

# A Perspective on the Phases of Charles Burchfield's Creativity

By Sara Baer

Burchfield's early landscapes were imbued with expressionistic light that brought forth a uniquely mystical and experiential vision of nature.

In 1917, his self-proclaimed "Golden Year," Burchfield focused on his immediate surroundings in Salem, Ohio, producing images of woodlands, pastures, and relatable town scenes in an audacious, near-abstract, style that owed a debt to European and Asian art, but brought forth a unique ability to capture moments in time well beyond the usual scenes of previous artists.

Burchfield graduated from art school as an illustrator, and he enjoyed a highly successful career as a designer with M.H. Birge and Sons, a wallpaper company. Burchfield did not treat his arts and crafts design work as secondary to his painting, but rather considered it a vital additional creative outlet that expanded his artistic technique and legacy.

Burchfield's mid-career is defined by a more realistic approach to his surroundings. His painting of scenes of non-descript factory towns saw him associated with American Regionalism. Even though Burchfield went to great lengths to distance himself from any associations with the movement, he produced several paintings from the period that effortlessly caught the desolate and ashen mood of the anonymous and silent world with which he was so familiar. During this period, he also experimented with oil paint as a medium. To solidify his artistic legacy in a more long lived medium, Burchfield created at least 18 known oil paintings in an industrial American Regionalism style. He was dissatisfied with these efforts and returned to his expertise as a watercolorist for the remainder of this artistic career.

In a self-conscious attempt to distance himself from associations with the American Regionalist movement, Burchfield spent a good deal of his time looking to the natural world and music for inspiration. Burchfield was especially moved by Finish composer Jean Sibelius's *Symphony No. 2*, writing in a journal entry on November 29, 1930, that: "I have just received the Second Symphony of Sibelius—Its power & beauty overwhelms me—what a magnificent genius is Sibelius—All the torture of barrenness and indecision that this autumn assailed me are dissolved in this elemental music—pictures and ideas pour in upon me—my joy is almost too great to be borne."

Around 1943, Burchfield's style shifted once again. His paintings from this era reveal a bold, expressive, palette which he matched with a marked symbolic content. New York's D.C. Moore Gallery says of his painting of this period, "He was initially inspired to develop what he called 'reconstructions' or 'two-period pictures,' composites of smaller, early works, mainly from 1917

and 1918, which he enlarged with strips of paper to create grander, more complex compositions. Much of his later work reveals two complementary sides of his artistic personality—from exuberant views of sunlit fields and atmospheric skies to more introspective meditations on the profound depths of nature.”

In this later period, Burchfield developed a visual pattern that includes intricate linework, like swirls and waves, to express the sonic vibrations and other tones he heard in nature. Trees can be seen askew or bent in a manner that signifies a gust of wind; the wings of dragonflies and birds are blurred and blended to express in-flight motion; gushes of water pound the rocky talus at the foot of a waterfall, then trickle steadily along the stream. These elements are symbolized through directional brushwork, which provides a visible contrast between bold and subtle lines, shapes, and forms that communicate movement, sound, and associated sensory characteristics.

Often described as “hallucinatory,” these paintings teeter between a portrayal of nature based on a combination of reality, fantastic imagination, and subconscious gestures. In the catalogue for the 1965 University of Arizona exhibition, *Charles Burchfield: His Golden Year*, he recalled: “1915 was the year that ideas came to me which were to haunt me the rest of my life; ideas and visions of paintings that were far beyond my ability or knowledge to carry out and still are, after fifty years, an unfulfilled dream.”

During his lifetime, Burchfield's watercolor paintings continued to receive critical notice, including a 1956 solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum, honorary degrees, and a gold medal from the American Institute of Arts and Letters for his entire body of work.

The Rehn Gallery's October 1966 display of 16 large watercolors that Burchfield created in the previous five years drew high praise from John Canaday, the *New York Times* art critic, who called it “the freshest, most attractive Burchfield show yet.”

In 1964, Burchfield wrote, “How slowly the ‘secrets’ of my art come to me. When I said this to Bertha, she said, ‘Aren't you thankful that at 71 new secrets are being revealed to you?’ And I certainly am.”

Burchfield continued to reveal those secrets through his artistic creations until his death from a heart attack on January 10, 1967, in West Seneca, New York.

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