

# WIND, SUNSHINE, AND SKY

## A Meteorologist's Interpretation of Charles E. Burchfield's Watercolors

by Stephen Vermette and Tullis Johnson

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Charles E. Burchfield wrote, "To me, the artist, interested chiefly in weather—all weather is beautiful and full of powerful emotion..." It is this beauty and emotion that powers the watercolors of Charles E. Burchfield. A naturalist who was schooled on the works of Henry David Thoreau, John Burroughs, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, his paintings reflect the simplicity of the local countryside, and are best known for imaginative, stylized landscapes and rural scenes. And whether purposeful or as a backdrop, many of his watercolors depict weather, changes in seasons, and the climate of the region south of Lake Erie where he spent most of his life. In 1914, Burchfield wrote, "I find no sympathetic beauty in the sky I have not lived under." So, just as climatology is defined as the aggregate weather within a region, the watercolors and sketches of Burchfield, as chronicled in more than 50 years of his writings, drawings, and paintings, are themselves weather events, the aggregate of which characterizes the region's climatology. His works are truly "... a journal of the wind, sunshine, and sky."

Burchfield (1893-1967) was born in Ashtabula, Ohio, but spent most of his youth in Salem, in the northeastern part of the state. He attended the Cleveland School of Art from 1912-1916 and studied with Henry G. Keller, Frank N. Wilcox, and William J. Eastman. A short stint in the army (1918-1919) had him working on camouflage designs. Burchfield moved to Buffalo, New York, in 1921 to work as a designer for a wallpaper company, and he eventually settled in Gardenville (a suburb of Buffalo) where he lived until the end of his life. Leaving the wallpaper business behind at the onset of the Great Depression, he emerged as one of the most accomplished and popular American artists of his generation. Burchfield gained acclaim through inclusion in prestigious national exhibitions, and he received numerous awards. In December 1936, *Life Magazine* declared him "one of America's 10 greatest painters" in its article "Burchfield's America." His artistic achievements were honored by the inauguration of the Charles E. Burchfield Center at the State

University of New York, Buffalo, on December 9, 1966. President Lyndon B. Johnson eulogized the artist in a letter dated November 14, 1967, saying "[Burchfield] was artist to America."

The key to interpreting and appreciating "weather" in Burchfield's world of watercolors is that the artist draws on more than the visible palette to illustrate what is "present." In 1961, Burchfield wrote, "An artist must paint not what he sees in nature, but what is there. To do so he must invent symbols, which if properly used, make his work seem even more real than what is in front of him." Sensory experiences and abstract emotions are made visible through the addition of halos and auras, various cartoon-like squiggly lines, and semi-abstract symbols that catalogue emotions which Burchfield referred to as "conventions for abstract thought." The depiction of a hot summer's day is not complete without the chirp of crickets and katydids or the trill of the cicada. While some have argued that these emotions are projections of the artist's state of mind at the time of his painting, it can also be argued that these emotions are an expected natural response brought on by what is present. A weather enthusiast will recognize that weather events bring on both visual and emotional responses. Burchfield has managed to combine both in his watercolors. The challenge in interpreting Burchfield's work is to not limit oneself to the visual. **W**

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## WIND BLOWN ASTERS (1951)

The bright colors in *Wind Blown Asters*, especially the yellows, convey a bright, sun-filled, but windy, day. Wild asters are primarily known to bloom in late summer or autumn. Aside from the clouds stretching with the wind and the bent lone tree, Burchfield provides a view of the wind from the perspective of the grasses and flowers. The “eyes” in the field convey a sense of surprise or a sense of “hanging-on.” The Monarch butterfly, partly hidden among the asters, is buried in the business of taking in the flowers’ nectar and pollinating next year’s plants prior to migrating south. In meteorology, wind is often seen as a sign for change. In the case of this painting, wind may convey the on-coming change of seasons for both the asters and the butterfly.



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## NOVEMBER STORM (1950)

*November Storm* portrays a time caught “in between.” The orange-red autumn colors are gone, seen in the painting as only a few relic leaves caught in the season’s detritus. The sepia hues convey a sense of aging, of times past. The winter snows have not yet come to compact the small vegetation and grasses flat to the ground, and to blanket the scene with a white softness. The “now” is a strong and bitter cold wind (as cold as any winter’s day) that causes the ghostly stalks and grasses of last season’s growth to sway. The tree is gnarled and weathered—a witness to November storms of the past. The winds appear to ride up the trunk of the tree; the rhythmic brush strokes convey a rhythmic howling sound emanating from the tree. The tree offers no shelter to the living, as it might shelter one from wind, rain, or sun in other seasons. The sky itself evokes turmoil and darkness, and conjures up a ghostly emotion of fear. This is the type of weather that offers no shelter, where the cold and wind cuts through an individual like a sharp knife. The calendar says it is not yet winter, but the scene and one’s senses say otherwise.



## **FIREFLIES AND LIGHTNING (1964-65)**

*Fireflies and Lightning* evokes a warm, humid night. There appears a general shimmer in the trees, clouds, and ground. The heat lightning, silent due to its distance, conveys the sense of warmth. Fireflies tend to prefer warm and wet weather. In their worm stage, the fireflies hibernate in the soil or the bark of trees all winter. Now in their adult stage, the evening is an awakening to warmth. Fireflies, also referred to as lightning bugs, are most active and thus visible on calm nights. The lack of wind, the thunder-less lightning, and the silent blinking of the fireflies all convey a sense of calm and warmth, evoking the quiet before the approaching storm.



## JULY SUNLIGHT POURING DOWN (1952)

In *July Sunlight Pouring Down*, the sun is literally pouring down from the cloudless sky as yellow shafts of light. The aurora of light in the background and on the tree canopy reinforces this brightness. The tree itself appears weighted down by the sunlight, much as if covered by snow. The lush vegetation—tansy, milkweed, and Queen Anne’s lace—are shown bathing in the sunlight. This July day is responding by releasing warmth, best illustrated by the rhythmic undulations of the vegetation beyond the tree’s shadow, and by the erosion of the vegetation and higher tree canopy into shimmering waves of heat.



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## FLAMING ORANGE NORTHERN SKY AT SUNSET (1915)

Burchfield wrote on the day he created the study *Flaming Orange Northern Sky at Sunset* (July 16, 1915): “A wonderful glorious day—my heart is sailing the skies. At sunset, several huge storms moving mightily along the horizon in a wonderful array of colors; after the sun is gone, a huge flaming orange spot appeared in the northern sky & startles the whole black landscape ... My pencil was frantic.”

On May 22, 1915, Lassen Peak (in California) exploded in what was known as the “Great Eruption of 1915.” Is it possible that the vivid multihued colors shown in this study were, in part, influenced by a volcanic eruption in California?



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## CLEARING SKY (1917)

The weather (including the towering cumulonimbus) is moving from right to left in *Clearing Sky* (July 1, 1917), as shown by the numerous chevron or crescent shapes in the sky. The shapes are often used by Burchfield to indicate change. In this case, the blue color of the chevron indicates clearing skies.

## CICADA SONG (1951)

*Cicada Song* conveys a feeling of a summer day's oppressive heat. The hazy sky appears to melt down onto the landscape. The tops of flowers are radiant with an orange aura. Two rhythms appear in the painting. The first is expressed in the fields of grain. Wavy lines of rising heat appear in the foreground and extend into the background as heat waves swell across an endless field. Up in the trees, we see rhythm of the cicada song. In the month or so that cicadas live as adults, they are found high in the trees. The song of the cicada is a trill pulse that extends for several minutes before winding down. In this painting, tick marks on the tree tops appear to lift the top of the tree as if it were propelled up by an explosion of sound.

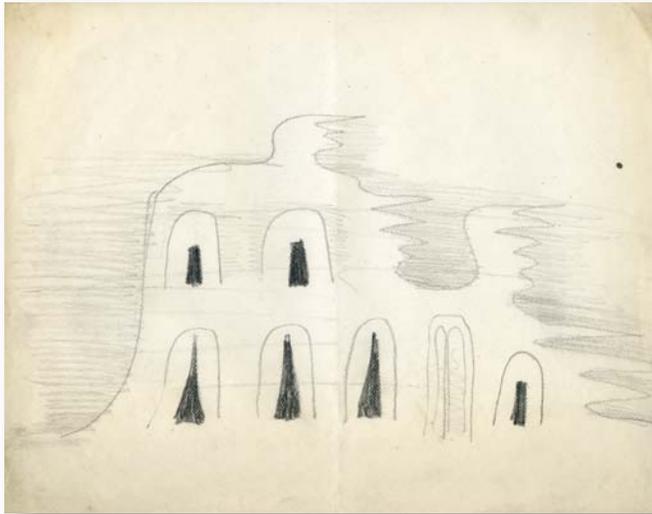


PRIVATE COLLECTION

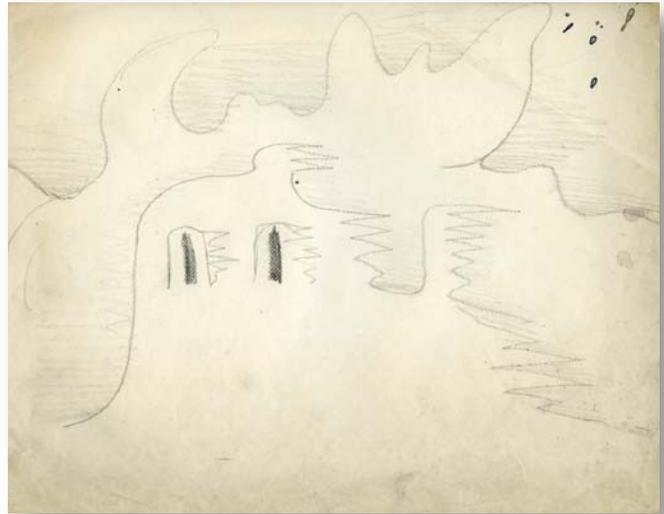


## HOT SEPTEMBER WIND (1953)

An illustration of Burchfield's multisensory approach can be found in *Hot September Wind*, where the rising heat is made visible by the waves and yellow lines radiating from the ground. With the flowers facing the viewer, you sense the heat blowing on your face. The stylized "M" shape in the middle of the image and throughout the watercolor may at first seem out of place, but the shape is Burchfield's "convention" for morbid brooding, as in what one might feel with the passing of fall into winter.



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## THE BLIZZARD: THE WHITE NORTH WIND (ca. 1918)

The windows in Burchfield's studies for *The Blizzard: The White North Wind* appear as eyes squinting out into the wind and cold. No warmth radiates from the windows. Burchfield's unique conventions for "fear" and "the fear of loneliness" fill the sky, and the structure itself appears to be blowing away, as depicted by the downwind ragged edge shown in contrast to the smooth upwind form. The sketches together might be viewed as a time lapse depicting the relentless winds carrying away the snowy house, leaving but two windows. However, even the two remaining windows are shown to have developed a ragged downwind edge, and it appears that they too may soon be lost to the white drift—yes, a watercolorist's definition of a blizzard.



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## RAIN, CLEARUP & SUNBURST & WIND STARTS TO BLOW (1915)

In All-Day Sketches, which are "read" left to right across the image, the weather is shown as it changes over time. One from July 11, 1915, *Rain, Clearup & Sunburst & Wind Starts to Blow*, begins with a gently falling rain—hash marks are vertical—against a backdrop of foliated trees. Next the rain ends, but layers of low clouds are present over the trees. The cloud bottoms appear pointed—almost aggressive—suggesting a turbulent atmosphere. In the final scene, trees are blown by the wind. Burchfield wrote, "Just as sun comes out, the wind commences to blow violently." Then we see a sudden appearance of the sun and its aurora of light. Watercolors dated to a specific day, and specifically Burchfield's All-Day Sketches, compare well with synoptic maps of the same date, providing not only a visual of the day's weather, but also its progression.