

CHAGALL WORLD IN TURMOIL

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WALL PANELS OF THE EXHIBITION

Introduction

Marc Chagall is one of the most significant artists of European modernism. In his almost hundred years of life, he created a multifaceted oeuvre that can hardly be pigeonholed in terms of art history and enjoys enormous popularity worldwide. Chagall's works are often described with similar adjectives: poetic, dreamy, escapist. There is a particular discrepancy between Chagall's reputation as a poet among modernist painters, known above all for his colorful depictions, and his biography, which was significantly influenced by the political and social upheaval in Europe during the twentieth century. Chagall's pictures are always closely linked to the reality of his life, despite their often fantastic content. This is particularly evident in his works of the 1930s and 1940s, in which he clearly reflects the political reality around him and sets out to find a fitting visual language for both his personal experiences and the Shoah. On the basis of the artist's oeuvre, *Chagall: World in Turmoil* delves into important themes such as flight and persecution, the memory of one's origins and finding a new home in exile, but also the question of which personal experiences, and ascriptions by others, decisively shape one's own identity. These perspectives enable a differentiated view of one of the twentieth century's most important artists, whose life and work seem more relevant today than ever before.

World in Danger

From March 1 to June 4, 1931, Marc Chagall traveled to the British mandate territory of Palestine, along with his wife Bella and their daughter Ida. This trip has frequently been connected with his illustrations for the Bible, which the publisher Ambroise Vollard commissioned in 1930. Chagall had already completed the first gouaches prior to his trip, as a basis for the later etchings. His visit also enabled him to accept the invitation extended by Meir Dizengoff, who was the cofounder of Tel Aviv and its mayor at the time, to attend the laying of the foundation stone for a Jewish museum. What distinguishes the works produced in Palestine in particular is an almost documentary character. His perspective on the "Holy Land" is, however, selective and concentrates principally on the depiction of the sacred sites significant to Judaism. Chagall captured the Arab and Christian population just as little as the political situation. Chagall's focus on Jewish culture can be explained on the one hand by his search for inspiration for the Bible illustrations. On the other, the encounters in Palestine prompted him to examine his own Jewish identity, which was increasingly coming under threat from the outside. Chagall reacted in a very similar way during a trip to Vilna in Poland (today, Vilnius, Lithuania), which he embarked on by invitation of the Institute for Jewish Research (YIVO). During his stay, he witnessed several anti-Semitic attacks. Alarmed by the threat to Jewish culture in Vilna, Chagall painted and drew sites of Jewish life here as well, such as the large synagogue.

Heimat and Home

Chagall shifted the center of his life again and again over the years. Some of these moves were voluntary, while others were prompted by external pressure or even life-threatening danger. In 1922, Chagall left Vitebsk with his wife and daughter and moved to Paris by way of Berlin. At this point in time, he did not know that he would never again see his hometown, which had shaped him intensively as a person and as an artist. It was first in the 1930s and 1940s that this

foreboding slowly became a sad certainty. It was under the impression of the growing threat to the Jewish population of Europe in particular that the nostalgic references in Chagall's work intensified. Vitebsk appears repeatedly in various paintings and became a symbol of the longing for his lost home. Even the city of Paris, which Chagall once called his "second Witebsk", becoming his new place of residence in the 1920s, does not play as central a role in the works of the 1930s and 1940s as his Russian hometown. The same holds true for New York, to which Chagall fled along with his family from persecution by the National Socialists in 1941. Even though the city, which cannot be compared to any European metropolis, made a great impression on the artist, it barely appears in his pictures. Views of Vitebsk even turn up again and again in depictions of places like Cranberry Lake or High Falls in Upstate New York, where Chagall temporarily found a new home.

Flight and displacement

Chagall already experienced pogroms in his childhood, with the Russian October Revolution and the Shoah subsequently influencing his private life and his work. When the Communist Party restricted artistic freedom in Russia in 1922, Chagall moved to France in 1923. Paris became his new home, until the National Socialists seized power in Germany in 1933 and systematically persecuted and murdered Jews throughout Europe in the years that followed. In 1939, Chagall first moved with his family to the south of France, before ultimately emigrating to the United States in 1941. His own experiences, but also the reports that reached him in exile, thus pervaded his painting. The crucifixion motif plays a particular role in this context. Chagall already occupied himself with the depiction of Christ on the cross sporadically starting in 1908. In the 1930s and 1940s, he dedicated himself to this topic more intensively and hence reacted directly to the events of the war in Europe. In his pictures, he clearly characterizes Christ as a Jew with attributes like the Jewish prayer shawl (tallit) or phylacteries (tefillin), and thus makes reference to the duality expressed by the figure of Christ. By combining Christian iconography with Jewish symbols, Chagall developed a new narrative and stylized Christ as a Jewish martyr. With the crucifixion, Chagall therefore found a personal motif with which he addressed the persecution and extermination of Jews in Europe, without referring directly to the historical situation in his pictures.

Bella

Marc Chagall visualized the motif of a floating, intimately connected pair of lovers in numerous paintings. The protagonists are the artist himself and his wife, Bella, who was born in 1889 as Basia-Reiza Rosenfeld. The rendering of the lovers appears with different facets, hence also in the form of figures with two heads, thus calling to mind the mythological god Janus, whose gaze is turned to both the past and the future. The pair of lovers hence makes reference to bygone times shared in Vitebsk and also to an uncertain future. Like Marc Chagall, his wife, Bella, also grew up in Vitebsk. As a daughter of a wealthy jeweler, she enjoyed a secondary education. The couple met each other in 1909 through a mutual friend and married in 1915. In 1923, they moved to Paris, where Bella Chagall collaborated on the French translation of Marc Chagall's autobiography *My Life*. When the married couple was forced to emigrate to the United States in 1941 due to the systematic persecution and murder of Jews in Europe, both Marc and Bella were deeply concerned about the continued existence of the culture of their home. While in exile, Bella Chagall processed her Jewish childhood in Eastern Europe through literary activity. Her memoirs, *Brenendike likht* (Burning Lights, 1945) and *Di ershte bagegenish* (First Encounter, 1947), were published posthumously. After Bella Chagall's sudden death on September 2, 1944, Marc Chagall portrayed his deceased wife in an iconic way and thus processed his grief over her passing, but also the destruction of the tradition of Eastern European Jewry.

The Falling Angel

Chagall worked again and again on *The Falling Angel*, which accompanied him from Paris into US exile and back to Europe, over a long period of time. The picture can be regarded as a programmatic work of the 1930s and 1940s. The process of its creation makes it possible to retrace Chagall's examination of political events in a particularly impressive way. The current dating names the points in time at which the three different versions were completed: 1923, 1933, and 1947. The first version of the painting was made shortly after Chagall returned to Paris, most likely under the impression of his stay in Germany and the increasingly anti-Semitic atmosphere there. The seizure of power by the National Socialists prompted Chagall in 1933 to start working on *The Falling Angel* again. Even though Chagall exhibited the second version of *The Falling Angel* at the Kunsthalle Basel in 1933, he worked on additional variations in several sketches. Several pictorial motifs appear in the designs for these sketches, such as the crucifixion and fleeing individuals, motifs that are used in the final version, but also in subsequent paintings. Chagall completed his work on *The Falling Angel* in 1947, shortly before moving back to France from exile in the United States. The changes to the angel, which now has distinctly female traits and is falling to earth with its mouth wide open, are particularly striking. Here, the angel no longer seems to be the cause of the horror from which the other figures are fleeing, but instead appears to be itself frightened by what it sees on earth.

Aleko and the Firebird

In late 1941, Marc Chagall was commissioned to design four sets and the costumes for a ballet performance of *Aleko*. He became involved in the piece, which is based on a Russian poem by Alexander Pushkin and was set to music by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, by invitation of the choreographer Léonide Massine and the dancer Lucia Chase, who would later cofound the American Ballet Theatre. At the center of the tragic love story is the young aristocrat Aleko, who falls in love with the beautiful Sinti-Roma girl Zemphira. His love, however, remains unrequited and turns out to be fatal for Zemphira. The premiere was initially planned for New York. But since the local production costs would have exceeded the planned budget, the production was moved to Mexico City. Along with Léonide Massine, who also had Russian-Jewish roots, Marc and Bella Chagall traveled in August 1942 to Mexico City, where the premiere was celebrated at the Palacio de Bellas Artes on September 8, 1942. The premiere in the United States followed roughly one month later, on October 6, at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Three years later, in 1945, the American Ballet Theatre commissioned Chagall to design sets and costumes again, this time for the piece *The Firebird*. After the death of his wife Bella the previous year and the subsequent creative crisis, this work was of great significance for him and was also an important public commission. Chagall designed three sets, a stage curtain, and over eighty costumes for the staging. The premiere took place on October 24, 1945, at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Igor Stravinsky composed the music for the ballet, and Adolph Bolm provided the choreography. The fairy-tale-like story deals with the young Prince Ivan Tsarevich's love for the Princess and his brave struggle against the evil magician Koschei. Chagall's costume designs visualize the fanciful world of the firebird with its floating human-animal hybrids, demons, and two-faced figures.

Looking forward – looking back

Marc Chagall regarded the end of the Second World War with mixed feelings. While the longed-for return to France came tantalizingly close, information about the Shoah, which had already reached his ears through the US media and Jewish emigrant circles, became a horrible certainty. Chagall was also torn in his private life. After his wife Bella's death, he found a new partner in his housekeeper, Virginia Haggard. Nonetheless, the loss of his great love still weighed heavily on

him, and the prospect of leaving her grave behind in the United States did not make returning to France any easier. Chagall's feeling of being torn between the United States and Europe, between Bella and Virginia, between the past and the present, also became visible in the works produced prior to his return to France. In addition to pictures in which he reacted to the murder of millions of Jews and expressed his concern about the future of Europe, there are also pieces that presage a new chapter in his art. Chagall's inner conflict becomes particularly clear—in this phase of transition between two periods of his life—in his portraits with two faces, in which he frequently blended his own face with that of his deceased wife or, as a painter with two faces, looked at the canvas and his model simultaneously. In August 1948, Chagall left his exile in the United States and returned to France along with Virginia Haggard.