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Robert Fishko, *Director*

### **CHARLES BURCHFIELD**

(1893-1967)

American

A painter of both the towns and countryside of middle-western America and enchanted woodland scenes. Born in Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio, he grew up in Salem, Ohio, and studied at the Cleveland school (now Inst.) of Art from 1912 to 1916. His mentor there was Henry Keller. In 1921 Burchfield moved to Buffalo, to design wallpaper until 1929 for M.H. Birge and Sons; he spent the remainder of his life there. His career can be divided into three distinct phases: During the first, which ended about 1918, he painted landscapes often based on childhood memories and fantasies; during the second, from about 1918 to 1943, he portrayed the grimy streets and rundown buildings of the eastern Ohio area; and during the third, from 1943 until his death, he returned to landscapes, investing them with a kind of ecstatic poetry. Burchfield often reworked old pictures, however, so that work from different phases may appear side by side. His preferred medium throughout his life was watercolor.

Intensely aware of woodland sounds and presences, Burchfield tried to capture bird and insect noises in his early landscapes by using small staccato accents and whiplash arabesques. Some knowledge of Oriental art helped him to simplify his forms. In 1917 he developed an abstract shorthand of systematically varying shapes to suggest specific moods (*Church Bells Ringing, Rainy Winter Night*, 1917, Cleveland Mus.) About this time, he also painted small houses with peculiarly haunted qualities.

Escaping somewhat from his overheated imagination about 1920, he began to make studies of the architecture of middle-western streets. In part showing the influence of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, Burchfield's paintings of the 1920s also reflected the general debunking of the American heartland by cultural critics. In such watercolors as *Sulphurous Evening* (1926, St. Louis Mus.), he captured the weary, depressed look of a house well past its prime. These works came to be considered forerunners of AMERICAN SCENE PAINTING of the 1930's. During that decade, Burchfield created major works that are highly descriptive of Depression America, including *The Parade* (1934) and *End of Day* (1928, PAFA).

In 1943, tired and bored with his work and fearful of arriving at an artistic dead end, Burchfield once more began to explore the landscape scenes of his youth. Adopting a less realistic style once again, he undertook, in an almost mystical fashion, to express the mystery of nature, even attempting to capture seasonal changes in a single picture (*The Four Seasons*, 1949-60, Illinois Univ.) He reinvestigated ways of capturing forest sounds, so that entire paintings are a mass of quivering brushstrokes, and he often outlined forms with yellow to give them a halolike, transcendental appearance. Although the images of his last period are clearly recognizable and obey the laws of perspective, at their best they evoke an entire emotional as well as perceptual spectrum. His last paintings are filled with chimerical creatures—butterflies and dragonflies from another world. Few American artists have ever responded with such passion to the landscape or have made it such a compelling repository as well as mirror of their intimate feelings. Burchfield's papers and many paintings are in the Charles E. Burchfield Foundation, Buffalo. *Lit.*: Baigell, Matthew, *Charles Burchfield*, 1976.