Chagall

A Cry of Freedom

In the wake of a life in which he experienced two wars and exile, Marc Chagall (1887-1985) produced a body of work that was deeply rooted in 20th century history. A figure of displacement and migration, like those appearing in his paintings, the artist travelled the world at the mercy of the century's woes; from his childhood in Russia to French lands, passing through Germany, Palestine, Poland, the United States, and Mexico, before settling on the Mediterranean coast. Imbued with profound humanism and nurtured by his Jewish heritage and the experiences he lived through, Chagall's art emerges as the messenger of his unfailing commitment to humanity and human rights; to equality and tolerance among people.

Driven by a great cry of freedom, Chagall opened his eyes to the wars of his time and to the battles he waged within art while following the great conflicts and events of the 20th century. Transcended by poetic strength and his imaginary, the artist's works and writings are powerful testimonials of his political convictions and humanist commitment, expressed through a particular symbolism that occasionally conveyed an acute sense of jest and humor rooted in Jewish culture.

Chagall. A Cry of Freedom portrays a painter who was the witness of his time and focuses on the issues that were of greatest concern to him from a novel point of view. The archival work and in-depth research conducted for this project seek to open paths for new readings of Chagall's oeuvre and highlight his immovable faith in universal harmony and peace by establishing interwoven perspectives and dialogues with the history that was unfolding.

Ambre Gauthier and Meret Meyer

Curators of the exhibition

Plural Identities: The Migrating Artist

The genre of self-portraiture occupies an important place within Marc Chagall's work. Dating back to 1907, the first of these pieces laid the foundations for a practice that changed little over time. Chagall created his self-portraits from a deep understanding of those by Rembrandt and was able to construct his identity through the interplay of symbolic and metaphoric variables that eluded the mark of time, revealing a process of introspection that was simultaneously conjugated with a distancing from his own self. Throughout his entire career Chagall appeared with a youthful face in his paintings. Always plural, the identity he displayed was devised through the creation of archetypal characters in a process in which the guises being adopted respond to two depictions: the painter with his palette and the painter working in front of the easel. Chagall's self-portraits reveal his interest in costumes and masks, inherited from his knowledge of the world of the circus. He portrayed himself as a rooster, a donkey, a doe, a billy goat—as can be seen in *Good Morning Paris* or *The Road to Cranberry Lake*—and sometimes even as a monumental bouquet of flowers or a tree of Jesse.

Intimately linked to the experiences of migration and uprooting, these self-portraits are the vectors of a stable inner world that granted Chagall grounding and protection in the face of the extreme events that shook his life and work. Conceived as autonomous themes or incorporated into compositions with more ambitious iconographies, they are placed in the nooks of the canvases like nods, constantly reminding the viewer that the artist is not sleeping, that he is aware of what surrounds him, and that he is fully invested in the political and historical events of his time.

Russia. World War I

Chagall moved to Paris in May of 1911 through a grant provided by one of his benefactors in Saint Petersburg. The following year he established relationships with the poets Blaise Cendrars, Max Jacob, André Salmon, and Guillaume Apollinaire, among others, who would go so far as to deem his painting “supernatural”. He also encountered other artists such as Léger, Modigliani, Archipenko, and Soutine in the French capital.

The outbreak of World War I caught him by surprise in Russia, where he had returned in 1914 after opening an important exhibition in Berlin. Although he intended to stay in the country only briefly, the war forced him to remain until the conflict subsided. A series of drawings made with India ink stands out among the works he produced during this period. Of a documentary and cinematographic nature, they capture the crude reality of war: the march of combatants and the wounded soldiers. In paintings such as *Newspaper Seller* or *The Smolensk Newspaper*, the artist delves into the representation of people’s daily lives in Vitebsk during the war, distancing himself from the more lyrical tone of his traditional compositions. Chagall himself recalled this period in his memoir: “Behind me, the fields of Vitebsk are abandoned. […] Each picket of the fence is like the tooth of a dark destiny”.

Russia, That Country of Mine

First in Paris, later in his hometown of Vitebsk, and finally through his time in exile, Chagall always carried Russia in his heart and soul. The painter constructed a pictorial universe that was deeply influenced by the experiences of his youth. This explains the multiple instances in which images of his city and his shtetl (Jewish community) featured in his paintings; the bell towers and domes of the churches, the hills and snow covered isbas, and the banks of the Divna River, as in *The Gray House*. These recurring iconographies—which he addressed since his formative years in Saint Petersburg—continued to evolve, incorporating family figures and characters from everyday life and the peasantry; this comprised his universe of references.

In 1917 Chagall witnessed the Bolshevik revolution, which he initially embraced with great enthusiasm; a position that granted him the status of Russian citizen in full right after years of discrimination for his Jewish heritage. In August of 1918 he was named art commissary for the region of Vitebsk by Anatoly Lunacharsky. After producing the backdrop for the first anniversary celebration of the October Revolution, he turned his full attention to the foundation of a people's art school—for the children of the poorest families—and a museum; institutions he later directed. Their focus was that of free education and the study of all the artistic currents of the time. It would be through these efforts that Jewish art would encounter its modernity. In May 1920, after several heated discussions, Kazimir Malevich took over from Chagall as director of the school. Chagall moved to the outskirts of Moscow, transferring his educational work to the colony of children orphaned due to the pogroms in Malakhovka, where he would continue to teach throughout 1921.

Yiddish Modernity.
The Jewish State Chamber Theater

In November of 1920, at the height of Yiddish cultural renovation, Marc Chagall was invited to collaborate with the Jewish State Chamber Theater (GOSEKT) by its director, Alexis Granowsky. Recently relocated to Moscow from Petrograd, this institution was the vehicle for a revolutionary theatrical approach in which all works were performed in Yiddish, the language of Central and Eastern European Jews. Chagall produced seven panels for the theater walls on the subject of the universal projection of the arts and Yiddish modernity: the *Introduction*—a frieze over seven meters in length—the four allegories of the arts (*Dance*, *Theater*, *Music*, and *Literature*), *Love in the Theater*, and *The Wedding Feast*.

Currently preserved at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, the exhibition features several studies for the panels that decorated the interior of the theater, which came to be known as “Chagall’s little box”. The interaction between sets, actors, and costumes resulted in a spectacle of total art. Chagall also painted a curtain that was not preserved. His collaboration with the theater came full circle with the creation of set and costume designs for the theater pieces *Mazel Tov*, *Agents*, and *It’s a Lie* by Sholem Aleichem, performed by Solomon Mikhoels in the leading role.

Yiddish Modernity.
Letters, Words, and Images

In 1906, in a prophetic text titled “Hope and Fear”, the Jewish writer and playwright Isaac Leib Peretz expressed the pain and violence that Jews would be subjected to in the future. Considered one of the classical authors of Yiddish literature, Peretz would in time become a champion for the renewal of this language and its culture. After the October Revolution in 1917, this renaissance gained momentum; the Yiddish language carried the ardor of an entire generation of Jewish artists and their hopes of witnessing the dawn of a new world.

Permanently falling into a dichotomy between tradition and modernity, the Kultur Lige—an association that played a key role in the dissemination of Yiddish art by promoting the illustration of books by avant-garde artists with the objective of modernizing Jewish culture— was established in Kiev in 1918, at the height of the struggle for Ukrainian independence. Upon his arrival in Moscow in 1920, Chagall met many other artists who belonged to the organization as they fled Kiev escaping from Bolshevik repression. For the artist, it would be a time to rediscover his roots and the language of his childhood. Both Chagall and El Lissitzky were members of the Lige’s art section; the illustrated book format constituted an optimal instrument to express a divided identity for them. At the time, Chagall collaborated on a great number of publications in Yiddish, such as the book of poems *Troyer* [*Mourning*], by the writer Dovid Hofstein, or the literary magazines *Shtrom Heftn* [*The Current*] and *Khaliastra* [*The Gang*].

These are not Prophetic Times

Chagall left Russia for good in 1922 and settled in Berlin with his wife, Bella, and his daughter, Ida. The artist worked on his autobiography, *My Life*, and learned the art of etching. After his exhibition at the Ven Diemen gallery, and despite having garnered much notoriety, he moved to Paris with his family in 1923, where they resumed contact with their circle of artist and intellectual friends. One such friend, the art merchant Ambroise Vollard, commissioned Chagall with the illustration of a series of books, among which were Gogol's *Dead Souls* and La Fontaine's *Fables*, a milestone of French literature. This commission was the catalyst for a wave of criticism against Chagall's Russian origins and entailed further proof of the rise of anti-Semitism throughout Europe. On September 21st 1925, in a letter to the art critic Leo Koenig, the artist wrote: "This is not a prophetic time, evil prevails".

During those years—prior to and after his trip to Palestine in 1932—Chagall produced a series of portraits depicting Rabbis and characters carrying the Torah. This foreshadowed the uncertainty around the destiny of a threatened people. In his memoir, the painter refers to these works: "The tormented prophets of Vitebsk appeared in my paintings: among the hungry and the ragged, they cast a hopeless gaze at the world. Their perspective is the same as mine. Their colors slither down like sweat, draining into God knows what. Waiting for the dawn, for the end of the racket, the propaganda, the concentration camps, the ovens, the physical and moral prisons, I painted tortured prophets".

Painting as an act of Militancy

In 1933, only a few months after Hitler had risen to power, the National Socialist party burned Chagall's *The Rabbi* at a public ceremony in Mannheim. The threat to the Jewish people that the artist had been foreboding was ultimately real. This sentiment became evident in other works of the time. In *Solitude*, the painter seems to define the diffuse notion of persecution by means of a Rabbi who is protecting the Torah—the symbol of the savior in Hebrew culture faced with an imminent catastrophe—while expressing the Jewish community's awareness of the isolation they would encounter in Europe from that point onward. This is also the case in *The Flayed Ox*, which precedes Chagall's crucifixions and symbolizes the martyrdom of the Jewish people, or *Nude over Vitebsk*, in which the figure of his wife, Bella, flies over his hometown of Vitebsk with her back turned away.

After its rise to power, the German National Socialist party established a political culture based on the country's "purification". One of the favored manifestations of this persecution was the *Entartete Kunst* [*Degenerate Art*] exhibition, whose first edition opened in Munich on July 19th 1937. Seven hundred and thirty works by one hundred artists were on display with the intention of pedagogically demonstrating the "decomposition" of modern art and its authors as perpetrators of an attack against Germaness and German culture, many of whom were Jews, Chagall being one of them.

Despite the situation, the artist resisted the notion of abandoning France at first. However, the news arriving from Germany and the subsequent disenfranchising of the Jewish population by part of Vichy's collaborationist government led Chagall to reconsider his decision. Thus, in 1941, thanks to the intervention of the journalist Varian Fry and the Emergency Rescue Committee, Chagall sailed from Marseille to Lisbon in order to join the group of artists on their way to exile in New York. During this long journey he commented on the destiny of those who had remained on the continent: "Water as far as the eye can see; waves, and the slight shimmering of the sea horizon. […] From the bridge I can see the Rabbis and their families in the distance being transported to the camps. In the air, however, one cannot hear the sighing of those who are dragged to the ovens".

To the Martyr Artists: Scenes of War and Crucifixions

On June 21st 1941, Marc and Bella Chagall settled at number 4 East 74th Street in New York; this was the beginning of an extensive period in exile. While in the city, Chagall established a relationship with Pierre Matisse, who hosted the iconic *Artists in Exile* exhibition at his gallery. The show featured fourteen artists living as refugees in New York, including Chagall himself. The personal and artistic ties he established with his new art merchant lasted throughout entire life, resulting in numerous exhibitions.

Chagall's political position versus the atrocities committed against the Jewish people became even more intense during this period, both in terms of his participation in a number of associations and how he represented the horrors of the conflict in his work, as is the case of *War*. Likewise, the paintings of this time evoke the brutality of the pogroms—particularly those perpetrated in Poland, a country the artist had visited in 1935—the deportations, and the life in exile that the Jewish people had been subjected to.

One of the most recurrent motifs in Chagall's work during this period—an obsession of sorts—was that of the crucifixion. In response to what came to be known as the "night of broken glass" in 1938, Chagall painted Crucified Christs wearing nothing but the tallit (a white prayer shawl) around their waist. This representation was a symbol for the suffering of the Jewish people. All of the exiled artists' fears were condensed in these violent and tragic images as he witnessed the devastation of Europe from the other side of the Atlantic. Another key work of this time is the triptych *Resistance*, *Resurrection*, and *Liberation*, which was based on a prior work titled *Revolution* in which political and religious symbolism are fused.

Toward the light

Upon his return to Europe from the United States in 1948, Chagall settled in France; initially in Orgeval, in the outskirts of Paris, and later on the Mediterranean coast. At the time, he and other renowned artists such as Henri Matisse and Fernand Léger embarked on a series of monumental projects on the subject of peace that were intended for religious buildings and event halls. After supporting the creation of the State of Israel in 1948—established on May 14th of that same year—Chagall produced a series of stained glass windows for the new synagogue at the Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem (1962). Likewise, the artist crafted tapestries and mosaics that portrayed the history of the Jewish people since biblical times for the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, also in Jerusalem (1967). During the same period, Chagall established himself as the messenger of a peace that had to be recovered and protected; this became the essence of his projects for the United Nations headquarters *Peace* window in New York (1963-1964) and the Chapel of the Cordeliers in Sarrebourg (1974-1976). Lastly, the painter turned to the bible once again in an effort to spread a message that was more political, without ceasing to propound universal peace and spirituality. His efforts were embodied in the seventeen paintings that comprise *Biblical Message* (1956-1966). Conceived initially for the Chapelle du Calvarie in Vence, the works were donated to France in 1966 toward the creation of what is now known as the Musée National Marc Chagall in Nice, the first museum dedicated to a living artist.

The permanent dialogue between techniques (sculpture, ceramics, stained glass, tapestry, and mosaic) that Chagall initiated in the 1950s fuelled his painting. This was specifically embodied—within this recreational and multi-faceted creation process—in the collage, as it featured the geometrical fragments of a synthetic vision of forms, textures, and colors. Chagall had experimented with collage during the 1910s and retook the technique in the 1960s as he worked on preparatory models for the stained glass windows of the Hadassah synagogue. In the 1970s he also made use of the collage for the conceptualization of his monumental paintings. Chagall's search for freedom and light by means of new techniques responds to the practice of a form of painting in which color and inlays express his urgency to live more than ever.