what controls the mind? -" (Journals, April 24, 1916) As his despondency deepened, he turned vainly to nature, inner resources and his teachers:

A cloud seems to hang over me. I resolve to be free and as poetical as the wild in nature, yet I find I am not; to renew the romance of last spring and summer - The flicker-calls in the park made me heartsick . . .

I do not think there is an artist in the school who can feel the beauty & poetry of nature as existing for its own sake. (Journals, April 26, 1916)

On the last day of April he deplored, "My life seems but a succession of unbearable seasons of gloom & despair."

His despair over his personal life and future as an artist reached its nadir a fortnight later: "A morning & an afternoon of almost unbearable gloom - Of what use was my pretending idealism? I could find nothing in myself worth saving." (Journals, May 15, 1916) The last two sentences were written over an erased passage, partially decipherable, which reads, "Planning suicide . . ." His hopelessness was abysmal and total: "This is the end of everything - the poetry of nature; the poetry of love; the poetry of life have all died - nothing is left. I am utterly despondent." (Journals, May 27, 1916) Seeing sunlit trees on a hill at sunset or hearing bird calls, he could think only of a world of wonder that he

would never enjoy again. When he came to reread these journal passages in sober maturity in 1962, the artist commented in the margin: "They must have had their source in the uncertain economic problem facing me at the conclusion of my art school career - there seemed no way to earn a living at art - and there wasn't." If this belated explanation seems inadequate, one can only speculate on the contributing factors. Disappointment at his failure to achieve an expressive vocabulary for his increasingly heroic visions? Young love and hope for marriage blighted by reduced circumstances? Failure to find any work as a practising artist after four years of formal instruction? Morbidity brought on by emotional frustration and sexual repression? To these must be added the fact that Burchfield, who suffered in later life at least two further prolonged periods of depression bordering on breakdown, must have suffered periodically from manic-depressive tendencies. Manic-depressive disorder characterizes the Puritan temper, indigenous to Burchfield's rural middle-class environment.

Be that as it may, the young painter alternated for a considerable period of time between elation and depression. Within little more than a week after contemplating suicide, he wrote in his journal, "Life seemed short for the stupendous work I am to accomplish" (Journals, June 5, 1916); but later in the month, "A terrible oppression is on me - Nature seems foreign to me - I hear bird calls almost unmoved -" (Journals, June 14, 1916) Yet he strove to view his situation with some detachment and practicality: "I long for a period of seclusion - There is nothing in a half-way mode of living - yet I force myself on, watching what little I may from nature, only enough to realize what wonderful poetry I am missing -" (Journals, July 21, 1916)

Slowly he achieved a measure of acceptance, a temporary *modus vivendi*: "And so I have arrived at this point, and have no more possessions than the love of nature and life - The true poet needs no more." At the end of the academic semester he graduated from the Cleveland School of Art, came home to Salem and resumed his job at Mullins. Gradually his gloom and self-hatred lifted, as he wandered the familiar countryside, making voluminous nature notes and sketches as usual. By August he could look back on his recent attacks and reassess his character in Hamlet's fashion:

I have of late been unguarded. I have attempted to hedge in my soul with aloofness & indifference. Consequently thoughts of hated business & politics have crept in. My mind mechanically goes over things that have no bearing on my life -

I can look forward to no future; I must spend a season of oblivion with nature -" (Journals, August 7, 1916)

"When I learn that my weakest moment is when I feel confident of my strength, then may I conquer," he counsels himself with a paradox. (Journals, August 27, 1916) Two days later he recognized that even such quiet self-searching as this was dangerous and resolved to give up his relentless introspection: "I find I am looking at myself too often. At all is too much." Sound advice that he was only intermittently to follow as long as he lived.

Life in Salem proved healing. But possibly as a result of the reawakening of boyhood memories and dreams, possibly out of dread of resuming formal studio training in New York where he had obtained a scholarship at the National Academy of Design for the coming year, he began to experience terrifying hallucinations. He lay sleepless in bed, fearing he might awake insane. He heard pounding while at work, "frightfully deep & hollow, seeming to come from the

depths of the earth." (Journals, September 23, 1916) "I seem to feel some presence which hovers to one side - " he writes, "sometimes it is a man, or a phantom, or a running dog; I look quickly but there is nothing there." (Journals, September 23, 1916) (Compare Untitled - "Walking Man," no. 26) Superstitious paranoia dogged him on his beloved rambles in the woods, where stumps concealed something lurking, logs writhed and "flowers have faces but they are not always pleasant." (Journals, September 24, 1916) Ruefully he observed that "the happiest moment contains in its womb the germ of the most morbid one." Then comes again the ultimate temptation of the manic-depressive: "It takes so little to cause me to sink into despair and the merest trifle turns the thoughts aside for happier." Written originally beneath "sink into despair" but later erased is the still detectible "think of suicide." (Journals, September 23, 1916) Gone now are those "idealistic lands to the south - sun-beaten thunderheads at noon!"; and he longed "to awake some morning entirely refreshed, to walk out barefooted in the dewy grass and walk eastward in the dusk over a strange land to meet the sun - " (Journals, September 23, 1916) The fearful visions and rapidly alternating moods continued through the remainder of the 1916 journal entries and well into those of the following year. Not until he ceased to attribute his own morbid moods directly to the natural world about him and channeled them into a highly personal vocabulary of abstract symbols for various states of mind, as he was to do in 1917, did Burchfield emerge from the Slough of Despond.

Meanwhile he withdrew into lethargy or endless self-questioning: "Sometimes I wonder at the Multitude of Ideas I gather - does profusion breed confusion?" (Journals, September 28, 1916) His former pleasure in reading turned to aversion. He dismissed the war raging in Europe as of no concern to artists who must not sacrifice their precious time by reading. (Journals, September 29, 1916) He no longer sketched or painted but gave over his free evening hours to preparing restlessly for the trip to New York: "My hands fairly itch at their idleness - How long must I continue to feel this poetic longing arise, and have no means of letting it forth? Does not poetry suffer thus? Can a caged bird fly even if let loose after years of imprisonment?" (Journals, September 29, 1916)

13

With grave misgivings he left for New York early in October. At once his doubts were confirmed. After attending one life class at the National Academy, he like Byron shook the dust of classrooms from his feet forever. Instead he instinctively turned to the harbor where a sparrow's "lisping and whistling" conjured up "the first bird song in spring on a warm day in the marshes." (Journals, October 7, 1916) Feeling that in New York he had begun "to lose sight of former days" and had become "dead to everything," he solemnly determined "to study nature - to study the figure - to keep always my ideal before me - " (Journals, October 7 and 12, 1916) In spite of finding a sympathetic sponsor in the art critic Walter Pach and an enthusiastic dealer in Mary Mowbray-Clarke, who gave him his first commercial one-man exhibition that fall, the brooding, homesick young man had reached an impasse:

This seems a crisis in my life. Without money, discouraged, I look myself over. I lack the courage to do the hard work. I dream ideas & possibilities; I see the mountain-tops but haven't the character to climb. Seeing my faults, I do not cast them aside but brood over them. Failure looms. (Journals, November 15, 1916)

Exactly one week later he was on a train for Salem, which he reached at 5:30 A.M. after an all-night ride. "Seedy, grimy and hungry - and in very low spirits," he felt the trip to New York had been a complete failure; but the warm reception

from his family made up for everything. The next day he visited the Mullins Co. where he was welcomed back to his old job. And the day after that found him in a retreat familiar from boyhood: "To Post's Woods - a wild windy day - as I entered the woods the roar of the wind in the tree-tops filled me with indescribable joy - I was 'home' at last - " (Journals, November 24, 1916)

At first these rambles in beloved haunts, many of which like Adam he had named himself, and the remembrance of things past only stirred up the feelings of loss he had suffered from so acutely in Cleveland and New York. But he had reached a major turning-point, both in his emotional and artistic redemption. Looking one evening at a sports magazine, he re-experienced vividly "old forgotten sensations of the wild unsophisticated American outdoors. I saw clearly how my work has become mere decoration; & realize how puny I was compared to the hugeness of such a nature." (Journals, December 4, 1916) The source of this sense of inadequacy and unfulfillment was to be also the source of renewed health and creative activity: a return to the benefactions of nature. Its promise is contained in the last paragraph of the last entry of the journal for 1916:

Yesterday in the woods - rain - queer light from Zenith - trees like elusive creatures - now appearing, now disappearing, some seeming to crouch or supplicate. How the rain dripping on the leaves sounding - the deep ominous rumble of a train coming from the depths of the earth was an old sound - " (Journals, December 4, 1916)

In his own words 1917 was to become his "golden year." The catalog for the memorial exhibition at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York, in 1970 lists 165 watercolors for that year—fewer than the 191 listed for 1916 but superior in their use of a highly inventive, personal set of symbolic conventions devised to celebrate an anthropomorphic, animated universe.⁴ But that is another chapter. By the end of 1916 Charles Burchfield had indeed "come home," but in another sense he was at last well "on his way."

III

To organize an artist's life and career by years or decades is, of course, a gross if convenient over-simplification. However, the journals and the twenty-three paintings from 1916 in the Tony Sisti gift presently on exhibition reveal that in that year Burchfield was breaking free from his work of the previous year. Already fascinated by nineteenth-century aesthetic theories of synesthesia and *les correspondances*—the concomitant stimulation of one sense by a stimulus to another—he sought a set of calligraphic devices that would enable him to translate sound and movement into pictorial images: "Yesterday morning while on my way to school . . . walking under the trees I felt as if the color made sound." (Journals, October 15, 1915) Another concept that attracted him was the total or comprehensive art form advocated by Wagner. Early in March 1915 he had seen the Diaghilev Ballet, with performances by Pavlova and Nijinsky and sets by Leon Bakst: "I never was so completely transported. . . . Everything seemed newly created in my mind. It is almost the ultimate in stage art - the union of music, drama, dancing, pantomime, & design." (Journals, March 21,

4. *Charles Burchfield. Catalogue of Paintings in Public and Private Collections. Museum of Art, Munson-Williams Proctor Institute, Utica, New York, 1970.*

1915) Late in the same year he not only discovered Japanese woodcut prints but learned that Hiroshige had composed *haiku*—"little poems, one of which told how 'I laughed at the moon, & the moon laughed at me.' " (November 28, 1915) Increasingly the journals record his observation of the clean, sharply juxtaposed images that Ezra Pound recommended to the early Imagist poets: "Don't be descriptive . . . viewy. Get the exact curve of the thing." Many of these journal entries are small epiphanies, much like the early imagist efforts of T. E. Hulme, William Carlos Williams and Pound himself. Here is one: "The wind waves the branches of the peach tree, whose shadows zigzag across the arclight-yellowed steam of the window." (Journals, January 5, 1916) Eventually Burchfield found precisionism and abstraction in painting anathema but his eclectic interest in new directions in the arts at this time has not been sufficiently noted.

By the end of 1916 he had begun to tire of the flat pictorial design and bold color harmonies of the Japanese print and the *fin de siècle* posters which imitated them. Viewing an exhibition of work by one of his Cleveland instructors, "so remote from anything commercial either in subject or treatment," he wrote, "a great discouragement came over me as it seemed that I was viewing nature, not with an innocent eye, but thru the eyes of a poster-designer." (Journals, December 13, 1915) The journals and watercolors of 1916 in this exhibition indicate that almost at once Burchfield began to free himself of the poster-like, over-designed decorativeness of his earlier schoolwork through a much closer scrutiny of the effects of light, atmosphere, weather, and time of day or season. The several journals and notebooks for 1916 contain voluminous color and compositional notes on how to achieve precise effects: "At a flash of lightning in a rainstorm have trees dkr. [darker] at this point." (Journals, April 20, 1916) He began to experiment with various conventions for transposing these calligraphically to paper. He observed that "trees have a lacy edge at *sunset* time - at twilight, they commence to thicken." (Journals, April 14, 1916; See "Afternoon in the Grove" and "Yellow Afterglow," nos. 20 and 22) At the same time he loosened up and simplified his watercolor technique, outlining his forms swiftly and freely in pencil, and quickly brushing them in with broad strokes of a larger hair brush. Neither pencil nor color is subordinated to the other. Although he does not abandon altogether his use of hot, violent fauvist and expressionist color, there is now far greater range and subtlety. His colors now range from chalky pastels (See Untitled and "Reflections," nos. 3 and 4) to acid, astringent hues ("Afterglow" and "Yellow Afterglow," nos. 19 and 22). It is difficult to believe that the composer of these vibrant, zestful harmonies is the tormented author of the journals.

15

Simultaneously he abandoned *haiku* effects in a search for a larger, more expansive view of nature: "The artist must be lavish in his material; like Nature, [he] is a profligate spender, yet with continent results." (Journals, February 27, 1916) Making copious notes, he reverted to the "all day sketches" and transitional season paintings of 1915 in which he could express the paradoxicality of nature. (Compare the preliminary studies and sketches for "Autumn to Winter" and "Winter to Spring," nos. 29-33) The idea, derived from an exhibition of Chinese art he had seen the year before, "was to execute, in a continuous form, the transitions of sequence of weather events in a day, or several days or seasons." (Arizona Catalog, p. 15) His epic ambitions returned. One hot, hazy day in late August 1916 he viewed an approaching storm:

Immense storm to south at noon - It mounts high - its sunlit
white peak reaches the zenith - Epic masses of hazy sunlit piles
millions of miles to the North -

I imagine myself Titan and view this phenomenon in a large way - (Journals, August 23, 1916)

Like Whitman, the young Burchfield desired to embrace the universe in its entirety, to sketch or paint everything that attracted him. "Art is not a means of earning a livelihood or a mere pastime, as it is for the layman," he exhorted; "... it is life itself. ... The artist paints not from desire, but because he must." (Journals, August 7, 1916)

Accompanying his eager, insatiable reunion with nature in all of its multitudinous diversity and oneness were a renewed nostalgia for boyhood and the old yearning for strange, far-away lands: "My mother telling me something I had forgotten ... reveals to me perhaps the source of my dreaming of the southeast sun shining in an immense forest - of endless afternoons near old coal mines." (Journals, September 5, 1916) Maurice de Guerin's *The Centaur* again opened up this world of boyhood when "I believed in gods and living like the wind. ... Why can I not now be as irresponsible as the wind?" (Journals, September 21, 1916) The mysterious, strange land of the East, as later a remote, barbaric Northland was to do, beckoned:

I stood on a high rolling ridge-like hill and looked to the east - the rolling hills extended miles away, darkened but still reflecting the afterglow; the moon above intensely white - all at once lights commencing to twinkle at odd places - the gloom called me. It was East. (Journals, September 10, 1916)

Burchfield's South and East are for him at this juncture, not simply the paradise promised by dreams, religion or death, but the state of boyhood innocence and prenatal immanence. The North came to be for him the promise of peace, transcendence, and oneness of death. Unconsciously he knew that his path to either must be through his art. Art for him was not only life; it was grace and salvation. At the age of twenty-three, barely out of art school and with the abortive experience of New York behind him, he still despaired of achieving the vision he sought: "Stepping outdoors tonight to see the moon, flashes of lightning from the north drove the moon from my head. ... I felt I was in the dissolving of nature. Yet the sketches I brought home were only puny - " (Journals, September 7, 1916) They lacked, he added the next day, "the big epic power of nature - " He could not know, as is so abundantly clear from the evidence of the journals and that of his rapidly expanding *oeuvre*, that he had survived his cruel rite of passage and would soon emerge into artistic manhood.



18



24

CATALOG

- Measurements are in inches, height precedes width.
- Paintings and drawings are listed separately in chronological order, except where stylistic resemblance suggested an exception.
- All paintings are watercolor with pencil on paper. The media of drawings are noted.
- Where Burchfield has provided a title, the original title has been maintained. Otherwise, the work is noted as untitled. Descriptive titles appear in italics.
- All works are from the Burchfield Center Permanent Collection, gift of Tony Sisti.

PAINTINGS

18

1. HIGH NOON; October 1915
14" x 20"
2. UNTITLED; October 1915
Clump of Purple Trees
13½" x 19½"
3. UNTITLED; March 1916
Trees
14" x 20"
4. REFLECTIONS; March 1916
14" x 20"
5. MULLEIN STALKS IN SPRING;
March 1916
9" x 13⅝"
6. SPRING SILHOUETTE; April 1916
8⅞" x 11⅞"
7. NATURE'S GOTHIC WINDOW;
May 1916
9" x 12"
8. UNTITLED; May 1916
Waterfalls
14" x 14¾"
9. EUCLID AVENUE; May 31, 1916
20" x 14"
10. UNTITLED; May 17, 1916
Red House
20" x 14"
11. UNTITLED; June 19 1916
Dark Red Houses
14" x 20"
12. UNTITLED; June 24, 1916
Cloud Study I
14" x 20"
13. UNTITLED; June 24, 1916
*Black and White Cloud -
Cloud Study II*
14" x 20"
14. BOZZERT'S DAM, SALEM, OHIO;
June 26, 1916
20" x 14"
15. SUNLET AFTERNOON AFTER A
FOGGY MORNING;
June 28, 1916
14" x 20"
16. MARSHY MEADOWS; June 30, 1916
14" x 20"
17. WHITE CLOVER; June 30, 1916
14" x 20"
18. PAST NOON; July 7, 1916
14" x 20"
19. AFTERGLOW; July 8, 1916
19⅜" x 14"
20. AFTERNOON IN THE GROVE;
July 11, 1916
14" x 20"
21. HAZY JULY NOON
(SUNFLOWERS); July 30, 1916
20" x 14"
22. YELLOW AFTERGLOW;
July 31, 1916
20" x 14"
23. SUN BEHIND CLOUD; July 5, 1916
14" x 20"
24. WINDSWEPT SKY;
September 10, 1916
14" x 20"

25. UNTITLED; September 27, 1916
Lone Cloud
14" x 20"

26. UNTITLED; January 10, 1918
Walking Man
18" x 11 1/4"

DRAWINGS

27. VIEW FROM EAST BUFFALO; 1924
pencil, 13 1/4" x 21"

28. WINDBLOWN SKELETON; 1945
Study for
CHERRY BLOSSOM SNOW
carbon, 10 7/8" x 17 1/4"

29. Study for
AUTUMN TO WINTER, #1; c. 1966
pencil, 11" x 17"

30. Study for
AUTUMN TO WINTER, #2; c. 1966
pencil; 13 1/2" x 19 1/2"

31. Study for
AUTUMN TO WINTER, #3; c. 1966
pencil, 9 3/4" x 13 1/2"

32. Study for
WINTER TO SPRING, #1; c. 1966
pencil, 9 7/8" x 13 1/2"

33. Study for
WINTER TO SPRING, #2; c. 1966
pencil, 8 1/2" x 11"

