

Country Life and the Hunt: Burchfield and Wallpaper Design

In 1999 an extremely rare set of panels from Charles E. Burchfield's scenic wallpaper, *Country Life and the Hunt*, was discovered in an antique store in Vermont. Rolled up, the wallpaper had been stripped from the walls where it had originally been installed, probably more than seventy-five years ago. Thanks to a generous donation from Gail and John Greenberger, the Burchfield-Penney Art Center purchased *Country Life and the Hunt* and embarked on a multi-year conservation project to restore the salvaged wallpaper. As a result, it can be exhibited and appreciated once again.

Restoring *Country Life and the Hunt* has been a major undertaking conducted by paper conservator Patricia D. Hamm, who has worked with the Burchfield-Penney Art Center since 1987. Ms. Hamm is a Fellow of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works and is the leading authority on Burchfield's materials and techniques. Eileen Saracino, Tracy Dulniak, and painting conservator James F. Hamm have assisted her.

The conservation project was made possible with significant support from the Edith and Frances Mulhall Achilles Memorial Fund, Gail and John Greenberger, and the Conservation Treatment Regrant Program administered by the Lower Hudson Conference, in association with the Museum Program of the New York State Council on the Arts.

The Charles E. Burchfield Foundation generously granted funds for restoration, as well as the related exhibition, brochure, and educational programs. Additional support was provided by the James Carey Evans Endowment, the County of Erie, the Mary A. H. Rumsey Foundation, and charitable contributions by museum members and visitors.

Country Life and the Hunt

Scenic wallpaper featuring *The Call*, 1924

Designed by **Charles E. Burchfield** (1893-1967)
Produced by M. H. Birge & Sons Company, Buffalo, New York
Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center,
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John Greenberger, 1999

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Country Life and the Hunt

Scenic wallpaper featuring *Full Cry*, 1924

Designed by **Charles E. Burchfield** (1893-1967)
Produced by M. H. Birge & Sons Company, Buffalo, New York
Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center,
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John Greenberger, 1999

Country Life and the Hunt was sold exclusively in sets of twenty-eight strips, printed in just one color scheme. According to a Birge advertisement, "Each strip is fourteen feet high and has a printed width of twenty inches. One set covers forty-six feet eight inches lineal wall measurement. The greatest height of actual printed detail is six feet two inches."

The Burchfield-Penney Art Center acquired both primary vistas, as well as several extension panels that serve to enlarge the woods that separate the main scenes. Unfortunately, a small portion of the panel in "Full Cry" that links the fox and dogs is missing, either due to the original installation around an architectural feature of the room, or from the later removal. Nevertheless, in essence the narrative is complete. In fact, upon close examination of "The Call," you can see that an almost identical panel exists without the animals to connect landscape motifs with the distant country village.

Schematic for *Country Life and the Hunt* printing block
Details from *The Call*, 1924
Carbon on tracing paper

Designed by **Charles E. Burchfield** (1893-1967)
Produced by M. H. Birge & Sons Company, Buffalo, New York
Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center,
Gift of the M.H. Birge & Sons Company, 1973

Known as the makers of fine and exclusive wallpapers, M. H. Birge & Sons Company was founded in Buffalo in 1834. Around 1924, when *Country Life and the Hunt* was launched, Birge also had branches in New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and London, England. They specialized in modern designs that were hand-printed in the eighteenth-century, hand-blocked method. This required a far more complex and costly method of production than is used for machine-made, roller-produced wallpapers with repeated patterns.

Country Life and the Hunt took two years to produce, after Burchfield completed his original design paintings. Two hundred and fifteen blocks were carved and four hundred and twenty separate hand-printed color designations were necessary for completion of the intricate work. Birge proudly advertised *Country Life and the Hunt* as "one of the most elaborate scenic wallpapers produced in America."

Schematic for *Country Life and the Hunt* printing block
Details from *Full Cry*, 1924
Carbon on tracing paper

Designed by **Charles E. Burchfield** (1893-1967)
Produced by M. H. Birge & Sons Company, Buffalo, New York
Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center,
Gift of the M. H. Birge & Sons Company, 1973

Abstract Trees, c. 1928-29
Wallpaper, pattern 2416F

Designed by **Charles E. Burchfield** (1893-1967)
Produced by M. H. Birge & Sons Company, Buffalo, New York
Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center,
Gift of J. Frederic Lohman, 1992

Modern French, c. 1924-26

Also known as ***Willow Trees***

Wallpaper mounted on board, pattern 1438

Designed by **Charles E. Burchfield** (1893-1967)

Produced by M. H. Birge & Sons Company, Buffalo, New York

Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center,

Purchased with funds from the Buffalo Foundation, 1973

Burchfield's love of trees is clearly evident in many of his wallpaper designs, including the variations illustrated here. Wooded vignettes are his most characteristic features in *Country Life and the Hunt*, yet they also resemble the work of nineteenth-century French scenic wallpaper masters, Jean Zuber and Joseph Dufour. Taking a more contemporary approach, Burchfield designed a stylish abstraction of willow trees for *Modern French*, which is illustrated in *The Birge Book of Decorative Suggestions*, dating from around 1926.

Chinese Garden, 1924-25

Wallpaper, pattern 9150

Designed by **Charles E. Burchfield** (1893-1967)

Produced by M. H. Birge & Sons Company, Buffalo, New York

Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center,

Gift of Reed Forest Products, Inc. (Part of the Decorative Products Group, Wallcovering Division, Birge), 1977

These pattern book samples hint at the grandeur of the full installation of Burchfield's *Chinese Garden*, with his elaborate foliage, flowering plants, exotic birds, and butterflies. As well, the samples demonstrate how shifts from realistic color schemes to the more imaginative create radically different effects. Panoramic Chinese garden motifs date back centuries to hand-painted papers that have inspired generations of designers.

Chinese Garden, 1924-25

Illustrations from *The Birge Book of Decorative Suggestions*, 1925

Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center,

Gift of the M. H. Birge & Sons Company, 1973

Lilacs and Poplars, undated

Wallpaper mounted on board, pattern 7124

Designed by **Charles E. Burchfield** (1893-1967)

Produced by M. H. Birge & Sons Company, Buffalo, New York

Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center,

Gift of the M. H. Birge & Sons Company, 1973:48

Lilacs and poplars were two of Burchfield's favorite trees. Nevertheless, there was a world of difference between the free way he chose to paint them in watercolors versus the restrictions inherent in wallpaper designing. Mulling over this dilemma in 1923, he wrote in his journal:

In looking at some pussy willows today and seeing the infinite variety of highlights on their glossy shells, & the infinite variation of color on the stems, I thought how easy it is to limit one's self by doing designs which are limited to 12 colors and which demand flat treatment— I must overcome this tendency to lose the delight of sketching— of myriad accidental effects—

***Red Bird and Beech Trees with Border*, 1924**

Wallpaper fragments mounted on board, pattern 2922B

Designed by **Charles E. Burchfield** (1893-1967)

Produced by M. H. Birge & Sons Company, Buffalo, New York

Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center,

Gift of the Burchfield Family, 1971

When designing wallpaper, Burchfield sometimes borrowed imagery directly from watercolors he had painted a few years earlier in Ohio, around his home in Salem and in the countryside surrounding Cleveland. He also employed similar strategies in his cretonne designs used for coordinating drapery and upholstery. *Red Bird and Beech Trees*, from 1924, was based on his 1917 painting, *Song of the Red Bird*, which he expanded in 1960. The forest scene produces multiple vanishing points through the repeated vertical pattern and side-by-side installation of wallpaper strips, giving the pink misty woods a surreal air of fantasy. As such, it serves as a precursor to panoramic, scenic designs.

Red Bird and Beech Trees was the only wallpaper design that Burchfield installed in his home on Clinton Street in Gardenville, West Seneca. These fragments came from his pantry.

***The Riviera*, c. 1926**

Left panel of original color design for scenic wallpaper

Gouache on canvas mounted on masonite

Designed by **Charles E. Burchfield** (1893-1967)

Later produced by M. H. Birge & Sons Company, Buffalo, New York

Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center,

Gift of the M. H. Birge & Sons Company, 1971

As a wallpaper designer, Burchfield grew frustrated when he had to follow company dictates for historic European imagery that appealed to popular taste. He preferred creating original work based on his own paintings and observations of nature. Faced with the job of designing another scenic wallpaper, he complained in his journal on November 8, 1925:

*A futile day full of bitter thoughts & unsuccessful attempts—
How I despise the Americans who prefer 18th century French landscapes to healthy American 20th
century scenes—How I hate the architects who put themselves on the buck for making literal copies of
English architecture—*

*The firm I work for contemplating a literal copy of a French landscape wall-paper, a venture that
requires that I go to N.Y. and copy the color scheme—*

*How I despise those dealers that trade in "art objects" of the past forcing the artists of the day to
do all manner of work that they should not do—*

*How I scorn & loathe myself because I cannot ignore these debasing influences in American art &
paint with bold lusty disregard of their false & weak standards—paint the raw crude healthy aspects of
nature that I love— Because they are the dominant power I must earn my own & my family's daily bread
doing work that is directly opposed to my ideals in art—but were I a really strong character I should
struggle thru with a few great things in spite of everything—*

The Riviera, c. 1926

Center panel of original color design for scenic wallpaper
Gouache on canvas mounted on masonite

Designed by **Charles E. Burchfield** (1893-1967)

Later produced by M. H. Birge & Sons Company, Buffalo, New York

Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center,

Gift of the M. H. Birge & Sons Company, 1971

Advertisements for *The Riviera* published in 1929 claimed that more than 150 original photographs were "correlated by the artist" to depict the coast of France near Villefranche. Maritime Alps and the Mediterranean Sea form the backdrop for an ornate French villa and formal gardens.

Note that details are repeated on the left and right sides of each design panel for *The Riviera*. Alignment was key to producing a coherent panoramic view. These original paintings are smaller than the final wallpaper, which was approximately six feet high.

The Riviera, c. 1926

Right panel of original color design for scenic wallpaper
Gouache on canvas mounted on masonite

Designed by **Charles E. Burchfield** (1893-1967)

Later produced by M. H. Birge & Sons Company, Buffalo, New York

Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center,

Gift of the M. H. Birge & Sons Company, 1971

Sunflowers

Reproduction wallpaper produced in 1973

Based on the original wallpaper created in 1922

Designed by **Charles E. Burchfield** (1893-1967)

Produced by M. H. Birge & Sons Company, Buffalo, New York

Rollers for *Sunflowers*

Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center,

Gift of the M. H. Birge & Sons Company, 1971

M. H. Birge & Sons Company Scrapbook

Gift of the M. H. Birge & Sons Company, 1973

The M. H. Birge & Sons Company considered *The Riviera* to be one of their most significant scenic wallpapers. In another advertisement in this scrapbook dated July 1929, a black and white illustration shows *The Riviera* in Barlum Tower of Cadillac Square in Detroit. Yet another reference, dated January 1928, contains the formula for glazing *The Riviera* hung on the walls of the Birge office hallway: "Gelatin size—one coat. Pratt & Lambert flat varnish—one coat."

Cecil Laloin

The Fallowfield Hunt, Full Cry

One of six chromolithographs

A set of British chromolithographs found in Charles E. Burchfield's studio may have served as source material for his *Country Life and The Hunt* scenic wallpaper designs. This example, *Full Cry*, bears the same title as one of Burchfield's vignettes. He may also have incorporated a sense of humor, showing some riders falling off their horses, as a result of Laloin's similar comical detail. Other titles in *The Fallowfield Hunt* series include *Breaking Cover*, *The Death*, *The Check*, *The Breakfast at the Three Pigeons*, and *The Hunt Supper*.