



Blackbirds

Date

March 1916

Primary Maker

Charles E. Burchfield

Medium

Watercolor and graphite on paper

Description

Charles Burchfield's love of nature is apparent in his watercolors; his semi-abstract landscapes of central Ohio and upstate New York present a very personal, even spiritual or mystical, view. "It is the romantic side of the real world that I portray," the artist once wrote. "My things are poems—I hope." Rather than presenting a fantasy, however, Burchfield had a deep understanding of the natural world and was familiar with the essays and poetry on that subject by Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Burroughs. Burchfield painted both *Blackbirds* and *Spring Rain* (cat. no. 62) in the spring of 1916, when he was preparing to graduate from the Cleveland School (now Institute) of Art. There, in late 1915, he had been introduced to the work of the Japanese printmakers Hiroshige and Hokusai and thus to ukiyo-e color woodblock prints. Elements borrowed from those compositions—

stylized forms, decorative patterning, and a flattening of the picture plane—are apparent in his watercolors. Drawings related to both compositions appear in the artist's sketchbooks of this period (now in the collection of the Burchfield Penney Art Center, Buffalo, NY), including some dated March 2016 that document his explorations in simplifying the forms of tree branches, foliage, and birds along with diagrams in which he seems to have been working out how to depict reflections. *Spring Rain* may have been painted from the artist's living quarters, looking toward his backyard. Another watercolor made earlier in the year, *Backyard, Late Winter*, shows the same view from a slightly different vantage point. The artist used gouache to depict driving rain in a number of watercolors of this period—a device that repeats itself here. Both watercolors were bequeathed to the Wellin in 2016 by Daniel W. Dietrich II, Class of 1964, a staunch supporter of the arts on campus. (SOURCE: Alcauskas, *INNOVATIVE APPROACHES, HONORED TRADITIONS*, 2017)

Dimensions

Sheet: 11 15/16 × 8 15/16 in. (30.3 × 22.7 cm) Frame: 20 7/8 × 16 7/8 × 2 in. (53 × 42.9 × 5.1 cm)