Chagall, Marc (1887-1985)

Marc Chagall was a Russian-Jewish Modernist painter who lived in Paris for a substantial portion of his life. In Russia, after the 1917 Revolution, he was named the Commissar of Arts for Vitebsk, where he built and developed an art institute. He would soon leave the school over disputes regarding Kazimir Malevich’s strict adherence to Suprematism. Chagall’s work ranges over a wide array of media including painting, stained glass, textiles, prints, and stage sets. His family history and time spent in France and the United States give him and his work a unique perspective which bridges Eastern and Western modernist traditions. The sources and influences to which he turned included Jewish folk culture, Symbolism, Cubism, and Fauvism. His friendships with members of the western European avant-garde, including Robert Delaunay and Guillaume Apollinaire, allowed him to develop a well-connected basis in the Parisian art world. His paintings are known for their experimental, expressive, and bold use of colour as well as the poetic, figurative compositions which largely call upon the visual surroundings of his childhood. His major works include monumental-scale stage sets for Opera and Theater productions in Paris and New York.

Chagall was born to a working class Jewish family in Vitebsk, Belarus. He studied at the Imperial Society for the Protection of the Arts in Saint Petersburg from 1907 to 1910. Moving to Paris in 1910, Chagall met Guillaume Apollinaire, Robert Delaunay and Fernand Léger, and encountered Fauvism and Cubism. He participated in the *Salon des Independants* and the *Salon d’Automne* in 1912. He was given his first solo show in 1914 at Der Sturm, Berlin.

He returned to Vitebsk in 1914 to marry his fiancé, Bella, when the First World War began, closing Russia’s borders and keeping Chagall from returning to Paris. Anatoly Lunacharsky, Commissar for Education, named Chagall Vitebsk’s Commissar in 1918. He founded the Popular Art School, developed a broad and comprehensive syllabus, and employed El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, and Ivan Puni as teachers. Chagall acted as Director of the school until clashes with the suprematists over Chagall’s figurative and mimetic compositions led to his resignation in 1920. He left for Moscow, where he completed a commission for the Theatre of Jewish Art, including murals, curtains, costumes and six stage panels. He left for Berlin in 1922 followed by Paris in 1923, traveling throughout Holland, Spain, Egypt, Syria and Palestine.

He worked in Paris throughout the 1920s and 30s, taking French citizenship in 1937; however, his arrest and short imprisonment under the Vichy government forced him and his wife Bella to depart for the United States as refugees in 1941, following an invitation from MoMA. Chagall’s time in New York (1941-1947) was marked by Bella’s sudden death in 1944.

In 1950 he settled in Saint-Paul de Vence, France, where his style subtly developed into more intricate, mosaic-like painting. From the mid 1950s until his death, Chagall worked with stained glass, a medium that allowed imaginative colour experimentation. In 1964, he completed *The Sources of Music* and *The Triumph of Music*, two monumental murals that were shipped to New York for the Metropolitan Opera House, where they hang in the main lobby.

**References and further reading:**

Bucci, M. (1970) *Chagall.* Florence, Sadea/Sansoni.

Compton, S. (1985) *Chagall*. London: Royal Academy of Arts in Association with Wedenfeld and Nicolson.

Kamensky, A. (1989) *Chagall: The Russian years 1907-1922*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Polonsky, G. (1998) *Chagall*. London: Phaidon.

Souverbie, M. (1983) *Chagall*. London: Methuen.