SUN AND ROCKS
CHARLES E. BURCHFIELD ROTUNDA
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Essay by Nancy Weekly

Sun and Rocks is possibly the most bizarre landscape that Charles Burchfield ever painted. A molten black sun emits brilliant white and yellow light in various forms. A diamond cross circled by spokes of white rays ignites golden flames of heat along rocky cliffs, surrounds spiky tree branches, edges tumultuous clouds, and flickers throughout the cobalt sky. Very little looks familiar; instead, each element has a distorted resemblance to what we would expect to encounter in a remote landscape. Mesmerized by such a strange world, we want to unravel the hidden meaning of this evocative vision.

Sun and Rocks is quite a departure from American Scene painting for which Burchfield became known in the 1930s and early 1940s. If encountered apart from any context, *Sun and Rocks* might be thought to have been painted by a visionary or outsider artist. The American Visionary Art Museum defines "visionary art" as:

> Like love, you know it when you see it. But here's the longer definition, straight out of our Mission Statement: "*Visionary art as defined for the purposes of the American Visionary Art Museum refers to art produced by self-taught individuals, usually without formal training, whose works arise from an innate personal vision that revels foremost in the creative act itself.*" In short, visionary art begins by listening to the inner voices of the soul, and often may not even be thought of as 'art' by its creator.

Burchfield received formal training at the Cleveland School of Art, so he would not qualify as visionary by that part of the definition; however, he did cultivate enough confidence to paint subjects from a highly individual, experiential perspective while upturning watercolor painting traditions. Yet there are many ways in which this particular painting by Burchfield might be interpreted as being visionary.

on page 1 Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967), *Sun and Rocks* (detail), 1918-50; Watercolor and gouache on joined paper, mounted on board, 40" x 56"; Collection of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, Room of Contemporary Art Fund, 1953

Outsider art depicting hallucinatory religious images is sometimes dismissed as off-putting zealotry. At first glance, *Sun and Rocks* may appear to fall into that category as Burchfield's most overtly Christian painting because of its dominant diamond-sun-cross in the sky. On closer examination, though, the symbol is oddly antithetical to orthodox representation. Burchfield had been raised in a family with divergent views: his paternal grandfather was a Methodist evangelical minister, while his father rejected religion entirely. Burchfield himself spent the majority of his life unaffiliated with any church, vacillating from youthful atheism to adult agnosticism, fueled by decades of a pantheist relationship with nature. After years of internalized debate, he decided to join the Emmanuel Lutheran Church, which his wife Bertha and their five children had attended for many years. On April 2, 1944, he and his son, Charles Arthur, were confirmed, but the event earned only a brief sentence in his journals; however, a few days later the two bonded on an inspirational hike in Gowanda, New York, mutually appreciating the primordial qualities of the canyon. Nature still seemed to hold the greatest significance in providing emotionally rewarding, life-affirming experiences.

Akhenaten, Nefertiti and their children worshipping Aten, c. 1930 BCE Collection Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ägyptisches Museum

Burchfield's religious commentary in his later journals brings together mystical, transcendental views of nature with an appreciation for the God he believed enabled him to paint. Still, he often opted for painting more universal, animistic subjects. For example, in a statement about *Sun and Rocks*, the artist explained: "Shining from the deep blue cavernous sky, the spring sun—our great day-time star—floods the scene with brilliant light that will heal the wounds of the earth and bring forth new life…."[2] This kind of imagery can be seen in ancient Egyptian art, particularly in the 18th Dynasty, under the reign of Pharaoh Akhenaten (1352-1336 BCE). He created the first monotheistic religion by worshipping the sun disk, Aten, as the life-giving force and by rejecting the significance of all other deities. Carved stone relief sculptures depict Akhenaten[3], often accompanied by his wife, Queen Nefertiti, and their children, worshipping under an all-powerful sun. Its long, narrow rays reach earthward, ending with tiny flames and hands, some holding an ankh, the symbol of life and immortality. These temple sculptures are, in a way, the first "*Sun and Rocks*"—symbolic representation of an individual's adoration of the celestial center of our earthly universe, necessitating a break from cultural traditions.

The noteworthy difference between Akhenaten's sun disk and Burchfield's is that the latter one is obliterated. It is a black sun, pocked with craters. Green flickers shimmer around its circumference where mass meets light. Actually, it is not the sun at all—it is the moon in perfect alignment to cover the sun in a total solar eclipse. While many archaic occult or mystical cultures frightened by this rare phenomenon embraced the black sun as an icon, Burchfield was enthralled and depicted the opposite effect. Instead of the sun vanishing into sudden nightly darkness, the eclipse appears to

refract light into magnified trajectories that illuminate the sky more intensely and disperse the sun's heat over the surface of the earth. He witnessed an earlier paradigm of diamond sunlight in 1931 while walking from his home on Clinton Street in Gardenville, New York to Mineral Springs and Indian Church Roads:

> Never before has the great star we call the sun seemed so much like a star as today — Shining from such a depth of blue, with little mist or atmosphere to obscure it, it cannot be seen as a sphere; but only as a diamond shaped burst of dazzling light — even its color is like starlight — cold and remote —
>
> I walk along in ecstasy –
>
> The brilliant star of February has risen in the Southeast, and sends its blinding cold light over the vast white earth opening up emerald and cobalt caverns in the northwest sky — a black crow cries hoarsely from some dusky wood.[4]

In *Sun and Rocks*, the principal astral event balances the dominant rocky landscape. Burchfield wanted to reference an ancient time, perhaps before the existence of humans. After he finished the painting, he wrote that it was:

> *An attempt to depict a scene of primeval times, in early spring, when conflicting forces of nature hold sway and seem to fill the earth with violence and chaos. A great cliff, shaggy with ferns, juts up into the sky; from it, forced loose by the relentless process of erosion, huge boulders have tumbled down the hillside. Among them, hemlocks, torn and twisted by the violence of wind and storm, have managed somehow to sustain life; here and there also, a few wild ginger plants have ventured forth.*[5]

A series of diagonals sculpted in light and shadow draw attention to distinct sections of the landscape. The jutting cliffs are fringed with primordial ferns. A pair of hemlocks topped by "tree spirit" eyes forms an arch on the left. Two slender branches on the right form a Gothic arch portal with a view to a distant valley where a stream looks like a crescent moon. A yellow flame of sunlight topping the arch touches a bird-shaped cloud. Impish wild ginger plants grow near a rotted tree and a fallen, moss-covered log. A lone black bird flies over rocks near the center. Quivering black lines throughout the composition accentuate the oddness of this place. They might be read as animation ciphers for a gentle breeze or heat waves generated by the sun on cool rocky planes, but there is another explanation.

An album of studies in the Charles E. Burchfield Foundation Archives reveals that this painting underwent surprising stylistic and compositional changes. It started on May 2, 1918 as a relatively small watercolor measuring 25 ½ x 20 ½ inches. Burchfield had titled it *The Song of the Peterbird* after the haunting call of one of his favorite woodland birds that he described as "a strange little pixie of the woods, half frightened, half curious."[6] The bird's charm was partially explained by the artist when the painting was exhibited:

> The Tufted Titmouse is named the Peterbird in some localities on account of its plaintive call "Peter—Peter" always twice repeated. It vies with the cardinal for the honor of being the earliest harbinger of Spring. Something of a ventriloquist, he seems to send his notes from some remote mysterious land. Its aforementioned plaintive character seems to suggest that the bird is alarmed at his surroundings, a feeling I have tried to express.[7]

In the painting, the small, crested gray and white bird with large black eyes was perched in a bare tree at the base of an imposing cliff in "Bedford Glens, a small canyon to the south of Cleveland," Ohio.[8] After it had been exhibited in *Early Water-Colors by Charles Burchfield, 1917-1918 Period* at the Frank K.M. Rehn Galleries in New York in 1939, *The Song of the Peterbird* returned to Burchfield and remained in storage for several years.

In 1943 Burchfield invented a new technique to expand the promising ideas of earlier works, particularly watercolors from 1917-1918. He pasted small original paintings onto a large backing board using wheat paste, sponges, and rollers. Then he added new pieces of paper, usually around all four sides, on which he extended and embellished the original composition. In 1944 Burchfield decided to expand *The Song of the Peterbird*, and mounted the original painting on larger board measuring 36 x 52 inches. Afterwards he wrote that it "shows great possibilities, and I hope to put into it all I ever felt about the Peterbird. The longing to hear this bird again, in the right surroundings and on the right kind of day (a brilliant day in March in the hollows) is so strong at times, as to make me almost ill."[9]

During the next four years he made new drawings at "Rock City, southwest of Olean, N.Y."[10] Many sketches include monologue comments about the effects he should paint. For example, in a sketch dated February 1945, he noted the area in the composition where:

> The only place where the Peterbird call is 'pure' – Its influence is felt at various points – changes the appearance of objects, …but does not repeat itself exactly — / Astonishment and wonder are the keynotes of this picture – Eliminate all else –/ and then simplify the whole thing in big powerful forms with broad undercut shadows influenced — so that it is like a terrific thunderclap – / It makes violent action in the trees- / Prehistoric / Wild Ginger," flame of spring shapes and plant motifs in front of rock formation.

In addition to the Peterbird's song which he had diagrammed in 1912 on a G sharp scale, classical music also resonated visually throughout the imagery. When the painting originated in 1918, Burchfield attempted to incorporate joyous first impressions of "Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, which "overwhelmed" him "with its elemental force and power." He drew parallels with a mythological world.

> In particular, the third movement is more directly concerned with my work at that time. I seemed to me the expression of titans engaged in boisterous play; as though they might skip about from mountain to mountain and even at times hurl enormous chunks of rock at each other in sport to the accompaniment of thunder and wind. It was in such a mood that I tackled the subject of rocks and cliffs in early May of 1918.[12]

As the painting became more complex, another great composer's work left its resonance. The Finnish composer Jean Sibelius offered equally compelling symphonic works. In 1948 Burchfield wrote:

> The other day, after having painted all day among the Rocks, I played the Sibelius Fourth Symphony — the impression of the rocks and the music intermingled, each magnifying the other, and presently I had a vivid inner eye picture of a strange fantastic scene in some unknown North land — a vast open canyon, with the sea at one end, sides of the canyon composed of the same sort of prehistoric weathered rocks as in Rock City, only on a grander scale with deep ice-locked caves. Oh that I could actually wander into such a place![13]

Between 1948 and 1950 Burchfield added four more inches in height and width, making the final painting 40 x 56 inches. The focus of the painting, as well as the title transformed. After spending all day working "on the 'Song of the Peterbird' picture," he wondered, "(Shall I change the title to "Sun, Clouds and Rocks")? — I felt in fine fettle, able to tear into the picture, making changes & inventing new themes and details – I put into the sun all the devastating destroying power of that 'star' that I feel on a March Sap day."[14]

The "Peterbird" itself disappeared, but its eponymous song remained in rhythmic lines that reverberate throughout the larger masterwork. Burchfield's audio-cryptograms for the Peterbird's song developed from a process of uninhibited doodling to more conscious abstraction in order to devise very simple motifs to repeat among the trees, ferns and rocks. He also applied the same technique to transform trillium, wild ginger and the larger flying bird into related motifs. *Sun and Rocks* had become so much more than a painting of a bird perched in a tree by a cliff, so Burchfield "eliminated [it] as being too literal and a symbol of a flying bird substituted." What had become more important was the enchanting, "elusive song…His notes seemed to come from far away, beyond space and even time, the remembrance of some pre-historic age."[15] Burchfield's evolving symbols from mythology, music and nature mediate a powerful, visionary landscape—earth and cosmos held under the spell of an invisible bird's song that "suggested far away prehistoric times, when natural forces, being unexplainable to man, were given personalities."[16] Once again, Burchfield convinces us to listen closely when we look at the landscape in order to hear timeless harmony.

[1]http://www.avam.org/stuff/whatsvis.html

[2]Charles E. Burchfield, "Sun & Rocks," manuscript, c. 1953-54, Burchfield Penney Art Center, Charles E. Burchfield Archives, Purchased with funds from the Peter A. Vogt Family Foundation, A2004:011.XIII.64

[3]Burchfield may have been familiar with the limestone stele fragment depicting "King Akhenaten Worshipping the Sun God" (1376-1362 B.C.E.) that had been exhibited in the sculpture court of the then-named Albright Art Gallery. It was acquired in 1937.

[4]Charles E. Burchfield, Journals, Vol. 38, Feb. 1, 1931, p. 21. (Burchfield Penney Art Center, The Charles E. Burchfield Archives, Gift of Charles E. Burchfield, 1966.)

[5]Burchfield, "Sun & Rocks" MS, c. 1953-54.

[6]Charles E. Burchfield, Untitled drawing 82.4, Burchfield Penney Art Center, The Charles E. Burchfield Foundation Archives, Gift of the Charles E. Burchfield Foundation, 2006.

[7]Charles E. Burchfield, "Early Water-Colors by Charles Burchfield, 1917-1918 Period," New York: Frank K. M. Rehn Galleries, 1939.

[8]Joseph S. Trovato, ed, quoting Burchfield in Charles Burchfield: Catalogue of Paintings in Public and Private Collections. Utica: Museum of Art, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, 1970, p. 238.

[9]Burchfield, Journals, Vol. 45, March 29, 1944, p. 94.

[10]Burchfield quoted in Trovato, 1970, p. 238.

[11]Burchfield, Untitled drawing 82.10, Burchfield Penney Art Center, The Charles E. Burchfield Foundation Archives, Gift of the Charles E. Burchfield Foundation, 2006.

[12]Charles E. Burchfield, "Recent Acquisitions, Sun and Rocks by Charles E. Burchfield," Gallery Notes, XVIII, no. 2 (Jan. 1954): 24.

[13]Burchfield, Journals, Vol. 49, Apr. 21, 1948, pp. 60-61.

[14]Burchfield, Journals, Vol. 49, Apr. 21, 1948, pp. 60-61.

[15]Burchfield, 1954, p. 24.

[16]Charles E. Burchfield's Journals, Volume 60a, February 14, 1962, p. 66.

on the last page Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967), *The Song of the Peterbird* (detail), May 2, 1918; Watercolor and gouache, 26" x 19"; Black and white photograph of the original painting exhibited in 1939 Later incorporated into *Sun and Rocks*