



## 47: Charles Burchfield *Cat-Eyed House* (1918) *Springtime in the Pool* (1922) *Telegraph Pole* (1935)

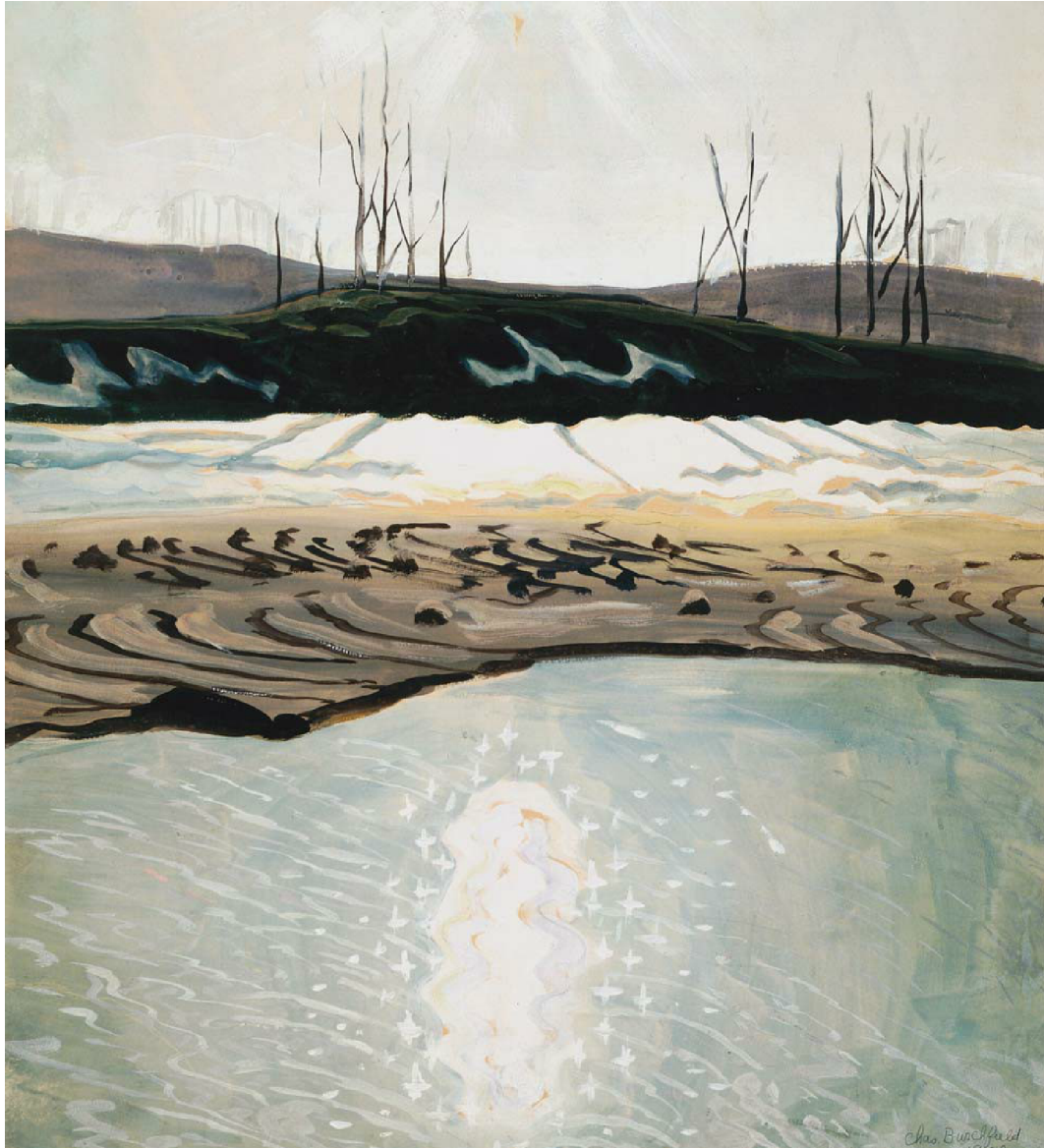
Nancy Weekly

Two of the paintings by Charles Ephraim Burchfield in the Memorial Art Gallery's collection aptly illustrate the stylistic extremes that frame an intense period of transition in the painter's work and life, and a third serves as an early environmentalist's statement against the pollution of industrial America. *Cat-Eyed House*, coming at the end of World War I, marks his early ventures into fantasy and anthropomorphism. *Springtime in the Pool*, coming at the end of this process, is one of only three paintings he completed in 1922,<sup>1</sup> but stands among Burchfield's most buoyant and evocative works. Also known as *Sun Reflected in Pool*, it is a glorious homage to spring that ushers in the radical personal changes taking place in Burchfield's life, as well as a transition in his painting style and subject matter.<sup>2</sup>

To understand the importance of *Springtime* in Burchfield's oeuvre, we need to digress briefly to consider his career and education. Six years earlier, in 1916, he had graduated from the Cleveland School of Art, having concentrated in design, illustration, and painting. His early works were imaginative, stylized landscapes and rural Ohio scenes. During this time of artistic development, Burchfield sketched incessantly and started all watercolor paintings with a graphite sketch of simple outlines that he filled in with color. During his student years he had been influenced by Chinese landscape scroll paintings, Japanese artists Hiroshige and Hokusai, illustrators such as Aubrey Beardsley, and Russian ballet designs by Léon Bakst. These led him to a style that capitalized on flat patterning and limited modeling for three-dimensional mass. In a retrospective exhibition in 1965, he recalled his favorite Cleveland teacher, Henry G. Keller, saying that his "inability to see form" and his "virtually complete concentration on two-dimensional pattern, amounted almost to genius."<sup>3</sup>

Charles Burchfield,  
1893–1967  
*Cat-Eyed House*, 1918  
Watercolor with graphite  
on paper, 18¼ x 22¼ in.  
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,  
44.53

After a truncated visit to New York City in the fall of 1916 to attend the National Academy of Design on a scholarship Burchfield returned to his small home town of Salem, Ohio. There, far from painting in a merely decorative style, he began in 1917 to depict childhood emotions and visualizations of sound through linear distortions and symbols. In doing so, he created a personal, visual language that he used throughout his career. His vocabulary included distinctive repetitious patterns for cicadas, crickets, spring peepers, and other wildlife, animation marks to suggest the effect of wind rustling through trees, and inventive motifs he called "Conventions for Abstract Thoughts," which symbolically characterized extreme emotions such as "Fear," "Morbidness," "Melancholy," "Dangerous Brooding," "Imbecility," and "Insanity." These conventions he used as anthropomorphic tools to suggest personality flaws of residents through the exterior of their buildings. By 1918, when he painted *Black Houses* (private collection) and *Cat-Eyed House* (now owned by MAG), he abandoned the specific menacing fantasy forms of the "Conventions" and instead exaggerated porch shadows, cornices, curtained windows, sagging clapboard and rooflines to make the houses themselves appear as gargantuan beings. Not a single right angle can be found in *Cat-Eyed House*, transforming it from an engineered architectural structure in Washingtonville, Ohio, into a lurking feline caught in the sun's glare off snow. He considered these paintings "'portraits' of individual houses....[M]any were social or economic comments...to express the ingrown lives of solitary people."<sup>4</sup>



Inducted into the U.S. Army in July 1918, Burchfield traveled to Camp Jackson, South Carolina, where he first served in the field artillery, and later was relieved to be transferred to the camouflage corps. The return to his previous life after the war was difficult. Regrettably, he destroyed a fanciful series of paintings depicting life from a bird's perspective after being discouraged from publicly showing them.<sup>5</sup> During his modest output that year, he also painted abandoned coal mines, trains, and beleaguered houses in Ohio's small towns. Then, having floundered in finding appropriate subjects at the beginning of 1919, Burchfield reached a pivotal point after reading the newly published *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson, although he preferred the settings over the characters in these stories that conveyed an atmosphere of disillusionment, boredom, and desperation in mid-western America. He considered Anderson to be one of America's best writers of their generation. The book sent him "back to the human scene" and his paintings took on an analogous look of despondency. A number of national critics recognized the connection between Burchfield and Anderson.<sup>6</sup> Carl Bredemeier in Buffalo thought that Burchfield painted

*truthfully, directly, brutally, and without apology, as he saw it....What Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters do for us in verse, what Sherwood Anderson did for us in "Winesburg, Ohio," and what Sinclair Lewis did in "Main Street," Burchfield does with water color. Nature sees to it that we have every generation, our uncompromising realists, clear-eyed, fearless men who tear aside the sham of our lives and show us some of the dross.*<sup>7</sup>

Burchfield took pride in their comparisons, saving in a scrapbook the articles that declared him "the Sherwood Anderson artist."<sup>8</sup>

Literary works continued to fuel Burchfield's interest in American subjects. He was drawn to the work of Zona Gale and Sinclair Lewis, and especially favored Willa Cather's "epic grandeur of post-pioneer life."<sup>9</sup> After the sale of some works from his first exhibition at the Kevorkian Gallery in 1920, Burchfield used the income to take a three-month summer leave from his office job in Salem to travel and paint. In New York, Mrs. Mary Mowbray-Clarke, a bookstore owner who had become his first art dealer during his original brief visit to the city, introduced him to Arthur B. Davies, who showed Burchfield his own experimental techniques with oil tempera. Burchfield tried using it for a couple of paintings, including *Late Afternoon Twilight* (Burchfield-Penney Art Center).<sup>10</sup>

Back in Salem in 1921, with the American economy in a postwar depression, Burchfield lost his job at the W. H. Mullins Company, where he had worked since childhood. At first he painted full time and was encouraged when The Brooklyn Museum acquired *February Thaw* (1920)—his first work purchased by a museum. During the summer he worked at Elias Kenreich's farm in Greenford, Ohio, where he became attracted, and soon engaged, to Bertha Kenreich. Wanting to earn a living using his artistic talent, Burchfield, on the advice of his former teacher Henry Keller, applied to M. H. Birge & Sons Company, one of the nation's most prominent and artistic wallpaper companies. After head designer Edward B. Sides hired him as his assistant designer, Burchfield moved in November to a small apartment close to the plant in Buffalo, New York.

The year 1922 signifies a major change in Burchfield's life. On April 13 Mary Mowbray-Clarke wrote to Burchfield about his current group exhibition at the Montross Gallery and how she "begged them to cut out the tiresome blurb about your supposed hatred of Salem." She offered poignant advice on his approaching marriage, and importantly, observed: "...only you and Sherwood Anderson seem to have direct power to use American experience pure and simple. You can both infuse into the verities of the powerful seeing eye the verities of another world than that of the eye. An avenue to the subconscious in both of you is at times opened and you achieve considerable power of statement."<sup>11</sup> Such validation of his current and future abilities may very well have sparked Burchfield's creative drive, sending him to Spring Brook to paint *Springtime in the Pool*.

Charles Burchfield,  
1893–1967  
*Springtime in the Pool*, 1922  
Watercolor and gouache  
on paper, 21¼ x 18¾ in.  
Gift of Mrs. Charles H. Babcock,  
45.68





The courting period that spring was filled with anticipation of the imminent wedding, their separation tolerated as a necessity of preparation. Burchfield changed apartments twice, settling in May at 170 Mariner Street, where a two-room apartment would become the newlyweds' first home. Sprucing up the new apartment, Burchfield wrote enthusiastically:

*It is May! The buckeye trees are almost fully out, and hang loosely with great masses of vivid emerald foliage—there is nothing to equal this brilliant color of green—the sun shines on it in a subdued silvery highlight & the partly cloudy sky beyond is composed of pale violets—a cool breeze comes out of the sunlit south—Maple trees are speckled with twin leaves that form horizontal dashes across their branches—The shadows under porches suddenly become intensified & full of poetry—It is the kind of day that should have its lawnmower going.*

*At evening to my new quarters—to the place where Bertha & I will start life together—Mariner street is lined with buckeyes & elms, and I felt a wave of joyousness come over me as I walked up under those brilliant green trees, spotted with yellow in the late afternoon sunlight....<sup>12</sup>*

Four days later he wrote:

*In the afternoon I went out to Hamburg & beyond to walk, & get some wild flowers plants to decorate the rooms for when Bertha comes—I felt as I used to when as a small boy I gathered plants for my grape-arbor garden....The virgin freshness of the new trees gives the woods a feeling of sacredness—A plowed field, dried in the sun gleamed intensely hot white thru openings—Mosquitoes abounded but their humming belonged to the general summer scheme....<sup>13</sup>*

Charles Burchfield,  
1893–1967  
*Telegraph Pole*, 1935  
Watercolor, charcoal and  
graphite, 23½ x 20½ in.  
Gift of Mrs. Charles H. Babcock,  
47.105

On May 20, Charles and Bertha were married on her family farm. Their trips into the Western New York landscape began shortly after they returned. Before the end of the month they took a Saturday walk along the Niagara River, experiencing the flush of the season with the optimism of newlyweds. Burchfield sustained new confidence in taking his artwork in a different direction. "[I]t came over me all at once how proud & glad I was that I was 'I'—that my conception of nature was all sufficient to me—that nature in all its raw harsh uncouth beauty was worth more to me than all the sophisticated art of the world—that I am a pioneer, and that I must retain the courage to present nature in all its harshness & not soften it to the vulgar taste of sophistication...."<sup>14</sup>

*Springtime in the Pool* quite likely was painted just before Burchfield's marriage, since the bare trees indicate that the weather was still cool enough for pockets of snow to linger. In Volume VII of his *Painting Indexes*,<sup>15</sup> Burchfield recorded this singular painting for 1922. Its "location or subject" was noted as "Cazenovia Creek, near Northrup Rd, Spring Brook, N.Y." The rural setting was perfect for a blissful evocation of nature, emblematic of the elation in his personal life that he needed to express through earthly, yet metaphysical symbols. Wandering through the same region on weekend forays with Bertha later, Burchfield wrote about how their laughing, enjoying the sounds of robins and towhees, the smell of the earth, or a chance visit to an old farm, sometimes made them feel transported in time to "romantic pastoral scenes of hundreds of years ago."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the painting depicts a timeless scene rendered in a palette of seasonal colors and brilliant light. The primordial land of lavender gray hills rises behind horizontal bands of rich black and ochre earth, a melting trough of snow, and a taupe shore with pink accents. Open, limitless space in the pale aqua sky is accentuated by delicate leafless trees whose branches dissolve in the air like water ripples, drawing the eye toward the sun's presence at its zenith, suggested by subtle gradations of white gouache. Its pure light dances in shades of pastel blue, green, and gray, becoming whitest at the center, while ripples on the placid pool undulate in the palest hues of gray, lavender, and salmon. The painting

taken whole is a paradigm for new life and growth, a new direction with more complex concerns, a personal identification with nature. It stands as a transcendental turning point in Burchfield's work and life, a hint of the remarkable, mythical works that were to come.

Fast forward to the mid-1930s and Burchfield's painting changes dramatically. For eight years he had grown increasingly disenchanted with the demands on his time at the wallpaper factory, yet he worried about the ability to support his wife and five children. In February 1929, art collector Edward Wales Root introduced him to the New York gallery owner Frank Rehn, who began to sell his work. Yearning for an alternative that would give him the freedom to paint, Burchfield agonized over making the right decision. After six months' association with Rehn, he resigned from Birge in August, only weeks before the stock market crash triggered the Great Depression. Nevertheless, Burchfield managed to maintain his artistic independence for the rest of his career. He began to seek new subject matter in Buffalo's harbor and urban landscape, near his suburban home in Gardenville where he had moved in 1925, and further into the countryside. His work reflected greater realism in larger compositions. Finding an odd beauty in industrial pollution and weathered houses, Burchfield chose the unglamorous side of America during the 1930s in order to call attention to both the "sinister darkness" of a man-made environment and the romantic retreat into domestic simplicity or rural purity.

*Telegraph Pole*, painted in 1935, is a perfect example of a lingering thought reemerging in a contemporary context. He wrote that the composition was "built around a telegraph pole found near Beech Creek, Penn[sylvani]a,"<sup>17</sup> discovered during his trip home from the Army in 1918. Merged with details from other sites, the pole became a remarkable metaphor. Clearly it had been a tree in its earlier life. Cut down in its prime, stripped of its bark and limbs, it is now imprisoned by wires along tracks leading to an industrial inferno. The battered tree seems still alive, writhing to escape from the belching smokestacks, daunting factories, and lifeless row of workers' huts. Soot-filled blue-black smoke builds into thunderheads certain to carry ash and, as we now know, acid rain to a scorched earth. Ironically that telegraph pole is relaying its own message: a call for humanity to reverse its misguided destruction of the land. It points the way to the later, even grander masterworks that reflect Burchfield's increasingly personal reverence for nature.

Nancy Weekly is the Head of Collections and the Charles Cary Rumsey Curator, Burchfield-Penney Art Center at Buffalo State College.