

Charles Burchfield

One of the most original watercolorists of the 20th century, Charles Burchfield (1893-1967) was born in Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio, and moved to Salem, Ohio at the age of five. Burchfield developed his passions for nature and art early in life through his reading of the transcendentalist writings of John Burroughs and Henry David Thoreau. Between 1912 and 1916 Burchfield studied at the Cleveland School of Art, where he was advised to seek subjects that were personally meaningful. Unlike many of his American contemporaries, Burchfield did not travel abroad or depend on other paintings for inspiration. Extremely sensitive to nature's varying moods as well as to his own, he found his subjects in nearby countryside and towns. Burchfield left Salem permanently in 1921 to take a job in Buffalo, N.Y. as a wallpaper designer. Although he enjoyed modest recognition for his early watercolors of Ohio, it was not until 1929 that Burchfield gained enough financial success to devote himself to painting full time.

Working primarily in watercolor, Burchfield's vision was poetic, and he discovered unexpected beauty in familiar and ordinary places. He responded to sights he knew well and attempted to convey more than just visual impressions. Edward Hopper recognized his friend's gift for capturing what artists generally overlooked: the jumble of eaves and gables formed by his neighbor's roofs, the sag in a barn door, the tilt of the weathered drain spout on the side of a house. Burchfield's subjects are unsophisticated but gain immediacy through energetic two-dimensional patterns that animate the surface of his pictures and evoke sensations of the subject's particular play of light, weather conditions, and even sound. His emphasis on synaesthetic experiences has an affinity with Arthur Dove, another artist widely collected by Duncan Phillips.

Duncan Phillips was an admirer of Burchfield and elaborated on the artist's early accomplishments: "He was, in his technic [sic], both daring and deliberate, both whimsical and precise. When he wished he could conjure up the essence of a scene indoors or out. Phillips's regard was also implicit in his correspondence with the artist & I have never had the pleasure of meeting you but I feel that I know you through your very expressive art."

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