By My Side: Charles E. Burchfield's Letters to Bertha K. Burchfield from 1923 to 1963

Alana Ryder
RYDERAH@BUFFALOSTATE.EDU

Advisor
Cynthia A. Conides, Ph.D., Associate Professor of History, Director of Museum Studies

First Reader
Nancy Weekly, Adjunct Lecturer of History, Head of Collections and the Charles Cary Rumsey Curator, Burchfield Penney Art Center

Department Chair
Andrew D. Nicholls, Ph.D., Professor of History

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Charles E. Burchfield’s Letters to Bertha K. Burchfield from 1923 to 1963

by

Alana H. Ryder

An Abstract of a Thesis
in
History with Museum Studies Concentration

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

May 2012

State University of New York
College at Buffalo
Department of History
ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Over the past 80 years, research on American artist Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967) has often placed little emphasis on the people and events that were essential for his artistic freedom and the success of his career. This paper, based on the contents of forty years of letters between Burchfield and his wife Bertha Kenreich (1886-1973), challenges the artist’s mythology, which includes misconceptions of his isolation, lack of influences, dislocation from art history and the insignificance of human connections and activities.

New dimensions of Burchfield’s identity are examined, significantly his positions as a husband, father, friend to other artists represented by Frank K. M. Rehn, juror, commissioned artist and educator. The brilliant balance between and necessity for both a traditional life in Gardenville, New York and one in the cosmopolitan art world is explored. Burchfield’s career and ability to create was based on the companionship, stability, validation and security that Bertha and his art circle granted. Through this recent access to alternative primary sources in the Charles E. Burchfield Archives at the Burchfield Penney Art Center, a new portrait of the artist emerges.

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Approved by:

Cynthia A. Conides, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of History
Director of Museum Studies
Chairperson of the Committee
Thesis Advisor

Andrew D. Nicholls, Ph.D.
Professor of History
Chair of the Department of History

Kevin J. Railey, Ph.D.
Associate Provost and Dean of the Graduate School
THESIS COMMITTEE SIGNATORY

Cynthia A. Conides, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of History
Director of Museum Studies

Nancy Weekly
Adjunct Lecturer of History
Head of Collections and the Charles Cary Rumsey Curator, Burchfield Penney Art Center
Acknowledgments

For most of my life as a student, I have aspired to be a contributor to women's studies. During my undergraduate years, a number of my research papers focused on topics found in the footnotes, from the *Power of Women* series by 16th-century Netherlandish artist Lucas van Leyden to the illustrated autobiography *Citizen 13660* by Mine Okubo on the Japanese internment. I found these exercises genuinely enriching and viewed them as acts against our "historical amnesia" and reductionism. Later, a seminar on the Buffalo-born Consensus school historian Richard Hofstadter sparked the idea to devote my thesis to a biographical alternative on a great historical figure.

This paper was written almost three years into my career at the Burchfield Penney Art Center in Buffalo, New York. After seeing over a dozen exhibitions on Burchfield, I found the need to formally devote myself to studying the literature on the artist under the supervision of Burchfield scholar Nancy Weekly.

I have my own love of writing and receiving “old-fashioned” letters, so I was especially drawn to the research of Burchfield through his personal correspondence.

I would sincerely like to thank Dr. Cynthia Conides, Nancy Weekly, the staff at the Burchfield Penney and my family for their support and contributions. This would not exist without their encouragement and the encouragement of those educators in my life who have inspired a quest for perspective and insight.
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Reproduced with permission of the Charles E. Burchfield Foundation

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I: Introduction

In the coming decades, Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967) has the potential to become one of the most well-studied American artists. Not only do over 50 years (10,000 pages) of his journals remain intact, but the artist and his family maintained an immensely detailed record of his artistic production, including drawings, sketches, notes, clippings and correspondence. The public soon will have unprecedented digital access to material in the Charles E. Burchfield Foundation Archives, housed in the Burchfield Penney Art Center at Buffalo State College. Access to these objects, in addition to more than 80 years of exhibition history and publications, will secure Burchfield’s place on the forefront of American art history.

The motivation to study Burchfield through the letters to his wife, Bertha Kenreich Burchfield (1886-1973) (figure 1), emerged after a survey of 20th-century scholarship on the artist. Although researchers have relied on Burchfield’s journals since John I. H. Baur used them for his first biography on the artist in 1956,\(^1\) the private correspondence between Burchfield and his family members have not been used to shape the current understanding of the artist. The Burchfield Penney acquired the letters, along with other important correspondence, artwork and photographs, through the Vogt Family Foundation in 2004. The material was not accessible to the public previously.\(^2\) Burchfield’s artwork has ignited decades of research and exhibitions across the nation. As the artist’s body of work is astoundingly complex, Burchfield’s life deserves to be treated with complexity and careful scrutiny as well. This paper examines four decades of Burchfield’s public and personal life through the portal provided by the letters to his partner.

The majority of the nearly 150 correspondences to Bertha were written when Burchfield was visiting the Frank K. M. Rehn Gallery\(^3\) in New York City, serving on art selection juries,

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\(^2\) The Charles E. Burchfield Archives was purchased by the Burchfield Penney Art Center in 2004 in honor of Dr. Edna M. Lindemann. The Archives, including the letters to Bertha and other family members, artists, collectors, dealers and art institutions, is now available for research purposes.

working on commissions or teaching out of state. The letters to Bertha, written between 1923 and 1963, have opened up two areas of Burchfield’s life that have not been examined in depth before. They cast light on the nature of the relationship with his lifelong companion and spouse and their children. In addition, they expose the inner workings of Burchfield’s engagement in the public art world. The letters reveal the ways that life events affected Burchfield’s artistic production. This paper also looks at Burchfield’s life as a career in art, an artist, friend to dealers and patrons, juror and teacher. Attention will be drawn to the reality that Burchfield’s artwork had to provide for real, material things for his family. Each artistic decision hinged on this reality. The consistent support of his family and the security of his life in Gardenville gave Burchfield the luxury to follow his own path and artistic career. Burchfield’s career relied on the traditional marriage and gender roles of the time, factors that cannot be minimized when considering the proper conditions of being a full-time artist. While decades of scholarship have supported Burchfield’s position as a man of isolation and solitude, Burchfield’s artistic career rested on the stability, companionship and support of his family and friends in the art world.

This paper is divided into three sections. In the first part, the writers who shaped 20th century scholarship on Burchfield will be introduced. The literature review will clarify what these scholars agree upon, the areas of debate and what questions remain. In the second part, personal dimensions of Burchfield’s life, which include an investigation of his personality, attitudes, opinions and his marriage will be explored. In the third section, readers will learn about the relationships with his primary dealer, patrons and fellow artists as well as investigate his positions as a juror and educator. Both the second and third sections will be based on the evidence found in the correspondence between the artist and his wife. Although a wealth of material remains from Burchfield’s life, scholars have not previously been able to study the artist through those closest to him: his wife, children and friends.

Frank K. M. Rehn opened his gallery in November of 1918 and began representing Childe Hassam and Helen Turner the same year.

A considerable portion of 20\textsuperscript{th} century writing, at least until the 1990s, is repetitious and supports the mythology of an isolated and uninfluenced artist. The events of Burchfield’s life were often condensed into one paragraph. The artist, whose career spanned over 50 years, largely focused on the natural environment of Salem, Ohio and Western New York. He was born in 1893 in Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio. Raised by his mother, Alice Murphy Burchfield, after his father, William Charles Burchfield, died when he was five, Burchfield was one of six children. From a very early age, the artist showed an extraordinary attachment to nature and its inhabitants. He captured the weather, vegetation, insects and other life forms in drawings and notes. Excelling in school, Burchfield graduated from high school as valedictorian. At his commencement speech, he said, “Nature is better understood today than formerly, in attempting to interpret her moods, the artist and poet cast aside all reserve and give themselves up to her entirely.”\textsuperscript{5} Burchfield followed or approximated this approach his entire life. He worked almost exclusively in watercolor, but during his college years at the Cleveland School of Art (1912-1916) he was recognized by his professors for excellence in design and illustration. Although he won a scholarship to attend the National Academy of Design in New York City, after only one class, Burchfield withdrew from the school. He remained in New York from October to November of 1916 and then returned to Salem to work at the W.H. Mullins Company, a manufacturer of metal products.

Nineteen-seventeen, Burchfield’s Golden Year, was a time of “rapid” and “unpremeditated” work. The subject matter was often drawn from childhood memories and included sounds and a new system of symbols.\textsuperscript{6} In 1917 Burchfield titled a sketchbook \textit{Conventions for Abstract Thoughts}. Burchfield’s personal iconography incorporated childhood memories and fears. They appeared in Burchfield’s artwork, though not always applied stringently, until the end of his life. In 1918, after a brief stint as a camouflage designer in South Carolina during World War I, Burchfield’s concentration shifted to realism and the world touched


by Man. Although he still painted nature, between 1918 and 1940 Burchfield’s subjects mostly focused on industrial and domestic life.

During his lifetime, Burchfield was one of America’s most well-known artists, associated with the same gallery as Edward Hopper, Reginald Marsh and Eugene Speicher. Prior to signing on with Rehn, Burchfield was represented in New York by the Sunwise Turn Bookshop owner Mary Mowbray-Clarke from 1916-1922 and the Montross Gallery between 1924-1928. In the 1920s, Burchfield exhibited in New York City, Philadelphia and Cleveland as well as at venues such as the Art Institute of Chicago (1921), the Grosvenor Galleries in London (1923) and the Salons Americaines and Galerie de la Chambre Syndicale des Beaux Arts in Paris (both in the summer of 1924). Burchfield was the first artist to receive a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1930. In the 1930s, the artist received numerous awards and commissions. Burchfield gained attention from major national publications such as Time and Life magazines.

World War II marked a change in Burchfield’s life and art. In 1943 a transition in his work began when he rediscovered “personal expressionism” and fantasy. Baur stated, “It is small wonder that the expressionist paintings of the fifties not only are Burchfield’s most powerful work but also are among his freest and most spontaneous in feeling.” The artist’s methods changed radically, whereby he turned to works of his post-college years or those he had destroyed. In the early 1950s, Burchfield’s work also traveled as far as India and Japan.

Perhaps Burchfield is most admired for the evolution of his style and his ability to synthesize his three periods as defined by Baur. Burchfield’s work stands the test of time for its universality in subject matter and originality of style. His legacy is supported by thousands of

**Notes:**

8 Ibid., 22.
9 Trovato, *Charles Burchfield*, 109 and 117. In 1923, a man named Edward McKnight Coffer took Burchfield’s paintings to the Grosvenor Gallery in London. Later in 1925, his work was on view at the Marie Sterner Gallery in Paris.
10 Burchfield was featured in *Time* in December 1934 and *Life’s* “Burchfield’s America” in December 1936.
12 Ibid., 239.
13 Ibid., 195.
15 Burchfield believed that he had progressed to a fourth period. He discussed this in his 1959 interview with John D. Morse, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
pieces of archival material and writing. Many writers, such as Michael D. Hall, Dave Hickey and Ralph Sessions, have commented that his life was a beautiful balance of living as both an insider and outsider of the dominant American art community. While he chose to live in Gardenville (a suburb of Buffalo, which afforded him rich subject matter and peace), he also was extremely well-connected with and supported by the art community in New York City.

In 1959 the artist reflected, “I believe if one were to live a million years, he could not exhaust the possibilities for expression that Nature affords and yet think of the tragedy of hundreds of artists who seem to never look at Man or Nature.”16 Several months after Burchfield’s death on January 10, 1967, Lyndon B. Johnson wrote a letter right before the one year anniversary of the founding of the Charles Burchfield Center in Buffalo.17 The president expressed his hope that Burchfield’s legacy would continue through the means of the Center.

Burchfield, like many great artists, has been a victim of reductionist history. He has fallen prey to the tendencies, in the manner history and collective memory are formed, which erase complexity and romanticize figures of the past. Artists, spanning the globe and centuries, have been embalmed in their own mythology. As will be discussed through the theories of some writers on Burchfield in the literature review, Burchfield’s mythology includes convictions of his isolation, evasion of categorization, unfixed position in American art history and the insignificance of human connections. As a result of these contextual dislocations and assertions of isolation, Burchfield’s works have become dislodged from their historical, social and personal contexts. The belief in the irrelevance of the external world, held by many writers on the artist, has tilted the exploration of Burchfield to his relationship with the natural world, personal conventions and style and transitions between periods. All of these investigations can be conducted by looking inwardly at the artist and his oeuvre.

16 Baur, *The Inlander*, 262.
Another crucial reason why Burchfield and his career need to be studied through alternative sources, such as the letters to Bertha, is the understanding that the journals are not entirely pure, spontaneous writing. As early as the 1930s, Burchfield realized that the journals could have a purpose beyond a personal diary. Thus Burchfield was well aware that his writing could be used for an autobiography and act as another way to influence and control the way the public saw him. Nannette V. Maciejunes argued in her article in *North by Midwest* (1997) entitled “Burchfield on Burchfield: An Artist’s Journal Reconsidered” that Burchfield’s journals should be interpreted as constructions instead of pure windows into the artist’s mind. “In the context of the journals, remaining aloof from the art world became a necessary condition for Burchfield to succeed in becoming the artist he wanted to be,” Maciejunes wrote. In addition, Burchfield disclosed that some of the thoughts on his personal life were too private for the journal.

The nearly 20-year project led by J. Benjamin Townsend to publish *Charles Burchfield’s Journals: The Poetry of Place* (1993) was immensely important for the development of Burchfield scholarship and public interest in the artist. However, the past decades of writing and exhibitions on Burchfield show an overwhelming reliance on the abridged journal contents and a lack of effort to pursue other primary sources. Scholars have contributed to the crystallization, without much question, and recycling of the conclusions of earlier scholars such as Baur and Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Future scholarship demands that new material, particularly that which has not been mediated already, be studied. Moreover, Burchfield’s relevance needs to continue to be found in other fields. A significant rupture occurred in the publication of *North by Midwest*. Authors contributed essays on Burchfield’s importance and relevance across disciplines and evidence that multiple realities of Burchfield may coexist. *North by Midwest* catalyzed fresh

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18 For more on the perspective that Burchfield’s journals were a carefully constructed voice for posterity, see “‘Burchfield on Burchfield: An Artist’s Journal Reconsidered’” by Nannette V. Maciejunes in *North by Midwest* (1997).
20 Ibid., 103.
approach in renewing and reinserting Burchfield into the dialogue of American art from a wide pool of scholars and admirers.

Many writers have used Barr’s statements in the “Introduction” to the catalog for the 1930 Museum of Modern Art solo exhibition *Charles Burchfield: Early Watercolors 1916 to 1918* as a point to launch a counterargument. In this case, Burchfield’s own words will be the point of departure. Bertha’s support, as acknowledged below, and relationships and events in the art world were essential for the course of his artistic development. In 1942 Burchfield wrote to Bertha:

> The longer I live, the more & more I realize how much you mean, not only to me as a man, but as an artist. The world looks on me, perhaps, as a “self-made” man, but without you by my side, I know the story would have been far different. And you – you don’t care whether the world knows that or not – all you care is the doing of it, which is what makes you so precious to me. So don’t ever go away and leave me, for I know, as surely as I know anything, that there will never be another woman in my life. It’s either you, or loneliness, and so it’s got to be you.

Bertha’s influence and range of support for her husband and his artistic career will be discovered in the forty years of letters. Even before this source was examined, the passing comments of 20th century authors collectively provided a portrait of her influence. From documenting his artistic legacy to persuading him to join the church after decades of irresolution, Bertha was an unwavering partner. In addition to raising their five children (figure 2), many times single-handedly when Burchfield traveled, Bertha supported Burchfield’s decision to quit the M. H. Birge and Sons [Wallpaper] Company (where he worked from 1921 to 1929) to pursue a full-time artistic career. She also encouraged him to change his style from the second to third period in the early 1940s although Burchfield was doubtful and anxious that this may have changed his ability to support his family. The journals reference the many times when Burchfield asked Bertha for her opinion and approval of his work. Bertha kept the letters, scrapbooks and

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22 In his introduction to the exhibition catalog for Burchfield’s solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1930, Barr states that it was difficult to discover any “important external influence.”
23 Charles E. Burchfield, Letter to Bertha K. Burchfield, dated March 23, 1942; Charles E. Burchfield Archives, Burchfield Penney Art Center at Buffalo State College, Buffalo, NY, purchased with funds from the Vogt Family Foundation in honor of Dr. Edna M. Lindemann, 2004. (Hereafter, letters from this acquisition will be referred to as Charles/Bertha letters and referenced by date.)
25 Ibid., 69.
ephemera for her husband’s posterity. Baur thanked her for providing him material for his first biography of Burchfield in 1956.26 Later in life, Bertha accompanied her husband on some of his summer teaching positions as well as on sketching trips. Perhaps most valuable and hard to measure was the consistency of support Bertha provided for her husband during periods of uncertainty and doubt.

While Burchfield was concerned with the “multiplicity of outlets”27 of communicating with the public, he also was aware that his public image could be shaped by his release of texts. In the 2010 publication of Fifty Years as a Painter, which included all of the artist’s published writings, Ralph Sessions argued that Burchfield “…presented a nuanced portrait of himself that reveals a complex personality, a man who integrated a modest and largely traditional lifestyle with a sophisticated involvement in the contemporary art world.”28 This integration is precisely what this paper will explore through the letters from the artist to his partner.

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26 Ibid., 10.
II: Literature Review

i. The historiography of Burchfield

The general public’s opinion about Burchfield has been formed not only by his artwork and its presentation in exhibitions, but also through his own published essays, museum catalogs, biographies and articles from the late 1920s into the 21st century. Among these voices, there is consensus, disagreement and a multiplicity of approaches to understanding his artwork. Unlike other artists who have been pigeon-holed into artistic movements, writers on Burchfield have engaged in a healthy debate on his place in American art history. Most accept Baur’s division of Burchfield’s career into the early, middle and late periods. They find rich connections by looking at Burchfield’s works in relation to other artists, literature, music and personal memory. Authors have argued for his place as an insider and an outsider of the art world and society.

Almost all of the authors emphasize the humanity and universality in Burchfield’s works. They agree that he had an incomparable relationship with nature. They find extraordinary importance in his lifelong effort to recapture his feelings as a youth. The public also celebrates his unexhausted exploration of the commonplace and the beauty in his immediate environment. Many praise him for his nontraditional, nonconformist personality. They admire the continuity, diversity and synthesis of his career. His deeply personal style, language and conventions continue to be explored. Nearly all of the writers depend on Burchfield’s journals in their analyses and criticisms. Similar to so many great artists, many of the authors turn their attention to Burchfield’s fluctuations in mood. While the director of the Arizona State Museum (the organizer of Burchfield’s *Golden Year* exhibition in 1965) praised Burchfield for a life of unimpeded creativity, Burchfield dealt with periods of doubt and moments when he thought his painting would not continue.

Most recently, scholars have put forth arguments that crack some of the monolithic ideas that have been recycled: the same journal excerpts and arguments put forward by Barr and Baur that went unchallenged for many years. Some curators have argued to place Burchfield in the
modernist tradition. The mythology of Burchfield is also loosening slightly to allow room for alternative perspectives on his artwork. Writers such as Nannette V. Maciejunes have also planted the idea that there were reasons why Burchfield’s image was so tightly controlled, and that investigations should be launched to understand the separation between the artwork and Burchfield’s private and public life. She has provoked people to consider that the notion of a self-made man may not exactly be true. Yet there still is an absence of effort to understand what kind of family support, friendship and networks made it possible for Burchfield to have such a prolific career.

The next five sections will provide a basis of understanding of how public perception of Burchfield has changed over the decades beginning in the late 1920s. Authors from different eras will be seen together in a lineage. The investigation of how Burchfield’s identity has been cultivated by the artist himself, biographers, scholars and museum professionals is crucial to accepting that there are great areas of his artwork and life that need further examination. Without this background, it would be impossible to see the differences between past interpretations and new interpretations of the artist through his letters to his wife, Bertha.

ii. 1920s and 1930s: “On the Middle Border” and at the MOMA

In the late 1920s and 1930s, Burchfield was known for his urban and industrial scenes. In 1928 (the year of his first published text) Burchfield had been married to Bertha for six years and already had four children. He was working for M.H. Birge and Sons Company as its senior art designer. In response to misconceptions about Burchfield and his art (primarily comments on his relationship with Salem, Ohio by art critic Henry McBride in the 1920s), Burchfield wrote an essay “On the Middle Border” (1928), which was featured in Creative Art magazine. The article contained Burchfield’s early influences and his discussion of style and artistic movements.

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29 Burchfield, “On the Middle Border,” xxx-xxxi. In this essay Burchfield presented his commercial work as something honest that did not deserve any kind of pity.
From the outset of the essay, Burchfield explained that he was wary of publishing his writing. Burchfield felt it was safer to let his brush be the primary way to communicate with the world.\footnote{Ibid., xxv.} He described to his readers, “My plan will be to superimpose on a sort of skeleton outline of the external events of my life, a summary of the thoughts, motives and ideals that developed from each corresponding period.”\footnote{Ibid., xxv.} Burchfield had a desire for transparency with the public and wanted to be the one to characterize the evolution of his art.

The structure of “On the Middle Border” is quite important to our idea of how Burchfield configured himself as an artist, gaining considerable fame at this time. As he discussed periods of his life, he began with a generality or stereotype of great artists and then showed how he fit this mold. For example, he discussed the harsh circumstances of his childhood. He also described how his childhood saved him during periods of time when he lacked ideas. Burchfield wrote offensively, in the sense that he knew that there was a myth that he was self-taught and he used this opportunity to dismiss the idea. He was also upfront about the financial security that a career in illustration would have provided him, however, he pursued painting instead.\footnote{Ibid., 15.} He described how his professors at the Cleveland School of Art, particularly Henry G. Keller and Frank N. Wilcox, were invaluable to his education. Keller introduced him to new art movements and art circles in Cleveland. Burchfield stated that he had not heard of Cezanne, van Gogh, Gauguin and Picasso until later.\footnote{Authors such as William H. Robinson argue that Burchfield was exposed to modern art in Cleveland through his professors at the Cleveland School of Art, the Kokoon Club and artists like William Sommer. See “Native Sons: Burchfield and the Cleveland School of Art” in \textit{North by Midwest} (1997).} Readers must question his comment about his insularity from the outside world since he openly thanked his primary contact in the art scene in New York, his “fairy godmother,” Mary Mowbray-Clarke.\footnote{Burchfield, “On the Middle Border,” xxvii. Mowbray-Clarke is discussed in depth in M. Sue Kendall’s essay “Serendipity at the Sunwise Turn: Mary Mowbray-Clarke and the Early Patronage of Charles Burchfield” in \textit{North by Midwest} (1997).} Burchfield described the period following graduation and before WWI as the happiest moment of his life. Burchfield said, “I took no interest in what was
going on in the outside world, either artistic or political; lived the life indeed of an artist
hermit.”

“On the Middle Border” offered some of Burchfield’s positions on art. In his mid-30s at
the time of publication, he described vehemently that “Never should the artist adopt an artificial
formula that has been evolved by some other man, and superimpose it on nature.” He carefully
explained how he could admire and be influenced by an artist, but how he would never use
another person or genre’s style blindly for the sake of using that style. Burchfield argued that his
decisions on style came from within. These ideas were fluid and allowed changes with his
moods. He admired “the Moderns” and by way of admiring them, demonstrated that he did not
self-define himself as a Modern artist. Burchfield acknowledged that in the late 1920s he
painted the American scene because he found that it was the best subject matter for him
personally and it allowed him to be true to himself.

The assertions of Burchfield’s isolation and disinterest in the outside world were
established by Burchfield in this publication. His statements that his style came from within and
that he did not believe in following the styles and experimentations of his contemporaries also
positioned him as someone whose inspiration came without the trends of current artistic
movements. It would be more than fifteen years before Burchfield published another statement.

Two years after “On the Middle Border” was published, the exhibition Charles
Burchfield: Early Watercolors 1916-1918 was held at the Museum of Modern Art in April 1930.
Alfred H. Barr, Jr., then director of the Museum of Modern Art, wrote the brief “Introduction” for
the catalog. The acknowledgment recognized Frank K. M. Rehn’s role in uncovering the works

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35 Ibid., xxvii.
36 Ibid., xxix.
37 Ibid., xxix.
38 Ibid., xxxi. In “On the Middle Border,” Burchfield wrote, “…I am inclined to favor the Moderns, excepting, as I have hinted, those
who have nothing more than a borrowed formula to offer.” He also said that it was not until after art school that he heard of “Cezanne,
Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso and others.”
39 Ibid., xxxii.
from Burchfield’s Golden Year in the winter of 1929.40 Although Barr’s writing was short, it became a seminal text on the artist, referenced countless times by Burchfield writers.

Barr began, “To those familiar with Charles Burchfield’s mature style his early work now exhibited for the first time must appear surprising and even contradictory.”41 The director was intrigued by Burchfield’s attempt to “re-create the sensations and emotions of his childhood.”42 He also argued that Burchfield’s early work showed a “strength of design and clarity of purpose which raises these youthful watercolors to a high level of original achievement even as formal inventions.”43 Barr’s interest in comparing the dramatically different styles of Burchfield’s art continues to be investigated by scholars and in exhibitions.

During the Golden Year of 1917, Barr wrote, “…Burchfield concentrated upon the expression of moods and emotions on the one hand, and on the other upon specific forces and even sounds and movements of nature.”44 They were “neither vague nor spontaneous.”45 Barr remarked that Burchfield’s chosen subject matter was not always considered relevant to the public.46 John I. H. Baur made a similar observation several decades later. Barr described the early works as more romantic and lacked the “Satire in which hate and wit are intermingled” and “discovery of picturesque ugliness” present in his newest works.47 Barr and Baur shared the term “expressionistic” to define Burchfield’s art.

Importantly, Barr described how much preparation went into Burchfield’s final works (dating 1929-1930), referring to his extensive drawings.48 He also was aware of Burchfield’s abstract conventions that conveyed fears, emotions, sound and movements. Perhaps Barr’s most essential observation was that “One can only conclude that we have in this period of Burchfield’s

41 Ibid., 5.
42 Ibid., 7.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 5.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
development one of the most isolated and original phenomena in American Art.”

The director noted Burchfield’s teacher Keller’s advice to “use his imagination rather than to follow the conventional Impressionist methods of the period.”

In Barr’s opinion, Burchfield’s recent work (that of the 1920s) “has placed him among the most interesting American artists.” When compared to Baur’s perspective twenty-five years later, Barr (who was reflecting on the work completed during Burchfield’s position at M.H. Birge) had a much more complimentary view of this decade. Barr placed Burchfield in the middle of the new artist movement in America and pronounced, “In these gray, silver and black watercolors that authentically native movement which might be christened American-Scenism is seen at its pictorial best.” Similar to Burchfield’s first public testimony, Barr’s writing crystallized many of the impressions we hold of Burchfield into the 21st century. Both Burchfield and Barr’s identification of the importance of childhood and indifference to the popularity of subjects and styles remain some of the most important qualities studied in the artist’s work nearly one hundred years later.

iii. 1940s and 1950s: Synthesis and reflection

In 1945, Burchfield wrote the “Foreword” to the small monograph about him published by the American Artists Group. The artist’s fame continued to rise steadily since the 1930s, and his work was included in national exhibitions and a handful in Europe. During the final years of World War II, he was in the midst of another style change, the transition from the middle to late period, when he synthesized all that he had learned in previous years. The “Foreword” addressed Burchfield’s working methods and his thoughts on design and composition. Similar to “On the Middle Border,” Burchfield expressed how hard it was to put his thoughts and attitudes into writing instead of his works of art.

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49 Ibid., 6.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 5.
52 Ibid.; This marks a change in opinion over time. In the middle of the 20th century, John I. H. Baur dismissed the significance of the middle period, although his opinion shifted in The Inlander (1982).
53 Burchfield’s work traveled widely in the 1930s to places such as Chicago, Washington, D.C., Paris, Venice and Stockholm.
The artist described his three main working methods: paintings from nature completed on
site, studio painting and a combination of the two. Burchfield said:

The best work is done in retrospection. Even when working directly from nature, I am painting
from memory, for not only am I trying to recapture the first vision or impression that attracted me
(and which is all that is worth going after) but also the distillation of all previous similar
experiences.54

In addition to working from memory, Burchfield believed that each work of art possessed
distinct issues and requirements of the artist. He said, “Thus in a sense each picture brings its own
peculiar problems, and the artist must proceed by instinct, improvise on the spot, or invent new
ways of saying things out of hand.”55 He also wrote, “…my chief concern is to record as many of
my impressions as possible, in the simplest and most forthright manner.”56 The artist also
explained how important it was for an artist to study nature and her laws. Much like the
Renaissance artists, Burchfield stated, “The work of an artist is superior to the surface appearance
of nature, but not its basic laws.”57 Commenting on the way that his life had been broken into
periods, Burchfield insisted that they were not as sharply defined as people would like to believe.
He argued that romanticism was in all his works throughout the periods. He declared, “…my
chief aim in painting it [a given scene] is the expression of a completely personal mood.”58
Burchfield’s second piece of writing for the public again tried to clarify his artistic process. He
emphasized the importance of memory and the synthesis of his past experiences. Burchfield also
argued for his skills as an artist: the mental skills it required to be able to adapt and invent for
each particular work. He also aimed to explain the continuity in his career throughout periods,
which included romanticism and the imposition of a personal mood on each painting.

Eleven years later, in the conclusion of Charles Burchfield (1956), John I. H. Baur
asserted that “…no other American artist, since the mid-nineteenth century, has approached
nature more closely, expressed her moods more imaginatively, or found her presence in greater

55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
spiritual force." This biography on Burchfield was published to coincide with the nationally touring retrospective exhibition that began at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1956. Museums from across the country loaned works for the exhibition. It was the first time that Burchfield had permitted and assisted with the use his personal material, including items from his studio, records from the Rehn Gallery and autobiographical notes to put together an exhibition and text. Closely working with Burchfield, Baur wrote the book based on his journals and letters between Burchfield and Frank Rehn and Edward Root. He also relied on the material collected and saved by Charles and Bertha. Baur’s text serves as a remarkably personal account of Burchfield’s character, internal struggles and complex relationship with nature.

The slender book is divided into three sections marking the three periods of Burchfield’s life. First, Baur described the period following art school, then the middle period from the 1920s-1940s during his marriage and children’s growth and finally the years between World War II and the mid-1950s. Baur argued that although Burchfield was known primarily for his industrial works of the middle period, he thought that it was a diversion from Burchfield’s true pursuits as an artist. The author called for a study of Burchfield that took into account his entire career, rather than just his early or middle periods. Charles Burchfield established a progression to explain the ultimate fusion of the first two periods of the artist’s life to his current period, where the early romanticism and mid-life technical foundations were fused.

Importantly, Baur did not shy away from describing Burchfield’s fluctuating temperament and periods of withdrawal and loneliness. The overview of the artist’s early adulthood made note of his readings, Alice in Wonderland, Robinson Crusoe and The Wind in the Willows, to name a few, and also experimentation in different media and design work. Baur stated that Burchfield possessed a clarity and precision in his art after graduation from the Cleveland School of Art that came from his understanding of the natural world and use of his personal

59 Baur, Charles Burchfield, 80.
60 Ibid., 13.
61 Ibid., 14-5.
62 Ibid., 15.
conventions. Baur also cited the influence of Japanese prints and scrolls and fairytale illustrations. In a recurring exploration of Burchfield’s moods, Baur explained that paintings reflected Burchfield’s moods, rather than the actual scene. For example, Salem, Ohio took on many characteristics as his views changed over the decades.

In the early 1920s Burchfield came to know a new place, Western New York, and stated, “...I thought it was not what a place is that makes for art—it is what the artist feels about [it].” Baur hardly talked about Burchfield’s life outside of art, only that he took advantage of concerts that came to Buffalo and did not have much interest in socializing. Baur pointed out several times how Burchfield disliked being categorized with certain artists, like the Regionalists, or being known for a particular genre. At times, Baur discussed Burchfield’s relationship to his art in nearly opposite terms. Delightful trips to the countryside were contrasted to the hardships of painting, loneliness and recurrent financial worries.

The book closed with a brief survey of Burchfield’s life, stable marriage, teaching positions, joining the Lutheran Church and still being swept up in drastic mood changes. It was apparent that Baur held Burchfield in very high esteem. The two must have placed much confidence in the other as Baur had unprecedented access to Burchfield’s journals, memories and reflections. Baur’s first text on Burchfield established Burchfield’s marriage to nature. He also defined the three periods and explained how the first two combined to shape the late period. Baur echoed Barr’s position that Burchfield possessed a clarity of purpose from the start of his career which imbued each work with his personal mood. A few years later, a man not working for the Whitney, but for the Smithsonian, would gain more ground with Burchfield.

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Ibid., 27.
Ibid., 28-32.
Ibid., 35.
Ibid., 37.
Ibid., 45.
Ibid., 50.
Ibid., 48-50.
Ibid., 73-77.
On behalf of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, John D. Morse conducted an audio recorded interview with Burchfield in 1959. The lengthy discussion contained both general reflections on Burchfield’s career and very specific explorations of certain works or life experiences. Burchfield’s ease with Morse was quite apparent. He provided anecdotes and humorous accounts of some of the events of his life. Morse’s questions moved from topics such as artistic training and influences to M.H. Birge to teaching. Sometimes the questions were posed leadingly and Morse was eager to compliment the artist. Burchfield occasionally strayed from the questions or failed to answer them at all. Throughout the interview, Burchfield showed Morse items from his studio or articles to help explain his responses. Morse also extracted some of Burchfield’s opinions on his contemporaries as well as critics. The footnote of the transcription described how the interview concluded pleasantly by having drinks with Bertha, followed by a dinner out.

Burchfield cited specific artists he admired. Burchfield then was led to reflect upon various key events in his early adult life, for example producing his first design for the wallpaper company. Burchfield said, “…nothing like this had ever been done before in wallpaper, and I was quite pleased that my very first design was made into wallpaper, and it was received quite well…it did create quite a stir.” Burchfield also recreated for Morse moments of pivotal change. The artist described how Frank Rehn thought that he had a well enough established reputation to be able to live off the sale of his works, and then advised Burchfield to wait for a period before he quit the company on July 31 or August 1, 1929. Burchfield also summarized how Bertha supported him in the situation:

Well, I wouldn't have been able to do it if it hadn't been for the faith and courage of my wife. As she has often said, "I'd rather be poor and hungry than be a widow." Of course, probably she wouldn't have been a widow, but I would have been very unhappy and probably sick and miserable.

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72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
Burchfield very clearly explained how his method of watercolor painting (dry paper with a small amount of water on his brush) allowed for flexibility and changes. He made a comparison to writers or composers who went through multiple versions of their work. Morse was also interested in Burchfield’s taste in music, literature and poetry. Many of these references were not in Baur’s work. Burchfield mentioned Norwegian author Knut Hamsun’s *The Growth of Soil*, *Segelfoss Town* and *The Children of the Age*. Burchfield also praised the works of Willa Cather and lamented that she never won any major awards for *My Antonia*. He was also fond of the shorter works by poets Milton, Wordsworth and Browning.

Morse was able to get Burchfield to comment on his tastes for European masters. Of Peter Breughel, Burchfield said, “Well, Peter Breughel is an all-time favorite of mine and there was a time when, I think, probably my middle period might even show some influence of Breughel -- I don't know. I don't know enough about those things.” He also offered a list of his favorite Italian masters including Giotto, Leonardo, Titian and Michelangelo. From other countries, he admired van Gogh, Cezanne, Courbet, Degas and Homer. Burchfield also thought “Picasso the evil genius of modern art.” When asked about the future of art, Burchfield admitted that he had not seen anything new. Morse commented that his view was shared also with Edward Hopper. Burchfield argued that “all you can hope is that the artists will sometimes again turn their attention back to humanity and the world of nature.”

Well, I think that if this world lasts for a million years or two million years, or more, that never can you exhaust the subject matter of humanity or nature. It's simply inexhaustible. I feel about my own work, for example, my interest is more in nature now than in man-made things; I don't know how much time I've got left, but I'd like to have at least another lifetime like I've had to say what I want to say about nature. I just don't think I can ever get it said. There just isn't time.

Morse also showed an interest in Burchfield’s teaching career. Humorously, Burchfield described how awkward he felt making comments on his students’ works, and he recalled that

74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
sometimes he thought to himself, "This person has no business trying to be an artist." As a teacher, Burchfield offered the advice below:

Don't think about the medium. What you're trying to say is much more important than what you're saying it with. And if you're thinking about what you are trying to express, you may use watercolor like nobody else ever used it. And that's all right as long as you say what you want to say.

Burchfield also spoke of enjoyable times when he and Bertha socialized with his students when he had a summer position at Ohio State University.

A good portion of the interview was devoted to Burchfield’s opinion on how his life was viewed by others. Burchfield recognized that Baur divided his life into periods. Burchfield seemed to accept this and explained that his dealer thought that he was now in his fourth period. The artist mentions that he felt that some critics understood his work well.

This very loosely structured interview rocked back and forth between discussions of artwork, life and purely factual information to reflections and opinions. The unmediated interview allows us to hear directly how Burchfield viewed his periods, style changes, life events, influences and attitudes on modern art. The interview with Morse was an opportunity for Burchfield to identify, in his mid-60s, the significant moments in his life that were outside of his art practice, for example, at the wallpaper company and teaching appointments. It also provided him a time to reflect on the influences on and enjoyments of his life and to make a statement on the future of his art and of American art.

iv. 1960s and 1970s: “The settling of the soul”

The 1965 exhibition Charles Burchfield: His Golden Year in Tucson, Arizona was the most comprehensive retrospective of its time. Works by Burchfield spanning fifty years were included, many of which had not been on view to the public before. The artist played a major part in organizing the exhibition with the director of the University of Arizona’s gallery, William E.
Steadman. The catalog is comprised of two texts by Steadman and a lengthy autobiographical essay by Burchfield. Steadman credited Baur and Mrs. William McCurdy who worked at the Cleveland Museum of Art for assisting with the retrospective. As a friend of Burchfield’s sister Louise Burchfield, McCurdy helped bring the “human qualities” to the exhibition, according to Steadman. In the “Acknowledgments,” the director stated that Burchfield’s “influence has been wide, both as a painter and teacher.”

This exhibition at the University of Arizona followed the retrospective at the Whitney nine years later. Steadman’s essay “Charles Burchfield – His Golden Year” painted a mystical, somewhat overly flattering image of Burchfield. For instance, Steadman said that Burchfield possessed “…a hand so certain and so absolute that the element of doubt finds no refuge in his craftsmanship.” Steadman described Burchfield as “a man on a journey, making a joyful trip through life and the world of artistic achievement.” Steadman declared, “In fifty years there has never been any blocking of his creative expression; his very first painting has been followed by a magnificent procession of day by day creativity.” While Steadman was probably only trying to show Burchfield in a positive, prolific light and elevate his reputation in the Southwest region, these kinds of statements erase the complexity of Burchfield’s artistic career. There were several times, captured in both the journals and letters to Bertha, where Burchfield fell into “ruts” and questioned the direction of his art. Steadman helped to perpetuate the reputation of an artist who was not affected by external events or grave internal struggles, when in fact events such as the two world wars and the death of his mother and sister greatly affected his ability to produce art.

In quite a familiar structure, Burchfield’s contributed essay “Fifty Years as a Painter” was broken up chronologically by artistic periods. The artist included some anecdotes that were not

82 Ibid., 9. By contrast, writers in later decades, such as Townsend, believed that “Except for members of his own family who have become painters, he spawned no disciples.” See The Poetry of Place (1997) p. 529. While a great number of watercolor artists revered him, none adopted his unique techniques.
83 Ibid., 11.
84 Ibid., 12.
85 Ibid.
revealed in Baur’s 1956 text. Burchfield acted as his own mythmaker, yet at other times was strikingly humble. He was also quite candid about what ideas influenced the direction of his art. For example, after seeing Asian art in Cleveland, particularly Chinese scrolls, Burchfield set out to do multiple seasons and create his own set of conventions “as other great artists had done.”

Early in 1918, Burchfield stated that after exhausting a style and documenting an overwhelming number of ideas, he set them aside for twenty-five years. Burchfield described his development as coming from life and nature rather than formal learning, but he also acknowledged the importance of his instructors at the Cleveland School of Art, patrons at the Sunwise Turn Bookshop and a wide cross-section of literature.

Burchfield’s essay also revealed parts of his philosophy as an artist. He believed that “It has been said that great art is a perfect union of form and idea, but if an artist is going to be remiss in either, it has better be in form.” On Eastern and Western art, Burchfield described how during the middle period, his interest for Western art grew. He argued that “oriental art” and Western art had similar traits that he admired. In this essay Burchfield also explained how he drew inspiration from the mundane and commonplace things in life and did not care for the overly cultivated world. In addition, Burchfield asserted that the works of his middle period lacked social commentary and were an examination of “post-pioneer life.”

The catalog for Charles Burchfield: His Golden Year is valuable for what it reveals about a cordial relationship between Burchfield and a museum. The catalog is a blend of matter of fact accounts, personal stories and artistic philosophy. The text could be faulted for mythologizing Burchfield and his artistic production. Yet, it also happened to be one of Burchfield’s final opportunities to reflect and make a public statement about his life and art before his death.

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87 Ibid., 21.
88 Ibid., 16.
89 Ibid., 20.
90 Ibid., 38.
91 Ibid., 20.
92 Ibid., 36.
Chronologically, the next text by Burchfield was published posthumously in 1968. *The Drawings of Charles Burchfield* (1968) edited by Edith H. Jones (which included an essay by Burchfield on drawing) and “An Exhibition of the Drawings of Charles E. Burchfield” (1953) by Leona E. Prasse are the two primary perspectives on Burchfield’s drawings. These texts marked the resurgence of interest and rising importance of Burchfield’s drawings in the art community. They are essential in evaluating how Burchfield’s drawings, doodles and studies continue to shape our understanding of his art and affect the way that his work is studied and exhibited.

Burchfield explained the purposes of his drawings in his essay “The Place of Drawings in an Artist’s work” in *The Drawings of Charles Burchfield*. The essay was written specifically for the publication. The short text moved back and forth with his perspectives on drawing versus painting. Burchfield began his essay by stating, “One of the greatest joys of an artist’s working life is producing drawings, probably because he enjoys greater freedom in drawing than he does in what he considers his major work.”

According to Burchfield, they held no such burden to be completed and could be worked on until they became artworks unto themselves or tossed aside. Burchfield said, “...the best drawing is nearly always a by-product, not a direct intention.”

Drawing also had the effect of surrender for Burchfield, where he gave way to the intention of the lead.

Yet the drawings significantly helped Burchfield’s artistic development, as Prasse also argued. Burchfield noted instances where they pulled him through compositional dilemmas and increased his understanding of how to represent objects from nature or a specific scene. They also were drafts for many of his outdoor paintings. In addition, he explained his system of “idea

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94 Ibid., 7.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid., 8.
notes” (for example, of motifs, sounds or sensations), where he exhausted an idea and filed it away to age like wine for another time.97

Burchfield wrote in a very informal way, in which readers could understand his thought process and witness how he grappled with his own beliefs and even came to change his mind. He made analogies to music, likening drawing to a composer who played a piano with no premeditation.98 He also was deeply personal. He explained how he continued drawing, even from completed works to keep the life of it going. Burchfield said, “This might be called the post-mortem of an event, or a checking out.”99 The book cited Burchfield as personally not having taken photographs of his finished works (a task done by his dealer), so making a drawing was also a way of documentation and capturing the essence of a work.100

The rest of the book contains an autobiographical chronology based on Burchfield’s notes prepared for the Whitney and the exhibition at the University of Arizona. The autobiography is richer in detail than Baur’s first account and more specific since Burchfield wrote many of the descriptions. The artist also stated how his children rapidly grew up and his family expanded. One of the last things that he said in the essay was, “My hope is that I will never say to myself ‘That’s it; now I have said everything I have to say.’”101 Burchfield, Prasse and drawing and print advocates assigned many purposes and values of drawings in relation to painting, mostly in reference to their role in preparing for final works. Burchfield also importantly expressed his drawings’ importance independent from final works. All suggest that the studying of materials, regardless of their medium, leads to a better understanding of Burchfield’s creations as a whole.

At last in 1970 the first attempt at Burchfield’s catalogue raisonné was released. Joseph S. Trovato’s Charles Burchfield: Catalogue of Paintings in Public and Private Collections (1970) still provides a useful guide to study Burchfield’s life chronologically. At the time of publication,

97 Ibid., 7-8.
98 Ibid., 7.
99 Ibid., 8.
101 Ibid., 12.
Trovato was the assistant to the director of the Museum of Art, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica, New York. The catalog was produced for the exhibition *The Nature of Charles Burchfield—A Memorial Exhibition* that ran in the spring of 1970. Trovato used the most comprehensive information available at the time. The catalog is helpful for readers to understand Burchfield’s work in a progression or cycle and also to see the destinations of these works in public and private collections. The catalog also contains maps of the areas where Burchfield was living. The sections of plates are set off with biographical comments and excerpts from Burchfield’s journals or correspondence.

Trovato’s “Introduction” is elegiac in tone, published just three years after the artist’s death. Trovato wrote, “His work reflects not only a deep love and reverence for nature but also an uncommon empathy and accord with its sights and sounds.” The author expressed hope that Burchfield and his work would become more well known in the coming decades as his material became more accessible to the public.

Trovato included themes, such as Burchfield’s childhood and place in art history, that many writers before him commented upon. Burchfield believed that it was important to regain the relationship one had with nature as a child. This “spirit of youth” is one of the most prevalent characteristics in Burchfield’s history. It also explained how his artwork returned to his post-college years in his adult life. Trovato, like other authors such as Baur, places Burchfield in the tradition of Homer and Eakins. Trovato said it was a tradition “…characterized by the highly individual nature of their work.” Also similarly to Homer and Eakins, Burchfield chose simple subjects and possessed an authentic and personal relationship with nature. As in the Morse interview for the Smithsonian Archives in 1959, Trovato found that Burchfield admired Brueghel

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103 Ibid., 397. Trovato relied on a list of references completed in 1942 by a Harvard student, John W. Straus. In an undated letter, Burchfield wonders if he gave too much information to Straus. Clancy was of the mind that this information should be kept private.
104 Ibid., 7.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
and Degas. “Burchfield ‘admired Brueghel for his extraordinary landscapes and snow scenes; and Degas because he knew what to exclude from his paintings.”

Trovato argued that Burchfield established lifelong themes and subject matter in his artwork in college. Also similar to writers before him, Trovato stressed that Burchfield was not interested in the Armory Show of 1913 or contemporary art in New York City. Adhering to the division of Burchfield’s life into three periods, Trovato explained that from 1915 to 1920 Burchfield created nearly half of the total amount of works in his lifetime, “…the best of which are among the most original achievements in American art”. A unique observation from Trovato was his assertion that the 1920s and 1930s were a time when Burchfield moved away from the Eastern influence of his college years and explored and ultimately adopted Western traditions. Trovato said that in these decades Burchfield gained “the handling of three-dimensional form and mass—for a richer pictorial effect.” This may be a new way to analyze the transition between Burchfield’s first and second periods.

At the end of the “Introduction,” Trovato inserted a quote by Burchfield commenting on his dissatisfaction with being categorized with painters of the American scene. Burchfield said that “…the worthwhile artist doesn’t care about a subject for its national character.” Trovato called Burchfield a “man of many moods” and said that the last period of Burchfield’s life allowed these feelings to flow freely. “Light and mood and movement, the fundamental motives of all his work, link him inexorably with the world about us and at the same time personify that nature of the artist himself,” Trovato determined.

Nearing the end of his life, Burchfield said, “1965 finds me going back more and more to that rhapsodic visionary year of 1915 for inspiration and subject matter, which in turn, becomes

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109 Ibid., 193.
110 Ibid., 8.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid., 8-9.
113 Ibid., 9.
114 Ibid.
115 Ibid., 10. This seems to contradict some of Burchfield’s comments in his journals that show admiration for Finnish novelists who can encapsulate a whole national spirit in their texts. He also admired Jean Sibelius’s (1865-1957) Finlandia.
116 Ibid., 11-12.
absorbed into a further probing into the secrets of life, nature and the world of the spirit.”

Trovato painted a picture, by drawing on other authors, Burchfield’s own writing and that of his friends, of Burchfield as a non-traditionalist who evaded categorization. The aura of artistic genius remained, as an emphasis was placed on how Burchfield established his path very early in life and his death brought on great hope for further discovery.

Moving further into the 1970s, art historian Matthew Baigell’s text *Charles Burchfield* (1976) is an account on Burchfield that for the most part is predictable. Many of the main arguments he put forth about the artist’s life were contested in later scholarship, particularly from the 1990s. Baigell’s strength lied in his associations between Burchfield and contemporary American authors. He also was quite adept at making connections between the country’s popular mood or attitudes and Burchfield’s relevance at a particular moment in time. Baigell suggested that the public use Burchfield’s art to understand part of America’s past, especially those years between 1890 and 1940. Whereas some literature on Burchfield at the end of the 20th century argued that the late period was a synthesis of the first two periods, Baigell was like Baur (specifically, in his 1956 biography) in that he argued that the middle period was a digression from his artistic career. Baigell believed that the late period was a revival of the first. Baigell said:

Most remarkably, the late paintings are very similar to the first ones: in fact, they fulfill the promise of the early works. So involuted was the work of this shy, retiring man, whose life was largely lived within his own mind rather than among people, that any point of entry into his work must of necessity involve the whole of it.

Also similar to Baur, Baigell supported a holistic study of the artist in order to understand the full scope of his expression. Baigell’s text was slightly problematic in its overemphasis on emotion and instinct and in its assertions of an anti-intellectual and anti-theoretical approach to artistic creation. The author said, “His distrust of intellectual assumptions was a typically American trait, and if that meant ignoring modernist art, it was a decision easily reached.”

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117 Ibid., 309.
119 Ibid., 11.
120 Ibid., 121.
Baigell stated in his “Introduction” that Burchfield’s paintings “unlike those of most other important artists, are difficult to relate to anything but themselves. They do not belong to a particular school and seem to have been little affected by world events.”\(^{121}\) This case that Burchfield defied contextualization or categorization is a recurring characteristic in Burchfield scholarship. Baigell stated further that, “Changes in his attitude coincide with rather than devolve from particular public or political conditions or those necessities relating along to the world of art.”\(^{122}\) Again, Baigell was part of another trend in Burchfield scholarship that isolated him unrealistically from the art world.

Baigell described Burchfield’s aversion to human contact and insisted that his artwork was a response “to nature’s stimuli rather than to human interactions.”\(^{123}\) Indeed many authors on Burchfield underplay the role of personal and professional relationships on his art and career. It was unclear if Baigell personally knew Burchfield, but the author wrote of the artist: “Warm and responsive within the comfort of his family, loyal to his few close friends, he was to the public a solitary man, jealously guarding his privacy and uncomfortable without it.”\(^{124}\) Baigell also added, “He was hardly known even to his neighbors; he could live no other way.”\(^{125}\)

Baigell identified John Burroughs as an extremely important influence on Burchfield. Some of the men’s connections included a love of March, close study of birds, insects and their sounds and the relationship between nature’s mood and personal mood.\(^{126}\) This last point, interestingly, was the way that Baigell explained Burchfield’s “accord…between himself and nature” in its varying states.\(^{127}\) Later in his career, Burchfield admired the writing of many Finnish and Scandinavian authors.\(^{128}\) Baigell found that contemporary authors, like Zona Gale,
were similar to Burchfield in that the content of their works was more important than the technique.\textsuperscript{129} Baigell also credited the role of composers, mainly Jean Sibelius and Antonin Dvorak. However, later in the book Baigell discussed Burchfield in an art historical context. In addition, Burchfield was greatly moved by the Asian art he was exposed to in Cleveland. It should be noted that Baigell did not acknowledge that the artistic climate in Cleveland was probably far more sophisticated than he reveals. Baigell questioned if Burchfield learned much about American art traditions during college.\textsuperscript{130} While Baigell talked about the importance of Chinese scrolls and Taoism, he bluntly stated he did not want to make too many Asian associations and argued that Burchfield was a Western artist and “typically American.”\textsuperscript{131} Yet unlike other American artists, the city was not a place for Burchfield. “His flight from it reaffirmed his artistic inclinations which...would never flourish in cosmopolitan centers.”\textsuperscript{132} Although the city might not have provided Burchfield with inspiration for subject matter, New York provided great support for his work since his years following college.

The paintings of the middle period were less flat and abstract than the first. Tighter compositions added to the works’ realism.\textsuperscript{133} Baigell devoted an entire section to Burchfield’s haunted houses. Not only were they a reflection of their inhabitants, but Baigell also believed that they were a reflection of the artist himself.\textsuperscript{134} Baigell thought that the houses and townscapes of the time were “vehicles for Burchfield’s state of mind rather than realistic observations of Middle Western architecture.”\textsuperscript{135} By contrast, Burchfield’s own writing on the middle period declared that this was a time when subject matter dictated style.

Baigell also described the post-war climate in America and the disconnection within society. Burchfield’s own work following World War I in 1919 was filled with sadness and
despair. Burchfield’s career ended much where it started, capturing the “ecstatic vision of nature.” His interest in the mystery and wonder of the natural world was renewed.

The writing from the final years of Burchfield’s life and the immediate years after his death contain the artist’s own and writers’ hopes for the future of his art. The 1965 retrospective at the University of Arizona was the climax of Burchfield’s mythmaking. However, it also exposed his vigor for life, desire to continue sharing a message worth painting and the amount of reflection and analysis he conducted on his career. Burchfield’s essay for his drawing exhibition provided a unique account of the significance of drawing to his artistic process. Trovato’s publication of Burchfield’s catalogue raisonné was the first clear time that students could look at Burchfield’s artwork and life in tandem. Finally, Baigell brought readers back to the tradition of Barr, in his arguments for Burchfield’s insularity and his works’ imperviousness to events and trends in the larger art world.

**v. 1980s and 1990s: Immortality through nature and “subjective interiority”**

Published fifteen years after Burchfield’s death, *The Inlander* (1982) expanded upon Baur’s first text on the artist. Baur again divided Burchfield’s life into three periods, but his look was much more extensive and comprehensive than in the first biography. Themes that continued to run through the artist’s life included his relationship to nature as a “romantic celebrant,” the fluctuations in his style that often circled back to earlier periods and the development of his personal conventions. Still shrouded in mysticism, *The Inlander’s* final chapter placed Burchfield in the American tradition of pantheists, among authors and artists such as Emerson, Burroughs and Homer. Baur’s intention was to tell the story of a seemingly ordinary man who had a
remarkable relationship to nature. He argued that throughout Burchfield’s life, subject and mood had the most influence on his style.\textsuperscript{140}

Quite humorously, Baur told his readers to skip the chapter “Events and Circumstance” on Burchfield’s life outside of art if they wished. Baur wrote, “The painting doldrums…that had always afflicted him at unexpected moments continued to do so.”\textsuperscript{141} Burchfield seemed to have accepted his periods of “blues” as oftentimes they came before great periods of artistic outpouring.\textsuperscript{142} He also became more accepting of a life in solitude. His artistic career truly blossomed from the mid-1940s. Burchfield received several retrospectives, honorary degrees and teaching positions.\textsuperscript{143} His health problems, some of which were present since 1930, became increasingly worse,\textsuperscript{144} and he had to spend more time in the studio rather than outdoors.\textsuperscript{145}

Baur’s final chapter was different from all of his other writing on Burchfield. After resisting contextualizing Burchfield in respect to other artists or movements in the entire text, Baur placed the artist among American transcendentalists, pantheists, naturalists and Luminists. He discussed Burchfield’s relationship to poets such as Robert Frost and Robinson Jeffers.\textsuperscript{146} Also in the final chapter, Baur insisted that until the end, Burchfield’s style never slackened, even though it seemed he knew he had limited time.\textsuperscript{147} Baur’s further contribution to Burchfield scholarship was important because he always held Burchfield up as an incredible American artist. The attention to detail to Burchfield’s entire life and the final chapter of \textit{The Inlander} gave Burchfield a place among the country’s most well regarded men of the arts and humanities.

Fifty-seven years after Barr’s exhibition on Burchfield’s early works, the Columbus Museum of Art produced \textit{The Early Works of Charles E. Burchfield 1915-1921} in 1987. The exhibition was held just months after the Burchfield Foundation held its annual meeting in Salem.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 184.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 241.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 244-245.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 246-247. Burchfield suffered from lumbago starting in the 1930s. In the 1950s onward he dealt with asthma, low blood pressure, eye trouble and diabetes, among other things.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 250.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 261.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 255.
This occasion brought several new works by Burchfield into light.\textsuperscript{148} Merribell Parsons, then director, wrote the introduction to the catalog and credited Baur with the inspiration for the exhibition, which traveled to Laguna, California and Buffalo, New York.\textsuperscript{149} Baur had recently passed away. He had studied Burchfield for more than thirty years and was responsible for gaining access to the journals and requesting drawings of maps of Salem.\textsuperscript{150} In 1984, three years prior to \textit{The Early Works} exhibition, Baur had organized Burchfield’s major retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.\textsuperscript{151} More focused, the 1987 exhibition examined only the first six years of Burchfield’s artistic career, all works completed in Ohio.

The “Introduction” was written by Nannette V. Maciejunes. She discussed the fascination that the public often had with artists’ early years and cited Barr’s legacy in the 1930 Museum of Modern Art exhibition focused on Burchfield’s post-college years.\textsuperscript{152} Maciejunes did not pose anything radically new. She agreed with Baur’s division of Burchfield’s life into three periods and the way these periods had been generalized by their stylistic changes. Maciejunes quoted Baur’s 1956 biography, picking out selections that characterized the artist as a man alone in the world with a relationship to the natural world unlike anyone before him. In addition, she recognized the importance of Burchfield’s drawings but expressed a dismissive opinion of his experimentation with oils and printmaking.\textsuperscript{153}

The catalog included an article by Baur entitled “Burchfield in Ohio.” Baur inserted the prerequisite one-paragraph biography, several of the more well-known quotes from the journals and interestingly drew attention to Burchfield’s qualities, calling him “painfully self-conscious” and “far-from-handsome.”\textsuperscript{154} This article painted Burchfield as a man always longing for or

\begin{align*}
\textit{\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 3.} & \text{ As contributor to the \textit{North by Midwest} catalog (produced 10 years later) William H. Robinson, argued, perhaps the Cleveland years were the most misunderstood period of Burchfield’s life.} \\
\textit{\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 3.} & \text{ Merribell Parsons, “Introduction,” in \textit{The Early Works of Charles E. Burchfield 1915-1921} (Columbus: The Columbus Museum of Art, 1987), 4.} \\
\textit{\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 3.} & \text{ Ibid., 9.} \\
\textit{\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 9.} & \text{ Ibid., 9.} \\
\textit{\textsuperscript{152} Nannette V. Maciejunes, \textit{The Early Works of Charles E. Burchfield 1915-1921} (Columbus: The Columbus Museum of Art, 1987), 7.} \\
\textit{\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 8.} & \text{ Ibid., 8.} \\
\textit{\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 10.} & \text{ Ibid., 10.}
\end{align*}
returning to his past.¹⁵⁵ Like Maciejunes, Baur also gave praise to Barr’s attention of Burchfield’s early works in 1930.¹⁵⁶ Additionally, Baur asserted that Burchfield’s paintings contained traces of human characteristics and life, even though they may not have contained figures.¹⁵⁷ This anthropomorphism reflected a dual interest in both the natural and man-made world.¹⁵⁸ He also argued that the works after 1918 were melancholy, a reflection of the disruption caused to his art by his war experience.¹⁵⁹ Perhaps because of the focus of the exhibition on Ohio, Baur also gave the state a significant role in Burchfield's shift and change in his art in 1943.¹⁶⁰

At last in the early 1990s, Charles Burchfield's Journals: The Poetry of Place (1993) edited by J. Benjamin Townsend was released to the public. Certainly one of the book’s many merits was its way of appealing both to audiences who know nothing and those who know quite a lot about the artist. The task of condensing over fifty years and more than 10,000 pages of the artist’s journals was catalyzed by Townsend in 1974.¹⁶¹ The book, more than 700 pages, was organized by themes and subsections that ranged from “Self-Reliance and Sacred Privacy” to “Nature as Manifestation: Burchfield, the Poet and Visionary.” In the “Editor’s Introduction,” Townsend discussed the evolution that led him and his team to abandon a chronological structure. According to C. Arthur Burchfield, the journals offered “an opportunity to view an artist’s paintings and simultaneously be allowed into his mind through writings that so richly mirror the intense feelings his paintings evoke.”¹⁶² Indeed the wealth of material that exists in the journals and the other contents in the Charles E. Burchfield Archives provide unparalleled resources in studying the artist. Yet the confidence in the idea that the journals were a direct mirror or window into Burchfield’s mind should be questioned by readers. As will be seen further in the literature

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 14.
¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 9.
¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 13.
¹⁵⁸ Ibid.
¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 12.
¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 14.
¹⁶² Ibid., xv.
review and one of the letters to Bertha, there are variables that lead to the argument that the journals were produced with a consciousness of the public eye.

Burchfield wrote on more than one occasion that he was not fully candid in the journals. In 1936 he said, “Another flaw I find is an all too frequent lack of sincerity—afraid even in the seclusion of my diary to be honest with myself.” He also was conscious of the imbalance of focusing on nature over “human contacts” and in 1936 considered those records of human experiences to have more value. If Burchfield observed an imbalance in subject matter, perhaps due to the fact that he considered spending his life as a nature writer instead of an artist, readers should also be aware of the imbalance that may have carried through in Townsend’s selections.

There are other major factors to consider when reading the journals. Foremost, all readers need to be cognizant that Townsend maintained an incredibly unique and powerful position to characterize Burchfield’s life. Townsend recorded how Burchfield self-edited his entries. While this demonstrated how the artist’s thoughts changed over time, *The Poetry of Place* also recorded something that Burchfield may not have intended us to know. Readers are also privy to seeing how Burchfield went back to comment on some of his accounts and he denoted which entries were key for Baur and other biographers. These acts of self-grooming should alert readers that Burchfield felt motivated to clarify or alter his language or meaning. For example, Burchfield erased indications of his belief in pantheism in preparation for Baur’s biography in the mid-1950s. Readers should also consider what characteristics and traditions from texts and other artists’ journals (such as Delacroix or his favorite composers) may have inspired and influenced the way that Burchfield recorded and patterned his life.

Townsend offered a more balanced approach to discussing Burchfield’s life and art. Writers before him had come close to entirely ignoring life events and their effects on

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163 Ibid., 5.
164 Ibid., 4.
165 Ibid.
166 Lindemann, *The Art Triangle*, 41. Root sent Burchfield a copy of Delacroix’s journals. “Burchfield responded with several letters including comparative analyses to his own efforts in journal keeping and to stimulating passages.”
Burchfield’s work. Townsend devoted a chapter to “Women and Love,” which outlined the support Burchfield gained from his mother to study nature and the artist’s reverence and admiration for her and Bertha. The editor asserted:

His personal life, like his work, was firmly anchored by the opposing poles of body and spirit. All the more reason to have stressed the necessity for monogamy, fidelity and family stability as armor against the carnal urges he knew so well.\[167\]

Yet, monogamy, fidelity and family stability also contributed to the environment Burchfield required to create artwork. Bertha’s devotion as her husband’s primary supporter is immeasurable. Townsend stated in his “Introduction”:

There are no strikingly dramatic external events or powerfully influential personal relationships in the artist’s life. On the contrary, the patterns in Burchfield’s growth were those of constant recurrence and reversion, of adaptation and self-renewal, not sequential progression.\[168\]

It is this writer’s opinion that today the scope of “powerfully influential personal relationships” may differ from the kind of “influences” as defined (primarily as artistic influences) in the history of Burchfield scholarship. Marriage to Bertha propped up and sustained Burchfield’s development as an artist. His wife and others close to him motivated and informed his opinions and actions. These people were influential and the bonds to family members, dealers, patrons and other artists were powerful because without them, Burchfield’s life would have been drastically different.

It is important to describe the main observations in reading the entirety of The Poetry of Place since most readers may not observe these things if they only read a few sections. Indeed, the structure of the journals seems to anticipate that a person would not read the whole book since the introductory essays by Townsend as well as the contextual paragraphs that precede some entries make Burchfield’s writing very accessible at whatever point one enters. Providing the prefatory context is quite helpful, especially since few people in the world will probably ever read all of Burchfield’s journals. Yet, this ease of accessibility also takes away an opportunity for a reader to understand the development of Burchfield’s life on his/her own terms.

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167 Townsend, The Poetry of Place, 125.
168 Ibid., xix.
In the hundreds of pages, the themes that predominately interested Townsend float to the surface. He emphasized the life cycles of nature and Burchfield’s own life and the periods of prolific artistic output and periods of drought. Again and again, the selections address religious and faith issues and Burchfield’s constant movement toward embodying youth or capturing his youthful relationship to nature. Townsend also highlighted how different sensory inputs triggered Burchfield’s memories and ideas about mythology, fantasy and magic. The journal selections were sinuous, reflecting Burchfield’s fluctuating temperament, moods and return to attitudes or subject matter. The entries also brought to the surface lifelong dealings with conventionalization, realism and fantasy. The journals revealed Burchfield’s feelings towards fame, the art world and the public life. Townsend delicately presented Burchfield’s conflict with painting, as a reason for life but also at times a prison. He also showed a man who had to struggle between the solitude required to produce art and the lifestyle that having a family and being a part of the art world demanded.

One benefit of reading *The Poetry of Place* was that it revealed Burchfield’s daily life. When Burchfield’s artistic production was going very well, he did not have as much time to write. Therefore, we can also view the journals as an activity that supported his expression and thought process during these lulls. The entries recorded such simple things as the routines of a typical sketching trip but also his views on exhibitions, film, music, the art world and teaching. The journals were laden with wonderfully diverse references to places, music, people and literature that provide further leads to understanding the artist. Some journal selections were extremely funny and reveal some of Burchfield’s pet peeves and attitudes towards his contemporaries. Burchfield’s humor, whether intended or not, showed a deeply human side. Another benefit from reading the journals (that is often absent from the paintings), was to gain an awareness of Burchfield’s human-to-human interaction. Most consistently he described his exchanges with Bertha. Throughout his lifetime, Burchfield recorded how she unfailingly
provided encouragement, advice on his artwork and life course and physical support when he was ill.

Perhaps one of the most obvious drawbacks of *The Poetry of Place* was that with the lack of overall chronology, one might get a very artificial sense of Burchfield’s life without seeing how he dealt with subjects over time and how they were intermixed with other events and themes. For example, if one just reads the chapter on dreams or fantasies, one could easily be overwhelmed and leave with a distorted view of Burchfield. In addition, we have to be aware that the journals were not a perfectly transparent window into Burchfield’s life or a mirror of his artwork. The artist specifically stated that some matters are too personal. Burchfield wrote, “I do not find it possible to write even in the privacy of my diary of my love for Bertha—To put it down in words would seem to destroy its sacredness.”

The purpose of the journals for Burchfield were manifold and likely have not all been discovered. In his early adulthood, the artist thought that he would be a nature writer. As time passed, he used the journals to record his observations, reflections, dreams, self-doubt and work through ideas when he was unable to paint. Townsend’s book provided a range of people a sample of work that was representative of the entire body of Burchfield’s journals. The selected entries presented alternative perspectives to understanding Burchfield than his artwork provides and indeed are incredibly useful in the continual interpretation of his art and life. Yet both abridged and unabridged, readers have to be aware that both are actively selected versions of Burchfield’s experiences. They are not, as C. Arthur Burchfield said, an open, unfiltered gateway into the artist’s mind. Additionally, writers have to be cautious if *The Poetry of Place*, and not the entire body of the journals, will be referenced as the main source for future Burchfield scholarship.

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169 There is, however, a chronology on pages 714-716 in *The Poetry of Place* and other helpful references such as genealogical tables.
The same year that Townsend’s publication was unveiled, *Charles E. Burchfield: The Sacred Woods* (1993) by Nancy Weekly delved into the complicated and nuanced relationship between Burchfield and the spiritual. Weekly uncovered relationships in Burchfield’s work to 19th century landscape traditions, the Hudson River School, American Luminists and German romanticism, especially the work of Caspar David Friedrich. Burchfield’s relationship with God and the institution of the church were contentious. Yet periodically, the artist wanted to find, thank or receive help from God. In Burchfield’s lifetime, art was a mode by which he could celebrate and come to terms with God. Weekly argued that “For Burchfield, the act of painting became his sacred ritual, his form of worship. The mystery, tranquility, and evocative power of his transcendental odes to nature are his testimonials.”

She also proposed that the absence of figures (or use of an intermediary) in Burchfield’s landscapes, by contrast to Hudson River Valley paintings, allows the observer to see Burchfield’s view of the world from the artist’s perspective. Weekly posited:

> But, rather than use tiny figures as props within a panorama to signify the relationship of humans to some higher power, Burchfield magnified nature itself as a vehicle. Thus he suggested the interconnectedness of earthly existence with the cosmos in an experiential way that is more psychologically compelling to the viewer, who is not distanced from participation.

The “Introduction” contained a condensed biography and a concise summary of Burchfield’s artistic periods. The exhibition and catalog stood as a tracing of Burchfield’s lifelong handling of religion and spirituality and provided evidence of painting as a form of religious ritual. Early in his life, Burchfield had doubts about organized religion. Burchfield’s father had rebelled against his father, James Reade Burchfield, who was an evangelical minister. Burchfield’s opinions toward religion could be traced through the journals and letters. Weekly described, “Inconsistently, he wrote about rejecting formal religious practices, even approaching atheism in some of his comments, at the same time that he stylized secular imagery to give it
unmistakably religious references.” Weekly used the metaphor of sight throughout the paper, as a way of examining sight as it relates to faith. In 1931, the artist wrote to his wife Bertha’s preacher that “My inability ‘to see’ arises directly from my innate desire ‘not to see.’ I literally abhor the thoughts of becoming an orthodox Christian.” What spiritual nourishment Burchfield could not find in organized religion he found in the nearby landscape. Weekly explained that nature was an allegory for Burchfield. He used subject matter such as trees and wildflowers to express his relationship with the natural world. Throughout different periods of his life, nature was Burchfield’s place of solace from the rest of the world.

Weekly compared Burchfield’s philosophies to those of Edmund Burke, John Ruskin, Thoreau, Emerson and Kant. Burchfield believed that nature had to be captured in all of its moods, not just the pleasant ones that would appeal to the art world. He identified with the concept of the sublime, that nature was especially interesting in her most violent and mysterious conditions. For Burchfield, painting, Weekly asserted, was his most sacred act and his experiences in the woods were his ritual. Burchfield believed that encounters with the divine did not need to be mediated by the church or the clergy. The artist could reach nature by observing, appreciating and recording nature’s beauty and wildness. In his artwork, Burchfield created several paintings that contain churches. The most intense and critical was Church Bells Ringing, Rainy Winter Night (1917). He also collaborated on a series of wood block prints on biblical subjects that his printmaker friend J. J. Lankes carved and printed in the 1920s. Religious motifs underlie many of Burchfield works, most famously in Grain Elevators (1932-8) and Sun and Rocks (1918-50).

173 Ibid., 35.
174 Ibid., 13.
175 Ibid., 15.
176 Ibid., 68.
177 Ibid., 67.
178 Ibid., 110.
179 Ibid., 49.
Part of Burchfield’s distaste for the Church may have come from his community that put social pressure on those who did not join the Christian faith.\(^{180}\) Although Baur suggested that Burchfield have the title of the last pantheist, Burchfield went back through his journals in 1955 to remove any signs that he wanted to be considered one.\(^{181}\) Near the end of his life, Burchfield rejected the label of pantheist because he believed that the entity of God was separate from all of his creation on earth.\(^{182}\) Yet, in his 50s and heavily influenced by Bertha and Reverend Victor Neeb, Burchfield joined the Lutheran Church in 1944.\(^{183}\) Weekly stated that perhaps the pressure from his family and the community and mounting health problems were some of the reasons for his conversion. Weekly also discussed the mystical North, *Conventions for Abstract Thoughts* and synesthesia in connection to Burchfield’s work, all subjects that were not addressed in-depth by previous authors.

Just a few years later, the Burchfield-Penney Art Center published *Life Cycles: The Charles E. Burchfield Collection* (1996). The catalog was assembled after the donation of significant gifts by Charles Rand Penney of Burchfield paintings and other Western New York collections. Charles C. Eldredge, former director of the National Museum of American Art and art history professor, wrote “Wedded to Nature: The Art of Charles Burchfield.” The essay was another contribution in analyzing Burchfield’s relationship to nature, specifically, one more focused on his paintings’ secular roots. Similar to the way Weekly discussed the central place of the sublime for Burchfield, Eldredge related the sublime to Thoreau and music, mainly the compositions of Sibelius and Beethoven.\(^{184}\) In addition, Burchfield’s lifelong aim to recover the spirit of his youth was held in common with Transcendentalists, particularly Emerson.\(^{185}\) Eldredge explored Burchfield’s high regard for the commonplace things in life, nature as a rejuvenating life force and the love of his nearby surroundings.

\(^{180}\) Ibid., 43.
\(^{181}\) Ibid., 45 and 73.
\(^{182}\) Ibid., 72.
\(^{183}\) Ibid., 45.
\(^{185}\) Ibid., 21.
During World War I, Thoreau was celebrated for both his pacifism and quest to understand the mysteries and symbolism in nature.\textsuperscript{186} In the summer before he went to art school, Burchfield wrote, “If we must have ‘something’ which we must call patriotism, let it be concerned with humanity as a whole, not to this petty nation or that, that we may be patriotic to righteousness, not to race.”\textsuperscript{187} Burchfield admired Thoreau’s writing and philosophy, especially the importance of simplicity in life.\textsuperscript{188} The artist’s search for the mysterious unknown, where the importance of the journey is more important than getting there, was also shared with Thoreau and C.S. Lewis.\textsuperscript{189} Burchfield found the divine right outside of his doorstep. Both Weekly and Eldredge made important associations among Burchfield, the Transcendentalists, earlier painting traditions and music. They also carefully untangled the complexities of Burchfield’s relationship with God and the Church and experience of the divine in nature.

In 1997, the Columbus Museum of Art once again produced a traveling exhibition on Burchfield. The exhibition catalog \textit{The Paintings of Charles Burchfield: North by Midwest} edited by Nannette V. Maciejunes and Michael D. Hall was much larger and contained many more points of view on Burchfield from scholars of various disciplines. The exhibition traveled to the Burchfield-Penney Art Center in Buffalo, New York and a smaller version traveled to the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Insitution in Washington D.C. In the “Introduction, On the Middle Border: Charles Burchfield Revisited” Maciejunes and Hall outline the intent of the exhibition:

This book and the exhibition it accompanies attempt to confront the Burchfield question directly and to do so in a newly expanded context...the brilliant and puzzling pictures of Burchfield painted throughout his long life merit both an aesthetic reassessment and a fresh presentation to the American art community.\textsuperscript{190}

In addition, the exhibition strove to understand why Burchfield had been on the periphery and attempted to find a way to reintroduce him into the core of American art. Maciejunes and

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 20.
Hall argued that in current times there was a renewed interest in regionalism, the self and “outsider” art.\(^{191}\) *North by Midwest* was organized by leitmotifs: Memory and Fantasy, The Regional Scene, Nature and the Cosmos and the Divine. The editors emphasized that the exhibition had the potential to discover multiple voices and truths about Burchfield and that the need for an expanded, interdisciplinary conversation was required to maintain his relevance.\(^{192}\)

“Charles Burchfield and the Theme of North” by Roald Nasgaard, art historian and former chief curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario, related a piano piece by Glenn Gould to Burchfield’s theme of the North.\(^{193}\) This theme was not addressed as a major topic by either Baur or Townsend.\(^{194}\) Nasgaard’s article primarily connected music and man’s search for the truth to Burchfield’s own yearning for the North. The author divided the North into three dimensions: its location/nonlocation, roots in childhood and Sibelius, admired by both Burchfield and Gould.\(^{195}\) Burchfield had “unbounded admiration” for Sibelius and heard his music in his mind on his excursions in the woods.\(^{196}\) Nasgaard’s discussion pointed out the contradiction in Burchfield’s obsession for northern lands and the unknown and how he did not take the opportunities to travel widely (to Alaska or Europe, for example) when presented. Also, even when Burchfield visited typically inspiring places, such as Niagara Falls and Colorado, they did not ignite anything visibly different in his work. Nasgaard argued that these scenes “evoked something that was already in his mind’s eye.”\(^{197}\) The North served as a metaphor during Burchfield’s entire career. Nasgaard connected Burchfield to a 20th century Canadian pianist and painters known at the “Northern Symbolists” who shared a fascination with the North and spent their lives in search for the mystical unknown.\(^{198}\)

\(^{191}\) Ibid., 14.

\(^{192}\) Ibid., 22.


\(^{194}\) Ibid., 25.

\(^{195}\) Ibid.

\(^{196}\) Ibid., 28.

\(^{197}\) Ibid., 26.

\(^{198}\) Ibid., 31.
In contrast to Nasgaard’s interpretation of Burchfield’s North, Henry Adams offered a more traditional, iconographical interpretation of the artist’s works. Similar to many other writers, Adams used polarities to understand Burchfield’s work.\(^{199}\) Adams, professor of American Art at Case Western Reserve University, followed the breakdown of Burchfield’s career into the commonly identified early, middle and late periods. “Charles Burchfield’s Imagination” sought to understand Burchfield through “visual and symbolic decoding.”\(^{200}\) Adams stressed that “Whereas for many artists style provides the key to the emotional center of their work, for Burchfield, who ranged through many styles, the central core of his work was vested in this distinctive set of visual hieroglyphs.”\(^{201}\) Adams also argued that Burchfield had an incredibly strategic way of remaining isolated and staying in tune (the author hints that this was deliberate) with the larger trends in the art world.\(^{202}\)

Kenneth L. Ames, who was chair of academic programs at the Bard Graduate Center, also wrote with an interest in understanding the way Burchfield personified the world around him. “Of Times, Places, and Old Houses” investigated how Burchfield’s works were universal and familiar.\(^{203}\) He argued against the placement of the artist in the Regionalist camp. Among many topics, Ames studied Burchfield in relation to Victorian sentimentalism, the Gothic tradition and German expressionism.\(^{204}\)

Ames compared and contrasted Burchfield’s work to Hopper’s and found Burchfield’s triumphant and altogether having more character.\(^{205}\) Ames pinpointed Burchfield’s relevance to his attachment to the private world of the backs of houses, by extension, the background of our existence.\(^{206}\) Ames argued that our reaction to Burchfield’s work is primal.\(^{207}\) Of much interest to

\(^{200}\) ibid., 110.
\(^{201}\) ibid., 124.
\(^{202}\) ibid., 123.
\(^{204}\) This last relationship is explored somewhat confusingly and too briefly in the essay “Charles Burchfield: Apocalypse Now” by Donald Kuspit who called Burchfield “the first authentic American expressionist artist.” (128).
\(^{206}\) ibid., 60.
\(^{207}\) ibid., 55.
scholars was evidence that Burchfield altered the houses he painted, projecting the past onto the present.\textsuperscript{208} As noted in the Introduction, Ames was the first writer who observed that Burchfield’s way of life was supported by the circumstances of a traditional marriage and the “sexist division of work.”\textsuperscript{209} Although other men in Burchfield’s circle were married to artists, such as Josephine Nivison (Edward Hopper) and Betty Burroughs (Reginald Marsh), before the movements of the early 1960s, women’s worlds were made up of their husbands’ and children’s lives. Burchfield held conventional views on the role of his wife and her duties to manage the household and raise the children. However, his devotion to Bertha stayed ignited and constant from the beginning of their marriage to his death. A few months before the couple was wed, Burchfield wrote:

My conception of God has been changed – I never had any idea of the real beauty of love – I have commenced to think about immortality – There is nothing in life compared to loving a girl whose presence can both inspire the loftiest ideas, together with the most common fellowship of laughter and contentment.\textsuperscript{210}

Bertha was revered by Burchfield for her virtues, strict morals and symbolic roles as idealized love, nature and life-giver. Many authors, such as Townsend, have noted Bertha’s essential role in protecting Burchfield’s working environment and peace.

Another essay in the *North by Midwest* catalog that gave credit to the role of women in Burchfield’s life was M. Sue Kendall’s essay on Mary Mowbray-Clarke, Burchfield’s early patron and founder of the Sunwise Turn Bookshop in New York City. Kendall, an author of many works on regionalism, explored Burchfield’s rise to fame in the 1920s and the influence and early patronage of Mowbray-Clarke who was somewhat a mystery in previous Burchfield scholarship. Kendall explained that Burchfield was well-known to the art world before his representation with Rehn and the 1930 Museum of Modern Art exhibition. His works were already in collections in New York, Philadelphia and Washington, among other cities.\textsuperscript{211} She described how Mowbray-Clarke was Burchfield’s advisor for six years. As his mentor, she was responsible for launching

\textsuperscript{208} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid., 56.
\textsuperscript{210} CEB Journals, Vol. 35, January 30, 1922, p.30.
his career and exposing him to ideas through books and patrons. Indeed, Kendall argued that Burchfield’s introduction to Mowbray-Clarke could have been “the most important single event in building his career.”

Earlier in life, Mowbray-Clarke was a governess. She studied art in Paris, wrote a book of art history and taught the subject. Her husband was a sculptor, and he helped organize the Armory show. The Sunwise Turn was a modern bookstore, which exhibited art and operated similarly to a salon (the term sunwise was drawn from a Gaelic proverb, having to do with propitiousness). Mowbray-Clarke and Madge Jamison, two women of the “leisure class,” ran the shop. Peggy Guggenheim was one of its employees and Arthur B. Davies was a patron. Burchfield’s work was first exhibited at the Sunwise Turn in 1916. Mowbray-Clarke was extremely well-connected with art institutions, universities and members of society. Kendall credited her for introducing Burchfield’s work to patrons that helped get his art displayed in galleries in London and Paris.

Kendall’s essay was a critical addition to the catalog because it acknowledged the other important non-patriarchal actors in Burchfield’s career, other than Root, Barr and Baur.

Michael D. Hall’s contribution to the catalog “Burchfield’s Regionalism: The Middle Border and the Great Divide” examined the community, neighborhoods and artistic debates of Burchfield’s time. The essay dealt with regionalism, not in the typical understanding, but as a dynamic combination of nationalism, citizenship and place that were delicately handled by Burchfield throughout his entire career. Hall identified two elements that he believed complicated the current study of the artist: the Middle Border and the politics of the modern art world. The writer’s objective was to understand the continuity of Burchfield’s life and his decisions to remain purposefully in the center of extremes.

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212 Ibid., 90.
213 Ibid., 91.
214 Ibid., 92.
215 Ibid., 96.
217 Ibid., 74.
The Middle Border was both a physical place and the ideological framework by which Hall interpreted Burchfield’s life and art. Hall’s article recreated the social, political and cultural extremes of the first half of the 20th century. He outlined the tensions between learned versus popular culture, abstract versus regional art and being a part of the art world versus isolationism. Burchfield lived in an era where the debate raged over what was American art, who was going to define it and how nationalism would reveal itself. Hall argued that Burchfield was able to stay in the center and maintain continuity throughout his artistic career. Hall said, “He [Burchfield] became the eccentric outsider-visionary brought from the middle border to reify post-war American longings for a new art of subjective interiority.” Hall studied Burchfield’s personal Regionalism in tandem with the nation’s shifting and ever-evolving interpretations of American art.

Hall and all of the other writers who contributed to North by Midwest are proof of a momentous change in the way the Columbus Museum of Art presented Burchfield to the public since the 1980s. The catalog was a collection of many voices. One voice did not dominate, rather all of the authors contributed to the Burchfield’s multi-sided truth. The catalog was a refreshing start to a new era of scholarship, one that had to be ignited in order to continue Burchfield’s interest and relevance in the 21st century. North by Midwest catalyzed a new approach in renewing Burchfield’s importance and reinserting him into the dialogue of American art from an incredibly diverse pool of scholars and admirers.

The writing on Burchfield in the 1980s and 1990s relied on the legacy of Barr and Baur. The Inlander was an expanded account of Baur’s first biography on the artist. Baur continued to assert that Burchfield’s life was largely devoid of external influences. His interest stayed fixed on the tensions within Burchfield’s artistic production and barely touched upon the activities in his life. The Early Works was published after Baur’s death. The legacy of his thirty-year study of

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218 Ibid., 81.
Burchfield would continue into the present. The publication also carried on the tradition of Barr by focusing on the artist’s early years.

The 1990s will always remain significant in Burchfield’s history because of Townsend’s *The Poetry of Place*. The condensation of 10,000 pages to over 700 had positive and negative benefits for the study of the artist. The abridged journals perpetuated the imbalance of focus on the internal versus the external. Shortly after *The Poetry of Place*, two works by Weekly and Eldredge examined Burchfield through 18th and 19th century schools of thought and art movements. They also explored Burchfield’s complicated relationship with spirituality and how it manifested itself in his work. Finally, the *North by Midwest* exhibition and catalog ended the decade with a multiplicity of voices on Burchfield and new themes to study in Burchfield’s artwork. The authors also set forth new theories and interpretations of the way Burchfield’s life could be configured.

**vi. 21st century: Burchfield’s American modernism**

The Kennedy Galleries, Inc. represented the artist’s estate until 2005, when it turned it over to the DC Moore Gallery, its neighbor on Fifth Avenue. The DC Moore Gallery published catalogs for solo exhibitions in 2009 and 2010. *The Architecture of Painting* (2009) argued for Burchfield’s modernity based on aesthetic, art historical and economic-political perspectives. The two essays in the catalog, one by Michael D. Hall and the other by Nannette V. Maciejunes and Karli R. Wurzelbacher, focused on Burchfield’s house paintings executed between 1918 and 1920. Bridget Moore’s “Introduction” described that Burchfield’s artwork following World War I shifted to “a period of intense introspection and experimentation,” which contained a “stripped-down sensibility that expresse[d] a spare structural and very modern approach to painting.”

Moore set up the fundamental purpose of this catalog, which was to show that the division between modernism and the American scene was a false construction. Burchfield’s paintings of

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1918 to 1920 may help us understand the artificiality of the long-standing belief that pits Burchfield against the modernists. Similar to the arguments expressed in *North by Midwest* (1997), Moore recognized Burchfield’s position as both an outsider (in terms of geographical locale) and an insider (in terms of his access and connections in the art world). She also contended that Burchfield “was both a receiver and transmitter, and that his essential importance in the history of American art is that his work synthesizes a unique vision of the modern American experience.”

Hall’s essay “Cones, Cubes, and Brooding Shacks: Charles Burchfield’s House Pictures 1918-1920” dealt with this short period’s approach to modernism. At the outset, Hall challenged Burchfield’s place in American art history that was established in the early 1930s. Hall firmly believed that it was more fruitful to study Burchfield’s aesthetics in the context of art history and rely less on his journals. The essay was based on two premises. The first was that Burchfield had exposure to modernist art, theory and teaching. The second was that Burchfield held experimentation to be an essential part of creation. Burchfield may well have considered the house paintings experiments since many of these works were unsigned. Hall wrote that they were Burchfield’s response to “the emergent Modernism redefining American art around him...” Burchfield himself said “...I view the house pictures as a deliberate and structured investigation of a non-traditional form of pictorial composition derived from cubism.” In addition, they were an experimentation with primitivism, a movement already underway in Europe and familiar to Burchfield’s teachers Keller and Wilcox. Based on these premises of exposure and experimentation, Hall argued that the works of 1918 to 1920 were modern, not just “approximations of modernism.” Hall’s essay was in direct opposition to Baur’s arguments that

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220 Ibid., 9.
221 Ibid., 12.
222 Ibid., 9.
223 Ibid., 12.
224 Ibid., 16.
225 Ibid., 13.
modernism was not of importance to Burchfield or a part of his exposure at the Cleveland School of Art.\textsuperscript{226}

Hall’s assertions echoed Moore’s “Introduction” to the catalog. He stated, “As an artist, Burchfield’s greatest strength may have been his ability to endlessly incorporate everything he had ever learned or experienced into his work.”\textsuperscript{227} To produce these house paintings of the late teens, Burchfield “had to abandon his decorative inclinations and traditional ideas on perspective.”\textsuperscript{228} In addition, Hall argued, like many other Burchfield scholars, that the characteristics (primitivism, animism, modernism) of one period could be dormant for many decades and then reemerge.\textsuperscript{229} In order to give these years validity as a period, Hall also described how this period (like all of Burchfield’s periods) was an exercise in “memory, experimentation and synthesis.”\textsuperscript{230}

In a manner similar to Hall, Maciejunes and Wurzelbacher defined Burchfield’s experience in Cleveland as one full of exposure to modernism—in art and literature—by contemporary artists in America and Europe.\textsuperscript{231} The object of the essay “Charles Burchfield: American Modern” was to determine how Burchfield became branded as a painter of the American scene when his roots from art school into the 1920s were unmistakably modern. Two articles from 1934 and 1936 in \textit{Time} and \textit{Life} magazine featured Burchfield and established his association with Benton, Curry and Grant and his position as the poster child of the American scene to the public. The American scene was known for its “combination of cultural nationalism and return to figuration,” two qualities that do not seem characteristic of Burchfield’s work of the time.\textsuperscript{232} Many of the references in “Charles Burchfield: American Modern” were derived from essays from \textit{North by Midwest} (1997). Important to note chronologically is that during the 1920s,

\textsuperscript{226} Ibid., 12.  
\textsuperscript{227} Ibid., 17.  
\textsuperscript{228} Ibid., 14.  
\textsuperscript{229} Ibid., 17.  
\textsuperscript{230} Ibid., 18.  
\textsuperscript{232} Ibid., 23.
Burchfield was known for his works of the same decade. It was not until the 1930 MOMA exhibition that the greater public was exposed to the work after college and of his Golden Year, 1917. Instead of working against arguments put forth by Baur as Hall did in his essay, Maciejunes and Wurzelbacher challenged Barr’s assertion in the 1930 MOMA catalog that Burchfield did not have external influences.

The authors quoted passages from the artist’s 1928 autobiographical essay “On the Middle Border” on the harsh and unjust realities of the industrial-technological age. Burchfield also decried the provincial and intolerant minds of some Americans. The artist reflected that during this middle period, his subject matter (post-pioneer days, industrial and small-town America) informed his style. “This time instead of my mood determining the manner and style of painting, it was the subject matter itself.” By contrast, in the other periods of his life, personal mood informed style. One of the breakthroughs of this essay was the revelation by the authors that “It was, then, his engagement with the American Scene that defined his modernism and his Midwestern identity, making him all the more believable to his New York audience.” The authors asserted that Burchfield’s work from 1918 to 1920 was part of the American scene, which briefly was part of American modernism. Later the American scene developed its associations with being insular and overly nationalistic. This was also probably the point in time when public opinion shifted from thinking of Burchfield as a modernist to being a regionalist.

Only one year later, Bridget Moore also introduced the DC Moore Gallery’s Charles Burchfield: Fifty Years as a Painter (2010). This catalog, taken from the title of Burchfield’s last autobiographical essay, is a fantastic collection of some of Burchfield’s most important writing that spans from 1928 to 1965. Many of these texts are hard to locate, and the DC Moore Gallery’s publication was a large step in increasing access to Burchfield’s own writing, much in the line of
Baur and Townsend’s efforts to publish portions of the journals. Moore stated, “America periodically produces unique and unconstrained artists who transcend their chosen mediums and subject matter. Burchfield is one of the very best.” To emphasize Burchfield’s modernity throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, Moore cited Burchfield’s 1930 one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art and then 80 years later, his blockbuster retrospective *Heat Waves in a Swamp* curated by Robert Gober. Similar to so many of Burchfield’s biographers, Moore contributed to the simplification of Burchfield’s life that adds basis for his mythology. She described him as a man who always knew himself and was a rare artist who rejected New York as a place to study and live to return to what was familiar in Ohio. While these statements may be accurate, they ignore the self-doubt and self-criticism that ran throughout his career. They also leave out information on the ties he made in New York and how important they would be to advancing his position in the art world.

Ralph Sessions wrote a brief essay for *Charles Burchfield: Fifty Years as a Painter* entitled “Charles Burchfield in His Own Words.” It examined the role of writing in Burchfield’s life and how this writing shaped the artist’s public perception. Writing, in the form of notes or sketches, was of primary importance to his artistic creation. For the public, Burchfield published a handful of important autobiographical works in his lifetime, as well as pieces on his contemporaries and sections of the journals. Like Maciejunes’ essay “Charles Burchfield: American Modern” (2009), Sessions used Barr’s argument about no external influences to launch his counterpoint. Sessions put forth many examples of Burchfield’s exposure to modern movements, influential relationships from college, strategic friendships and associations with

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239 Ibid., 9.
240 Ibid., 11.
other artists. In addition, Sessions observed the parallels in the way that Burchfield’s style and shifts in period seemed always to be connected to larger trends in the art world.

Both the 2009 and 2010 catalogs from the DC Moore Gallery stressed Burchfield’s modernity in his own time and posthumously. The authors argued for the continuity of his artistic periods and style and the brilliance in Burchfield’s synthesis of each period and ability to balance a private life and make the right connections in the public realm. The Architecture of Painting uprooted Burchfield’s static position as the poster child for the American scene. The authors challenged the division art history has created between the American scene and modernism. Both texts also relied on and continued where the North by Midwest catalog left off. They contested the foundational arguments by Barr and Baur that have generally been accepted until the late 1990s.

Fifty Years as a Painter was a crucial advancement for access to Burchfield’s own writing and certainly advanced the public understanding of the artist into the 21st century. The artist’s writing allows us to see how Burchfield’s early convictions on art remained in place throughout his life and how writing was another crucial method of defining himself.

The traveling exhibition Heat Waves in a Swamp: The Paintings of Charles Burchfield (2010) was the most significant exhibition to date of the artist’s work in the 21st century. Heat Waves was curated by internationally-acclaimed artist Robert Gober, who worked with the Hammer Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles, the Burchfield Penney Art Center and the Whitney Museum of American Art to organize the monographic exhibition. The catalog included essays by Cynthia Burlingham, deputy director of collections and director of the Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts at the Hammer Museum as well as articles by Nancy Weekly, Head of Collections and the Charles Cary Rumsey curator, and Tullis Johnson, then archives and curatorial assistant, of the Burchfield Penney Art Center and an essay by Dave Hickey, a freelance writer of fiction and cultural criticism.

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242 Ibid., 12.
243 Ibid.
One of the most noticeable themes in the *Heat Waves* catalog was the delicate line Burchfield walked as an incredibly famous artist and a man of little public attention in the art world. Burlingham’s article traces the history of watercolor since its invention in the 19th century and describes how Burchfield’s techniques evolved over the course of his career. She stated that watercolor was the medium of the “American avant-garde.” In addition, through watercolor, Burlingham inserted Burchfield amongst artists such as O’Keeffe, Hopper, Turner, Sargent, Marin and Demuth. She also argued, similarly to Prasse that Burchfield’s mode of painting with watercolor was analogous to great oil or history painting.

Weekly and Johnson turned their attention to specific categories of Burchfield’s drawings, the *Conventions for Abstract Thoughts* and doodles. Weekly described Burchfield’s discovery in his college years: “He realized that realism was inadequate for that goal [representing his experience in nature], so he conceived a language of symbols to express what seemed intangible…” Like many of Burchfield’s symbols, motifs and subject matter, the Conventions disappeared during his middle period and reemerged, and morphed in the 1940s. Weekly put forward Burchfield’s considerations surrounding his Golden Year, following the impossibility of education at the National Academy of Design. Burchfield wrote: “This time I regard as the most important one of my career, since cut off from all art influences and even art-friends, I was forced to concentrate on the most important thing for any artist – that of digging my art out of my everyday life.” Further examination should be given to the isolation of this period since Mowbray-Clarke was his patron at the time. Johnson suggested that many of Burchfield’s inventions like the Conventions and his monogram could have been born from his doodles, which Burchfield characterized as a free form of expression with no sense of obligation.

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246 Ibid.
247 Ibid., 22.
Dave Hickey's article “Burchfield’s Highway” was the most provoking text in the Heat Waves catalog. As a cultural critic, Hickey identified with one of Burchfield’s most controversial art critics, Henry McBride.249 Hickey asserted his belief that Burchfield works stand alone; they do not need to be viewed in context of other works.250 He also was fascinated with Burchfield’s relationship to the environment, in an ontological sense. Although Burchfield at times found himself in disharmony with the world,251 Hickey tried to describe Burchfield’s relationship with nature, which involved becoming part of it and losing “the self,” as if he were always experiencing “the unwilling dissolution of one’s identity into its environment.”252 These sentiments echoed Burchfield’s valedictorian speech.253

In the tradition of Maciejunes, Hickey did not hesitate to draw attention to the way that Burchfield cultivated and maintained his persona:

...Burchfield, in his every aspect, was so well disguised as a provincial American that, in retrospect, the fissures spring immediately to light, as forgeries reveal themselves in time. Good lies are based in truth, and Burchfield, today, seems to have been the part he played.254

Heat Waves in a Swamp gave Burchfield’s work renewed attention through its organization by such a recognized contemporary artist and exposure across the country. By looking at Burchfield’s career as a whole, it presented opportunities to study him in an art historical trajectory by way of medium, technique and process, symbols and subject matter.

From 1928 to 2010 there is a vast record by which to study the historiography of Burchfield. We form our opinion of Burchfield based on the rich history of criticism, analysis and interpretation of his work. The artwork and texts by Burchfield, the abridged version of his journals and the research of scholars from a variety of disciplines has expanded the interpretation of the artist and his work. From 1928 onward, there is a strong lineage of scholarship that argues

251 Ibid., 39-40.
252 Ibid., 41.
253 Burchfield’s relationship to his environment were also addressed by Baur, Townsend, Weekly and Eldredge in their discussions of his pantheism and transcendentalism.
254 Ibid., 40.
for Burchfield’s isolation, lack of influences and indifference to the art world, beginning with Burchfield and Barr. Burchfield’s artistic process has been admired for its sheer originality, synthesis of childhood memory, the conventionalization of nature, infusion of his personal moods and the brilliant evolution of his three periods. All of these characteristics contribute to his works’ universality and timelessness. Although there is a strong perpetuation of the work of Barr and Baur, contemporary scholars are stepping away toward new material, seen most clearly in *North by Midwest*. One of the most hopeful aspects of new Burchfield scholarship is this challenge that the interpretations of his art and life are not rigidly configured.

Twenty-first century scholars will use this tradition to launch new, fresh perspectives on Burchfield. The belief that Burchfield’s work and thoughts were finally made accessible through the journals has proven to be too limited and lacking in analytical application. A healthy debate continues on Burchfield’s relevance in the 21st century and his place in American art history. Yet almost all of the works in the literature review completely skirt Burchfield’s personal life, his role in the art world of New York and their relationship to his art career. The following chapters will examine the forty years of correspondence between Burchfield and Bertha between 1923 and 1963. At times the letters offer a complimentary view of past scholars’ perspectives and at other times they are incompatible. The letters will offer another dimension to the way that Burchfield, his personal life and his place in the American art scene of the mid-20th century are studied.
III. The Letters

i. Introduction

The forty years of correspondence between Bertha and Charles amount to more than 140 letters (over 375 handwritten pages). The contents of the letters both affirm the arguments put forth by the authors in the literature review but also unsettle some of our perspectives on Burchfield’s identity, personality and public life. Significantly, the letters do not demonstrate the artist’s misanthropic tendencies toward others, suggested by many of the authors in the literature review. In fact, the interactions between Burchfield and his family and people in the art world are overwhelmingly positive and beneficial to his career and art. Indeed, his artistic production and success rested on the steadfastness of these relationships. It is impossible to determine the completeness of this collection of letters but there are obvious gaps. Burchfield’s first forty years of marriage will be accessed through a very new, yet specific, prism. Some of the major events in Burchfield’s life that were influenced by Bertha, for example, his conversion to the Lutheran church, are absent entirely from the letters. Approximately half of the surviving correspondence between Charles and Bertha were written between 1936 and 1942, a span of time in which Burchfield was heavily involved in commissions and art jury selection committees.

The letters will expand the impressions and ideas of multiple understandings of Burchfield’s complicated character and way of life. By reading this correspondence to Bertha, readers can piece together the personality, habits, views, beliefs and hobbies of the artist. This process allows Burchfield to become more human and less of the genius artist of mythical status.
Other aspects of his working process, attitudes towards his era and contemporaries and some of his experiences that were not recorded in the journals will be revealed. An additional effect of reading the letters is to see Burchfield’s artistic production in tandem with his life, not magically separate from it. Art, though still operating as a form of expression and response to the world, is defined more in this paper as a product that provided a livelihood for his family.

In an age of instant and nearly free communication, letter writing seems romantic and steeped in importance. Burchfield’s correspondence ranges from quick notes to long narratives of his trips to love letters. Sometimes Burchfield would include articles, comics or cartoons for Bertha and the children. He considered writing to Bertha as talking or chatting with her. Burchfield wrote mostly in hotel rooms late at night after the exhausting duties of the day. Other times, they would be penned on a bumpy train ride. Burchfield considered a telephone call very expensive. However, when he did make a call, he found it comforting and worth the price. While in New York in January of 1939, Burchfield said, “It always makes me feel better after I call you, Bertha. I awoke at 5 am & got blue & everything…but after I talk with you I feel better.”

Letters served a similar purpose to his journal: they allowed Burchfield to record happenings, impressions, incidents and reflections. Also like the journals, letter writing was a productive activity to do when Burchfield could not find the energy or inspiration to work on his artwork. Significantly, they are more personal and less contrived than the journals, simply because Burchfield probably never dreamed that they would be placed in the public eye. Bertha read the letters, and in many cases, she shared them with the children.

Burchfield admitted that the journals were not the place to record his private feelings about love. While the journals lacked the human events that Burchfield later regretted not recording with as much attention, the letters are imbalanced in the opposite way. They reveal more about human interactions than his working methods or developments on his paintings,

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255 Charles/Bertha letters, postmarked January 3, 1939.
although mention of particular works of art are important and will be addressed. Burchfield’s marriage to Bertha provided companionship, comfort, stability, encouragement and practicality. These were all things for which Burchfield became entirely dependent for his mental, physical and artistic self.

Following the structure employed by Townsend, the next chapters will be broken into two artificial divisions arranged chronologically. First, the topics that relate to Burchfield’s personal sphere, which include his marriage, family and way of life in Gardenville will be discussed. Then, the other chapter will be devoted to illuminating Burchfield’s life in the art world during the first two thirds of the 20th century. Burchfield’s experience as an actor in art circles, juror, commissioned artist and educator will be examined.
IV. Private Life

i. Introduction to the private life

There are only a handful of instances when Burchfield wrote openly about his ideas of marriage. He believed that marriage “sets you free” and he was happy to leave his bachelor years behind. Burchfield expressed his unconditional love for Bertha and said that she was his best friend. At one point, he declared that with Bertha by his side, he could deal with any circumstance. The simplest of acts, such as pressing his clothes or packing a lunch, were acknowledged with gratitude. He described that Bertha was important to him as a man and an artist. Without her, he would be lonely and not “self-made.” Many times, he thanked her and wrote how much he appreciated her companionship. Even when he reflected on his childhood, Burchfield wrote that Bertha was often included (illogically) in these memories.

Burchfield’s letters to Bertha almost always conveyed a feeling of homesickness to be back in Gardenville with his family. Time away often seemed to feel longer than it really was. A self-declared fusser or “worry wart,” Burchfield fretted over his wife and children’s health and expressed more than once his fear of losing them to some accident. “Life would just be unbearable without you, it would have no meaning – I can’t see how I could ever go on with my painting if you were not by my side.” Without his family, Burchfield could not imagine carrying on as an artist. A few times, he asked God to protect all of them. A letter from very early in the marriage contained evidence that Bertha thought that she was a trial for Burchfield. Her husband assured her that she was not. In another letter, Bertha referred to herself as a “good-for-

257 Charles/Bertha letters, undated, probably November 1923.
258 Ibid., postmarked June 23, 1950.
259 Ibid., postmarked March 23, 1942.
260 Ibid.
nothing” and Burchfield had to convince her not to be self-defeating. She had “fits of impatience and depression.” In 1941, just a few months before the country’s entry into the World War and during an especially agonizing period of pain from his lumbago, Burchfield wrote in his journal, “I am a burden to myself, and my family, especially to my wife, whose efforts to comfort me, and bring me back to some degree of cheerfulness, make me ashamed.” 261 Both husband and wife had to do their part in keeping the other in positive spirits.

Burchfield and Bertha seemed to have a mutual understanding that time apart was difficult to manage on one’s own. In 1935, Burchfield wrote, “I know how lonely it is when “the other fellow” is gone, and will try to get thru as soon as I can.” 262 With such a large family, it was understood that it would have been quite difficult to travel with the children or leave them in another’s care. In 1941 Burchfield wrote on his departing train, “I can still see you all smiling at me as the train pulled out. You always send me away with a smile and I know it is hard to be left with the whole shebang to run alone.” 263 Burchfield often assured Bertha that he was staying busy on his trips. In especially trying situations, Burchfield expressed how much he wished that his wife could be there with him. On one occasion, Burchfield mentioned that he knew that Bertha did not eat well when he was away. “You never do eat when I’m away. Just so you don’t get down to skin and bones, so that I’ll cut myself when I hug you – and believe me you’re going to be squoze (sic) breathless.” 264 When Burchfield was feeling down, he wrote about how much Bertha made him feel better after talking on the phone. Sometimes the family’s letters would not make it to Burchfield on his travels and they were sent back to Gardenville.

Burchfield commented on the day-to-day activities recorded in Bertha’s letters: her cleaning and laundry, reports on the children’s behavior or mention of neighborhood events. Occasionally, he sent a box of candy for the family. Burchfield asked about their weather and whether or not they caught Charley McCarthy on the radio. He seemed especially tickled when

262 Charles/Bertha letters, postmarked October 21, 1935.
263 Ibid., postmarked July 9, 1941.
264 Ibid., postmarked July 4, 1950.
the artwork Bertha favored became the pieces most well received in New York. In 1935 Burchfield stated, “As I said before, everyone seems to back you up in the pictures you liked. So now I know for sure that you will have to be my censor – don’t you feel responsible?”\textsuperscript{265} He wrote about his dreams, sometimes rife with tension, other times full of fantasies about a pet lion or “gobs of hepaticas under pine trees.”\textsuperscript{266}

Bertha was entrusted with caring for the studio while Burchfield was gone. In letters or on the envelope, Burchfield asked Bertha to check up on the studio and its stove. One time when Burchfield forgot his sketches, Bertha rushed to the train station to deliver them. He wrote a poem in thanks on stationery from the Shelton Hotel in New York:

Little rhyme for Bertha: Listen, my children and you shall hear – Of the midnight ride of Bertha Revere – Her hubby so thoughtless had forgotten his sketches; --So Bertha the sketches she rushes and fetches. The train leaving time was dangerously near – But Bertha – she made it – she sure is a dear. (also Chubby)\textsuperscript{267}

Burchfield left Bertha emergency money when he was away and sometimes would send her a check just in case. Evidently, this was the easiest way for her to access their account.\textsuperscript{268} Finances were very strained at times. When Burchfield sold a work, he told Bertha to go buy something, often suggesting something practical. In the 1930s Burchfield seriously considered doing some illustration work. The sale of paintings in 1939 meant that the couple could purchase a new dining set and davenport and Bertha could buy new dresses or a coat.\textsuperscript{269} In October of 1939, Burchfield assured his wife that he was going to inquire about payments for a work since the couple wanted to make some improvements to the home.\textsuperscript{270}

Bertha was Burchfield’s archivist, and she followed her husband’s press coverage. Among other items, these records were vital for Baur’s first biography in 1956. In 1939 Burchfield wrote to Bertha and told her not to wait for an article in the \textit{American} since a critic

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{265} Ibid., postmarked October 23, 1935.
\footnotetext{266} Ibid., postmarked March 17, 1936.
\footnotetext{267} Ibid., undated.
\footnotetext{268} Ibid., postmarked June 29, 1950.
\footnotetext{269} Ibid., postmarked January 15, 1937.
\footnotetext{270} Ibid., postmarked October 9, 1939.
\end{footnotes}
was no longer employed there, which displays that they freely discussed art and his career.\textsuperscript{271}

Burchfield’s only description of Bertha in the letters was as follows:

\begin{quote}
I always have a mental picture of you now, with your little black hat set jauntily on the back of your head, your curly hair pushed away from your forehead, and that smile of yours which nobody could ever equal as you say to me ‘Hello Poppie.’\textsuperscript{272}
\end{quote}

The letters convey that Burchfield had a very joking, informal and affectionate relationship with the children. He was fond of nicknames and made up outrageous words. His warmth comes across in his pet names for them, the dozens of “Xs” at the closing of a letter and the way that he asked them about specific details of their lives, for example, the progress with a new beau (he once asked Sally if she was going to be a polyandrist\textsuperscript{273}) or the state of their colds. Most letters started with a line about how supremely happy he was to receive word from home or getting the chance to hear their voices on the telephone. The children sent their father artwork and in exchange, he returned comments and made suggestions. In one instance, he told Martha that she was already conventionalizing her landscapes.\textsuperscript{274} In New York, Burchfield made specific purchases of clothes and medicine for Arthur. A handful of times, he spoke of catching butterflies to bring home to Sally. Oftentimes, Burchfield meant to write individual letters to the children, but it happened rarely. This was likely why most of his letters were suitable to share with the whole group. He felt guilty about not devoting a note to each of them. When the children did not write, Burchfield let it be known that he was let down. As the children grew older, Burchfield felt saddened at the prospect of an empty nest.

In the 1965 essay “The Place of Drawings in An Artist’s Work,” Burchfield wrote of life events and his family. He said, “All of these events were of vast importance to me, but not quite pertinent to the subject of my work.”\textsuperscript{275} Burchfield’s use of “subject of my” work and not just “work” seems minor, but it indicates that life events were important to and intersected with his art

\textsuperscript{271} Ibid., postmarked January 12, 1939.
\textsuperscript{272} Ibid., postmarked September 23, 1952.
\textsuperscript{273} Ibid., postmarked November 20, 1942.
\textsuperscript{274} Ibid., postmarked November 21, 1942.
\textsuperscript{275} Burchfield, “Autobiographical Chronology,” 11.
but not his art’s subject matter. He also explained that he liked to have his family within hearing
distance when he worked.\textsuperscript{276} In 1937 Burchfield wrote, “…when you are alone it does get
monotonous traveling – 20 years ago I would not have been so, perhaps, but now I’m different
and want my loved ones within my easy reach.”\textsuperscript{277}

\textbf{ii. Private life during the 1920s and 1930s}

In the \textit{Inlander} (1982), Baur commented that it was especially rare for an artist to have a
successful marriage.\textsuperscript{278} For Burchfield, a successful marriage was essential for creating the
conditions required for his artistic career. In Ohio, Burchfield’s mother and sisters were
introduced to Bertha’s family through neighbors who had lived near the Kenreichs’ farm. Charles
met Bertha in December of 1917 when she was invited over for dinner.\textsuperscript{279} Before Bertha, there
was one other significant woman in Burchfield’s life. He was engaged to Alice Lambert Bailey, a
fellow student at the Cleveland School of Art. The engagement was broken off in 1916 because
of financial insecurity, and the event caused Burchfield great psychological distress.\textsuperscript{280}

During the summer of 1921, Burchfield worked on the Kenreichs’ Greenford, Ohio farm.
Burchfield’s attachment to the family developed quickly. Bertha’s parents were Elias Kenreich
and Mary Etta Kyser, and she was one of 10 children. Two of her brothers became ministers.

Townsend provided some information on Bertha and the Kenreich family:

She was the daughter of prosperous farmers who lived near Greenford, Ohio, four miles northeast
of Salem. The Kenreichs had emigrated in the late 1700s from Wurttemberg, Germany, and settled
in Mahoning County, Ohio, where Bertha’s great-grandfather had founded the Evangelical
Lutheran Church, known as the “Kenreich Church.” The family had remained staunch Missouri
Synod Lutherans.\textsuperscript{281}

The couple married at the Kenreichs’ home on May 20, 1922, approximately nine months
after Burchfield asked Bertha to marry him in August of 1921. The Burchfields’ wedding
announcement was listed in a newspaper’s “Society” section (figures 3 and 4):

\begin{footnotes}
\item[276] Charles/Bertha letters, postmarked May 2, 1924.
\item[277] Ibid., undated, 1937.
\item[278] Baur, \textit{The Inlander}, 73.
\item[279] Ibid., 128.
\item[280] Townsend, \textit{The Poetry of Place}, 72 and 76.
\item[281] Ibid., 124.
\end{footnotes}
With a profusion of spring blossoms shedding their beauty and fragrance on the scene Miss Bertha Louise Kenreich, of near Greenford, and Charles E. Burchfield of Buffalo, N.Y., were married at noon Saturday at the home of the bride’s mother, Mrs. Mary Kenreich. Rev. Mr. Walker, Youngstown, assisted by Rev. Charles Kenreich, South Sodas, N.Y., brother of the bride, read the ring service in the presence of about 50 relatives and friends. The bride was gowned in white georgette and carried a bouquet of white roses and lilies of the valley. The bridesmaid, Miss Emma Kenreich, sister of the bride, wore a creation of green georgette and carried pink roses and lilies of the valley. Joseph H. Burchfield, Cleveland, brother of the groom, was the best man. Dorothy Kenreich, the niece of the bride, was the flower girl. The ring bearer was James Hilgendor, nephew of the bride. Mendelssohn’s wedding march was played by Mrs. Charles Kenreich. A dinner followed the ceremony.

Mr. and Mrs. Burchfield are widely known in this city. Mr. Burchfield, son of Mrs. Alice Burchfield, East Fourth st., is a landscape artist and designer, employed by M.H. Birge & Son., Buffalo. The young people left Saturday night for Buffalo to make their home. Among the guests were Rev. and Mrs. Charles Kenreich and family, South Sodas, N.Y.; Miss Mary Benbow, Sharon, Pa; Frank and E. M. Hayes, Rochester, Pa.; and Fred Burchfield, Oberlin. (May 1922)

In the early and mid-1920s, Burchfield’s letters provided some information on their years as a young family living in an attic apartment at 459 Franklin Street, their second residence in Buffalo. Reflecting on this time in 1963, Burchfield wrote:

To the Studio – got out two W.C.’s made in the 20’s at 459 Franklin of Christmas trees in bloom – to show Bertha – they were of the trees surrounding the roof of the apartment house where we lived – We reminisced about our early married life there, and of how simple our pleasures were (making a game of throwing pebbles into a half-cantaloupe shell for one).

The letters contained references to Burchfield’s employment at M. H. Birge and Sons. Burchfield’s correspondence to Bertha were full of sentimentality, reassurances, endearments and a wish to be reunited. For a time in the spring of 1924, Bertha and their first child Mary Alice were away from Burchfield on a trip to Cherry Creek, New York. Burchfield described how much Bertha’s letters consoled him and the effort he put into staying busy, although work at Birge was exhausting. He purchased records for his wife and fellow music lover and did not reveal the titles until she returned. While traveling, Burchfield connected the occurrences, people and even the films he saw to Bertha and Mary Alice. He slept better if he had spoken to his wife and heard the baby’s sounds. These letters demonstrate that Burchfield was very open about how overwhelmingly happy he was to be a husband and a father. Without the anchor of his family,

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282 Unknown newspaper, photocopy from the Charles E. Burchfield Archives at the Burchfield Penney Art Center at Buffalo State College, Buffalo, New York.
284 Charles/Bertha letters, “April or May 1924” written on envelope. Bertha also had visited Cherry Creek in November 1923.
Burchfield wrote that he felt lost and was unsure of his ability to work. Burchfield thought that Bertha was the superior of the pair and stated, “May I become more worthy of you as time goes on.”

Frequently the letters to Bertha contained an angst, mostly for her well being. In an undated letter, Burchfield wrote about a home gas leak accident and how awful it would have been if anything had happened:

Dearest:

I shudder when I think about how near you came to being badly hurt or even worse, and I thank God you discovered the gas in time. Life would just be unbearable without you, it would have no meaning – I can’t see how I could ever go on with my painting if you were not by my side.

I love you, sweetheart, more with each passing day –

Poppie.

Burchfield’s writing also revealed some of the difficulties in their marriage. In one letter he confessed, “Your daddy hasn’t always been patient with you or understood your troubles, but I am sorry & want you to forget it. You are so precious to me that I don’t want anything to happen to you. God has given us a love that few people are privileged to have.” Sometimes Burchfield found Bertha’s letters to contain signs of tiredness and depression. Another occasion while still living on Franklin Street in Buffalo, it seems as though Bertha was recovering from a pregnancy or perhaps a miscarriage and was in a fragile physical state. Burchfield wrote (figure 5):

Dearest:

I wish you would not think of yourself as being “a trial to me” for you could never be that – True, I do, scold you when I think maybe you are doing too much, but it is never to imply that you are being a trial in so doing – Probably I should not hedge you in with criticism when you are trying so hard to “come back” to normal activity – No doubt it is I who is being the trial to you. Your accident was nothing you could foresee or help; it hurt me then, and it does now to have you suffer so, but it never was nor is it now or ever will be a trial to me; I love you too much for that.

It is true, you know, that “Life takes on a tender meaning, because you are by my side” (Ben Burroughs). I want you to rest secure always, because no matter what happens, I will always love you, darling –

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285 Ibid., postmarked May 2, 1924.
286 Ibid., postmarked May 5, 1924.
287 Ibid., undated.
288 Ibid., undated, April or May 1924.
289 Ibid., postmarked May 8, 1924.
In May of 1924 Burchfield made his first mention in the letters of wanting to live away from Buffalo.\(^{291}\) Hearing his apartment neighbors all of the time in addition to the convenience of being able to take a bus from the suburbs into the city were factors that made the prospect of moving enticing. On May 7, 1924 fellow artist and printmaker J. J. Lankes helped Burchfield look at homes in Gardenville, a town just south of Buffalo. Burchfield, Bertha, Mary Alice and Martha moved to 3574 Clinton Street in Gardenville in April 1925, just three months before Bertha gave birth to Sally.

One of the most painful events in Burchfield’s family life occurred in the summer of 1933 when Burchfield’s sister Frances and mother died within nine days of each other. A small series of letters from 1933 were shaped around this somber period. Burchfield returned to Ohio and expressed how much pain this caused him. It agonized Burchfield to see constant reminders of his departed sister. Burchfield noticed all of Frances’s personal touches and how much of the home’s decoration was influenced by her decisions. He did not have a chance to say good bye to her.\(^{292}\) Burchfield wrote openly about how much he wished Bertha could be with him. “…you are a part of me, and I wanted you to be with me so much….\(^{293}\) Another note asked Bertha to send his shoes for the funeral and wished the children love and strength.\(^{294}\) A journal entry from August 7, 1933 recorded the day of his mother’s death on June 23 of the same year. Burchfield commented on the sound of robins and church bells and flashes of imagery from the funeral. He wrote, “They are gone; and even now, the vain regrets outweigh the pleasant memories.”\(^{295}\) There are no letters regarding his mother’s death, which likely means that Bertha joined him in Ohio.

Over half a year later, Burchfield wrote to a friend from his Ohio years Charles E. Kaiser on

\(^{290}\) Ibid., undated, circa 1923-1925.  
\(^{291}\) Ibid., postmarked May 2, 1924.  
\(^{292}\) Ibid., postmarked June 17, 1933.  
\(^{293}\) Ibid., postmarked June 17, 1933.  
\(^{294}\) Ibid., postmarked June 22, 1933.  
January 26, 1934 about the deaths in his family. He said, “It seems when you lose your mother that you feel mortal – I never did before, but I do now.” The letter also revealed that Frances had been ill and Burchfield considered her passing a “blessed release.”

In the instances when Burchfield wrote directly to his children, readers get a sense of how informal and playful he was as a father. He was effusive in his thanks for receiving letters from the children, often calling a delivery of mail a “feast of letters.” In a note to Martha on November 18, 1934 he wrote to her about school and asked her to be awake early in the morning to greet him upon his return. Since Bertha wrote if the children were well behaved, Burchfield promised to bring them a gift or reward. A letter from the time of Burchfield’s 1936 Fortune commission in Altoona, Pennsylvania contained messages for each of the children except Cathy, who did not write. They exchanged jokes with each other, “So you think Sally I’m so dumb that I wouldn’t know any better than to chop down an iron-tree with the wrong side of the axe?” and make believe stories “Martha I hope that ghost brings that money to me” and talk about upcoming occasions like Burchfield’s birthday. Burchfield joked about seeing his family sooner than expected and told Arthur “I wish I could get you an airplane so big that I could fly right over Gardenville this minute to hug you for your nice letter.” To Cathy, Burchfield teased, “…did you sail boats on the pools of tears that were running around all over the house, or go swimming in them? It makes me so sad to know you are so sad because I am gone…”

Sometimes Burchfield made up little rhymes for the children:

Cathy had a cello
She filled it up with Jello
With pretty yellow Jello
And does it make it smell? Oh?

Sally’s playing croquet
With a buttonhole bouquet

297 Ibid.
298 Charles/Bertha letters, postmarked November 18, 1934.
299 Ibid., undated, circa late March 1936.
300 Ibid., undated, circa November 1936.
301 Ibid., postmarked January 14, 1937.
Do you think that is O.K.? (ouch! Who threw that rotten tomato?)

The children must have delighted in their father’s imaginative mind. In 1939 he told them that if he were to be wrongly accused of a crime, at least the artwork on the walls of his prison cell would be removed and displayed at the Metropolitan.

From the beginnings of his marriage to the final years, the longing to be home was painfully evident in the closings of the letters. While in Altoona, Pennsylvania on a railroad commission for Fortune magazine (and during the great flood that coincided with his trip), Burchfield wrote, “The new moon in the sky makes me homesick for quiet places, far way from all this turmoil & desolation. And the nicest quietest spot I can think of is Gardenville, 3574 Clinton St.” He also confided, “I imagine this is an experience that I will remember for a long time, and I don’t doubt [it’s] good for me, but sometimes the longing to get home and see you all gets me so strong that I think I’ll burst.”

The first two decades of Burchfield’s marriage and fatherhood established a strong reliance on family life in Gardenville. The letters demonstrated Burchfield’s love of being a companion and father. The dynamics and intricacies of the Burchfields’ marriage were illuminated in common letters and during times of grief. The couple’s devotion and friendship were founded at the outset of their life together. Importantly, there were signs that the marriage was not always perfect, yet they were open to finding a resolution. Husband and wife had to cope with mood swings. Burchfield’s devotion, trust and dependence on Bertha were strengthened these years as well as his position as a playful and caring father.

iii. Private life from the 1940s through the 1960s

Two major events in the later years documented in the letters—a trip to Canada with Rehn and a teaching position at the University of Ohio—illuminate Burchfield’s marriage. The

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302 Ibid., undated, circa October 1937
303 Ibid., postmarked January 10, 1939.
304 Ibid., postmarked March 25, 1936.
305 Ibid., postmarked March 17, 1936.
contents of the letters from the 1940s to the 1960s vary from World War II references to passionate love letters with an intensifying desire to share all of his experiences with his wife. A number of sequential letters are intact from 1941, when Burchfield accompanied Rehn on a trip to Canada following Peggy Rehn’s death. He and Rehn deepened their friendship during the period of bereavement. Although the beginning of the following letter from Canada was filled with homesickness and worry, the next portion indicated the excitement of a new environment.

Burchfield wrote:

Dearie:

Gosh, it was good to hear your voice tonight – I had been so blue & homesick for you all, all day that I thought sometimes I couldn’t stand it any longer. So tonight I told Mrs. Lyle I was going to call you up on the Q.T. – When I told her Frank had a complex about long distance, she said Dr. Lyle did too, and she knew how I felt, & she insisted on my calling up on her account. In fact she did the calling –

I don’t know what’s the matter with me – my mind don’t seem to function right – we had about decided I ought not call from up here, but it never occurred to me to telegraph you on our arrival – nor even to send my letters air-mail and so you had that long wait to hear if we were safe – Well, if [you’re] mad at me, you have a right to be – but it wasn’t because I wasn’t thinking of you almost all the time. That’s the big fly in my ointment – that I can’t have you here with me.

Today has been a quiet one. We did nothing but sit around & take it easy, so will be ready to go tomorrow. We did go up to a country club for tea tho. It was so warm all day, but it got better toward night. The big thing tonight is the Northern lights. They are performing beautifully, and they are beyond description. We are so high up that we have a wonderful view of them. They are over the mountains to the north, and part of them are reflected in the bay. They are a few queer looking dark clouds in front of them to add to the weirdness. At 12:30 the waning moon came up in the northeast and is reflected in the bay. Frank & I hate to go to bed. But we must – we want to get to Montreal (280 miles) tomorrow.

Well it won’t be long now, and in spite of all the sights to see here, I just want to see six people so bad, I don’t think I can wait –

Love & xxxxxxxx

Dad-bam.306

The artist, who had received so much aid and counsel throughout his career from Rehn, finally had a chance to return the kindness. Rehn’s new experience as a widow seemed to scatter

306 Ibid., postmarked July 16, 1941.
Burchfield’s mind. He wished Bertha could be there with him but knew it would not have been appropriate. This trip to Canada will be discussed further in Chapter V.

The family must have come up in conversation quite frequently, and Burchfield’s peers were eager to meet Bertha. At one dinner party, Henry Lyle, a close friend of Rehn’s, proposed a toast to Bertha and encouraged Burchfield to bring her down to New York sometime. Burchfield noted, “Mrs. Speicher especially seemed interested in you & your problems with the children. But they all thought you were wise to watch out over the kids.”

On another occasion at the Rehn’s apartment, Burchfield showed the couple a photo of the children. Burchfield recounted, “They seemed so pleased I brought it to them, and thought the kids looked lovely & intelligent. It is remarkable how cameras do lie, eh kids.”

Burchfield’s lighthearted jokes with the children continued. When Burchfield taught in Ohio, the teaching staff also wished that Bertha had been able to join him.

In 1942, Burchfield devoted an entire letter to professing his love for Bertha while on a trip in New York City. He recalled their wedding, just shy of 20 years prior. In the letter he discussed an intimate moment after he had finished painting and stopped to listen to the creek and birds. The sounds triggered a flood of memories, and Burchfield romantically explained how his youth was wrapped up nonsensically with Bertha:

Monday Morning

Mar. 23, 1942

Dearie:

It’s been a long time since I’ve written you a letter all your own. When I am in New York, I write to you, but it’s always with the knowledge that the youngsters will read it too; and while I don’t care how much they know about our love, still it’s not the same when I know only you will read. So this is just for you.

The other day, after I had finished my painting and eaten my lunch, I just sat in the car and “looked” and “listened” – The same little stream I have in my picture, had crossed under the road,

307 Ibid., postmarked January 7, 1939.
308 Ibid., postmarked January 9, 1939.
309 Ibid., postmarked July 1, 1950.
and ran along the road by the car, thru a little swamp, in which were pussywillows. Song sparrows and Red wings sang incessantly and their songs always take me back to my boyhood and youth in Ohio, when I used to roam the “Bottoms” near Egypt.

Always now, when I picture these early scenes, you are always mixed up in them, tho I didn’t know then that you existed. But in my mind’s eye, I always see this whole stretch of country as tho I am up in the air, looking down. I am south of the old covered bridge, and can see the whole Little Beaver Valley extending northwards, including the rise of ground that extends clear up to your old home, where you always are, as I first knew you. You have grown into my life so, that it seems as if you were always in it. When I think of gathering hepaticas as a boy, you are in the background – It is as if you were always there, waiting for me. Of course you weren’t really waiting, but I like to think of you as doing just that.

The longer I live, the more & more I realize how much you mean, not only to me as a man, but as an artist. The world looks on me, perhaps, as a “self-made” man, but without you by my side, I know the story would have been far different. And you – you don’t care whether the world knows that or not – all you care is the doing of it, which is what makes you so precious to me. So don’t ever go away and leave me, for I know, as surely as I know anything, that there will never be another woman in my life. It’s either you, or loneliness, and so it’s got to be you.

I love you, dear, a thousand times as much as I did on that day in August 1921 when you promised to be mine –

Dad

More than any other letter, this one explicitly described Burchfield’s reliance on Bertha and his recognition that his career was built on her support. His life would have been entirely different without this relationship. Bertha spent her lifetime behind the scenes of her husband’s fame, largely without recognition. This letter offered the perspective from Burchfield that she did not mind helping her husband advance in the art world.

Also in 1942 there was a rare instance when Burchfield remained in Gardenville when Bertha went on a trip. During the year of Sally’s wedding announcement, Bertha left with her daughter and it was Burchfield who logged his daily goings-on. He wrote of fixing lunch, fussing around in the studio, tending to the garden and purchasing an absurd 400 Christmas cards from a traveling business man. An undated letter recorded some of the humor Burchfield found in being alone and away from Bertha, “As I told the girls, I’m gathering material this week for a book “How to live alone and hate it.’”

311 Ibid., undated, probably 1945.
312 Ibid., undated, probably 1945
Burchfield had mixed feelings about Sally’s wedding. He thought:

After all it is an important event in our family life, and it is not much wonder my mind and heart are elsewhere than here.

I still feel that there is nothing else for us to do but to put as good a face on it as possible. In other words, I feel they’d go ahead anyway, so we might as well try to keep their confidence. Maybe its for the best anyway.\textsuperscript{313}

Other family and career changes occurred in the 1940s and 1950s. During his middle adult life, Burchfield held a number of teaching positions from 1949 to 1953. The only one captured in the letters to Bertha was his position at the University of Ohio in the summer of 1950. Apparently, his teaching position was mostly for the college’s publicity. As he aged, it was harder to be away from Bertha. The time in Ohio reminded him of when Bertha was with him when he was teaching for a summer at the University of Minnesota Duluth. Later in the fall, he met with artist Yasuo Kuniyoshi\textsuperscript{,\textsuperscript{314}} who also had taken a position at Duluth. Burchfield wrote:

Evidently they did not entertain Kuniyoshi in Duluth as much as they did us. He, like us, thought the city fascinating – and he said he thought Mrs. Wheeler was terrible. We had a good laugh over some of the people. He did not meet the Alspach’s at all, which is sort of funny isn’t it?\textsuperscript{315}

Later, Burchfield continued:

Last night turned out to be better than I thought – Bob [Olafson] insisted on being the host, and invited Kuniyoshi & his wife to go along. We went to an Italian restaurant in “The Village” just [off] Washington Square, then afterwards to Kuniyoshi’s apartment. We had a great time hashing over Duluth – and other things too.\textsuperscript{316}

As the time progressed in Athens, Ohio, spending weeks apart was more difficult. He wrote:

I think if you were here by my side, I could [put] up with anything. Gosh I just can’t bear to think of being two weeks away from you. We’re not getting any younger and I can’t bear to give up even two weeks of being with you. I want to share everything with you. There’s a red bird singing outside & it seems as if you ought to be hearing it too. The time will pass I guess but it seems now as if it wouldn’t.\textsuperscript{317}

\textsuperscript{313} Ibid., undated, probably 1945.
\textsuperscript{315} Charles/Bertha letters, postmarked October 3, 1950.
\textsuperscript{316} Ibid., postmarked October 4, 1950.
\textsuperscript{317} Ibid., postmarked June 23, 1950.
The letter was underlined with an understanding that the couple’s time together was becoming more limited. Towards the tail end of the Ohio teaching trip, Burchfield had a pleasant story for Bertha about a party at one of the professor’s homes:

I left at 6:30, as they had a party here for the class; one of the university professors and his wife at their home – brunch and tidbits. They have three chickens and they are awfully nice. At the exhibition opening, we were looking at a frog picture, and I recited the little frog poems I know. So Mrs. Elliot (the hostess) asked me to repeat them for the two youngest, a boy & girl. Then of course everyone else listened in. Then the boy, when he went to bed, sent word down with his father that he wanted me to see his drawings, (pinned up by his bed). So I went up. They seemed unspoiled & so unsophisticated.  

As such a fiscally conservative couple, it was rare for Burchfield to splurge on presents for Bertha. On Valentine’s Day in 1952, Burchfield was away from Gardenville. However, he sent her roses from a local florist named Galley’s and the following note:

By the time you get this you will have had a more concrete expression of my love for you (if they don’t forget at Galley’s – and I beat their heads off if they do!) than just words – But still, words ought to count too. You’re the sweetest woman in the whole wide world, and the best friend and sweetheart any man ever had. I’d like to have put this on a card with the roses, but like an idiot, I went over there without a card, and all he had was one without an envelope – and I couldn’t possibly let him know how crazy I am about you! – But anyway, the red roses don’t begin to say all that is in my heart about you. May God keep you safe & sound until my return – and I know He will – with loads of love & xxxxxxx 

Poppie.  

This note attested to a marriage still burning brightly, with elements of a boyish crush and devotion. The same year he expressed the pain in being away from Bertha. Similar to most of his messages, there were signs of being forgetful, goofy and fretful. Oftentimes he spiraled into a kind of longing for Bertha that prevented him from being able to do work. He confided:

I suppose I am very silly, for I haven’t been away from you 24 hours yet, but when I am so far away, then time doesn’t seem to enter into it I feel as [though] we’ve been separated a much longer time. I love you so much; and each passing day makes you more and more precious you are all I’ve got; tonight even my work doesn’t mean anything to me; all art bores me and all I’d like to do is bury my face in your lap and bawl or something. So now you know how I feel when I begin to think maybe I can come home two days sooner. 

Sweetheart:

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318 Ibid., postmarked July 3, 1950.
319 Ibid., postmarked February 13, 1952.
320 Ibid., September 23, 1952.
I won’t ask you to be my valentine because you’ve already shown by your love and thoughtfulness and companionship that you are already “it.” You don’t know how indispensible (sic) you have grown to me in the years of our married life –

Daddy.

Notecard from flowers:

Feb. 4, 1953

To the Sweetest Woman in the world:

May these flowers help to lessen the misery you have to endure with colds and fatigue, and give some small evidence of my appreciation of your love and devotion to me in my trouble –

Poppie.

Luggage tag:

TO THE QUEEN OF MAY
FROM
HER LOYAL, LOVING
LOPSIDED SUBJECT

In 1963 he gave his wife a bracelet. Bertha still seemed to think that presents of this sort were impractical as the two entered their twilight years (figure 6). The letter also revealed that Bertha felt self-conscious about her appearance in old age. Burchfield argued:

Dearest:

You are not to worry or lose one minute’s sleep. I explained to you thoroughly why it was not reckless extravagance.

When you said “It’s odd that it looks beautiful even on my old wrinkled arm” you more than paid for it – To me your arms and hands will always be beautiful for I see in them all the love and care you have showered in me. – I know you are conscious of them, and if a bracelet makes you forget how you feel about them (which I don’t!) then it is worth all it cost – and it did look as if it was made for you –

So go to sleep now honey and do not worry –

With all my love

Dad.322

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321 Ibid., possibly February 4, 1953
322 Ibid., postmarked February 18, 1942.
The balance that viewers appreciate in Burchfield’s artwork and career reflected the balance in Burchfield’s life achieved through the unaltering foundation created by his family. Another source of stability outside of his family was the artist’s network in New York. In one letter to Bertha, he said, “The trouble with me is when I am home & away from the center of things, is that I don’t have quite enough belief in the value of my own thoughts & pictures & ideas. And I ought to have more.”323 Burchfield received validation from both the private and public sphere, and he depended on both for the growth of his artistic creation. He discussed the need for both places in the following excerpt from the late 1930s:

I wish I could come to N.Y. just a little easier, and a little oftener, for here everything seems different. Out in Gardenville, I love the sense of security I feel here about our affairs; and I think the reason is, that out there we are among people who do not understand us, or are even dislike towards us (whether that’s our fault or not makes little difference; I don’t think it is.) To them, my position as an artist means nothing; down here, it means a lot. More & more, I think our place is down here – not in the city; but within a hundred miles or so, that we have easy access to it. Rehns think that until the children have their schooling, our best bet is to stick it out there; but after they are launched on their own lives, that you and I could find a place nearer here. They thought that in any case the youngsters will be going out to different places of their own, and might not like any place where we move to anyway. I hate to think of them going away, but in all likelihood they will. More & more I feel that New York should be my picture home. I know I could find loads of material along the river, the harbor, and the city; and as for country, in 50 miles I’ve found country yesterday as wild as the Penna. hill country.

From the beginning of their marriage through the Great Depression, World War II and late adult life, it is clear that the artist’s love and dependence on his wife did not diminish. He and Bertha enjoyed a long and open marriage that was kindled by their mutual loyalty and respect. Burchfield’s trip with Rehn after his wife’s death most likely brought Burchfield’s marriage into focus. A small selection of love letters from these decades professed his love to her. Some of Burchfield’s most cherished memories from childhood were fused with Bertha’s imagery. He acknowledged that his life, and life as an artist, would have been entirely different without her companionship. He loved her because she supported him with such willingness and without a need to be publicly acknowledged. In addition, Burchfield could always be candid with Bertha. He openly discussed his opinions, pressures from work, mood swings and anxieties. These were

323 Ibid., postmarked October 30, 1937.
324 Ibid., postmarked October 9, 1939.
all signs of a strong relationship that were essential for Burchfield’s artistic career. The letters demonstrated the extraordinary contribution that his marriage and family life had on his career. After more than 80 years of investigations of Burchfield’s art, career and life, these aspects of his private life must truly be recognized and celebrated.

V. Public Life

i. Introduction to the public life

Burchfield’s experiences in the art world are rarely given central focus in scholarship or exhibitions. The following chapter describes Burchfield’s endeavors as an artist among peers in New York, juror, commissioned artist and teacher. It was generally agreed upon by the couple and Burchfield’s contemporaries that it was wise that Bertha remained in Gardenville with the children. “Since he had five children (the largest family responsibility in the group), there were only two motives that impelled him to go to New York: attending the opening of his own one-man shows, and jurying exhibitions.”325 Burchfield served on art juries from 1929 to 1955. These events overlapped with his time working on commissions for Fortune magazine in 1936 and 1937. He documented the activity of the railroads in Pennsylvania and traveled to Texas and West Virginia to capture the mining industry. His teaching career lasted from 1949 to 1953 and included positions at the Art Institute of Buffalo, University of Buffalo, Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, Ohio University and the University of Minnesota.

As Burchfield grew older, traveling became increasingly inconvenient. It was more mentally straining to spend time apart from his family. Although the journeys were grueling (frequently he had to sleep on trains and wrote about his trials entertainingly),326 Burchfield expressed the delights of traveling. He was fond of the familiar scenes along the Hudson and was

325 Lindemann, The Art Triangle, 52.
326 Charles/Bertha letters, undated. Burchfield wrote, “Didn’t have such a good night on the train. I have discovered how to keep awake on the train. Have steam pipes running thru the mattress and turned on full blast – then have the train reduce speed suddenly at every five miles; sometimes, if the victim shows signs of dropping off, it is well to stop altogether, but care must be taken to start immediately with a rush, so that he will be jerked in two directions almost simultaneously. Generally, the victim gets very drowsy towards morning, so it is a good idea then to have several women get up at 6:00, and chatter their heads off. Under these circumstances, it is very unusual for anyone to go to sleep, and that is what every sane traveler desires – to keep awake as long as possible.”
fascinated by the landscape outside of New York. In the city, he had an interest in going to the orchestra, opera, ballet and the World’s Fair in 1939. He enjoyed watching people in their finery during nights out on the town. In 1937, he saw three ballets that he had seen originally during college in 1915. Burchfield described how the music of Stravinsky, costumes and settings were all in harmony.\(^{327}\) “It seemed to take years of worry off my mind,” Burchfield wrote to Bertha. Although the city was manmade, the artist found beauty in New York’s towering buildings and seeing them by a night walk or an open air bus. During World War II when New York had blackouts, Burchfield described being awestruck by the skyscrapers in the moonlight. In 1942 he wrote, “It is a beautiful night – moonlight, with soft white dappled clouds. New York is beautiful in the dim-out. The buildings so big and black and mysterious; for the first time the moonlight falling on the sides of the buildings is visible.” Even in the metropolis, he could observe nature and the weather.

In September of 1945 Burchfield took Arthur and his friend Eddie Pietrzack to New York while he served on the Guggenheim Foundation. The three took a train to the city, and the young men stayed in a corner hotel room on the 20\(^{th}\) floor of the Beekman Tower Hotel while Burchfield stayed on the 17\(^{th}\) floor. The same day the group took the subway to Coney Island.\(^{330}\) In a summary of the trip written in his journal, Burchfield recorded that they also spent September 6\(^{th}\) and 7\(^{th}\) sightseeing and stopped at Rockefeller Center, the Empire State Building, Brooklyn Bridge and the Statue of Liberty.\(^{331}\)

There were many references in the letters to Burchfield’s museum visits. He frequented the Metropolitan, Frick, Whitney and Macbeth Galleries and in other cities Burchfield visited the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and Art Institute of Chicago.

\(^{327}\) Ibid., postmarked October 31, 1937.  
\(^{328}\) Ibid. In the letter written the day before, Burchfield had been “feeling blue.” This trip to New York, the artist was conflicted over whether or not he should have taken on a $2,000 illustration job for a novel. Marsh, Poor and Benton were also being considered. Burchfield emphasized the family needed the funds.  
\(^{329}\) Ibid., postmarked November 20, 1942.  
\(^{330}\) Ibid., postmarked September 6, 1945.  
\(^{331}\) CEB Journals, Vol. 46, September 5–6–7–8, 1945, pgs. 42-3.
During a visit to a Degas exhibition in 1934 at the Marie Harriman Gallery in New York, Burchfield commented:

It was fine and entirely different from most of the sort of things I’ve seen of his. He is best known of course for his ballet dancers; these were portraits & interiors with figures, & one or two landscapes, very beautifully done. He is one of the great artists of the world.\textsuperscript{332}

These letters are evidence that he and Bertha discussed art and artists. In 1937 he saw a surrealist show and was quite open about his reactions with Bertha, “you can’t imagine the insanity of it.”\textsuperscript{333} In 1939 Burchfield went to exhibitions by his former teachers at the Cleveland School of Art, Henry Keller and Frank Wilcox. Burchfield praised Keller’s work; however, he thought Wilcox had regressed.\textsuperscript{334}

New York offered much better art supply stores, and Burchfield picked up specialty materials. He also went to gramophone shops to listen to records and purchase music for himself or as gifts. Perhaps more than any other activity, Burchfield’s movie going was a regular activity on any trip. The films ranged from Disney animations to Westerns to comedies. He wrote how films, like other forms of entertainment were a relief for his mind and a way to get a much needed laugh. Oftentimes he would go with another, most commonly Rehn.

Rehn met Burchfield through Edward Wales Root, a collector and professor of art appreciation at Hamilton College.\textsuperscript{335} After Root visited Gardenville in February 1929, he arranged a meeting with Rehn at Root’s home in Clinton, New York. Over the years, Rehn gathered some of the most important American artists under his gallery’s representation (figure 7).\textsuperscript{336} The dealer had a special relationship with Burchfield. Rehn advised Burchfield on the frequency of his showings (too often, the critics would take you for granted)\textsuperscript{337} and about serving

\textsuperscript{332} Charles/Bertha letters, postmarked November 15, 1934.
\textsuperscript{333} Ibid., postmarked January 14, 1937.
\textsuperscript{334} Ibid., postmarked January 6, 1939.
\textsuperscript{335} Lindemann, \textit{The Art Triangle}, 13.
\textsuperscript{337} Charles/Bertha letters, undated, after 1929.
on juries. Rehn was responsible for getting Burchfield’s works into important museum
collections, \(^{338}\) collections at the time that favored oil paintings. \(^ {339}\) In their correspondence, Rehn
offered Burchfield comfort and assurance. \(^ {340}\) Rehn also felt a devotion to the artist’s entire family
and an obligation to secure Burchfield’s life as a painter. \(^ {341}\) Burchfield received four solo
exhibitions at the Rehn Gallery between 1930 and 1935. \(^ {342}\) In New York, the two men would
enjoy dinner, a movie, glass of ale or game of 500 rummy. They frequently took trips to the
country and shared personal conversations, for example, in discussing Burchfield’s daughters’
college educations. \(^ {343}\) Burchfield also spent time with the Rehn’s extended family. \(^ {344}\) In 1939
Rehn took Burchfield to see the famous tennis player Don Budge, an event which Burchfield
enjoyed immensely. \(^ {345}\) Burchfield also found out during the event that Rehn had played tennis
growing up and received a number of awards. \(^ {346}\)

In 1937 the men discussed the idea of publishing a biography that would be an adaptation
of the journals with illustrations. Rehn thought that he could “get the best publisher in the city to
accept it & put it out.” \(^ {347}\) In addition, Burchfield told Bertha about the popularity of a work that
he had been holding in Gardenville. “He [Rehn] says everyone is crazy about the “Silver Stream”
(figure 8) – and when I see it here, it seems better than I thot. What annoys me is that I held it two
years in my studio, without realizing that it was one of my best jobs.” \(^ {348}\) The men shared a delight
in each sale and Burchfield took Rehn’s suggestions seriously:

I told you all the big news last night, but will write a note this AM. This sale surprised both Rehn
& I (sic). This fellow didn’t look like a rich man or a collector, but he seemed interested. Now we
think he “flew” (he came by airplane) from Pittsburg especially to buy something of mine. He
made no argument about the prices, but just said – “I’ll take those two”, and gave references etc.
He got two of my very best, & we are particularly glad as he is the first one in Pittsburg to buy,
and with good examples, others might follow. Rehn says I have never surpassed the “Creek Bank”

\(^ {339}\) Ibid., 27.
\(^ {340}\) Ibid., 24.
\(^ {341}\) Ibid., 26.
\(^ {342}\) Ibid., 22.
\(^ {343}\) Charles/Bertha letters, postmarked October 9, 1939.
\(^ {344}\) Ibid., postmarked March 8, 1939.
\(^ {345}\) Ibid., postmarked January 12, 1939.
\(^ {346}\) Ibid.
\(^ {347}\) Charles/Bertha letters, postmarked October 30, 1937.
\(^ {348}\) Ibid., undated, after 1929.
(figure 9), and I have to agree with him. It really astonished me when I saw it again. He says I’ve done things equally as good, but not better. So now I’ve got to beat it! If I can and I’m sure I can. Just think, I did nearly all of it in one afternoon.  

Rehn told Burchfield that he believed that Burchfield would have more fame and longevity than any of the other artists.  

A large portion of these trips away from Gardenville was devoted to business with Rehn and socializing with other artists represented by the gallery. In a letter from New York, Burchfield said:

I met a lot of people and everyone seems so enthusiastic over the new things. I hope I may be excused if I enjoy this little moment of basking in their admiration. I did struggle so hard this summer, and had so many doubts about my things, that now it seems good to spend a little while hearing people say the struggle was not in vain. I feel like letting down my hair & crying, as O.O. McIntyre would say.

Bertha vicariously experienced her husband’s achievements through the letters before hearing of them in person. Even in 1939, Bertha had still not met the Rehns. Burchfield’s struggles and doubts were shared with her, and letters with good news from New York must have been a relief.

Burchfield felt comfortable and enjoyed the company of Frank and Peggy Rehn, Edward and Josephine Hopper and Eugene and Elsie Speicher. Although he mentioned that he felt inadequate in dress and in making conversation, he felt at ease around these people. For example, in 1939, Burchfield enjoyed a dinner to celebrate his exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. A dinner with “sparkling conversation” was followed by a trip to the Whitney and then discussions until 1 a.m. in the top floor apartment of Mrs. Force of the Whitney. On a few occasions, Burchfield revealed a humble pride in receiving compliments at his exhibitions and for the quality of his hand-built frames. New York City caused a great boost to the artist’s confidence and peace of mind. Burchfield also openly stated how much he enjoyed meeting artists of whose work he admired and how he eventually enjoyed himself after initially being reluctant to socialize. “All

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349 Ibid., undated, circa mid-1930s.
350 Ibid., postmarked October 30, 1937.
351 Ibid., postmarked October 22, 1935. O.O. McIntyre was a columnist of considerable fame. His column “New York Day by Day” was published nationally.
352 Ibid., postmarked January 10, 1939.
my worrying seems for nothing, for it is interesting to meet & talk to artists whose work I have
known a long time.” In 1942 he also wrote:

> I find that some artists I thought I knew have totally new sides to their personalities. Randall
Davey, for example, I only knew as a sort of horsey fellow, full of off-color stories that were
pretty raw. Today I learned he plays the ‘cello, is crazy about chamber music, and has sets of these
“add-a-part” records which he plays along with.”

In addition to being around his contemporaries in New York, traveling to new places and visiting people had a positive effect on Burchfield’s artwork. By seeing other landscapes, Burchfield described that it may have helped lift him out of “ruts.” On a train ride in 1941, Burchfield remarked, “All ready – from watching the landscape, I can see I was in a rut in my work, so it ought to do me good in that way.” Looking at his peers’ artwork motivated and stimulated Burchfield to create. In 1942, after reviewing new work by Hopper, Speicher and Watkins, Burchfield said, “These fellows have done just about the best work of their careers, and it says to me “go & do the same.” When he doubted the success of a certain body of work, he was pleased to find that people indeed liked what he was doing.

He appreciated Gardenville because of its security and because he believed that his neighbors did not quite understand him as an important artist. It was clear that the suburb of Buffalo was Burchfield’s point of reference throughout his life. His observations in new places of the landscape, plant life, birds and other creatures were often compared to Gardenville’s. Burchfield also could not help associating people he met on his journeys to his family members. However, there were a few instances in the letters where Burchfield indicated that he wanted to live in another place. In 1936 he wrote, “In fact, I can think of a lot of places we’d all like better than Gardenville.”

Burchfield’s commissions took him to interesting locations around the country. He was charged with capturing America’s industrial life in 1936 and 1937. In Burchfield’s experiences,

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353 Ibid., envelope postmarked March 7, 1939.
354 Ibid., postmarked November 20, 1942.
355 Ibid., postmarked July 9, 1941.
356 Ibid., postmarked February 16, 1942.
357 Ibid., undated, circa second week of March 1936 before arrival in Altoona, Pennsylvania.
artists in the mid-20th century were treated very well by the companies offering the commissions. The letters show how Burchfield was extremely well attended to and received lodging, meals, car service and first-class assistance. The companies provided Burchfield with as much assistance as possible to get an image. He also had to spend a lot of time alone and frequently dined alone. There was a yearning in Burchfield’s writing that showed that he preferred to be in the pure landscape rather than the railroads or mines. He longed to be alone working on natural subjects. The letters on Burchfield’s commissions revealed the artist’s industry and sense of duty to those paying him for a work of art. He was always attentive of his expenses, including the price of phone calls and meals. Commissions took a toll on Burchfield’s mental health: he often got nervous, upset and anxious about his work. He noticed that he could not create his best work while worrying about its production. It “kills the creative impulse.”

I realize now that I got too nervous last year about producing pictures, and as a consequence, outside of a half-dozen did not produce my very best altho I went long periods without painting; I did not really taken (sic) to live. As a result, I have less material for our living. I want to do some of the fixing myself, the change of labor will do me good, I know. D --- I’m not going to worry and fret about my work again. I know it will always be a nervous struggle to produce my best things – but worrying about it kills the creative impulse (Is this news to me? asks Bertha) Well, I see it all so clearly here now, and I want to put it down on paper so I won’t forget it.

This excerpt illustrates that Bertha and Burchfield discussed the most private worries and matters. The artist saw and felt a direct connection between his artistic success and his family’s well being. This letter also shows that he and Bertha talked about the cycles of his production.

The artist’s commissions overlapped with the time period that he was an art juror. Burchfield served on juries from 1929 to 1955. The work was extremely intense and usually conducted in the heat of summer. At times, the panels of artists had to review thousands of artworks. On one jury for the Guggenheim, the committee critiqued no less than 6,833 works of art. Burchfield shared both serious and lighthearted stories with Bertha about serving on the committees. Burchfield also told his wife how the jury would compare the artwork of wives and

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358 Ibid., postmarked October 9, 1939.
359 Ibid.
360 Ibid., postmarked November 21, 1942.
daughters to the male relation’s artwork. In a journal written after he was in New York for the 1939 World’s Fair, Burchfield wrote that Josephine Hopper was complaining that her husband did not vote for her work or try to influence the jurors in another competition. He wrote, “God help the artist who is married to another artist!” In a correspondence from November 21, 1942, Burchfield described that the committee reviewed the work of Edward Hopper’s wife, Josephine. In Burchfield’s opinion, “It isn’t that she shows his influence, they look as tho she copied something he had done, only didn’t do it too well.” He was thankful that Bertha did not paint. Bringing the artists together as jurors also resulted in a heated exchange of ideas about the future of art, new artistic movements and styles, the effect of communism on art and museum policies.

The following two sections will look at the art world in New York through Burchfield’s eyes. Only one of Burchfield’s teaching experiences, at the University of Ohio, was captured in the letters. Similar to the way his personal and professional relationships gave Burchfield validation, teaching was a time for the artist to have positive interactions with aspiring artists. The artist was not comfortable doing demonstrations, but the college mainly wanted the students to have contact to the artist. The next chapters will trace Burchfield’s relationships with Rehn, fellow artists and other players in the art world. In addition, close up looks at art juries, commissions and university art schools will be included.

ii. Public life during the 1920s and 1930s

Burchfield did not always have to travel to New York City to be among his artistic peers. In 1923 Burchfield made references to receiving letters from fellow artist J. J. Lankes, with whom Burchfield collaborated on printmaking series during his first decade living in Western New York. Burchfield would call and get together with Lankes and also had Arthur Kowalski and

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362 Charles/Bertha letters, postmarked November 21, 1942.
William Schwanekamp over to his apartment when Bertha was gone. In August of 1924, Burchfield, Lankes and Schwanekamp drove to Vermont to visit Robert Frost.

In May of 1924 Burchfield referred to his representation with the Montross Gallery (1924-1928) in a letter to Bertha. “I got a letter from Montross saying the Metropolitan bought “The False Front” for $250. That makes $900 coming to us yet. He also framed and put three of mine in a group exhibition…” When Burchfield arrived in New York, he frequently visited Rehn and then made calls to find out who was in town. If his work was on view at a museum, he would pay a visit. Burchfield scheduled a lot of activities, business and visitations to make the most of the trip. He wrote to Bertha immediately if there had been a sale. On November 15, 1934, Burchfield wrote that Railroad in Spring (1933) (figure 10) had been sold. Rehn’s associate John Clancy relayed the news before Rehn had the chance. In the same letter, Burchfield also mentioned:

…another fellow up in New England wants the “Creek-bank,” but hasn’t to sell a van Gogh watercolor first to get the money. He has wanted it consistently ever since he saw it, so I think he probably will get it sometime.

The following selection from 1934 demonstrates the value Burchfield placed in face-to-face contact with Rehn and visiting New York:

I’m so glad I came after all, for things seem different when I’m here. For instance, in Rehn’s letter, he warned me against too deep cutting on the frames – this led me to think he didn’t like some of them, whereas all he meant was he didn’t want me to get into too much work – he likes the frames immensely, but would rather I’d paint – so would we all! But that shows the unsatisfactory quality of trying to discuss things by mail. And it is so too about the big Hollows picture (figure 11). I know now why he wasn’t quite satisfied with it. Now that I have been away from it, and see it in new surroundings, I think I agree with him. He was crazy about the little earlier one, the one with the three trees in it, and the sweep of sky. He also thinks the shed in the swamp one of my best ones, and says the frame [doesn’t] bother him, tho he said one fellow did say he thought it could be improved.

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363 Ibid., postmarked May 8, 1924.
364 Ibid., postmarked May 2, 1924. The Metropolitan purchased The False Front (1920-1921) in 1924 through the Rogers Fund.
365 Ibid., undated, a year when Burchfield had a work on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
366 Ibid., envelope dated November 15, 1934. Railroad in Spring (1933) depicted the New York Central Railroad in Buffalo. Burchfield wrote to his friend Charles Kaiser that it was one of the paintings done after his mother and sister’s deaths, where he forced himself out the studio and worked directly in front of the object. Creek Bank (1931-1932) was painted behind Brumries Restaurant at the intersection of Clinton and Union Streets. The painting was in the collection of Charles J. Rosenbloom of Pittsburgh.
367 Ibid., envelope dated November 15, 1934. Burchfield refers here to Two Ravines (1934-1943). According to his 1959 interview for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Burchfield started this work in the early 1930s. The subject matter was derived from a 1917 painting called The Coming of Spring. It took Burchfield a decade to enlarge and complete Two Ravines and in this 1934 letter Rehn predicted that it would become one of his most important works.
This letter also reveals how Burchfield’s opinion of his work changed over time and distance. It shows the advice, suggestions for improvement and encouragement Rehn provided to Burchfield. During the same trip to New York, Burchfield had lunch at Rehn’s with artist Morris Kantor, also represented by Rehn. Federal programs such as the Public Works of Art Project had launched the year before in 1933. The excerpt below was written before the launch of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1935. Kantor and Burchfield discussed a shared dislike for public art, emerging movements and an oversaturation of artists in America:

“…the movement for social propaganda in painting disgusts me; and the movement to replace pictures with murals; and also the propaganda that artists ought to sell picture(s) for $50-$100. Rehn is on the job on all [these] things, and it is good to hear his ideas & solutions. He also said that there is a plan afoot that he can’t discuss yet which will solve the problem of so many people painting & calling themselves artists; he said there are now 68,000 registered artists in the country. And that if there were as many as only 100 real artists there would be hardly be enough patronage or real use for them. I suppose this plan will be putting the standards higher so that a painter will have to prove himself, before he can claim to be an artist. I suppose any new plan will work hardships on some, but still it seems as tho the situation requires drastic action."

Burchfield’s language points to his advocacy for exclusivity in the art world. His opinion did not change in a similar discussion a few years later.

In the same letter, Burchfield included new developments for artists to make money on loans for museum exhibitions:

And he [Rehn] says that the idea of charging rent for pictures is definitely started now. The Worcester Museum is assembling a loan exhibition for Canada. The fee is not large 10% of the value of the painting up to $1000 per month – but it is a start. And would mean something if say an artist had 10 or 20 all out at once – it could mean $100 a month or more.

During the Depression years, Burchfield sympathized with artists represented by Rehn whose sales were not going well. From an undated letter, most likely from November of 1934, Burchfield recorded that Peggy Rehn thought that her husband would have to reduce his artists to six men. In October 1935, Burchfield noted that Rehn had to cut the prices of his artists’ work

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In a journal entry from May 8, 1943, Burchfield records that Bertha made a recommendation to make “the whole upper triangle” of the cave in Two Ravines black. Burchfield tested her idea out with a piece of paper and agreed that it looked right.

368 Ibid., postmarked November 16, 1934.
369 Ibid.
370 Ibid., undated, circa mid-November 1934.
by fifteen percent. In November of 1936, Burchfield also mentioned that Rehn might have to let artists go who were not producing enough work. In 1935 Burchfield said that Rehn was going to have lithographic reproductions made of Burchfield, Henry Lee McFee, Speicher, and Hopper’s work for potential buyers. Throughout the 1930s, Burchfield wrote of Rehn’s business decisions without any indication that he thought his position was in jeopardy. The artist sold work and exhibited work during these years.

Burchfield’s major commissions for Fortune magazine began in 1936 and continued into 1937. Upon entering Altoona, Pennsylvania, he wrote, “The comical thing about the trip is that the pure landscape inspires me more than the railroad shift, yet the latter is what I have to do.” Burchfield noted, “As I passed down ravines with dark pines woods, I longed to just [spend] days in such places painting, and not know there was an outside world.” He reflected, “I see so much wonderful stuff, so much that means the romance of the railroad, that it galls me to spend my energies doing the sort of thing they want.” However, Burchfield enjoyed the grittiness of these sites. These places that were “rough around the edges” activated his imagination. He particularly appreciated the “hard-boiled” quality of places like Altoona. Burchfield described, “It is foggy here, which makes the town more mysterious; every street corner and alleyway looks like a grand place for a murder.” In Altoona Burchfield worked with a photographer which proved to be very helpful. The railroad officials helping Burchfield provided him a boxcar and access to the top when he requested a higher perch from which to work. Of the town he wrote:

This is a wonderful place. There are probably twenty locomotives all in various stages of repair. The noise of the riveters is terrific. I can hardly grasp what I am seeing here in so short a time. And I feel that when I can do with the short time allowed me is so pitifully small. But it may pave the way for future things.

371 Ibid., postmarked October 23, 1935.
372 Ibid., postmarked November 21, 1936.
373 Ibid., undated, circa March 12-25, 1936.
374 Ibid., undated, circa March 12-25, 1936.
375 Ibid., undated, circa March 12-25, 1936.
376 Ibid., undated, circa March 12-25, 1936.
377 Ibid., undated, circa March 12-25, 1936.
378 Ibid., undated, circa March 12-25, 1936.
379 Ibid., undated, circa March 12-25, 1936.
Commissions expanded Burchfield’s experiences and opened up other worlds and subject matter. Burchfield felt that he should have worked on a larger scale. He mused that “What I need is a whopping big board, and really try to put down what I feel about those enormous iron monsters being gone over. Some are torn down to the cylinders, looking like great skeletons…”

Yet the situations were also trying. Burchfield had to get accustomed to working in different conditions, with the pressure of time and a patron expecting an outcome. He discussed these conditions with Bertha in the letters and the passages refer to other times when similar discussions took place. Burchfield expressed a fundamental conflict in not being able to let himself work openly if the vantage or subject the company wanted was not one that appealed to the artist.

Beginning on March 18, 1936, Burchfield recorded the start of the famous flood of 1936 in Altoona. He wrote:

Well there’s been lots of excitement here – so much so that I’ve had a hard time getting down to work. My partner had to go back to Pittsburg to attend to his office in connection with the flood there. He has to find out all facts about train service as it connected with the flood and keep the newspapers informed etc. He should have been there last night. As it was he was up most of the night telephoning. A lot of people were marooned here – (trains got this far and had to stop.) – a lot of them came to the hotel here, many without money, but the hotel trusted them. They claim it is the worst flood in this section in history, the waters higher than at the time of the Johnstown flood in 1889, except that then the dams broke, while this time the dams have held. As it is, it’s pretty bad at Johnstown now. I wish I could see some of it but all roads leading out of Altoona are closed, some of the bridges washed away. I thought once of going to Pittsburg by train (the first one since last night left at 11:15 this AM. because I thought it was the chance of a life-time to see a real flood; but there were no trains back from Pittsburg yet and I thought what if I got stuck up there and my job here uncompleted. So I decided to stay – I got a start today, but will have to go to the plant tomorrow morning to refresh my mind before I can go on.

Two days later, Burchfield sent another report:

Things don’t seem to get righted very fast. But of course the thing was terrible, and with bridges out, and tracks washed out and underwater, it is too much to hope to have it straightened out in a few days. There is a tension here all the time. Hotel still crowded with people stranded who want to get to points east of here. There is only one track open, from here to Pittsburg. I feel as tho I were missing something; but at first you couldn’t get out of here, and now, I can’t see but what I must stick to my railroad job. I’m behind in the schedule and probably will be to the end. I’m working on the locomotive repair picture, and it is coming pretty good…Everything seems disturbed and unnatural and minous. The night the floods broke, the lights went off all over the

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380 Ibid., postmarked March 22, 1936.
381 Ibid., undated, circa March 12-25, 1936.
382 Ibid., postmarked March 18, 1936.
town. I never saw such complete darkness. I expected any moment to hear the roar of waters. It
sure was scary. And the rain pouring down. But they soon cam[e] on again.383

This eye witness account is remarkable for its journalistic qualities and its simultaneous
fascination and horror. After the flood, Burchfield drove to towns that had been hard hit. He said:

It’s simply awful, and I only stayed a short time and you must know when desolation is so bad that
Burchfield can’t stand it, it’s pretty bad. I just stood there and hardly could believe my eyes. Iron
bridges crumpled and busted & tossed about, streets that looked like wild creek beds, houses
smashed; railroad rails twisted & torn, autos half buried in sand – trees & debris piled in yards –
you can’t believe it…It was a relief to get away, and into the untouched hills where everything
was serene and beautiful.384

Later in November 1936 Burchfield went to New York for an exhibition opening. He
spent time with Rehn, Hopper, Marsh and Zorach. He also met artist Peggy Bacon, wife of artist
Alexander Brook, both of whom were represented by Rehn.385 The same trip, he enjoyed
excursions to the country and dinners with the company of Edward and Josephine Hopper, Frank
and Peggy Rehn and Edward and Grace Root.386 He also noted that Life magazine was coming to
pay a visit.387 The owner of Time had just purchased Life and the first edition as a
photojournalism magazine was just being released. Burchfield was featured in the December
article “Burchfield’s America.”

Burchfield and other artists associated with Rehn were asked to serve on major museums’
juries for exhibitions. Most of the time, his letters from these occasions showed that Burchfield
was eager to get the work done and return home. He also knew how to excuse himself from
socializing after a long day with colleagues. Serving for these institutions in the mid-20th century
meant spending full days reviewing works of art. The sessions were broken up by lavish lunches
and dinners. Burchfield described the feast at the Carnegie Institute’s All-American exhibition:

The one good thing about last night’s affair was the food. We started out with cocktails of course,
with a hundred hors-d’ouvres (sic) then the dinner started out with soup, with celery [olives] etc –
then came fish, with breaded egg-plant, and a white wine. Then roast pheasant (delicious) with

383 Ibid., postmarked March 20, 1936.
384 Ibid., postmarked March 22, 1936.
385 Ibid., postmarked November 21, 1936.
386 Ibid., postmarked November 22, 1936.
387 Ibid., undated. Life ran a feature on Burchfield in 1936.
wild rice, & green limas, and champagne – then came hot house asparagus with Hollandaise sauce, and then some sort of spongy pudding with vanilla sauce, & coffee.\footnote{Ibid., undated, possibly 1941.}

In January 1937, Burchfield met artist Georgia O’Keeffe while serving on a jury in Springfield, Massachusetts. He recorded the event as follows:

I enjoyed meeting Georgia O’Keeffe (sic). She is very much alive, and says just what she thinks. I don’t know why I’ve thot of her as young & flighty – but she is middle-aged, and dressed very plainly – almost severely, and you can tell from her remarks, very much in love with her husband, Stieglitz. I agreed with her when she said on throwing out paintings that too much encouragement was being given to mediocre artists.\footnote{Ibid., postmarked January 12, 1937.}

Burchfield and O’Keeffe held similar attitudes about the influx of artists and the mediocrity of the entries in the exhibition. The trip also had some other sources of excitement. Burchfield explained that the jury tried not to award a prize. Burchfield recounted:

We tried to convince them that they shouldn’t give prizes, and the chairman of the exhibition committee asked blandly, “Would artists paint if there weren’t prizes given” – I never heard of anything so stupid or ignorant – did we jump on him! Well as I say it was a weird experience.\footnote{Ibid.}

The duties in Springfield were immediately followed by a trip to New York. This time Burchfield made his first visit to the Frick, met Molly Luce and her husband Allan Burroughs and called on the Hoppers.\footnote{Ibid., postmarked January 15, 1937.} There was a pleasant visit with Root with news that they were going to purchase more of his artwork.\footnote{Ibid.}

In February of 1937, Burchfield went to Chicago to jury another exhibition. He described that Chicago was as if “…you took New York & Buffalo, put them in a bag and mixed them up, you’d have Chicago.”\footnote{Ibid., postmarked February 16, 1937. Burchfield continued his thoughts on Chicago: “Coming in on the train, it all looked a good bit like Buffalo’s south side, only more of it.”} The jury had to select 100 works from a pool of 1,200. Again, Burchfield expressed “Too many people painting.”\footnote{Ibid., postmarked February 17, 1937.} An extremely odd meeting occurred at a comedy show in Chicago. Burchfield encountered a soldier he knew from Camp Jackson in South
Carolina during World War I. The man’s name was Mr. Tapp. He told Bertha, “It’s funny how I got a kick out of seeing them [Tapp and his wife], when really I never liked either of them.”

Commissioned work in the fall of 1937 also took him out West, again for Fortune magazine. The letters reveal a fascination with new landscapes, in particular Texas and the flat lands. While in Texas, he commented on how companies treated workers humanely. Burchfield wrote that Mexican workers received vacation with pay even in the late 1930s. Burchfield was intrigued by the landscape and new wildlife, particularly, the Spanish moss. On a train heading away from Texas, Burchfield recorded, “The red earth in northern Texas & Arkansas is spectacular – it seems unreal, roads so vividly red (a rich red orange brown).”

Watching the mining take place was exhilarating. Burchfield explained with ease the scientific and mechanical processes of the sulphur mines to Bertha:

The mining is done by forcing live steam down underground into the deposit bed, which melts the sulphur, which is piped up to the surface, conducted in steam-heated pipes to a place where [they] form it into huge molds where it hardens. These stacks or racks of sulphur are beyond belief. They are 1200 feet long, 160 feet wide & 45 to 50 feet high – solid sulphur, hard as rock (when they want any it must be dynamited loose). There are about 6 or 8 racks each with about 1 ½ million to 2 million tons in them. Well, it’s, true whether you believe it or not. I am planning a picture of where they have dynamited a lot and are loading it on freight cars (figure 12).

He also wrote in a post script, “I forgot to say, when the smelted sulphur comes out of the pipes, it is maroon colored – when it is dry it is of course brilliant yellow – isn’t that odd?”

The following day, Burchfield noted:

It is impossible to describe the sensation you have right in the sulphur, with it all around you, the sun beating down on it, with the yellow glare. The sky looks a deep blue violet, & the heat is terrific. Under your feet, the sulphur crunches like 10 degrees below zero snow.

This displayed evidence that Burchfield’s guides showed him a great deal before he began working on his images. After Texas, Burchfield headed to West Virginia on a coal
commission for *Fortune*. Sometimes the letters contained observations of the character of the people he dealt with, for example, his guides on his coal commission:

Sunday P.M.

Dear Sweethearts:

I didn’t get a letter off yesterday because I arrived late at Huntington, and then had to get up at 6:00 in the morning to catch a train. How I hated to get up!

Yesterday, as I said, I saw the extreme workings of the mine the trestles etc. how coal is sorted washed & the slate removed. The President’s son, young Francis, escorted me around. He was accommodating & cordial, but I didn’t like him; he seemed to be both spoiled & arrogant, tho I think he tried to conceal both. But a little incident occurred that I think showed his attitude. The mines & houses are set in steep hills; the road connecting the mines naturally forms the street with houses all along it. There are few sidewalks. Well, as we were driving along some boys were kicking a foot ball. Francis tooted, but one boy had to give one more kick. The ball landed in the road. He slowed down, but as luck would have it, it went under the wheel & of course broke it. I thot he should have [expressed] regret & even promised the boy a new one, but he just went on, annoyed at the occurrence. I don’t imagine a [miner’s] boy can have a new foot ball whenever he wants it. It made me feel mean, as tho I were a partner in the affair.

It is beautiful here. A little Japanese fellow is in charge, and he is a good cook. In fact he does all he can to make me comfortable. If all Japs were like him, there might be no Far East problem. As you look out, you have the feeling you are right up in the trees.

Last night, I took a walk down the road. It was moonlight, and in spite of the noisy young men etc, there was a feeling of wonderful peace & mystery. The great hills were dark blue gray & full of haze and mist. I haven’t had such a feeling about a place for a long time. In the daytime, it seems like a restricted sort of life, but under the moonlight it all seemed romantic & mysterious.

This morning after breakfast I climbed the hill on which this place is built. It was very high & gave me a lot of tough exercise, which is what I needed for my body & soul. The sunlight & air were perfect. I spent a couple hours wandering around. After a dinner (which was grand) I listened to the new radio awhile (heard Isolde expire in her live – death) and heard the exciting news that we are to hear the 5th Symphony (Sibelius) next Sunday, and then Pojola’s (sic) Daughter & then the 4th Symphony in November.

I’ve been reading & monkeying around the rest of the time; so the day has passed better than I thought it would. I won’t feel easy until tomorrow comes & I see whether I can get my coal subject or not.

If all turns out as I hope, perhaps this will be my last letter. I sure am getting anxious to be home again.

Here’s one way I put in my time. A Big Cat Doesn’t Eat Fish Greedily. However In July Kangaroos Like Mushroom Nubbins On Platters Quickly. Rats Should Tear Underwear Very Wickedly. There I’m stuck – can you go on with X Y Z?

It’s time to quit or you’ll think I’m goofy. Hoping you are the same.

Love & xxxxxxxxxxx
Daddy.  

This letter contained rich descriptions of the new landscape, indications of the workers’ experiences, references to the war and race relations and his love for music. It ended in a playful joke, which was very typical. The final image for *Fortune*, however, did not go smoothly.

Burchfield wrote in frustration:

Now this *Fortune* business. I can understand perhaps their disappointment, if they can’t actually reproduce the coal picture (figure 13), but to be so “snotty” about it. And it ought to be up to them to use a method of reproduction whereby they could use the black picture. Others do it every day. Well anyway, I won’t be bothered any more by jobs for them. I’m going to try and squeeze all I can out of them for the job tho.  

In other trip during the late 1930s, Burchfield ran into A. Conger Goodyear in New York City in January 1939. Goodyear was the former director of the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy and the first president of the Museum of Modern Art. He told Bertha, “Between you & me, I don’t like him. He was at the opening reception of Knox’s new room and said he was glad I was to serve on that board.” Burchfield was also in New York to serve on the jury for the *American Art Today* exhibition at the 1939 World’s Fair. The jury had to review thousands of works of art.

Burchfield wrote:

The lunches on this jury are interesting. About everyone in the world of art [is] here – sculptors, printmakers and painters. As one said to me “If the building should collapse it would be the end of American art for this generation” – Heh! Heh!  

In October of 1939 Burchfield was in Philadelphia for another jury position. “We had a full day yesterday, looking at 2,000 pictures, most of them terrible. Other jurors have the same discouraged feeling I have had after looking at hundreds of badly conceived and painted pictures.” After the sessions let out, Burchfield went to see Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell. The chairman of the jury took Burchfield to his home in the country. Burchfield narrated:

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401 Ibid., undated, 1937.
402 Ibid., undated, circa 1937.
403 Ibid., postmarked January 6, 1939. Seymour Knox’s "Room of Contemporary Art" opened in January 1939 at the Albright Art Gallery. They were probably talking about Burchfield serving on the board for the museum.
404 Ibid., postmarked March 9, 1939.
405 Ibid., undated, October 1939, sent from the Bellevue-Stratford hotel in Philadelphia.
Thornton Oakley, the chairman of the jury, and president of the Phila. W.C. Society, invited me to dinner with him. They live out in the country, and we left early enough so we could see some of Phila. and the country. They have a beautiful estate, an old colonial house (built in 1776) – and spacious grounds etc. He said he inherited it. The barn, which was almost as big as the house, they re-modeled into a studio, and second home. They have one daughter, who is studying the piano, so when she is at home, they go up to the studio home. Mrs. Oakley writes, and he illustrates her books, I enjoyed my little visit with them. They are great admirers of Sibelius, and visited him several years ago.

It all seemed very lovely, and it is very lovely, and perhaps my eyes were a little more green than usual, but when I got to New York and got your letter at the hotel (which believe me I was glad to get) and read your account of washing, and the bright October sunshine, I felt our little home, and our little backyard would look much nicer to me. You can’t have everything – he was amazed that I made a living from my pictures. But his “living” [includes] two homes, three cars, a cook, and a chauffeur and man-of-all-work. In his eyes, we probably wouldn’t be even “living” but in my eyes, the work he has to do wouldn’t be living either. We could have a little more graciousness tho, and I intend that we shall by hook or crook. \[406\]

Although he momentarily imagined a different way of life, Burchfield was content with being an artist and the modest kind of life he could lead by that profession.

Burchfield traveled all over the country in the 1920s and 1930s to New York, the south and middle America. Traveling to new places and engaging with people outside of Gardenville had a positive effect on his artwork. It recharged him, inspired new and greater works and gave him confidence in his artwork. Readers can also begin to understand that Burchfield’s artistic creation, both for Rehn’s gallery and for commissions, also had the weight of being responsible for his family’s livelihood. The lifetime relationship with Rehn truly developed and the importance of this relationship can easily be grasped. The two specifically talked about Burchfield’s biography, formed from his journals, in 1937. The artist also was keenly sensitive to the way the Great Depression caused Rehn to change the management of his gallery. Burchfield would continue to grow friendships with couples such as the Rehns, Speichers, Hoppers and Lyles. His experience working on juries showed a first-hand look at the way new artistic movements were affecting American art and what debate took place over the definition of American art.

\[406\] Ibid., postmarked October 6, 1939.
iii. Public life from the 1940s through the 1960s

Major changes in world events and Burchfield’s artistic periods marked the late 1930s and into the 1940s. Burchfield articulated how the World War II climate in New York was different from Gardenville. He observed:

Down here, the war don’t seem to worry people. They are interested, listen to radio news etc, but no one seems worried. Back in Gardenville, everything seemed going to pieces etc, and here, it seems as if everything is going on the same. People buying pictures etc. So I guess I will come out O.K. 407

The letters did not state a clear position on the war, but Burchfield’s journals described his pacifist inclinations and that he thought war brought out man’s bestiality. In June of 1940, Burchfield expressed:

I have the feeling…today that the whole struggle is a political and economic one directed by the jealousies of minority groups in each country, and that great masses of innocent men are being used, by the aristocratic groups on one hand to hold what they have, and by another group on the other hand which wants to create a new empire…. 408

The artist noted in 1941 that his hotel had air raid instructions posted in all of the rooms. 409 In a letter to Bertha in November of 1942, he spoke to her about using ration stamps to purchase gas 410 and also wrote:

So you’ve had another air – raid drill – What louzy (sic) luck – I mean that the baker isn’t glamorous (sic) – (like me). I read an article in a magazine, and it seems the idea of Buffalo being bombed is not so silly after all. They said Germany has planes ready, and all that keeps them back, is the cost so far is greater than the results they’d get. but they have Bombers capable of making non stop 6 – to 8000 miles, at 40,000 feet. So look out! 411

The casual and even joking tone of his comments made it seem as though Bertha and the family did not have immediate fears about the war.

War affected home life and also shook up the art world. In 1942 Burchfield explained:

He [Frank Rehn] wrote to the government at the [outbreak] asking what they thought he & his men ought to do, and they replied that they thought he should carry on as he had been, as much as

407 Ibid., undated, possibly 1939. This letter noted the potential sales of In May (Three Rod Road) and March Road which were both completed in 1939.
408 Townsend, The Poetry of Place, 635.
409 Charles/Bertha letters, postmarked February 16, 1942.
410 Ibid., postmarked November 20, 1942.
411 Ibid., dated March 23, 1942.
possible, that they wanted the cultural things to go on as before, even that they thought it was our best contribution to go on with our work.412

The tradition of Burchfield’s trips to the city paired with trips to the countryside continued during the war years. After Peggy Rehn’s death in 1941, Burchfield went on a lengthy trip to Canada with Rehn as introduced in Chapter IV. Along the way, they visited John Carroll, another Rehn Gallery artist, and his wife, Georgia (also known as “Pinky”).413 In a journal entry from August 7, 1941, Burchfield wrote about the Carroll couple, “His [John’s] attitude toward women is patronizing and half-contemptuous; his sole interest in them is sexual.” Observing the two quarrel over whether to eat inside or outside (which Burchfield thought it was the right of Georgia to choose), Burchfield recorded disapprovingly that John said, “Isn’t it funny how these little sluts are always getting cold?”—“414 Burchfield and Rehn drove from Montreal to Quebec and stopped on the way at the St. Lawrence, which Burchfield described as like nothing he had ever seen. The personal trip was still intertwined with work:

But first I want to tell you some good news (to be kept quiet until July 17) – Chicago Institute gave me the Blair purchase prize of $600 – added $400 to it to make $1000 (fast figuring!) for “House of Mystery” – Hooray Frank just got the news day before we met at Albany and he sprang it on me at Carroll’s at dinner. So let’s be happy! 415

He felt the scenery was “indescribably gorgeous.” The artist wondered what he could add to a place as an artist if it was already too beautiful. Burchfield’s lifelong attachment to the metaphorical North must have made his observation of a true “north woods” in the Laurentian Mountains significant. They spotted white whales in the bay.416 The artist describes the European feel of Canada: the French, quaint villages, churches and wild country. At the Lyles’ home in Canada, Burchfield saw the Northern Lights. Burchfield wrote to Bertha of the breathtaking beauty of the area:

How I would like you to see it – it is unlike anything I have ever seen. Whether it is paintable or not is another question – maybe it is, maybe not – at the moment, I think [it’s] one of those places

412 Ibid., postmarked February 16, 1942.
413 Lindemann, The Art Triangle, 25.
414 Townsend, The Poetry of Place, 568. Burchfield confessed in this entry that he found little in common with John Carroll, in art and lifestyle. The uncomfortable dinner was made worse by the consumption of several highballs while waiting for the delayed meal.
415 Charles/Bertha letters, postmarked July 11, 1941.
416 Ibid., undated. July 1941.
on a grand scale, and is just beautiful, and nothing for me to add to it. But it’s a great experience to see it. I’ll save descriptions until I come home.417

Similar to so many of the letters, Burchfield wished Bertha could share his experiences.

The poetic narrative continued in another letter:

I got a neat kick out of the Laurentian mountains – great piles of granite rock (which are a beautiful rosy violet) with small [evergreens] growing out of the crevices. With brilliant cumulus clouds hovering around their tops they made a grand sight. Our road led right thru them, and when we were quite close, they were very grand – almost sinister. After we had gotten thru them, we were in wild wooded hills – mostly dense black spruce – (You’ve seen them in pictures, they are the straight tall pointed evergreens that grow close together, and cover whole mountains, and are reflected in lakes – There are many little lakes set in the hills all along – they are like gems – The streams are very unusual in color – the water ranges all the way from light beer or ale (where the rapids foam white) down to deep “barnyard juice” color. This gives a very odd effect, depending on the time of day and the sky. At midday, reflecting a blue sky, they becomes rich blue-violet with olive undertones – then as evening comes on, they look almost black.

I have always wanted to see a “north woods” & now I have and I was not disappointed – they are very dark & mysterious, and I would not want to be lost in them. In full sunlight, they are very dark – facing the sun, the edges are a rich moss green, then the center stripe is almost black – picture a mountain range with thousands of them over-lapping, and against a deep blue & white sky, and you get a little of the rich effect they give. Sometimes Tamarack (the deciduous pine) are mixed in with a black birch, which oddly enough has a snow-white trunk – Occasionally there will be a dead pine – one that has died just this year – it will have all its needles yet, and will be a rich reddish brown in color.

Some sections have been burnt over, and one such area, where there were a lot of birches, the trees were still standing – like white ghosts.

One of the incredible things to me, is the bay itself – which is still the St. Lawrence River. Here it’s 10 to 20 miles wide, and the vastness of it, is something I can’t describe. It’s unlike anything I ever saw. It was the same to a lesser degree around Montreal – the country is apparently as flat or flatter than around our place at Gardenville – yet it seems as tho you can see for miles & miles.

Today was clear and cool – almost cold – and am I glad for my warm suit – already I’ve fallen in love with it any way – I’m glad I got it now. Yesterday it was cloudy with a little rain, and very cool.

Tonight they had Charles Living Good, Pres. Of the Cincinnati Museum to dinner. I liked him. After dinner we watched the sunset – Their house faces North-east – and we have a view that takes in the West Northwest, North, Northeast & some of the east. Curiously enough, the twilight seemed to the right in the exact north – it was unusual – It glowed until after ten ‘oclock, behind the hills; the distant hills were deep violet, and the closer ones as black as pitch. The country makes me think it must be like the Sibelius country.418

His descriptions of this elemental experience in Canada point to an encounter with the sublime. Burchfield’s absorption of the vastness, mystery and awesome qualities of nature were

417 Ibid., postmarked July 11, 1941.
418 Ibid., postmarked July 13, 1941.
significant and mirrored some of the qualities of his artwork. At the end of the trip Rehn asked if
Burchfield would join him in New York City. Burchfield explained the situation to Bertha with
empathy:

Frank just interrupted here to ask me if I would go on to N.Y. with him and be there one day – He
expects to get there Thursday night – and wants me to go to a ballgame or something on Friday,
and then come home Saturday. I would rather not, but [there’s] not much I could say so I guess
that will be the program. I guess he hates to land in N.Y. alone with no one to go to.

Well, all I have to do to know how he feels, is to imagine how it would be if all of you were gone
and I had to go home to an empty house – Well it gives me the blues just to think of it, and I want
to rush right home.419

When Burchfield was back in New York, his humorous incidents on the jury panel likely
provided entertainment for Bertha as well as himself. In November of 1942 on the Metropolitan
Museum of Art’s Artists for Victory exhibition jury panel, Burchfield wrote:

One of them I must tell you – (not on the war). It was a picture of a female nude lying on her back holding a
cello. She was drawing a bow across the strings. Quick as a flash Speicher shouted “Ah, she’s playing an air
on her G-string” – Well everyone – workers, museum staff and jurors, - simply howled – It broke up the
meeting for a few minutes.420

Sometimes the juries received imitations. In the same letter, the story of how Tony Sisti
entered a fake Burchfield caused an uproar:

Oh I almost forgot – Sisti sent in an imitation Burchfield – it was a scream – everyone laughed – and it didn’t
get in. There was still a funnier one. Someone sent in a full length portrait of a girl with my “Promenade
houses in the back ground – same manner & same coloring. I got a lot of kidding about it, and everyone said I
at least should have voted for it. I wished afterwards I had looked to see who did it.421

Burchfield was part of the joking and camaraderie of this tightly knit art community. He
also wrote on the same trip:

A horrible thing happened yesterday. Henry Poor’s picture came up, and nobody recognized it –
Speicher thought it looked like [someone] imitating Poor, and after it went out (it got only one
vote) he asked whose it was. We nearly fell thru the floor. Then Bohrod, who is a little pizmeyer,
rushed down & told Frank we had thrown Poor out, and that he alone voted for it. Such a
situation!

By the way – Virginia Cuthbert, Ruth Hoffman, and Blair all went in O.K. I haven’t seen anything
by Isaac Soyer yet – I hope we pass him if he sent anything.422

419 Ibid., undated, circa early July 1941.
420 Ibid., postmarked November 21, 1942.
421 Ibid.
422 Ibid., postmarked November 18, 1942.
In the same letter Burchfield also discussed contacting Lankes almost two dozen years after their initial collaborative work in the 1920s. Lankes’ wife had just left him:

Got a message from J. J. L. who is an alternate in the print section, to get in touch with him. James also got one and James told me a lot of stuff about him – and I guess will have to feel sorry for him – even if maybe he brought it on himself – Most of us do bring our trouble on ourselves. – His wife has left him – he lives alone in a boarding house, doesn’t teach at Aurora anymore, and has some physical trouble – I guess in a bad way. etc etc.423

The next day, Burchfield found out more news about Lankes:

Last night had cock-tails with J. J. L. & the James’s. Now I’m not sorry for J.J. anymore. He’s cracked and so self-centered and frightfully boring. He thinks he’s a Buddhist now, and he said “Wouldn’t it be funny if this war wiped out Christianity and we all became Buddhists” - !- Mrs. James said “Yes, wouldn’t that be something.” I was afraid to open my mouth for fear I’d vomit. Well that’s a sample.424

This friendship had drifted apart after many years and the two artists did not have much in common any longer. Each jury ended with the award of prizes, by which point Burchfield was eager to make the next train home.

There is only one set of letters to Bertha written during one of Burchfield’s teaching experiences. During the summer of 1950, Burchfield took a post at the University of Ohio, as referenced first in Chapter IV. The artist was concerned with the large number of students he was supposed to reach in such a short period, but the organizer of the summer program assured him that his purpose was just to have contact with the aspiring artists. The position was characterized by enjoying numerous picnics, listening to ball games, scoping out sites for sketching trips (including the Cottingham Mines) and enduring the merciless heat. Burchfield told Bertha that he escaped the near 50 students asking for his opinions one night for a moonlit drive.425 He explained that the majority of the students were predictable. “They never can seem to do anything but the picturesque, or obvious.”426 He was familiar with some of the other teachers, which included staff from the Toledo Museum. He joked with Bertha about some of the activities outside of painting:

423 Ibid.
424 Ibid.
425 Ibid., postmarked June 29, 1950.
426 Ibid.
In the evening Dr. Siegfred showed some films – the making of an etching, an oil painting O’Hara making a water-color, Benton making a mural (you have not lived if you haven’t seen these two – brother!) and a “What is Modern Art” by the Mus. Of Mod. Art.\textsuperscript{427}

Burchfield also allowed his students to review his work. The artist found some satisfaction in hearing their debates:

In the evening, I showed my second group of pictures to the class and others and also the first group over again. They made a hit again. One student told me she was listening to comments and the “voting” was 2 to 1 in favor of the imaginative ones. Afterwards a group of us went for refreshments.\textsuperscript{428}

The final decades of Burchfield’s life documented in the letters unveiled the ways World War II affected very different communities in New York City and Gardenville. His trip to Canada after Peggy Rehn’s death proved to be an important event that meant a great deal to his relationship with Rehn and also to Bertha. The letters contained one specific account of Burchfield’s position as a teacher at Ohio University. He continued to balance life as an artist, juror, teacher, husband and father in these decades. The correspondence to Bertha recording his public and private life opposes the determinations of writers, such as Barr, Baigell and Eldredge, that Burchfield was an isolated and uninfluenced artist. The letters trace the ways that Burchfield’s interactions with his peers motivated him to do better work and move out of his “ruts.” Rehn’s guidance and tremendous support helped to steer the success of Burchfield’s career. Contact with other Rehn Gallery artists and participation in art juries allowed Burchfield to exchange ideas about changes in the art world. In addition, the letters document Burchfield’s frequent enjoyment in seeing exhibitions at art museums and galleries. The lack of isolation from Burchfield’s family members and peers was fundamental to the development and evolution of his art. These relationships, and their continual cultivation, along with the stability of the life provided by Bertha, held up the career of a genius.

\textsuperscript{427} Ibid., postmarked July 4, 1950.
\textsuperscript{428} Ibid., postmarked July 6, 1950.
VI. Conclusion

The letters to Bertha provide a new way to understand Burchfield through a very specific lens. Dimensions of the artist’s identity outside of art creation, but still within the art world, and as a husband and father can be studied unlike ever before. This correspondence provides immediate and candid accounts of events and connections in Burchfield’s private and public spheres from 1923 to 1963. Some scholars have perpetuated the myth of Burchfield as uninfluenced and art historically-isolated. The majority of scholarship before the 1990s focused on the internal evolution of the artist and avoided a comparative analysis with concurrent events in Burchfield’s professional and private lives. Many Burchfield scholars were so focused on finding discoveries inwardly that the study of Burchfield has been separated from his personal relationships, the art world and history. While *The Poetry of Place* greatly widened access to Burchfield’s writing, its availability has also unwittingly caused a stagnation in scholarship due to an overreliance on a single source.

The recognition of Burchfield’s critical partnership with Bertha and relationships in the art world need to be given credit for the success of his long, remarkable career. Bertha, Rehn and fellow artists established the stable and supportive environment that made it possible for Burchfield to flourish. The letters offer glimpses of American history, through the eyes of an artist during the Great Depression, World War II, the height of the industrial era and a time when great debates were unfolding about the direction of American art. In contrast to the journals, Burchfield likely never expected anyone to read his letters to Bertha, and for this reason, they can be accepted as less self-conscious and constructed. These letters and other letters will expand the realities of Burchfield’s complicated personality and way of life. They will also expand the understanding of his artwork, in particular, the work he completed for commissions and those paintings specifically mentioned in reference to conversations with Rehn. A great deal of future
Burchfield scholarship could be generated through the examination of primary sources that will be made accessible through the Burchfield Penney Art Center and its digital archives.

The letters provide a focus on Burchfield’s identity outside of being an artist. They allow a study of him as a husband, father, educator and juror. They give readers a chance to see Burchfield’s everyday interactions, his personality, enjoyments and opinions on art and artists. The body of letters shows another way that Burchfield delicately was able to balance living in Gardenville and New York City. Burchfield’s life involved straddling the sophisticated art world and conventional family life. Both realms provided him comfort, stability, security, encouragement and the stimulation to create. The letters also show his artistic production in its context as the only means to support his family. Burchfield’s family depended on his art as a product and career for its well being. This caused undeniable pressure in his artistic advances and production.

Future students of Burchfield must consider that art does not occur in isolation from life. Further examination could directly compare these letters to the corresponding journal entries and artwork. Due to the lack of access to the private correspondence until very recently, this is just the beginning of research on Burchfield’s private life. There is much work to be done to see the human side of Burchfield and to start unsettling the mythology of the artist. In the future, the same body of letters may be used to delve into the dimensions of Burchfield’s relationships with Rehn, Root, his children or other family members. Research on Bertha and the Kenreichs also needs to be advanced in its own right but also to understand the other dimensions of advisement, partnership and assistance that Bertha provided as the woman behind the artist.

This paper originated in a lack of biographical alternatives to Burchfield and a repeated condensed, oversimplified look at his personal life. With hope, this study has started to give recognition to the people who have been left out of Burchfield’s narrative and prolific artist career. Bertha, Rehn and other artists had an extraordinary stabilizing effect on Burchfield’s life that allowed him to have a broad career as an artist, juror and teacher. Bertha’s lifetime
partnership was essential for the freedom Burchfield required to produce art. This paper confronts the myth that Burchfield was a misanthrope, a man of isolation and without influence. Instead, the portrait revealed is of a man who depended on companionship, support and stability in order to achieve artistic inspiration, freedom and his artistic height.
VII. Bibliography


Burchfield, Charles E. “The Place of Drawings in an Artist’s Work.” In The Drawings of Charles Burchfield.


**VIII. Appendix**

![Figure 1: Oscar Bailey, Bertha and Charles E. Burchfield in his studio, Gardenville, NY, 1963](image1)

![Figure 2: Photographer Unknown, The Burchfield Children, 1938 (Standing, left to right: Mary Alice](image2)
Figure 3: “Society, Kenreich-Burchfield” wedding article, May 1922
Figure 4: Charles E. Burchfield and Bertha K. Kenreich Marriage Certificate, May 20, 1922
Figure 5: Charles E. Burchfield, *Letter to Bertha K. Burchfield*, undated
Figure 6: The William Hengerer Company Photograph Studio, *Photograph of Bertha and Charles E. Burchfield*, c. 1962

Figure 7: Peter A. Juley & Son, *The Frank K.M. Rehn Gallery Stable*, 1945 (Seated, left to right: George Picken, Frank Rehn, Eugene Speicher, Alexander Brook; Standing: Henry Mattson, Edward Hopper, Reginald Marsh, John Clancy, Peppino Mangravite, Franklin Watkins, Morris Kantor, John Carroll,
Bradley Walker Tomlin, Charles Burchfield, Henry Varnum Poor

**Figure 8**: Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967), *The Silver Stream*, 1935-1937

**Figure 9**: Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967), *Rock Creek Bank*, 1931-1932

**Figure 10**: Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967), *Railroad in Spring*, 1933
Figure 11: Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967), *Two Ravines*, 1934-43

Figure 12: Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967), *Loading Sulphur*, 1937

Figure 13: Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967), *Soft Vein Coal*, 1937