

“SONG OF THE TELEGRAPH”



I have become most enthusiastic about the watercolors of Charles Ephraim Burchfield. At first it was the resplendent religious naturalism of his “Eye of God in the Woods” (47 1/2 x 25 1/2, Kennedy Galleries) that struck my eye, and then several years later it was his still-yet-moving “Burning Stump” which would provide such a wonderful illustration for Thoreau’s woods fire. Then I came across Burchfield’s “Song of the Telegraph” with its visual rendition of the vibration of the wires and posts as characterized by Thoreau, and recognized intuitively that he had been onto something. What, I thought, could conceivably provide a better illustration for Thoreau’s beloved telegraph harp, than this watercolor in which one could literally see the lines and the poles humming in the wind? Could there be some unrecognized connection here, between Thoreau and Burchfield, some inspiration? It seems that Burchfield originated in must the same context of small-town religiosity and self-satisfaction as had Thoreau, and had experienced much the same reactions. There definitely is a Thoreau involvement. For instance, troubled by a growing agnosticism, Burchfield jotted down on December 27, 1914:

“Courage. It is only one of Thoreau’s steps, by which we ascend.”

**“NARRATIVE HISTORY” AMOUNTS TO FABULATION,
THE REAL STUFF BEING MERE CHRONOLOGY**



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1852

February 8, Sunday: [Herman Melville](#) wrote to [Julian Hawthorne](#):

My Dear Master Julian I was equally surprised and delighted by the sight of your printed note. (At first I thought it was a circular (your father will tell you what that is)). I am very happy that I have a place in the heart of so fine a little fellow as you. You tell me that the snow in Newton is very deep. Well, it is still deeper here, I fancy. I went into the woods the other day, and got so deep into the drifts among the big hemlocks & maples that I thought I should stick fast there till Spring came, – a Snow Image.

Remember me kindly to your good father, Master Julian, and Good Bye, and may Heaven always bless you, & may you be a good boy and become a great good man.

Herman Melville



Feb. 8. Mrs Buttrick says that she has 5 cents for making a shirt, and that if she does her best she can make one in a day.

It is interesting to see loads of hay coming down from the country now a days – (within a week) they make them very broad & low. They do not carry hay by RR yet. The spoils of up-country fields. A Mt of dried herbs. I had forgotten that there ever was so much grass as they prove. – And all these horses & oxen & cows thus are still fed on the last summer's grass which has been dried! They still roam in the meads.

One would think that some people regarded character in man as the botanist (regards character) in flowers – who says “**Character** characterem non antecellit nisi constantia.” but this is well explained, and so that it becomes applicable to man, by this parallel aphorism of Linnaeus – Character non est, ut genus fiat, sed ut genus noscatur.”

It is apparently Fries who is made to say of his own system – or it may be Tuckerman who says it – that “By this key, I have not yet found that any plants, manifestly & by consent of all allied, are sundered.”

Tuckerman says cunningly “If the rapt admirer of the wonders and the beauties of life & being might well come to learn of our knowledge the laws and the history of what he loves, let us remember that we have the best right to all the pleasure that he has discovered, and that we are not complete if we do not possess it all. Linnaeus was as hearty a lover & admirer of nature as if he had been nothing more”.

Night before last our first rain for a long time – This afternoon the first crust to walk on. It is pleasant to walk over the fields raised a foot or more above their summer level – and the prospect is altogether new.

Is not all music a hum more or less divine? I hear something new at every telegraph post. I have not got out of hearing of one before I here a new harp.

Thoughts of different dates will not cohere.

Carried a new cloak to Johnny Riaden? I found that the shanty was warmed by the simple social relations of the Irish. On Sunday they come from the town & stand in the door way & so keep out the cold. One is not cold among his brothers and sisters. What if there is less fire on the hearth, if there is more in the heart.

These Irish are not succeeding so ill after all – The little boy goes to the primary school and proves a forward boy there – And the mothers brother who has let himself in the village tells me that he takes the Flag of our Union – (if that is the paper edited by an Irishman). It is musical news to hear that Johnny does not love to be kept at home from school in deep snows.

THOREAU ON THE IRISH

In this winter often no apparent difference between rivers ponds & fields

The French respected the Indians as a separate & independent people and speak of them & contrast themselves with them – as the English have never done. They not only went to war with them but they lived at home with them. There was a much less interval between them.



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

A 20th-Century painting by [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) representing this thought “*Is not all music a hum more or less divine? I hear something new at every telegraph post. I have not got out of hearing of one before I hear a new harp*” displays a more modern type of telegraph-line insulator than actually had been in use during the 1850s:



AEOLIAN HARP

The line insulators in use during that earlier period would actually have looked more like the following preserved examples:



DO I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION? GOOD.

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CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

March 15, Monday: [Henry Thoreau](#) again inspected the flowing sands in the Deep Cut. He made some remarks about bluebirds, and their warble that was in the air liquid, that remind one ever so much of the “Song of the Telegraph” painting by [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#):

[BIGELOW](#)

March 15, Monday: R R to Walden 3 Pm. I see the populus (apparently) tremuloides not grandidentata at the end of the RR causeway showing the down of its ament. Bigelow makes it flower in April – the Grand – in May.

I see the sand flowing in the Cut & hear the harp at the same time– Who shall say that the primitive forces are not still at work? Nature has not lost her pristine vigor– Neither has he who sees this.– To see the first dust fly is a pleasant sight. I saw it on the East side of the Deep Cut.


These heaps of sand foliage remind me of the lacinated –lobed –& imbricated thalluses of some lichens – somewhat linear laciniate– It cannot make much odds what the sand is – for I have seen it in the soil of our garden– They come out from the interior of the earth like bowels – a rupture in the spring – & bury the snow– The crust of the snow is completely concealed with the sand. for $\frac{1}{8}$ of a mile.– They also remind me sometimes of masses of rock weed on the rocks. At any moment the creative stream will be seen flowing in a restricted channel –or artery– but it is forming new lobes & at last in the ditch it forms sands as at the mouths of rivers in which the outlines of the different lobes are almost lost are dissipated into mere shaded outlines on the flat floor. Bent has left the chestnuts about Walden till the sap is well up that the bark may peel – he has cut the other trees. I saw the ants crawling about torpidly on the stump of an oak which had been sawed this winter. The choppers think they have seen them a fortnight.

The whistling of the wind which makes one melancholy inspires another.

The little grain of wheat triticum is the noblest food of man – the lesser grains of other grasses are the food of passerine birds at present – their diet is like man’s.

The gods can never afford to leave a man in the world who is privy to any of their secrets – they cannot have a spy here. They will at once send him packing. How can you walk on ground when you see through it?

The Telegraph harp has spoken to me more distinctly and effectually than any man ever did. ...

This afternoon I throw off my outside coat A mild spring day– I must hie to the great Meadows. The air is full of blue-birds [**Eastern Bluebird**  *Sialia sialis*] The ground almost entirely bare. The villagers are out in the sun – and every man is happy whose work takes him out doors– I go by sleepy Hollow toward the Great Fields– I lean over a rail to hear what is in the air liquid with the blue-bird’s warble. My life partakes of infinity.¹ The air is as deep as our natures. Is the drawing in of this vital air attended with no more glorious results than I

[AEOLIAN HARP](#)



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

witness? The air is a velvet cushion against which I press my ear— I go forth to make new demands on life. I wish to begin this summer well — to do something in it worthy of it & of me— To transcend my daily routine— & that of my townsmen to have my immortality now — that it be in the **quality** of my daily life. To pay the greatest price —the— greatest tax of any man in Concord — & enjoy the most!! I will give all I am for **my** nobility. I will pay all my days for **my** success. I pray that the life of this spring & summer may ever lie fair in my memory. May I dare as I have never done.— may I persevere as I have never done. May I purify myself anew as with fire & water — soul & body— May my melody not be wanting to the season. May I gird myself to be a hunter of the beautiful that naught escape me— May I attain to a youth never attained I am eager to report the glory of the universe.— may I be worthy to do it— To have got through with regarding human values so as not to be distracted from regarding divine values. It is reasonable that a man should be something worthier at the end of the year than he was at the beginning.

Yesterday's rain in which I was glad to be drenched has advanced the spring — settled the ways & the old footpath & the brook & the plank bridge behind the hill are suddenly uncovered which have buried so long— — As if we had returned to our earth after an absence & took pleasure in finding things so nearly in the state in which we left them

We go out without our coats saunter along the street look at the aments of the willow beginning to appear & the swelling buds of the maple & the elm. The great meadows are water instead of ice— I see the ice on the bottom in white sheets. & now one great cake rises amid the bushes (behind Peter's). I see no ducks.

Most men find farming unprofitable— But there are some who can get their living any where If you set them down on a bare rock they will thrive there. The true farmer is to those who come after him & take the benefit of his improvements — like the lichen which plants itself on the bare rock & grows & thrives & cracks it and makes a vegetable mould to the garden vegetable which grows in it.

1. William M. White rendered this as:

This afternoon I throw off my outside coat.

A mild spring day.

I must hie to the Great Meadows.

The air is full of bluebirds.

The ground almost entirely bare.

The villagers are out in the sun,

And every man is happy

Whose work takes him outdoors.

I go by Sleepy Hollow toward the Great Fields.

I lean over a rail to hear what is in the air,

Liquid with the bluebirds' warble.

My life partakes of infinity.



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1893

April 9, Sunday: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) was born in Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio, to William Charles Burchfield, a merchant tailor, and Alice Murphy Burchfield, previously a schoolteacher.

NOBODY COULD GUESS WHAT WOULD HAPPEN NEXT





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1898

[Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#)'s father William Charles Burchfield died when Charles was five years of age, and the family moved to Salem OH, a manufacturing town originally established by the Friends, where he would attend public school and high school, beginning to paint and draw there before he entered the 1st grade.

**LIFE IS LIVED FORWARD BUT UNDERSTOOD BACKWARD?
— NO, THAT'S GIVING TOO MUCH TO THE HISTORIAN'S STORIES.
LIFE ISN'T TO BE UNDERSTOOD EITHER FORWARD OR BACKWARD.**



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1906

[Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) worked after school and on Saturdays in a drugstore, and then worked in the mail department of the W.H. Mullins Company.

THE FUTURE IS MOST READILY PREDICTED IN RETROSPECT





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1911

August: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) had graduated from the Salem, Ohio high school in this year as the valedictorian of his class and had begun to file automobile parts at the factory of the local W.H. Mullins Company, until in this month he contracting [typhoid fever](#). During this illness he began [Henry Thoreau](#)'s WALDEN and journal selections but as an 18-year-old apparently could not as yet really get into them, becoming preoccupied instead with the writings of, you guessed it, [John Burroughs](#). When young Burchfield was able to return to the factory he was shifted to be an accountant in its cost department.



THE FUTURE CAN BE EASILY PREDICTED IN RETROSPECT



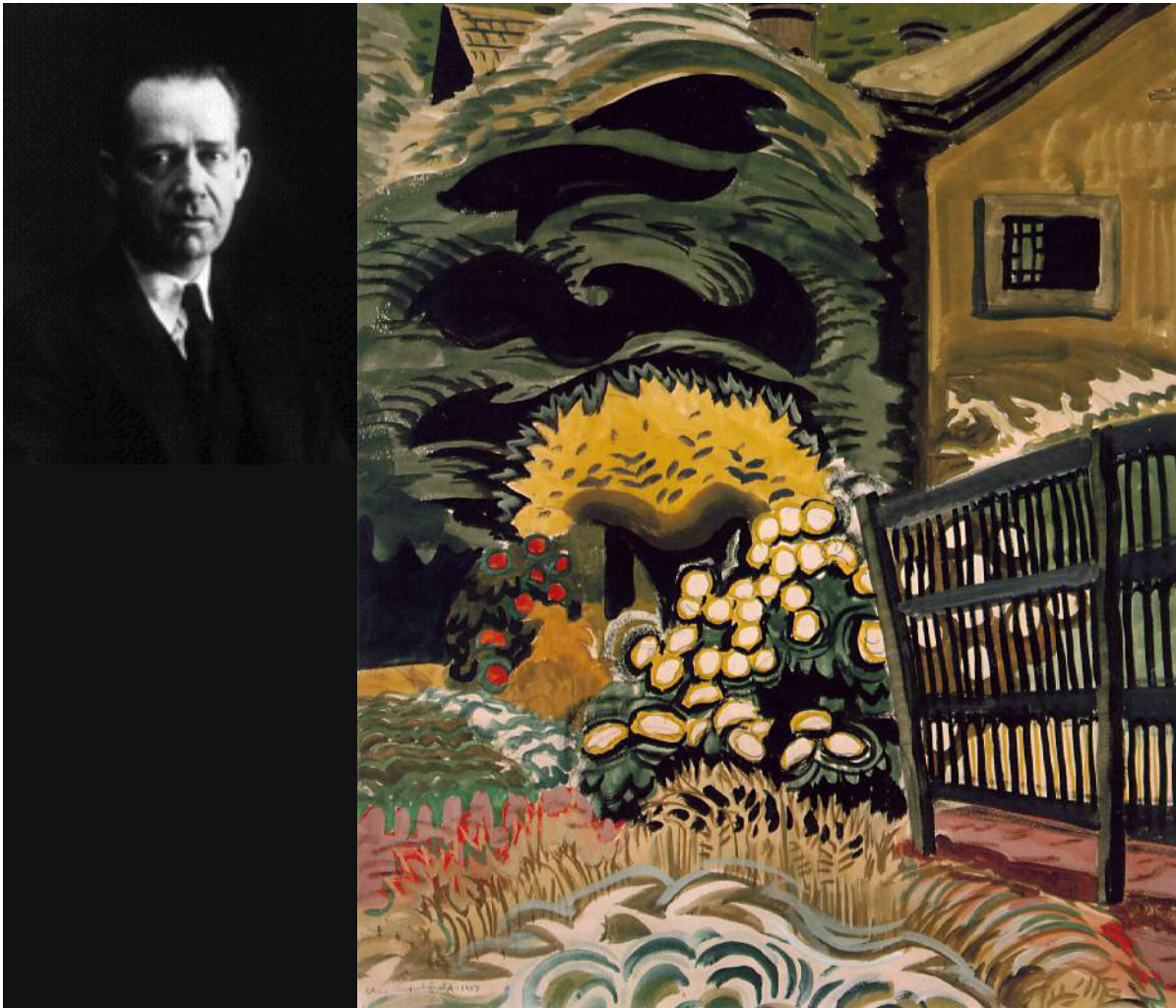


CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1912

Charles Ephraim Burchfield had received a \$120 scholarship and began to attend the Cleveland School of Art, which is now the Cleveland Institute of Art. He would continue to work, during vacations, at the W.H. Mullins Company.



CHANGE IS ETERNITY, STASIS A FIGMENT



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

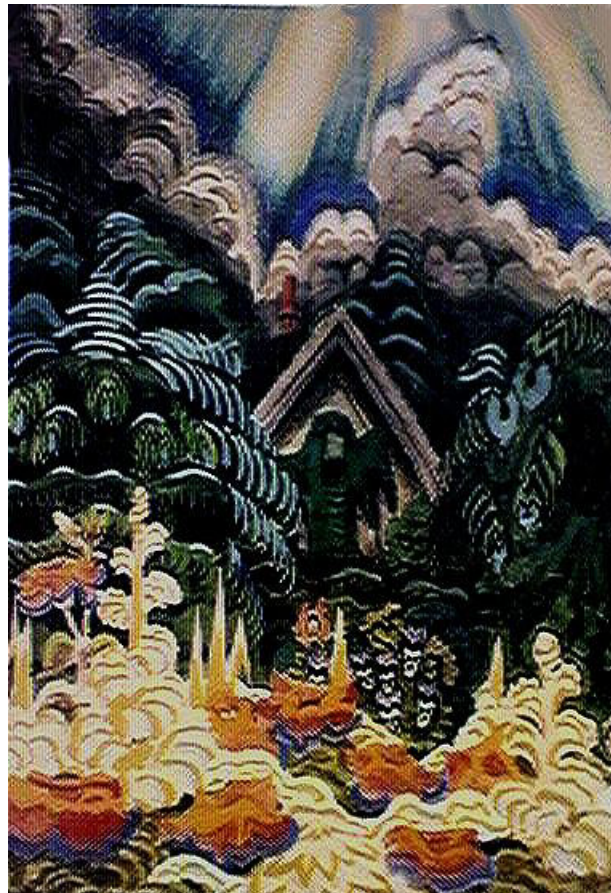
1914

July 23, Thursday: Because of a quotation from the AUTUMN volume of selections from [Henry Thoreau](#)'s work which had been put out in 1892 by H.G.O. Blake, which the watercolorist [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) had chanced

H.G.O. BLAKE'S SELECTION

upon in a magazine he had been reading, the artist was led at this point belatedly to a 1st encounter with Thoreau's [WALDEN](#):

Spent afternoon reading Thoreau's Walden. From a chance quotation from his "Autumn" in a magazine which was, in brief, his sole entry for Nov. 14, 1860 – "Yellow Butterflies Still" – I expected a book more of a chronology of nature than a philosophical treatise, but the book is nonetheless interesting and vital. In it I find that he was pursued at times by the same doubts as I am myself and I have derived from him a new courage, for he speaks from having met & conquered the doubts.





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

At 6PM, Austrian ambassador Baron Vladimir von Giesl presented his government's ultimatum to the Serbian foreign ministry in Belgrade. Its ten demands were so worded as to be unacceptable to any government (the demands included, for instance, allowing Austrian agents to roam freely in Serbia to stifle anti-Austrian propaganda). Serbia was offered 48 hours to accept these demands, or suffer the consequences.

July 26, Sunday: Austria-Hungary rejected the Serbian response to their list of ten demands.

Montenegro ordered mobilization.

Hoping to produce "a sobering effect" on [Germany](#) and Austria-Hungary, First Lord of the Admiralty [Winston Churchill](#) announced that he had ordered the Royal Navy to battle stations.

On a visit to Bayreuth Ernest MacMillan first experienced Wagner, at a performance of Das Rheingold.

[Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) continued his belated encounter with [Henry Thoreau's WALDEN](#):

Afternoon calm and peaceful. A few wisps of clouds appear. Sunset the "yellow light" kind. What a miracle that yellow light is coming as it does well after the sun has dropped below the rim of the world. All things become saturated with yellow light, even our thoughts. And so I sit in the saffron air, climbing the heights. At times I read slowly from Thoreau's Walden. I bless the chance that sent the book into my hands. It had always been my intention to read it, but like most good resolutions, it was put off. From reading it, the doubts that have assailed me -i.e. whether a spiritual life was to be preferred to a sensual existence, and whether to work for money, or for the love of my work- were banished. Thus as I sat and dreamed into the future, my mind was dissolved into the yellow and carried by it to undreamed of heights. Life seemed full of good things.

We know from Burchfield's manuscript autobiography, on file at the Whitney Museum of American Art, that he was encountering not only [WALDEN](#) but also the selections out of Thoreau's JOURNAL that had been incorporated by H.G.O. Blake into the AUTUMN season-book of 1892.

H.G.O. BLAKE'S SELECTION



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

August 4, Tuesday: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) was clearly paying attention during his reading of [Henry Thoreau](#)'s [WALDEN](#), for he was as recommended listening long and hard to the singing of the telegraph poles:

Listen long to the singing of the telegraph poles. It sounds more weird & beautiful by moonlight. * [This is a solo played by the arch music master, the wind, as he draws his bow —a shaft of moonlight— across the wires.] *

Each pole has a distinct tone. A steady throbbing sound — the poles, once trees, still are full of life which is expressed in this pulsating sound.

Seems a voice from the centre of the earth.

In the above journal entry the artist marked off his sentence “This is a solo played by the arch music master, the wind, as he draws his bow —a shaft of moonlight— across the wires” in parentheses and asterisked it in red pencil (as here depicted).



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

August 11, Tuesday: The 2d of twelve Liège forts, Ft. Evegnée, fell to the [Germans](#).

Anton von Webern wrote to Arnold Schoenberg to the effect that “An unshakable faith in the [German](#) spirit, which indeed has created, almost exclusively the culture of mankind, is awakened in me.”

That evening the watercolor artist [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) took H.G.O. Blake’s AUTUMN volume of selections from [Henry Thoreau](#)’s journals out onto the porch with him, to read while glancing at the Salem, Ohio sunset:

A wonderful sunset to-night – one of beautiful colors. I had taken Thoreau’s Autumn and gone out on the porch. I was first attracted to the sky by a peculiar phenomenon connected with it. The whole sky was clear except at the northwest where there was a long dark grey bank of clouds, which was not, properly speaking, a bank as there were many openings in it. In front of this was a long string of small curly clouds, traveling northeastward, whose topmost edges were colored bright orange. This was all the color there was and the quick curly line of color had a rapid rhythm that was strangely beautiful. Almost at once the color died out, – the sky became grey & I fell areading.

It was some time when I looked up again & when I did so I almost exclaimed aloud. The whole mass of clouds was turning to a vivid reddish purple, which with orange linings here & there, capriciously scattered, made a rich combination. It seemed a thing of life. Gradually this color faded again & I thought twas over. But no. In an unguarded moment while I was reading, another rapid change took place. When next I looked up it was because the whole earth was aglow. The bulk of the clouds had become a rich salmony yellow, which showed its fibrous, undulating surface, looked indeed like a great fire. Thru openings showed the robin’s egg-blue sky. This color lasted longer and faded slowly.

I find that such rich colorings come on cool clear days.

I wonder how many who viewed this spectacle could do so without entertaining an aspiration to something nobler than they had yet achieved? Indeed & I saw no one so much as giving the sky a second glance, if a first.


Most people start out in life with the idea that life is a burden thrust upon them against their will when it is the highest gift God can bestow, better than any promises of future bliss, if ever he made any; and so they go thru life looking forward to the heaven they imagine will come, going thru a set form of religious duties to prepare themselves for it, and spurn the heaven that is here on earth –which requires neither money nor religious rites for its possession– there is no mortgage on it.

H.G.O. BLAKE’S SELECTION



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

September 16, Wednesday: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) was appreciating H.G.O. Blake's AUTUMN season-book of selections from [Henry Thoreau](#)'s journals  so much that he was already eagerly anticipating going on to peruse as well the SPRING, SUMMER, and WINTER volumes of that series:

The beauty of Thoreau's thoughts increases for me every time I open the book. I anticipate reading his Spring, Summer & Winter almost as much as I anticipate an early morning walk in the Dutchman's [hill and picnic grounds in Salem, Ohio].

H.G.O. BLAKE'S "SPRING"

H.G.O. BLAKE'S "SUMMER"

H.G.O. BLAKE'S "AUTUMN"

H.G.O. BLAKE'S "WINTER"

December 27, Tuesday: In an attempt to manage and cope with a growing agnosticism which troubled him, and attendance at a Cleveland art school which was depressing him, [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) jotted down a memo to himself which indicates very clearly to us that this young man had been understanding what he had been reading of [Henry Thoreau](#):

The question of finances is persistent. I hate it. It turns my mind chaotically upside down. The true ideal seems false. —the beautiful unattainable. These are bad times for the poet. Courage. It is only one of Thoreau's steps, by which we ascend.





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1915

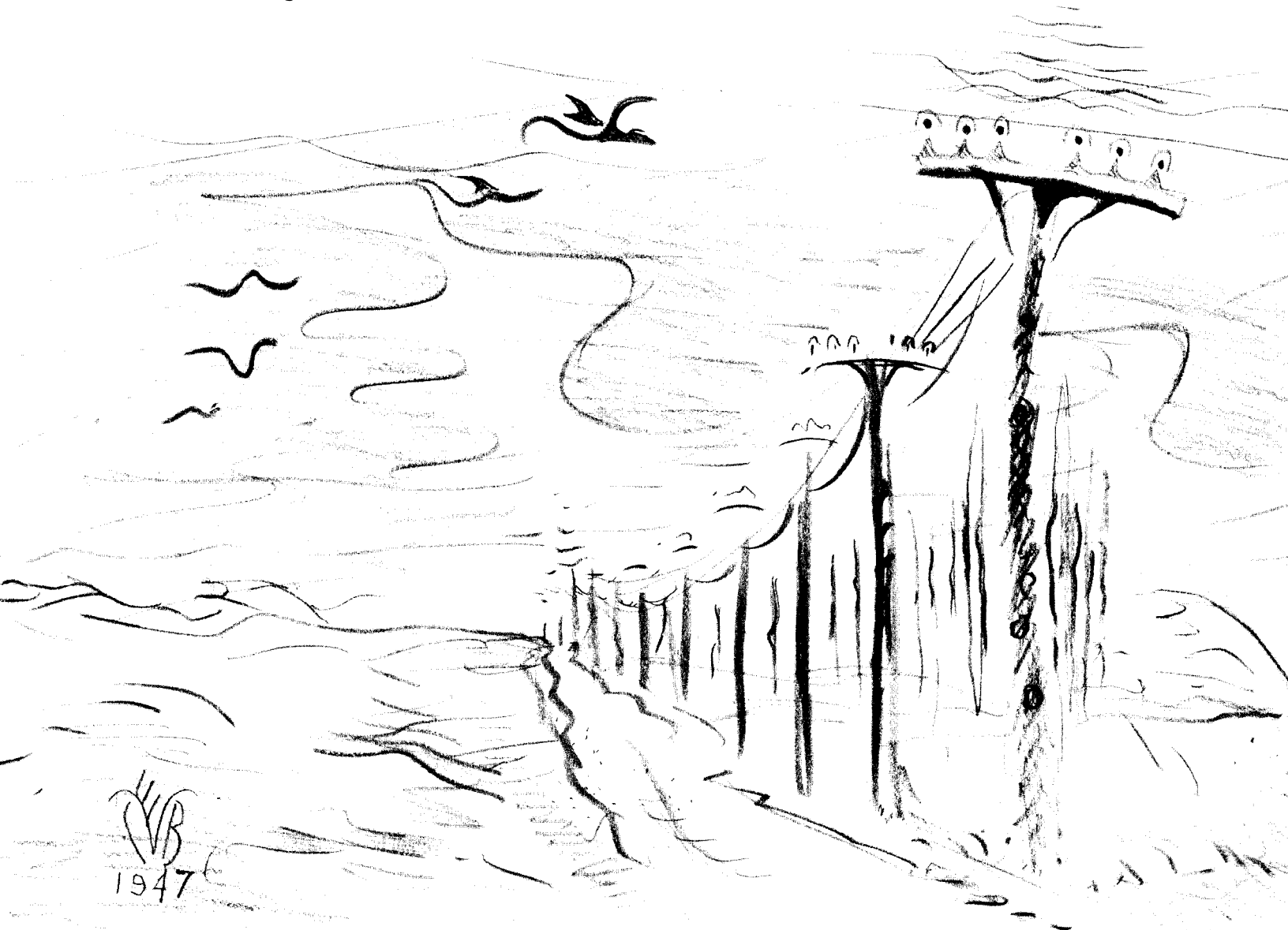
Charles Ephraim Burchfield began to paint independent of instruction.



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January 29, Friday: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) recorded some observations in his journal that would relate later to the worked and reworked watercolors he would make between 1917 and 1952 about [Henry Thoreau's](#) "Telegraph Harp":

All along the Canfield road I was accompanied by the "telegraph harp" which is the fitting music of such weather. I must always associate it with wide windswept fields in afternoon sunlight. While the humming of a pole just passed was still strong in my ears, the song of a new pole in a higher or lower and sometimes a minor key, commenced. I heard the clipping of the clashing wires which was like the call of an unceasing katydid on an August night.





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

July 26, Monday: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) made a comment in his journal that relates well to Thoreau's preoccupation with natural sounds:

It seems at times I should be a composer of sounds, not only of rhythms & colors—



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

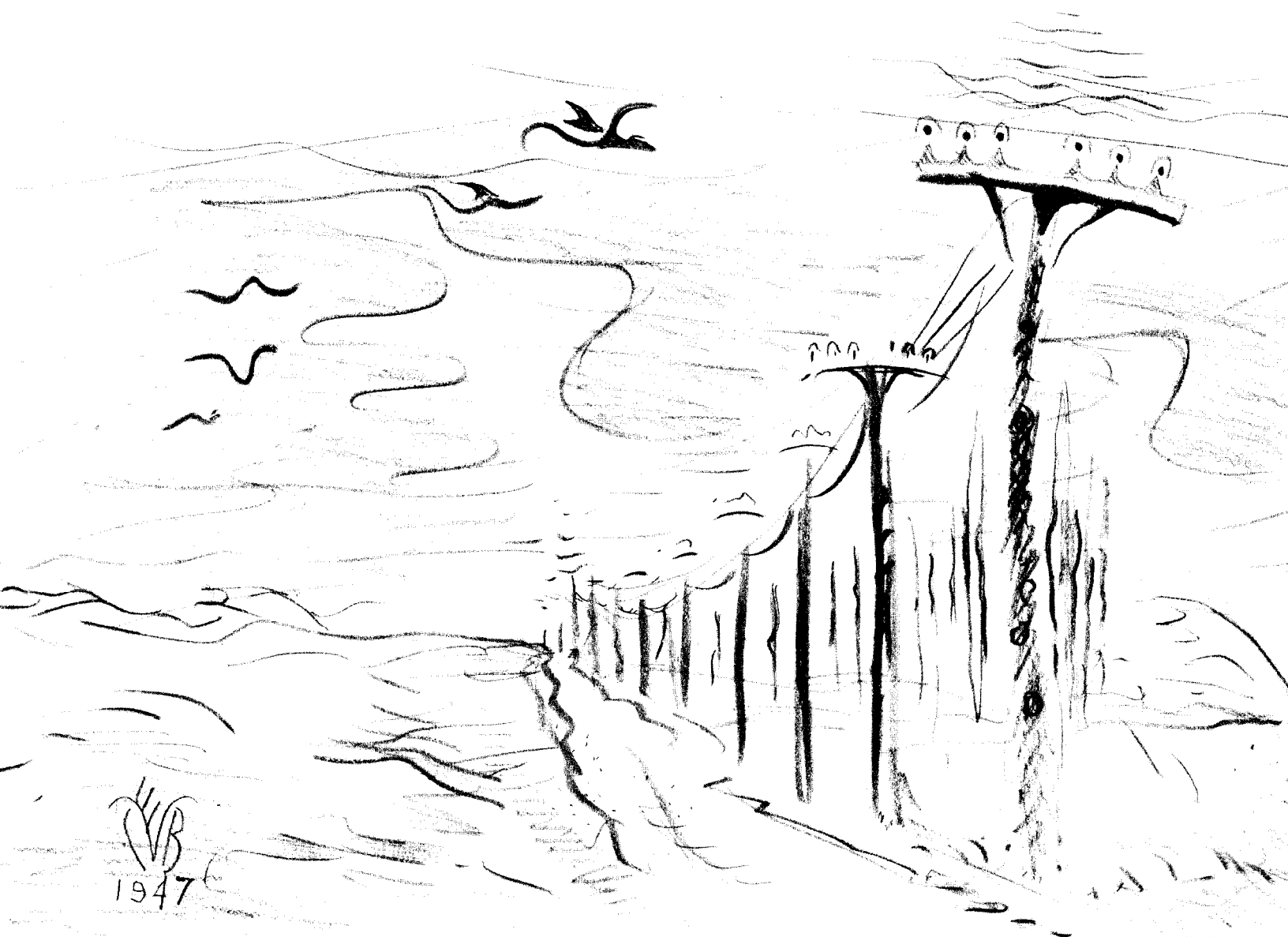
CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

November 20, Saturday: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) recorded some observations in his journal that would relate later to the worked and reworked watercolors he would make between 1917 and 1952 about Thoreau's "Telegraph

[HDT](#)[WHAT?](#)[INDEX](#)**CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD****CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD**

Harp”:

I wonder what determines the direction I shall walk? Yesterday all my senses were in tune for a walk northwestward along the railroad- Today something drew me to the southeast. Yesterday in the fierce wind, the telegraph wires fairly shrieked, and sounded like when we rub our finger tips on tumblers. I amused myself with making music by striking railroad ties (in piles here & there) with a stick. Each one had a different key & was akin to the music of the windblown wires overhead. Today - I got out at Fawcett's Thicket in time to meet a wild show-storm. Wind roared in the tree tops - I exulted as I have not for a long time.





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

December 5, Sunday: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) found himself confirmed by something in [Waldo Emerson](#)'s essay on "SELF-RELIANCE":

Some time ago on a walk with H—, I asked him if any knew just what a prayer was and declared that if I stopped to admire or sketch a tree, it was more of a prayer than meaningless phrases mumbled in a church. I was delighted a moment ago to find the same thought in Emerson's Self-Reliance.



Presumably Burchfield was referring to the following context:

In what prayers do men allow themselves! That which they call a holy office is not so much as brave and manly. Prayer looks abroad and asks for some foreign addition to come through some foreign virtue, and loses itself in endless mazes of natural and supernatural, and mediatorial and miraculous. Prayer that craves a particular commodity, -any thing less than all good,- is vicious. Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul. It is the spirit of God pronouncing his works good. But prayer as a means to effect a private end is meanness and theft. It supposes dualism and not unity in nature and consciousness. As soon as the man is at one with God, he will not beg. He will then see prayer in all action. The prayer of the farmer kneeling in his field to weed it, the prayer of the rower kneeling with the stroke of his oar, are true prayers heard throughout nature, though for cheap ends.



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1916

July: While working in the cost department of the Mullins Company, [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) received a scholarship to the National Academy of Design.





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

July 31, Monday: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) painted a light that was an all-pervasive flattened yellow glow, and titled his production “Yellow Afterglow” (this 20 x 14 watercolor over pencil sketch is now at the Burchfield Art Center). He had earlier described this use of the cadmium yellow pigment in conjunction with his reading of Thoreau’s WALDEN on July 26, 1914:

Afternoon calm and peaceful. A few wisps of clouds appear. Sunset the “yellow light” kind. What a miracle that yellow light is coming as it does well after the sun has dropped below the rim of the world. All things become saturated with yellow light, even our thoughts. And so I sit in the saffron air, climbing the heights. At times I read slowly from Thoreau’s Walden. I bless the chance that sent the book into my hands. It had always been my intention to read it, but like most good resolutions, it was put off. From reading it, the doubts that have assailed me -i.e. whether a spiritual life was to be preferred to a sensual existence, and whether to work for money, or for the love of my work- were banished. Thus as I sat and dreamed into the future, my mind was dissolved into the yellow and carried by it to undreamed of heights. Life seemed full of good things.

October: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) arrived at New York City to attend the National Academy of Design, only to become discouraged by his first and only day in class.



**WHAT I'M WRITING IS TRUE BUT NEVER MIND
YOU CAN ALWAYS LIE TO YOURSELF**

[HDT](#)[WHAT?](#)[INDEX](#)

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

December: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) was back home in Salem and at work at the Mullins Company after his experience in New York.



[Albert Einstein](#) completed *ÜBER DIE SPEZIELLE UND DIE ALLGEMEINE RELATIVITÄTSTHEORIE, GEMEINVERSTÄNDLICH* (ON THE SPECIAL AND GENERAL THEORY OF RELATIVITY, A POPULAR ACCOUNT). He worked on, among other things, the topic of gravitational waves, and quantum theory.



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1917

[Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) made a watercolor or sketch of the telephone lines strung on knotty wooden posts along Painter Road northeast of Salem OH, in front of Post's Woods, which were humming in the wind:

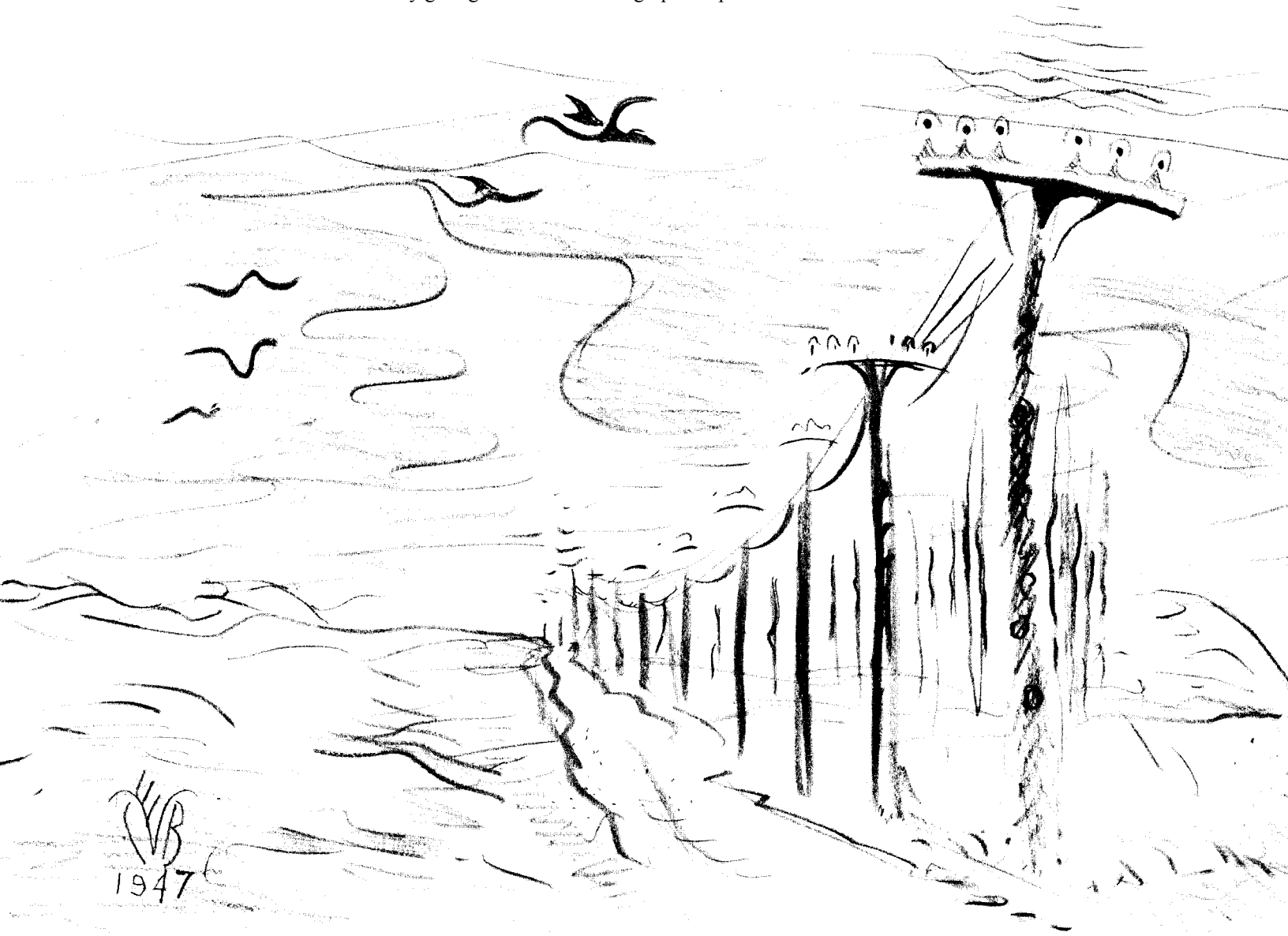
There are few sounds that are as wild and elemental as the music of the telegraph wires, that stir the blood as much, and fill the listener, boy or man, with such vague but intense yearning for he knows not what.

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CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

He honored Thoreau by giving this the title “Telegraph Harp”:





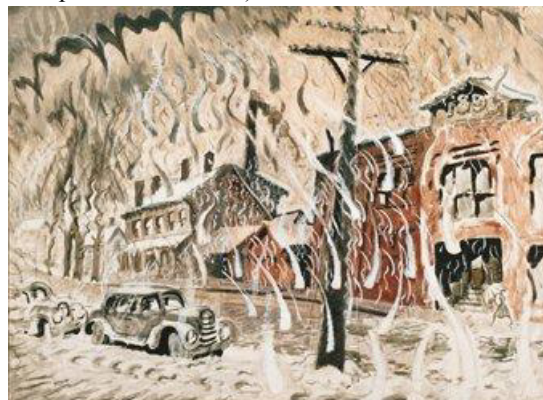
CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

He also made the watercolor of a “Luminous Tree” which is now at the Valparaiso University Museum of Art:



He also made this image of the main street in the [Quaker](#) town of Salem, Ohio on a winter day (he would touch up in 1943, and it is now in a private collection):





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1918

[Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) was inducted into the United States Army, which in accordance with its peculiar sense of humor of course consigned him to its Camouflage Section.



WORLD WAR I



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1919

January: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) was discharged from the US Army with the rank of sergeant, and returned to the Mullens Company in Salem, Ohio.

WORLD WAR I

His image of a house with a tall chimney in the [Quaker](#) town of Salem, Ohio, which would be made in this year during a November twilight, is now at the Kennedy Galleries:





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1920

February: The Inter-Allied Control Commission ordered 2/3ds of the *Freikorps* to disband.

PROTO-NAZISM

“February Thaw,” by [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#):





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

March 25, Thursday: Due to the lack of orders during the minor depression which followed World War I, [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) had been given a 3-month leave of absence from his cost-accounting function in the W.H. Mullens Company and had been devoting full time to his painting. While watching a marsh being burned over below Post's Woods northeast of Salem OH, he did his "Burning Stump" watercolor (32 1/4 x 24 1/4, Kennedy Galleries) that would make such a wonderful illustration for Thoreau's woods fire:

At late afternoon the fire had rushed on, leaving burning stumps on the hillside like torches.





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1921

Fall: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) moved to Buffalo, New York and became an assistant designer of wallpaper for M.H. Birge and Sons. Eventually he would become the head of the design department there.

Here is a sample swatch of his wallpaper!





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1922

May: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) got married with Bertha L. Kenreich of Greenford, Ohio.





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1925

April: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) moved with his family to a suburb of Buffalo NY called Gardenville.



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1929

August: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) resigned from M.H. Birge and Sons in order to devote full time to his painting.



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1933

[Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#)'s "Ice Glare."



He wrote that “*The other night I lay awake, tortured by a multitude of thoughts; outside the sky was blanketed with soft strangely luminous clouds, in which now and then appeared ragged holes thru which glowed the deep indigo sky--black star-studded caves that moved majestically toward the south. In one I saw two brilliant stars, and wondered what they were; the hole advanced revealing suddenly three stars in a row, and I realized I was looking at Orion. A feeling of peace and comfort came over me at the sight of this beautiful group, like some being saying 'All is well.'*” In December 1959 he would create his watercolor and pencil on paper “Orion in



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

December” (39 7/8 x 32 7/8 inches, gift of S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. to the National Museum of American Art):





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1935

A picture of an old iron bridge, done in this year by [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) and now in a private collection:



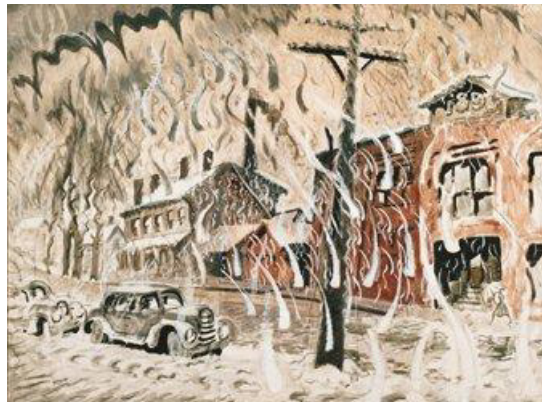


CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1943

In this year [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) touched up one of his 1919 watercolors, of the main street in the Quaker town of Salem, Ohio on a winter day (this is now in a private collection):





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1944

November: This is [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#)'s "Night of the Equinox":





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

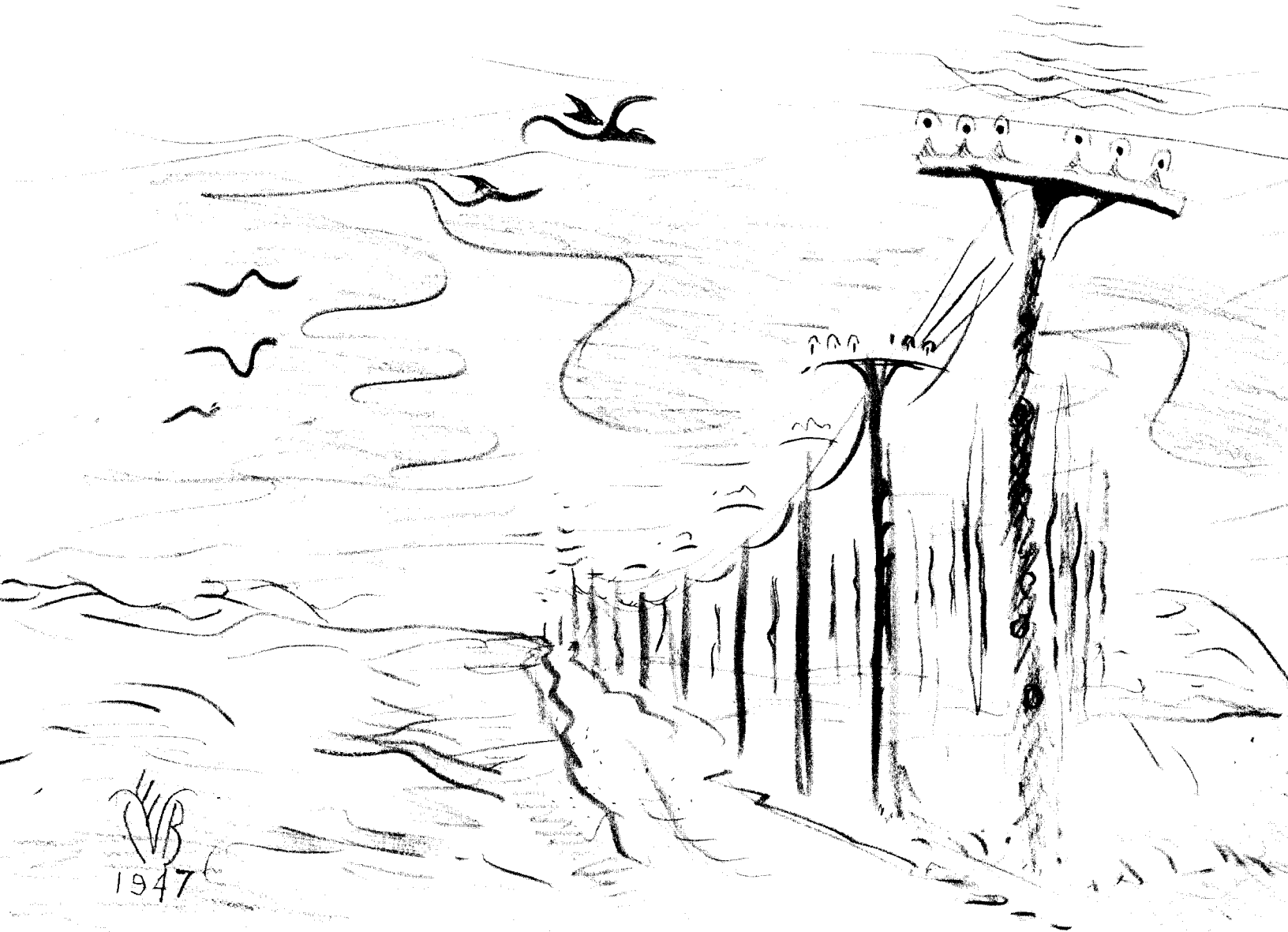
1947

[Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) made a study in conté crayon for his “Telegraph Harp.” That title, he wrote, he had “borrowed from Thoreau.” This study became an “idea note” for his watercolor “Song of the Telegraph,” which was evolving from that watercolor he had made 30 years before, in 1917 while in front of Post’s Woods

[HDT](#)[WHAT?](#)[INDEX](#)**CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD****CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD**

on the Painter Road northeast of Salem OH:

There are few sounds that are as wild and elemental as the music of the telegraph wires, that stir the blood as much, and fill the listener, boy or man, with such vague but intense yearning for he knows not what.





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1948

March 20, Saturday: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) started work on his “Telegraph Music,” on the basis of his 1917 “Telegraph Harp” sketch with its title inspired by Thoreau.

It is growing in power. It will be a fine thing to work on.

In order to do this work he needed to go out and get some fresh studies of telegraph poles with knotholes in them, and then return to his studio. Most of that day he spent simply in designing the picture although, as he very well recognized, his final pictures seldom resembled the initial designs he had prepared for them.





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

April 9, Friday: While working on his “Telegraph Music” (in its final 1952 form the 34 x 53 “Song of the Telegraph,” now owned by the Masco Corporation), based on the watercolor he had made in the summer of 1917 of the telegraph or, probably, telephone lines strung on knotty wooden posts along Painter Road northeast of Salem OH, in front of Post’s Woods, which had been humming in the wind, [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) wrote:

Most of the day on “Song of the Telegraph” – First east on Clinton St to get studies of telegraph poles with knot-holes in them – A dark cloudy day with strong wind of North, and occasional light snow-flurries. Then back to studio.

Most of the day went into designing of the picture. Although I had “laid out” the design motives from a preconceived idea, as usual I found the actual carrying out necessitated the complete altering or abandoning of such motifs & new ones adopted. A new motif that gave me great pleasure and which just seemed to grow of its own accord, was a vast cloud, in the form of a cawing crow, soaring above the woods to the left and heading due North. It symbolized for me the old yearning of boyhood for the Northlands, beyond the Covered Bridge, evoked by the elemental calls of crows. The part most likely to give trouble will be the telegraph line itself; it is easy to invent a multitude of symbols to represent the “humming” of a telegraph pole, but just because it is easy – therein lies the danger of overdoing it. Another series of motifs that gave me pleasure were white wind motifs, introduced in the sky, & above the woods, and running like white fire over the dead bleached out grass in the foreground, licking at the ancient gray rail fence running parallel to the road.

He would not be satisfied that his [Henry Thoreau](#)-inspired “Song of the Telegraph” watercolor had been completed, and be able to leave it alone and move on, until in the year 1952 “all at once its solution came to me.” At this present point the watercolor and ink on paper was titled “Telegraph Music” and was not yet nearly as large as the final 1952 version, less that 12 x 18. You will note that although the sky is full of crows and there is a little bluebird sitting on the fencepost, the bluebird is not yet within its little encompassing aura and



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

there is not yet anything of the golden glow:





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1949

From this year into 1952, [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) would be teaching a special class at the Art Institute of Buffalo.

January 29, Saturday: We find the following in the journal of [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#), bracketed in red pencil:

In studio most of the day. Studying pictures. "The Night of the Equinox," "Song of the Telegraph," and "Return of the Bluebirds" – These all seem like splendid starts, and it seems to me that I must increase their fantasy character still more and reduce or even eliminate any realistic approach. They must be distilled into pure art forms. The blend of realism & conventionalized fantasy is a compromise and they lose power for that reason.

It seems to me, more than ever, imperative that I somehow get these fantasies in finished concrete form even tho there is no sale for them. How we will live, I do not know.

He would not be satisfied that his Thoreau-inspired Song of the Telegraph watercolor had been completed, and be able to leave it alone and move on, until in the year 1952 "all at once its solution came to me." At this present point the watercolor and ink on paper was titled "Telegraph Music" and was not yet nearly as large as the final 1952 version, less that 12 x 18. You will note that although the sky is full of crows and there is a little bluebird sitting on the fencepost, the bluebird is not yet within its little encompassing aura and there is not yet anything of the golden glow:





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

April 5, Tuesday: We find the following in the journal of [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#), bracketed in red pencil:

To the "Big Woods"

A gray sombre day; pleasantly cool.

I had in mind an "eye of God" brooding over a landscape idea, and chose a small woodland pool as the spot for improvising on the theme. In the pool was the ghostly rotting trunk of a fallen white birch. A wind from the S.W. developed presently, and its soft roar thru the treetops was fine to hear. All day on the sketch, with difficulty in fighting a too realistic approach.

After finishing it, several excursions in the woods for rotten wood. The southern wind carried with it the first drops of rain, pleasant in the face.

This was the inception of his "'Eye of God' in Woods" (47 1/2 x 25 1/2, Kennedy Galleries). But as we will see the watercolor wasn't right — for the light that puts out our eyes is as darkness to us.



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

April 6, Wednesday: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) wrote in his journal:

It became apparent this morning that I had been inhibited yesterday in the "eye of God" motif. So after some experimenting, I made it jet black, and the whole picture gained power.



July: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) was teaching at the University of Minnesota in Duluth.



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1950

July: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) was teaching at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, and at the University of Buffalo.



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1951



During this year and the next, [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) would be offering an advanced seminar at the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy.

Summer: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) was teaching at the University of Buffalo.



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1952

[Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) completed his “Song of the Telegraph” watercolor which had began so many long years before, as of 1917, in sketches for a “Telegraph Harp” inspired by Thoreau, and had continued during the year 1948 in the less than 12 x 18 “Telegraph Music.” During this year “all at once its solution came to me” in this “Song of the Telegraph” (34 x 53, now owned by the Masco Corporation):





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1953

July: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) was teaching at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio.

[Kenneth Walter Cameron](#)'s "Thoreau Discovers Emerson: A College Reading Record" ([Bulletin of the New York Public Library](#) LVII, #7:319-34).



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1954

February 23, Tuesday: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) woke up at 2:30AM “overwhelmed at once with the enormity of my ever-recurrent sins and hideous thoughts,” feeling desperately alone and vulnerable under the “accusing finger” of God.

[Viet Minh](#) forces withdrew from forward positions near Luang Prabang and Muongsai, Laos.

Dr. Jonas Salk began to vaccinate children against polio in Pittsburgh. Concurrent tests began in 44 states.

US Secretary of the Army Robert Stevens advised the Senate Investigations Subcommittee, chaired by Senator [Joseph R. McCarthy](#), that he would provide the names of all personnel who had been involved in the promotion and discharge of Irving Peress, and that all those listed would indeed testify.

Olivier Messiaen’s piano work Cantéyodjayâ was performed for the initial time, in Paris.

Variations for piano and orchestra by Wallingford Riegger was performed for the initial time, in Louisville.



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1956

In this year Macmillan published a biography of [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) by John Ireland Howe Baur and Thomas Hollyman. I have been unable to discover in this biography anything more than a puerile and presumptuous Emersonianism, one that fails even to come to grips with [Waldo Emerson](#), let alone being able to explain either this artist's art or his intimate involvement with the writings of [Henry Thoreau](#):

Burchfield's place in this long, now waning, tradition [of American pantheism] is clear. Both his art and his thought coincide with the main aspects of American pantheism. He was a true Emersonian in every important respect. Like Emerson he found an ultimately inexplicable beauty in things "in and for themselves." The agony of spring, the unpaintable beauty of hepaticas, the recurrent pull toward realism as a mirror of nature are witness to this part of his belief. But, like Emerson also, he found a spirit in nature that he identified with God. He rejected the term **pantheism** because he came eventually to feel that God was both in nature and separate from it, but this seems to have been chiefly a way of reconciling his Lutheran faith, always shaky, with his more deeply held convictions about the spiritual essence of the universe. His early agnosticism, his long distrust of organized religion (so like that of Audubon and Burroughs), the profound solace that he found in nature, which shines out constantly in his journals and in his art, are all proof that God and the unspoiled world were, for Burchfield, virtually inseparable. And finally, like Emerson, he found beauty in the facts of nature – in its logic, its structure, its appeal to reason. The botanic drawings that he did as a child in Salem, the temptation that pursued him, even into art school, of becoming a naturalist instead of a painter, and his pleasure through all his life in identifying new flowers or birds were important aspects of his thought and even of his art.



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

November: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#)'s "November Sun Emerging," which he painted during some November between this year and 1959:





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1959

December 5, Saturday: [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) wrote that “*The last three weeks’ has been one of feverish mental activity for me — ideas crowding in so fast I can scarcely get them down on paper in the form of pencil drawings, let alone get them all started as pictures in water-color— Some were started (i.e. — a large 40 x 54 composition of a November sunset, using an old abandoned Colonial House, a huge dead chestnut tree and a field in which a colony of milkweed as a setting — a totally new version of the 1947 “Hemlock in November” in free fantasy, and also one of Orion and Sirius rising above Cottrell’s Poplar row, with frosty weeds, in the foreground; the completion of two 1946 realistic pictures (Bullis road culvert scene, and the scene N-NW from the studio, late lowering twilight) —*” He was creating his watercolor and pencil on paper “Orion in December” (39 7/8 x 32 7/8 inches, gift of S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc. to the National Museum of American Art):





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1960

[Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) completed work on a painting that he had begun in 1949 in which he had been attempting, fantastically, to merge the four seasons of the year:



[Former President Harry S. Truman](#) published MR. CITIZEN, a book about his postpresidential experiences.



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1965

[Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) completed work on a painting that seems to provide the perspective or point of view of a person lying in a field at night, gazing past dandelion seed heads at the moon:





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1967

January 10, Tuesday: In his State of the Union message to Congress, President Lyndon Baines Johnson once again declared "We will stand firm in Vietnam." UN Secretary-General U Thant expressed a personal doubt that [Vietnam](#) was essential to the security of the West.



Hey, hey, LBJ!

In West Seneca, New York, [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) died of a heart attack.



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1984

[Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#)'s 1949 watercolor on paper "Eye of God' in Woods," 47 1/2 X 25 1/2, is in the Kennedy Galleries, New York and appears on page 35 of Koslow, Francine Amy. HENRY DAVID THOREAU AS A SOURCE FOR ARTISTIC INSPIRATION (Lincoln, Massachusetts: De Cordova Museum and Dana Museum and Park, 1984).





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1993

J. Benjamin Townsend's edition, [CHARLES BURCHFIELD](#)'S JOURNALS: THE POETRY OF PLACE (Albany NY: State U of New York P).



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1994

Professor [Guy Davenport](#)'s [CHARLES BURCHFIELD'S SEASONS](#) (Pomegranate Communications).





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

1995

This photograph of [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#) by Peter A. Juley and Son and is from Joan Stahl, AMERICAN ARTISTS IN PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS FROM THE PETER A. JULEY & SON COLLECTION (New York: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, in association with Dover Publications, Inc., 1995).
Negative # J0001324:





CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

2010

A showing of [Charles Ephraim Burchfield](#)'s work at the Whitney on Manhattan Island, as "Heat Waves in a Swamp," was put together by Robert Gober. In [The New Yorker](#) magazine, the watercolor "Song of the Telegraph" was characterized by Peter Schjeldahl as "the most successful attempt I know, by anyone, to convey sound visually: a landscape alive to the buzz of wires on a march of poles in fleeing perspective."



Translation of [Thoreau](#) materials into Portuguese in Brazil: *WALDEN*. Coleção L&PM Pocket. Apresentação de Eduardo Bueno. Tradução de Denise Bottmann. Contém em apêndice "Thoreau," necrológio de Ralph Waldo Emerson. Porto Alegre: L&PM. 335 pages.

[TIMELINE OF WALDEN](#)

"MAGISTERIAL HISTORY" IS FANTASIZING, HISTORY IS CHRONOLOGY



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

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"It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."

- Remark by character "Garin Stevens"
in William Faulkner's INTRUDER IN THE DUST



Prepared: August 19, 2014



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

ARRGH AUTOMATED RESEARCH REPORT

GENERATION HOTLINE



This stuff presumably looks to you as if it were generated by a human. Such is not the case. Instead, someone has requested that we pull it out of the hat of a pirate who has grown out of the shoulder of our pet parrot "Laura" (as above). What these chronological lists are: they are research reports compiled by ARRGH algorithms out of a database of modules which we term the Kouroo Contexture (this is data mining). To respond to such a request for information we merely push a button.



CHARLES EPHRAIM BURCHFIELD

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Commonly, the first output of the algorithm has obvious deficiencies and we need to go back into the modules stored in the contexture and do a minor amount of tweaking, and then we need to punch that button again and recompile the chronology – but there is nothing here that remotely resembles the ordinary “writerly” process you know and love. As the contents of this originating contexture improve, and as the programming improves, and as funding becomes available (to date no funding whatever has been needed in the creation of this facility, the entire operation being run out of pocket change) we expect a diminished need to do such tweaking and recompiling, and we fully expect to achieve a simulation of a generous and untiring robotic research librarian. Onward and upward in this brave new world.

First come first serve. There is no charge.
Place requests with <Kouroo@kouroo.info>. Arrgh.