

Charles E. Burchfield

Famous People of West Seneca with Dolores K. Mendolia

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A home on Clinton Street in Gardenville and the lands around it served as an inspiration for Charles Ephraim Burchfield, recognized as one of America's most original artists and finest water-colorists. His major paintings have sold for as much as \$175,000. He is considered to be one of the pre-eminent American Painters of the twentieth century. Best known for his romantic often-fantastic depictions of nature, Burchfield developed a unique style of watercolor painting that reflects American subjects and his profound respect for nature.

He was born on April 9, 1893 in Ashtabula, Ohio. His father's death, when he was five, was a traumatic shock for the young Burchfield. Nancy Weekly, Burchfield-Penny curator and well informed on the artist's life, feels that the tragic event shaped his entire life. According to his friend, the late Buffalo artist Tony Sisti, Burchfield, in his early 20's, was a struggling, shy, sensitive man who contemplated suicide and would suffer periodic mood swings for the rest of his life.

Paying tuition through scholarships and working vacations, Burchfield graduated from Cleveland School of Art in 1916 and began developing the unique kinds of landscape painting that would one day make him famous. After graduation, he had a brief stay in New York City, and a year's tour of duty in the army. In 1921 he moved to Buffalo, NY, to work for M. H. Birge & Sons, a nationally prominent wallpaper company. He worked there as an assistant in the design department at 390 Niagara Street and became head designer in 1927. Burchfield wrote in an autobiographical manuscript, "Most of the wallpaper designing was routine work, 'hack work' it might be called."

Buffalo News reporter Anthony Cardinale wrote that during his first six months in Buffalo, Burchfield lived alone at 124 Whitney Place and 109 Mariner Street. He was desperately homesick for the brooks and buttonwood trees of Salem, Ohio, where he lived most of his youth. Then, in May 1922, he rented two small rooms at 170 Mariner and moved in with his bride, Bertha L. Kenrich.

In 1925, he and his wife moved to the clapboard house at 3574 Clinton Street, Gardenville, just east of Union Road overlooking the banks of Buffalo Creek. The lot was 33 feet wide and 450 feet deep. Burchfield built a two-room studio the size of a hen house halfway down the property. The couple raised four daughters and one son and it was here that Burchfield did some of his finest work.

In the 20's, Burchfield began to receive critical acclaim for his innovative use of watercolor and his ability to capture in his paintings, "the real epic poetry of American Life."

In 1928, he managed to sell half a dozen of his paintings in New York City at \$200 to \$850 apiece – a lot of money in 1928, but not enough to support a large family. Then in 1929, things

changed. His paintings captured the interest of an art collector named Edward Wales Root and art dealer Franklin Rehn. The three met and discussed Burchfield's artwork.

It was early in February 1929, on the eve of the Great Depression, that Rehn told Burchfield that he would see that he made a living at painting. Frank K. M. Rehn Galleries in New York City began representing Burchfield, where his works showed optimism and appreciation of American life. He quit his position at Birge & Sons and devoted himself to his paintings, his wife, and his five children, and perhaps his greatest love: the natural world around him.

His neighbor and friend, Katherine Albarella, said, when interviewed by Anthony Cardinale, "He was a very shy, shy person. And he didn't make friends easily. If he liked you, he liked you. Every single day he was in his studio..He loved classical music and he had a – we called them Victrolas then – a stereo, and he'd plug it in there and turn it on full blast. He didn't disturb anybody, because this was all farm country. He would paint from morning till night, summer and winter."

She told Mr. Cardinale that Burchfield, a naturalist, transplanted "tons and tons of flowers" into his yard. He dug up wildflowers that grew in the woods and filled his whole backyard with wildflowers, which he would often paint. Burchfield also enjoyed taking his five children on tours in the woods to view the wonders of nature. It was during this decade, that he was propelled to national fame as one of the founders of the American Scene.

Today Burchfield's work is represented in virtually every major collection of American art in this country. His work has been the focus of many museum exhibitions over the years, including major retrospectives at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Columbus Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Kennedy Galleries in New York City. His artistic achievement was honored locally with the creation of the Burchfield Art Center at Buffalo. Today, the Center, Known as the Burchfield-Penny Art Center, possesses the world's largest, most comprehensive collection of Burchfield's art, as well as archival materials, studio objects, and memorabilia that reflect the artist's life.

In the 50's, much of Burchfield's work was tied very much to the Great Lakes region. This led to a decline in Burchfield's popularity. Art Aficionados favored totally abstract works and tended to overlook anything tied to a time and place. But in the 1990's, this sense of place and the spirituality of Burchfield, really fascinated people.

"The very things that caused Burchfield to be in decline are bringing him back to us now," said Nanette Maciejnes, a Columbus, Ohio curator.

Burchfield's works were exhibited twice at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art, once in the 1980's and then again in 1997, where 85 of his works brought both critics and art lovers looking at his work with newfound respect.

"He deserves to be renowned," wrote Washington Post art critic Paul Richard in a full-page review that led the paper's Sunday arts section. Joann Moser, senior curator of graphic arts at the National Museum of Art related that the show was very popular. She said "People like his ideas, his images, the mystery and imagination behind his paintings."

"His paintings tell the story of an intense devotion to a pantheistic nature, executed in watercolors that place him with the greatest water-colorists of all time," wrote Joanna Shaw-Eagle, art critic for the *Washington Times*.

When Burchfield died at the age of 73, he had filled 67 bound notebooks with his personal notes, comprising some 10,000 pages including reminiscences of his work as a teaching artist-

in-residence at Buffalo State College from 1962 to 1965. Included are sketches, doodles, quotations, clippings, weather notes, and other marginalia and insertions offering the reader a rare glimpse into the artist's life. Burchfield's journals, now a 768-page book, *Charles Burchfield's Journals, The Poetry of Place, is sold at the* Burchfield-Penny Art Center.

In 2000, a 29-acre nature and art center was created in West Seneca in tribute to the noted American artist. The Charles E. Burchfield nature & Art Center is located at the corner of Union Road and Clinton Street. It overlooks his former home and studio.