

Burchfield's Astronomy

J. Patrick Harrington

SHS '57



“Afterglow” July 8, 1916

This is one of many dated paintings from 1915-1920 where the moon’s phase and the orientation of the lunar crescent are quite accurate. Most of Burchfield’s drawings and paintings from this period are astronomically quite close to the real sky.

Burchfield did few astronomical paintings from 1921 to 1945.

From 1946 until his death in 1967, Burchfield returned to depictions of nature, but became much freer in his approach, sometimes combining elements that could never actually be seen in the sky together.

The Importance of Orion to Burchfield

I like to be in bed at night and see **Orion** outside my window. This constellation, with the Pleiades ... have become **as important as the moon and sun.**

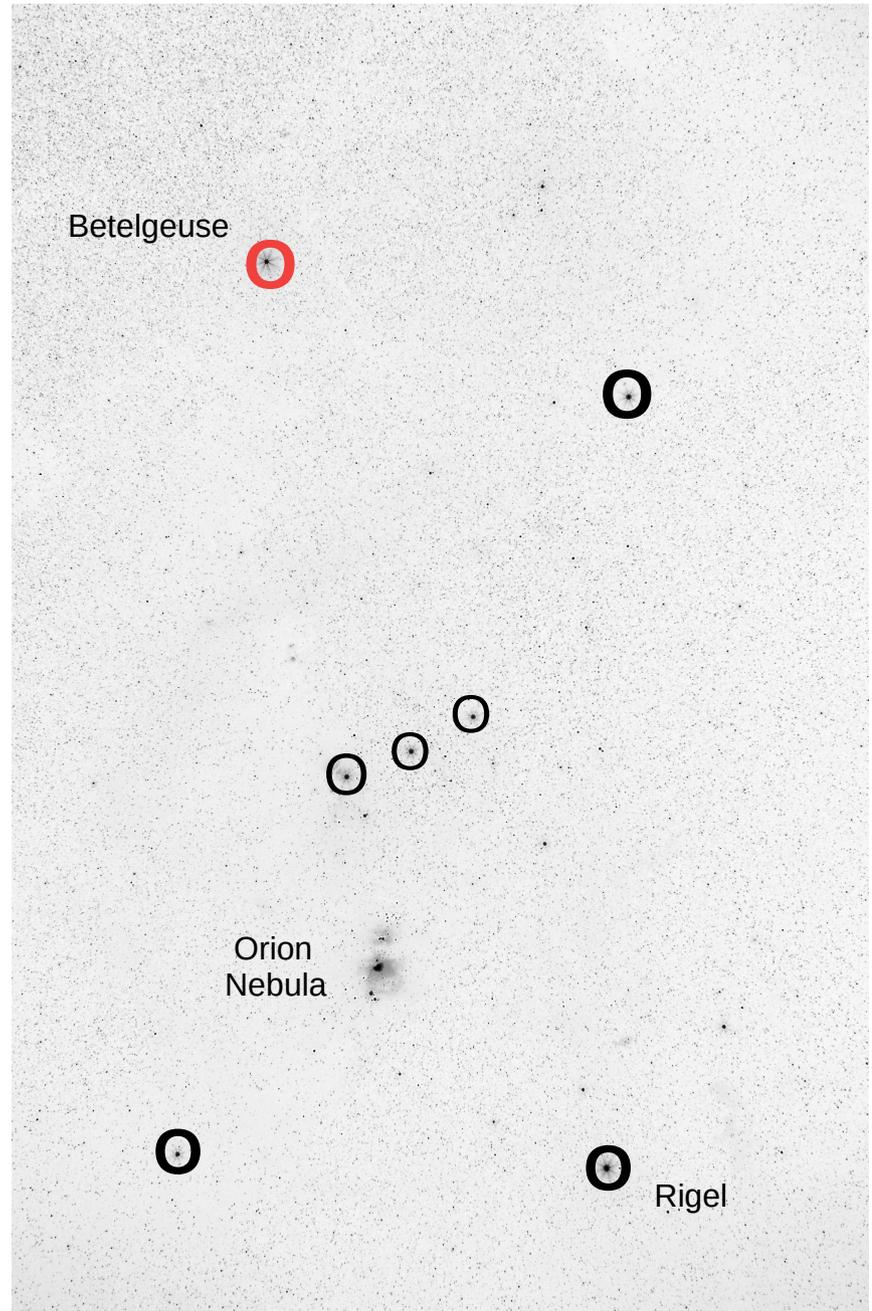
Burchfield's Journals, December 13, 1925

The other night I lay awake, tortured by a multitude of thoughts; outside the sky was blanketed with soft strangely luminous clouds, in which now and then appeared ragged holes thru which glowed the deep indigo sky – black star-studded caves that moved majestically toward the south. In one I saw two brilliant stars, and wondered what they were: the hole advanced revealing three stars in a row, and I realized that **I was looking at Orion. A feeling of peace and comfort came over me at the sight of this beautiful group,** like some Being saying “All is well” --

Burchfield's Journals, November 17, 1933

“I watched until **Orion, most beautiful of all constellations,** had risen three-quarters above the horizon.”

Orion





NORTH

Orion as seen from South America (Patagonia)

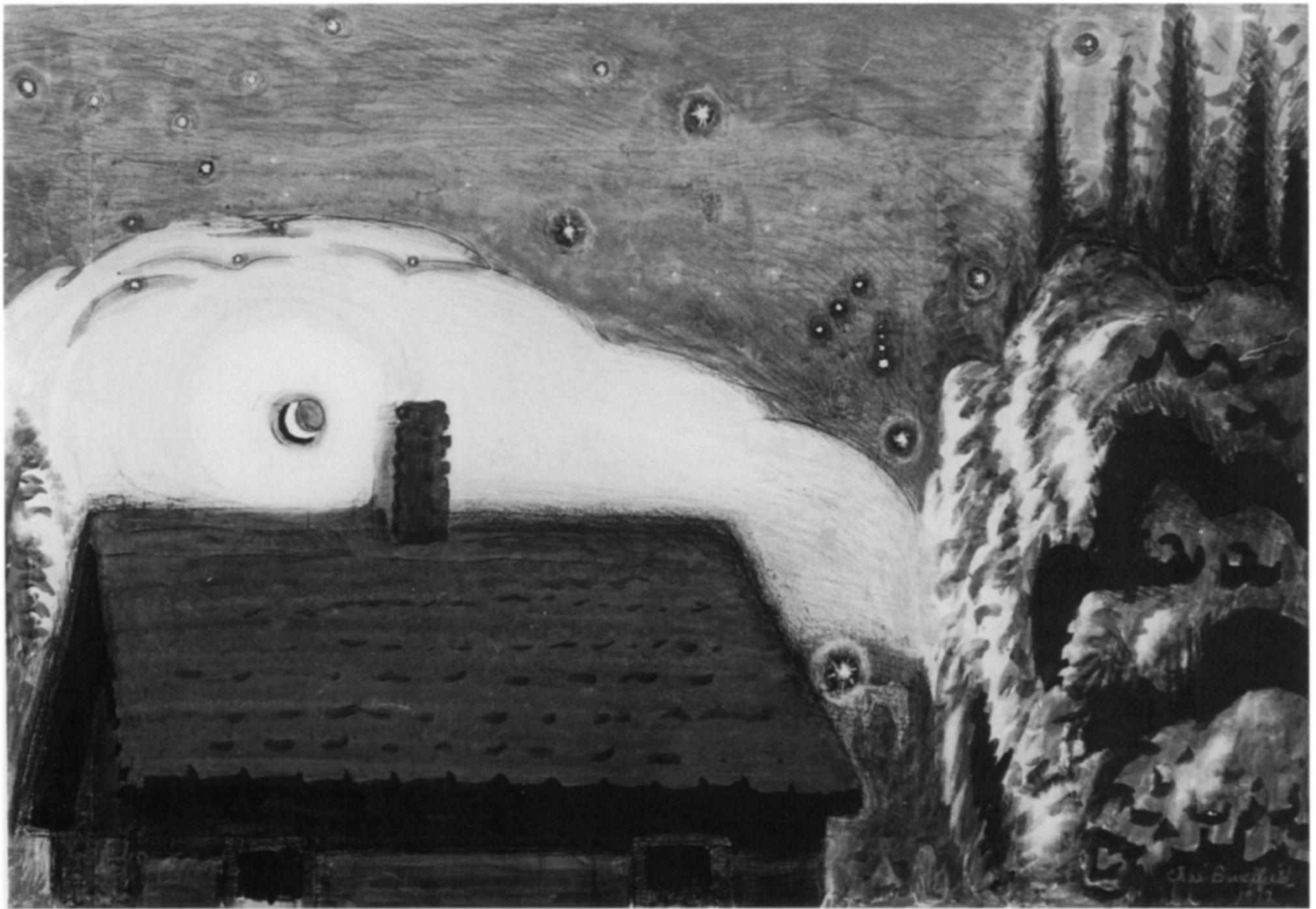
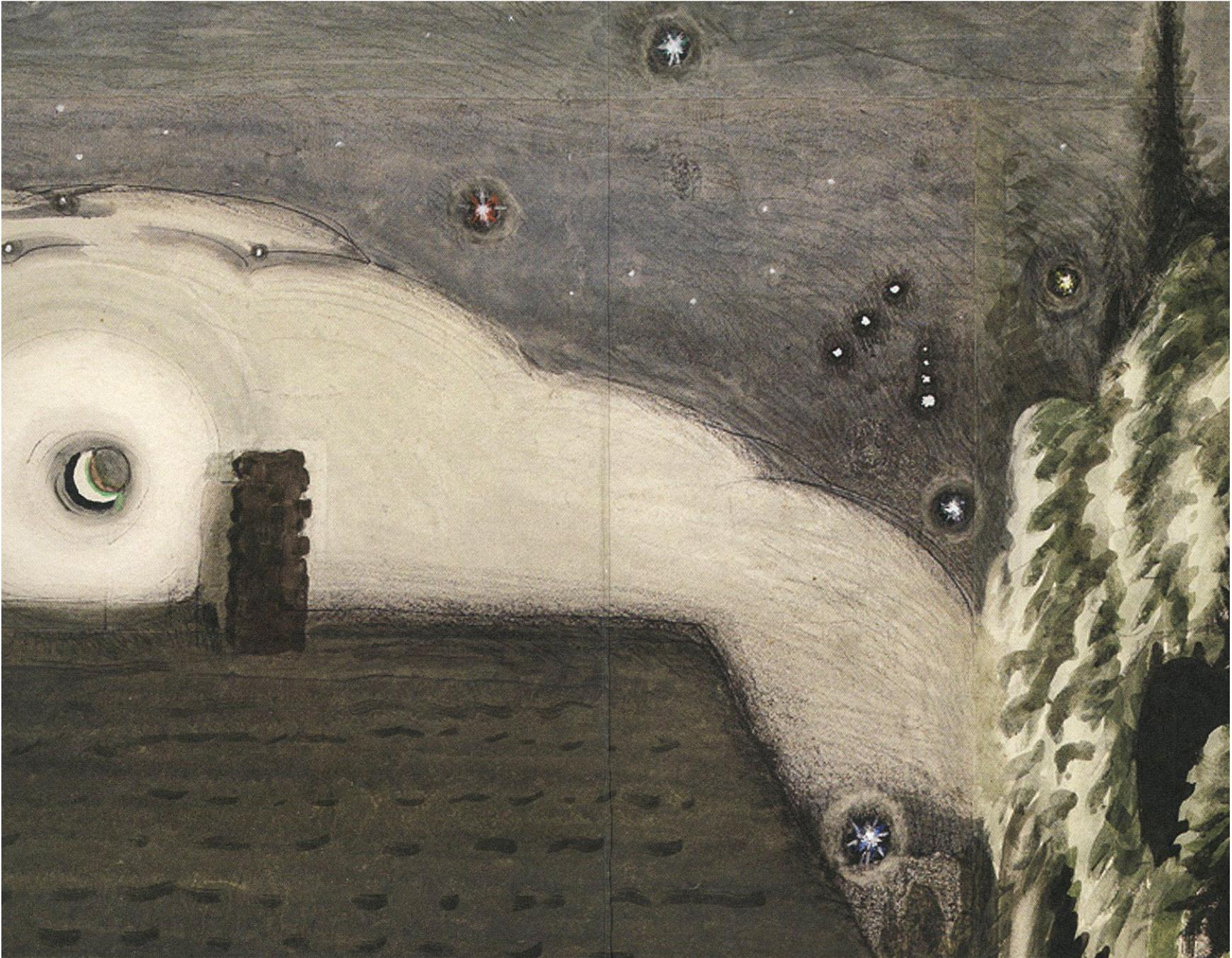


Fig. 1. Charles E. Burchfield. ORION AND THE MOON. 1917. Watercolor and crayon on paper, 23 3/8 x 34 3/4" (sight). Collection, Mr. and Mrs. C. A. Burchfield.



Detail of "Orion and the Moon" showing the color of Betelgeuse.

There are six possible dates in 1916: Aug 24, Sep 21, Oct 19. In 1917: Aug 15, Sep 11, Oct 8.

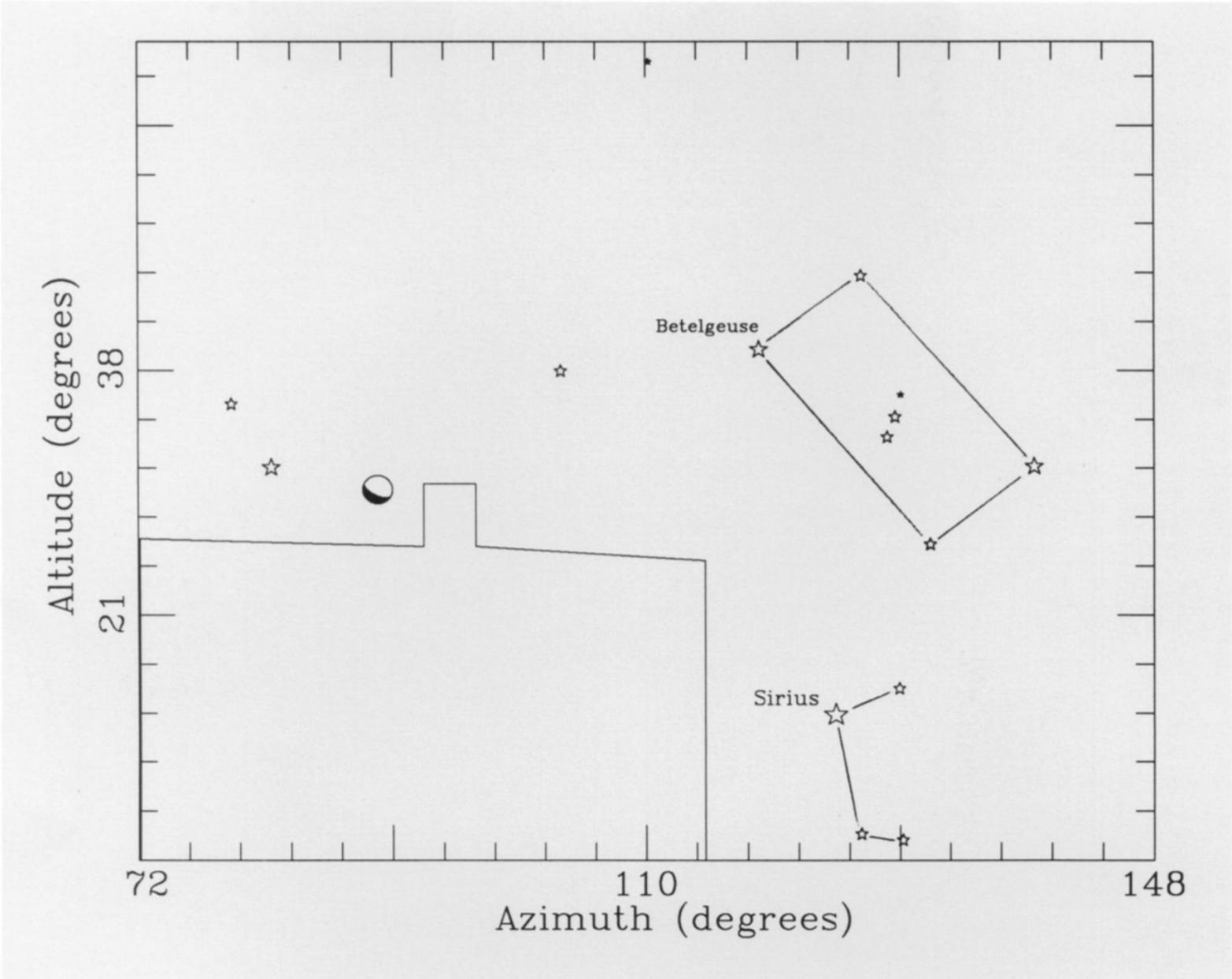
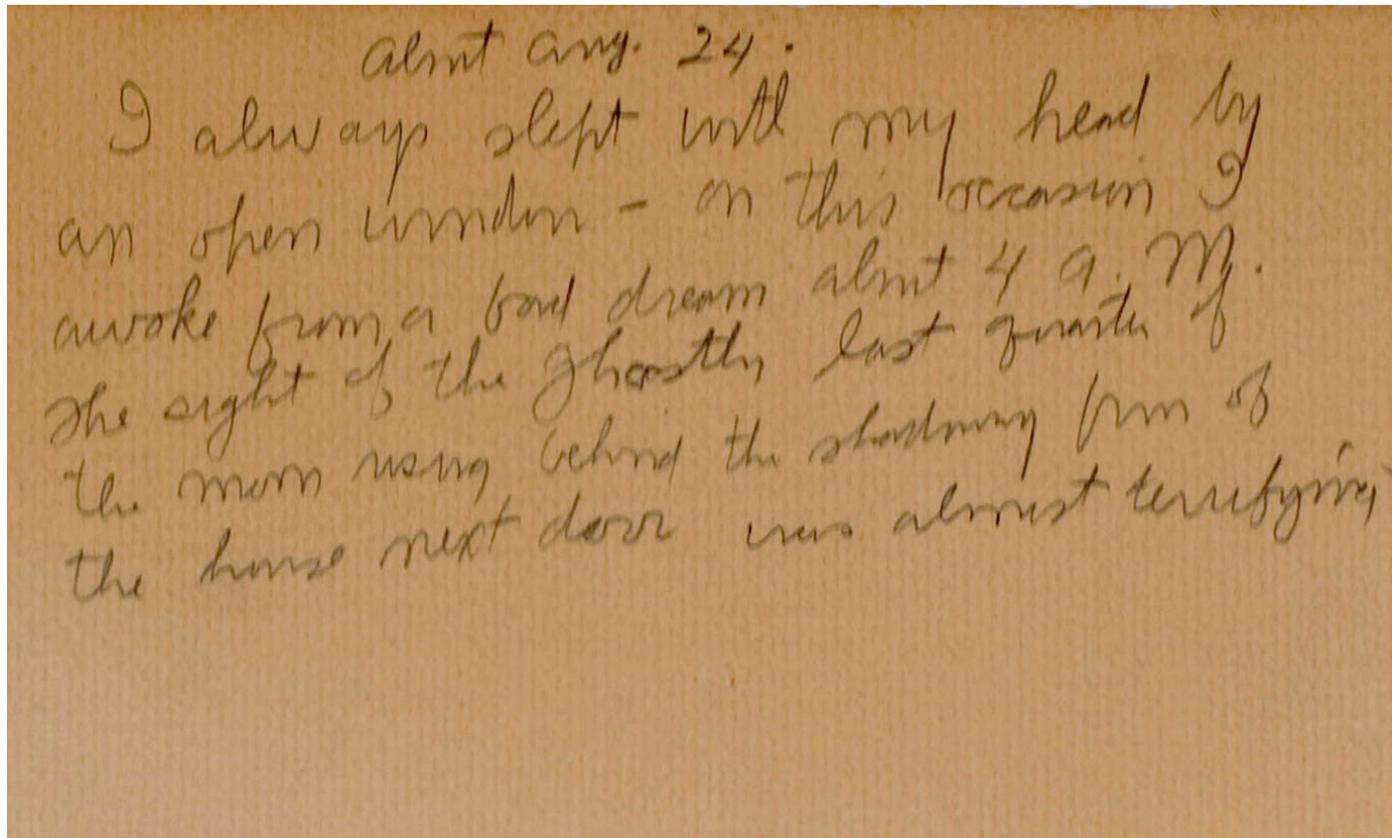


Fig. 13. Chart, prepared by the author, showing the eastern horizon on September 21, 1916, at 3:30 AM EST as seen from Salem, Ohio. The size of the moon has been increased five times. The star Betelgeuse, which has a red color, has been labeled. The size of the star symbol corresponds to the brightness of the star, Sirius being the brightest. See note 20 regarding the outline of the house.

Burchfield's note about what he saw on August 24 at 4 AM:



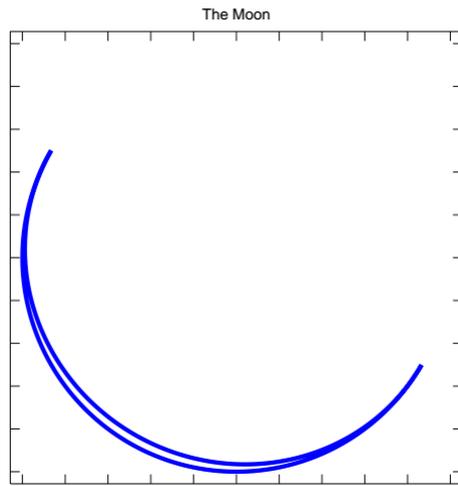
about Aug. 24.

*I always slept with my head by
an open window – on this occasion I
awoke from a bad dream about 4 a.m.
The sight of the ghostly last quarter of
the moon rising behind the shadowy form of
the house next door was almost terrifying*

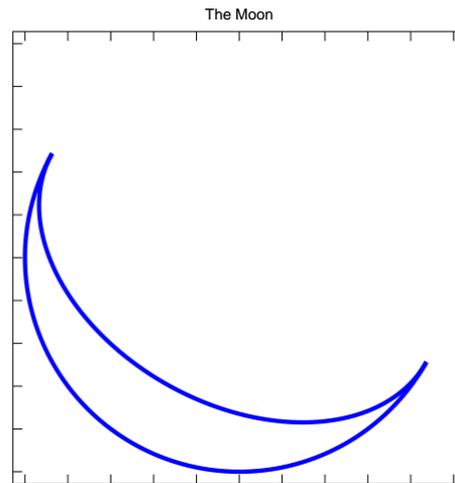
But the moon was not on visible Aug 24, 1917 – this has to be 1916!

The painting “Orion and the Moon” shows Orion and the moon rising in the east before dawn.

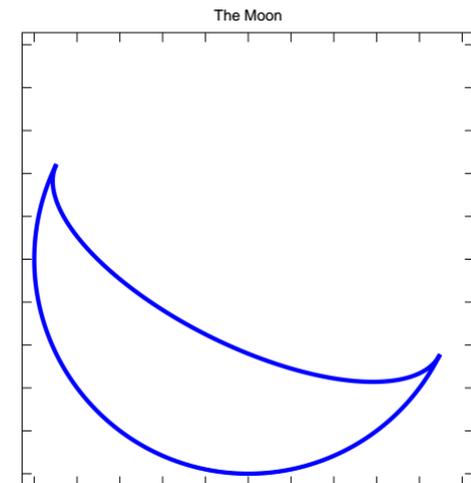
Here are the lunar phases on three dates in 1916 when the moon is near Orion:



28 July 1916

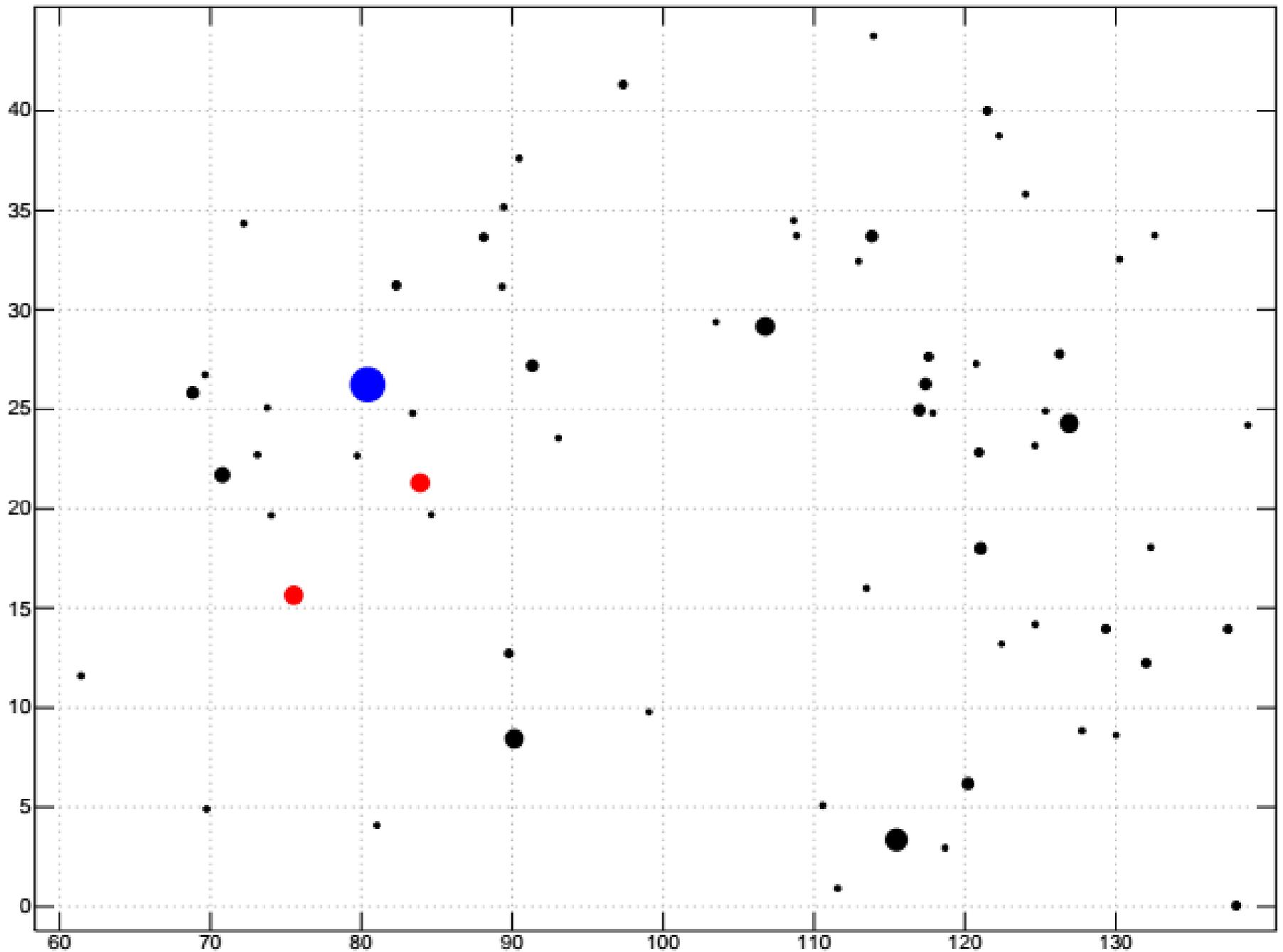


24 August 1916



21 September 1916

August 24 seems like the best fit to the painting “Orion and the Moon”.



The eastern sky over Salem on August 24, 1916 at 4:15 A.M.
The blue circle represents the position of the moon. (The red
circles are Venus and Saturn.)

37 years later, Burchfield was still haunted by this image!



Figure 4

Sketch from December 1953. Did Burchfield plan to make a large painting based on "Orion and the Moon", but extended to add the sunrise to the left of the house?



Chas. Burchfield, del.

No. 4.

J. J. Lankes-sculp

B+L

Do you see Orion's Belt?

Another title was:

"The Nebula in Orion As Seen If
Viewed From The Moon"

(What's wrong with that title?)

The landscape here is like
illustrations of the lunar surface
In popular astronomy books
of that period (1920's).

"The Heavens", woodcut with J J Lankes (1923-24)

In 1959, Burchfield wrote to his friend & patron Dr. Theodore Braasch:

“Yes, I did get the rising of Sirius and Orion painted – As I suspected it would ... it turned out differently than I had planned. I added the idea of the moon rising (just the very tip of it shows over the hill) – I did some astronomical juggling to get in all I wanted – above & to the left of the moon is “Canis Minor” to the right and most prominent “Orion” with Sirius below – all these have been put closer together than they would normally be ... An astronomer would no doubt be shocked.”

In his 1982 biography of Burchfield, “The Inlander”, Jack Baur assumed this letter referred to the magnificent late painting “Orion in Winter”. (Which is now in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection in Madrid, Spain.) But I realized that the letter could not refer to “Orion in Winter”, because there Orion is **setting**.

I proposed a painting from 1959, “Orion in December”, as the subject of the letter. In this painting, Orion is rising. However, this painting doesn’t show the moon.

The puzzle was solved by Tullis Johnson and Alana Ryder in the exhibit “Oh My Heavens” at the Burchfield Penny Art Center. They found a little-known painting “December Moonrise”, which is exactly like the description in the letter to Braasch.



"Orion in Winter" (1962)

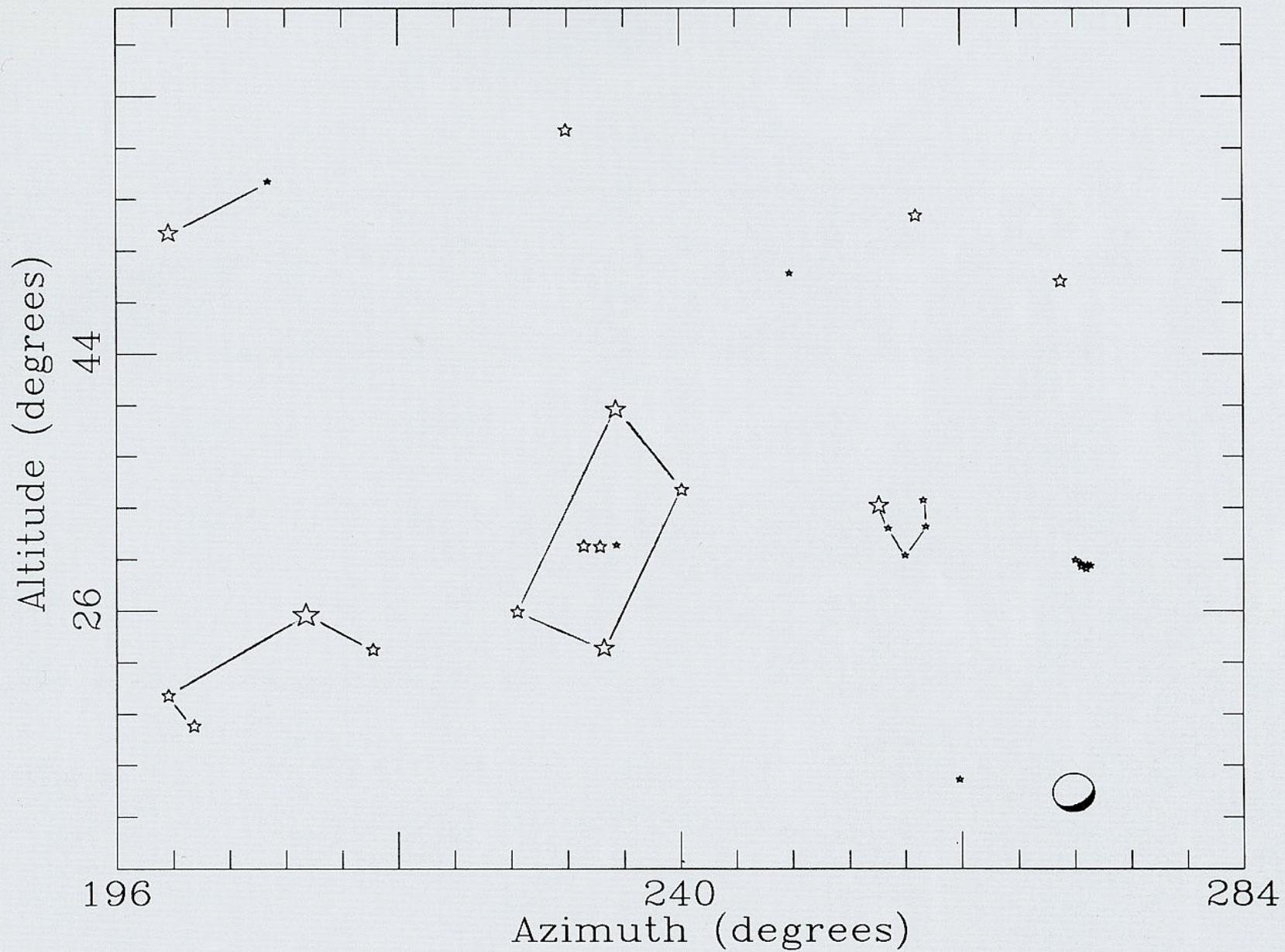


Fig. 16. Chart, prepared by the author, showing the southwestern horizon on March 9, 1962, at 9:30 PM EST as seen from Buffalo, New York. The moon's size has been increased five times.



“Orion in December” (1959)

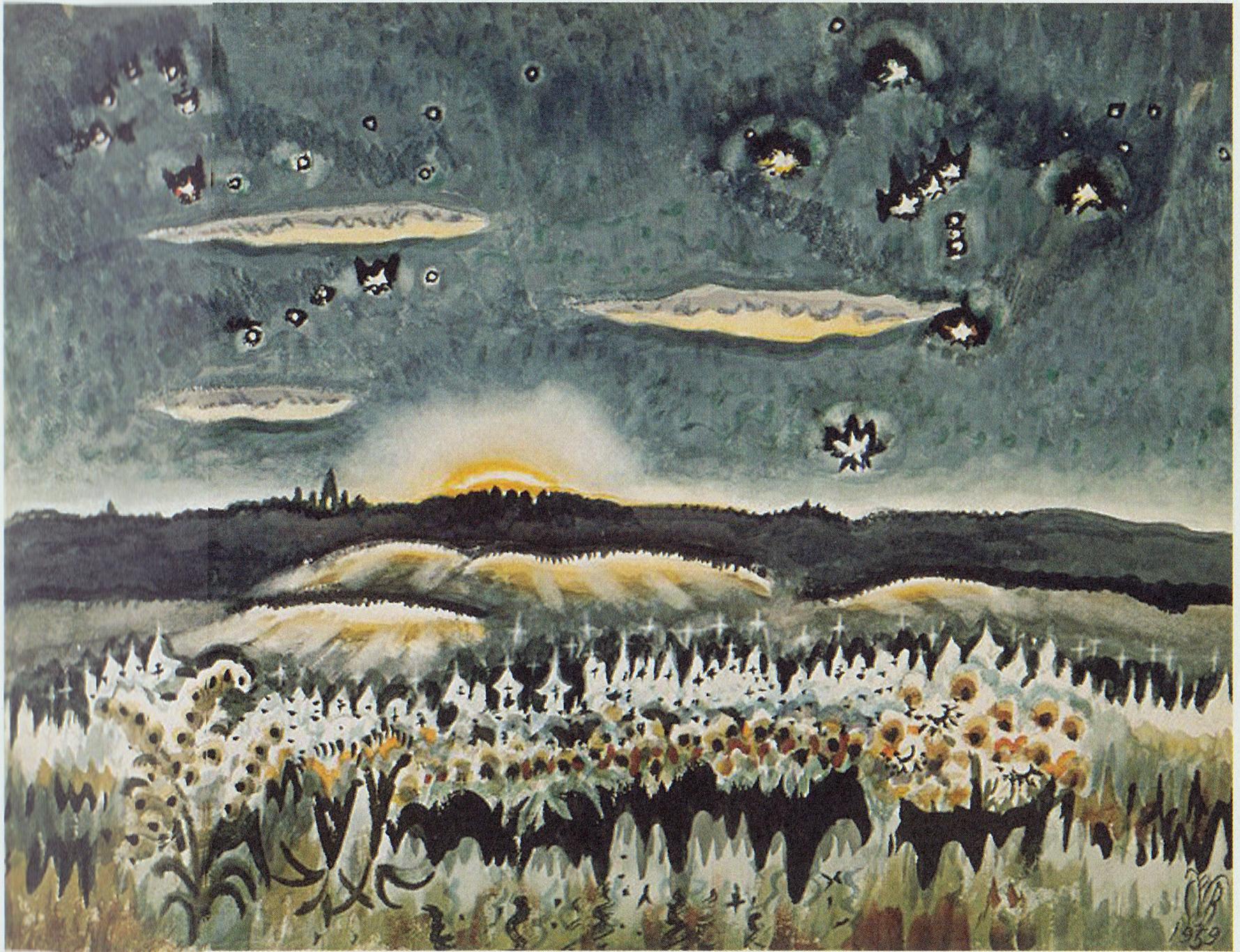


Figure 8

December Moonrise (1959)

The Sphinx and the
Milky Way (1946)

The "Sphinx" is the moth
near the bottom.



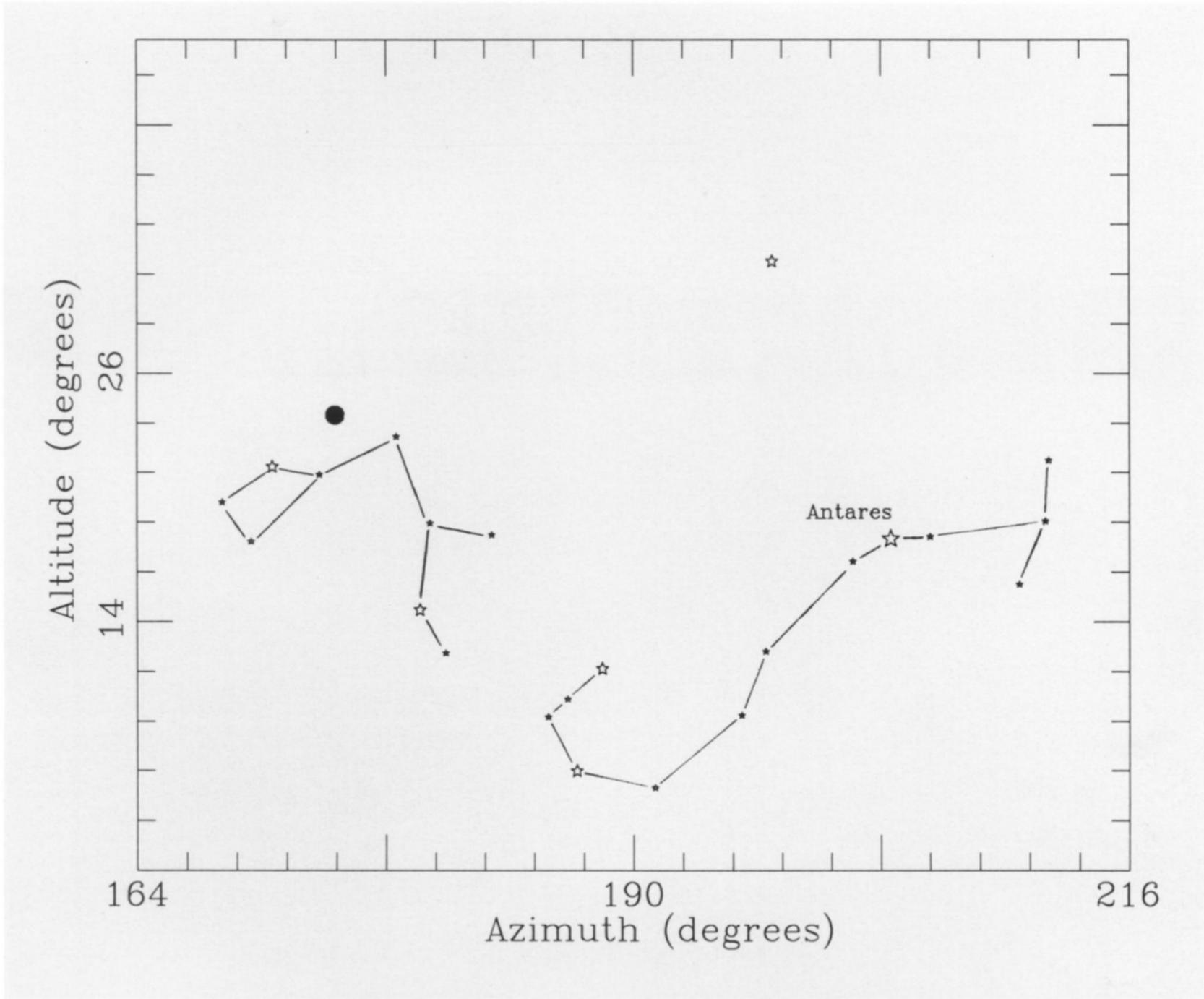


Fig. 20. Chart, prepared by the author, showing the southern horizon on July 31, 1917, at 10:00 PM EST as seen from Salem, Ohio. The size of the moon has been increased by a factor of 2. The star Antares, which has a deep red color, has been labeled.



An astronomical Impossibility.

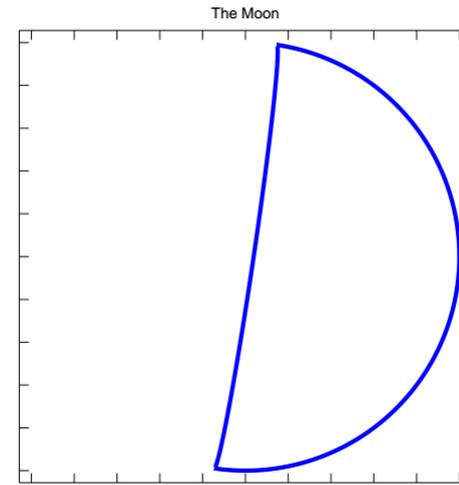
The moon is too large compared to the 22-degree ring around it. The Pleiades is too far from the moon and has the wrong orientation.

“Winter Moonlight” (1951)

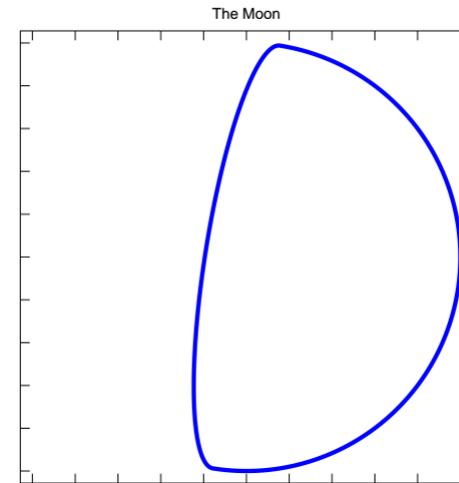


June Night (1959)
Christie's auction, May 9, 2018

(Estimate: \$600,000-\$800,000)



June 13, 1959 at 9:25 in Buffalo, NY



June 14, 1959 at 10:30



“Dandelion Seed Heads and the Moon” (1961-65)



Detail of "Dandelion Seed Heads and the Moon"

REFERENCES:

**“The Moon, the Stars, and the Artist:
Astronomy in the Works of Charles E. Burchfield”**

by J. Patrick Harrington. The American Art Journal
Volume XXII, Number 2, 1990

“Charles E. Burchfield: Oh My Heavens”

By Tullis Johnson and Alana Ryder
Catalog to accompany the exhibition at the
Burchfield Penny Art Center, 2013

Slides 12 and 18 are from the “Oh My Heavens” catalog.

Slide 9, the note about Aug. 24, is in the archives of the Burchfield Penny Art Center in Buffalo. I am grateful to Tullis Johnson and Nancy Weekly for bringing it to my attention.