

Description of Original Picture Frames on Watercolors by Charles Burchfield

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The examination of frames reveals information about the tastes and priorities of artists, collectors, and society at large. Frames are a snapshot of the age that produced them; the frothy, intricate decorations of the Italian rococo period stand in stark contrast to the restrained aesthetic that marks English neo-classical design. A case in point are eight frames on watercolors by Charles Burchfield from the Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute.



Figure 1

They were brought to the Center for examination and description in preparation for a future exhibition and catalog. The eight frames held works created between 1929 and 1948 and ranged in size from the smallest, just under 29 by 37 inches, to the largest, 65 by 57 inches. The titles reflect the artist's affinity for nature and the visionary energy his work: *Sphinx and the Milky Way* [Fig. 1], *Flame of Spring*, *Apple Orchard*, *Country Blacksmith Shop*, *Lace Gables*, *Pussy Willows*, *Skunk Cabbage*, and *Village in the Swamps*. All of the frames are original to the paintings they enclose. Seven of the eight pictures were in the collection of Edward Wales Root, Burchfield's longtime patron and confidant. Root bequeathed twenty-one Burchfield painting to MWPPI. The frames are made of commercial, mass-produced rail stock that Burchfield painted off-white or grey, sometimes painting over existing commercial gilding. In some cases he augmented the frames with carving or widened them with additional wood strips. All the frames retain a plain appearance that occasionally slouches toward the rustic. Their simplicity, notes MWPPI director emeritus Paul Schweizer, makes the frames look "like poor cousins" beside more opulently reframed Burchfields in other collections.

In examining the frames, a number of criteria were considered:

PROFESSIONALLY MADE VS. ARTIST'S SHOP MADE

The terms "professionally/commercially made" and "artist's studio" made are used to distinguish between commercial production by a mill or frame shop and work completed by the artist or his assistants. Relatively crude construction methods and materials are understood to be from the artist's studio. The artist's studio would have had access to a table-saw if it fabricated the liners on *Sphinx and the Milky Way*, *Apple Orchard*, and *Flame of Spring*.

RAIL STOCK

Most of the rails and liners are a pale hardwood, probably maple; the rails on *Apple Orchard*, *Flame of Spring*, and possibly *Sphinx and the Milky Way* are softwood, probably pine. The various profiles for the rails were commercially prepared with a spindle molder machine (shaper), where the wood was passed by a spinning head fitted with profiled cutters. Spindle molding machines were introduced circa 1850 and they were well developed by the twentieth century for accuracy and volume production.

CORNER JOINTS

The artist's studio would have received either assembled frames (with separate liners) or long lengths of rail stock for cutting to size and joining. It is quite possible that corners glued with hide glue were commercially prepared and those with white PVA glue were prepared by the artist's studio. *Apple Orchard* has PVA glue and *Sphinx and the Milky Way* and *Flame of Spring*, whose corners are hidden, may have PVA glue. Consistent nail technique and hide glue in *Country Blacksmith Shop*, *Lace Gables*, *Pussy Willows*, *Skunk Cabbage*, and *Village in the Swamps* suggests professional assembly. The corner joints were all completed before paint was applied.

LINERS

All eight frames have flat or beveled liners painted after assembly with matte white or off-white paint that contrasts with the color and luster of the frame paint. The liners on *Sphinx and the Milky Way*, *Apple Orchard*, and *Flame of Spring* appear to have been made by the artist's studio since they are cruder and show table-saw marks.

PROFILES

No two frames are identical in their size or molding profile, however all frames, except *Flame of Spring*, have a rounded ovolo or torus top molding followed by a cove, and these profiles are similar enough to assume they came from the same commercial mill shop. The outer profiles on *Sphinx and the Milky Way* and *Country Blacksmith Shop* are the same, and the profiles on *Pussy Willows* and *Skunk Cabbage* are the same but for additions to the back edge on *Pussy Willows*.

MODIFICATIONS

The outside profiles on *Pussy Willows* and *Lace Gables* were widened by the artist's studio with added wood strips (the first strips on *Lace Gables* appear to have been professionally added); their corners are shaped with simpler rounded forms. *Apple Orchard* has wood blocking for support, *Sphinx and the Milky Way* and *Flame of Spring* have build-ups for support, and *Flame of Spring* also has added strips to increase the rebate depth, all added by the artist's studio.

PAINTED FINISHES

All eight frames are painted, either off-white and toned and distressed (abraded to resemble wear and reveal color), or painted variegated grey colors and distressed (*Sphinx and the Milky Way*, *Apple Orchard*, *Flame of Spring*). The liners and the grey colors are matte, and the off-white frame colors are satin gloss, probably a period oil paint. The grey paint on *Apple Orchard* is water soluble. The extent of distressing the

Sphinx and the Milky Way 1946

Overall size: 64 3/4" x 57" x 2 1/4" Rail width: 6 1/16"

Profile

Frame: Ovolo top molding (1), a small ogee (2), a flat (3), a cove (4), a torus (5); the outside profile is a cove (6), a small ovolo (7), and a small cove (8). Liner: Flat with bevel at sight edge.

Paint Decoration

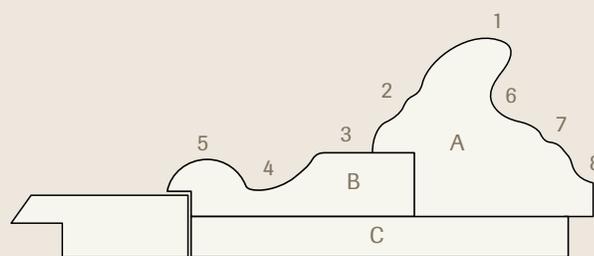
Three tones of matte grey paint on commercially brass-gilded wood; the paint is purposefully variegated and distressed to reveal the three paint colors. Liner: matte white paint.

Assembly

Sections A and B were professionally prepared moldings with brass gilded surfaces;

sections C and the liner were added by the artist's studio. The assembly of the frame parts was by the artist's studio, including the piecing of section A.

Sections B and C are continuous wood lengths to which twelve lengths of section A were added (three lengths per rail). The corners of A and B are mitered, glued, and nailed; the corners of C are butt joined and secured with corrugated nail fasteners; the corners of the liner are mitered and secured with corrugated nail fasteners. The end-grain seams and mitered corners on A are secured with corrugated nail fasteners. The frame and the liner were painted before they were fitted together with angled nails.



Flame of Spring 1948

Overall size: 47 7/16" x 37 3/4" x 2" Rail width: 4"

Inscriptions

Top rail, ink on paper label: W-61 Charles E. Burchfield Flame —Sp — [partly fragmented].

Profile

Frame: Small fillet top molding (the only frame without a torus/ovolo top molding) (1), a beveled flat main profile (2), cove outside profile (3). Liner: Flat liner (4) with rounded sight edge (5).

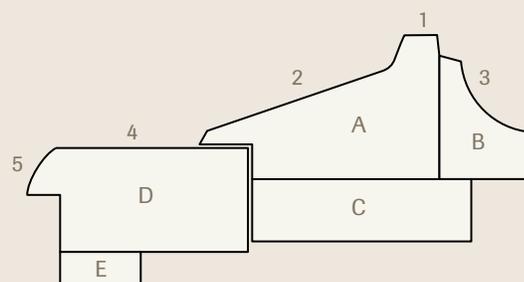
Paint Decoration

Frame: Two tones of matte grey paint over commercial brass leaf gilding. The gilding is barely visible. Liner: Matte white paint.

Assembly

The two parts of the frame, A

and B, were glued together, shaped, and gilded commercially. The rails were mitered and joined with glue and nails. Section C was added to the back by the artist's studio and secured with long nails from the front that were bent over on the back of C; the corners of C are butt joined and secured with corrugated nail fasteners. The frame was painted grey over the gilding and the paint laps onto section C. The liner was probably prepared by the artist's studio; the corners are joined with miters, glue, nails, and corrugated nail fasteners. The liner was painted before fitting to the frame with angled nails. Section E is a simple nailed addition by the artist's studio to increase the rebate depth.



paint varies; for example, the paint on *Lace Gables* and *Pussy Willows* (the two carved frames) is more distressed than the paint on *Blacksmith Shop* and *Skunk Cabbage*. The liner paint was not distressed.

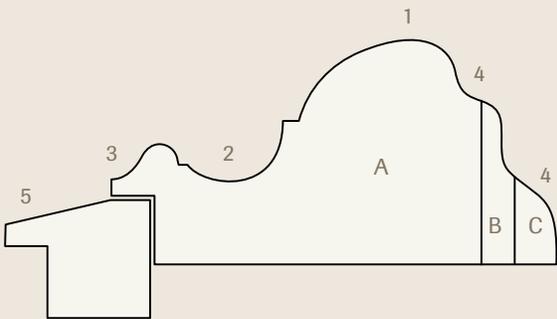
The same off-white satin gloss paint type and color were used on five frames, *Country Blacksmith Shop*, *Lace Gables*, *Pussy Willows*, *Skunk Cabbage*, and *Village in the Swamps*; this group is similar in profile, wood type, liner, nailing, gluing, etc., implying they were framed during a short period rather than the seven year period of completing the artwork (1929 to 1936). Two of this group of five (*Lace Gables*, *Pussy Willows*) have outer-edge modifications added by the artist's studio and the satin paint is continuous over the additions, implying the satin paint was also applied by the artist's studio.

GILDING

Five frame profiles were supplied with commercial brass-leaf gilding: *Sphinx and the Milky Way*, *Flame of Spring*, *Lace Gables*, *Pussy Willows*, and *Village in the Swamps*. The gilded finish was painted over by the artist's shop and the paint was distressed to reveal small amounts of gilding; the paint on *Flame of Spring* is less distressed and the gilding is barely visible. The gilding on *Village in the Swamps* has a red preparation layer revealed by the distressing. Generally, the earlier gilding is now more visible due to chipped paint.

CARVING

The corners on two frames, *Lace Gables* and *Pussy Willows*, were elaborated by the artist's studio with simple carving using a rounded file or rasp to form a symmetrical pattern of hollows. The carving cut through the commercial brass gilded finish and the filed surfaces were relatively rough when paint was applied.



Pussy Willows 1936

Overall size: 41 3/8" x 33 3/4" x 2 1/4"

Rail width: 4 1/2"

Inscriptions

Proper left rail, pencil: *Leave width as it is, cut length to 33 in. (33 1/8 exact)*

Top Liner, pencil: *Still Life*

Bottom rail, pencil: *Add stretcher frame (3/4" to show). Still Life.*

Cut for 25 1/2 x 33 (25 5/8 x 33 1/8)

[rebate size]

Profile

Frame: Ovolo top molding (1), a cove (2), a small ogee (3); outside profile with two coves (4). Liner: Beveled flat (5).

Paint Decoration

Frame: Off-white satin gloss with a thin dark toning glaze, lightly distressed, over commercial brass-leaf gilding.
Liner: Matte off-white paint.

Note: The same pallet was used on the frames for *Pussy Willows*, *Lace Gables*, *Skunk Cabbage*, *Village in the Swamps*,

and *Country Blacksmith Shop*.

Carved Decoration

Two symmetrical hollowed file cuts at the end of each rail (3 1/2" x 1 1/4" x 1/4" approx. each) form stylized leaf corner ornaments, applied by the artist's studio. The carving cut through the commercial brass gilded finish and the filed surfaces were relatively rough when paint was applied.

Assembly

The commercially shaped and brass-gilded frame A was widened with added strips B and C secured with glue and nails, and filler paste was used to round the angles. The rails were mitered, glued, and nailed together, and the file carving completed. Surfaces of B, C, and the filed hollows are not gilded. The liner was commercially prepared and mitered, glued, and nailed together. The frame and the liner were painted before fitting the liner into place with angled nails.

