



# THE NEW YORK OBSERVER

## Charles Burchfield: In Macabre Painting, Dark Introspection

BY HILTON KRAMER | DECEMBER 4, 2005

The American painter Charles Burchfield (1893-1967), whose work is the subject of a splendid exhibition at the DC Moore Gallery, was one of the most accomplished artists of his generation. He was also one of the most popular. He had the distinction, moreover, of creating a vision of the American landscape that established itself as one of the classic styles in modern American painting—a style in which the pastoral sentiments of his native Ohio are stripped of their innocence and charm and transformed into something far more sinister, a landscape of anxiety and dread.

Exactly what impelled Burchfield to focus his art so intently on the macabre and the grotesque remains something of a mystery. It's been suggested that he was influenced by the short stories of Sherwood Anderson, and while that influence may account for the feeling of isolation and abandonment in Burchfield's work, it doesn't really shed much light on his penchant for depicting both nature and the manmade world in such stark and threatening terms. It's certain, anyway, that he had a deeply introspective turn of mind.

At times, writing interested him almost as much as painting, and he's known to have written voluminous journals. He's also known to have created a series of cryptic symbols, representing extreme states of mind, and it may be assumed that some of these—drooping trees and black rain, among them—are elaborated in his paintings. As a youngster, Burchfield is said to have taken a keen interest in nature, collecting specimens, etc., yet in his maturity his paintings and drawings tended to transform the natural world into a phantasmagoria.

It's this powerful affinity for the fantastic that separates Burchfield from Edward Hopper, the only other American painter with whom he's commonly compared. It was never an apt comparison, but in the period when Burchfield and Hopper were the best-selling painters on the American scene, it was naturally assumed that they had something in common. As it turned out, what they had in common was only their distance from the kind of radical modernism that was beginning to command more and more attention.

In fact, Hopper's paintings are devoid of Burchfield's brand of imagination. Hopper's forte was in his psychological depiction of the relationships between the characters he portrayed. Hopper was indeed a far subtler painter than Burchfield. In many ways, Hopper was closer in spirit to a writer like Hemingway than to any other painter.

Burchfield was in some important respects the greater craftsman. In the very first watercolor we encounter in the show at DC Moore Gallery—Sunshine and Rain (1946-47)—the luminosity of the sunlight in dismal contrast to the rain is so brilliantly handled that we immediately recognize the hand of a master. In his depiction of light, he used watercolor as if it were oil paint, applying layers of the same color until he got the density of light he was looking for.

The test of every exhibition is whether the viewer leaves the show wishing to see more of the artist's work. By that standard, the current Burchfield exhibition gets a perfect score from this viewer. He's an artist I thought I knew pretty well until I saw this exhibition; what I'd like to see now is a full-scale retrospective. Meanwhile, Charles Burchfield: Paintings 1915-1964 remains on exhibition at the DC Moore Gallery, 724 Fifth Avenue, through Dec. 23.

