

Chagall's response to war and revolution

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15 September 1998

Marc Chagall--Love and the Stage, Royal Academy, Piccadilly, London.

Until October 4, 1998

In June 1914 the painter Marc Chagall travelled back to Vitebsk in Russia. He had intended a three-month stay before resuming his studies in Paris, but the outbreak of the First World War left him stranded in his homeland. He married his fiancée, Bella Rosenfeld, in Vitebsk in 1915, and spent the war working in the Office of War Economy in Petrograd, where he was intimately involved with the local avant-garde, both exhibiting his own work and visiting other exhibitions. He stayed on in Russia after the 1917 Revolution.

In September 1918 Chagall was appointed Commissar for Arts in Vitebsk, with responsibility for theatre in the area. In total his brief trip home lasted eight years, during which time he was busy on a wide range of work. This small exhibition collects together his paintings from that period, most of which have remained in Russia since 1922.

The three-room display, because it covers a relatively short period in an artist's life, offers a chance to focus on how Chagall responded to the upheavals of the First World War and the Russian Revolution.

The paintings are arranged into four main subject areas. The most unified group is the love paintings in Gallery 3, through which the viewer has to walk to reach the other galleries. His paintings for and about the theatre are spread across two galleries, whilst his revolutionary propaganda work shares most of a gallery with his paintings and drawings of Jewish life in Vitebsk. All of the groups feed into each other thematically and stylistically.

The love paintings occupy the pride of place in the exhibition. The large canvas *Promenade* (which has been used as the exhibition's poster), showing Bella flying round Vitebsk holding Chagall's hand, is a beautiful introduction to his work from this period. Elsewhere in this gallery there are other pictures of people flying--lovers, as in *Over the Town*, or an old man in *Over Vitebsk*--along with a stunning sequence of portraits of him and Bella as lovers. There are also a number of paintings based on early religious works. In *The Apparition* (based on El Greco's *The Annunciation*) inspiration is represented as an angel sweeping colour onto the canvas.

This is undoubtedly Chagall the mystic, representing what Apollinaire had called the "sur-naturel" world in his work. The response of some critics has been to suggest that this is what Chagall would have and should have been doing had he not been side-tracked by the Russian Revolution. Yet a viewing of the rest of the exhibition suggests that not only did Chagall respond positively to the possibility of an artistic upsurge contained in the

revolution, but that he was also quite positive about using his experience of revolutionary art in his more personal work. (It has been suggested, for example, that the pose for *Promenade*--Chagall earthbound while holding Bella aloft--owes something to his portrayal of revolutionary banner waving.)

Whilst his outlook was mystical, Chagall was also enthusiastic about the development of a material culture that he acknowledged stemmed from a revolutionary situation. He expressed this quite clearly himself when he asked, "Who of us can see, in its entirety, his path, whether in life or art, and who can tell where it will end? Fate has always, one might say, driven me from place to place. But I ought to be grateful to it for my stay in Russia during those decisive years of war and revolution."

An idea of his response to the enthusiastic flowering of culture in the immediate aftermath of the revolution can be gained by a study of his work for the State Jewish Chamber Theatre, which was dedicated to Yiddish productions. (Such a project was only possible thanks to the Bolsheviks' overthrow of tsarist restrictions on citizenship, movement and education.) Chagall was already talking in terms that linked the theatre with the external social upheaval. Speaking of the beginning of the war he said, "I didn't realise that ... that bloody comedy was to begin, as a result of which the whole world, Chagall included, would be transformed into a new theatrical stage on which huge mass performances would unfold."

By 1920 when he worked on the pieces in Moscow, he had a deeper understanding of the artistic possibilities for the theatre opened up by the new society. He said to the stage manager and actors of the Jewish Theatre, "Together let's throw out all this old stuff. Let's perform a miracle." The paintings are full of energy and life. The end piece, *Love on the Stage*, is an elegant portrayal of two classical ballet dancers (with the features of Chagall and Bella) outlined on a soft backdrop of grey and white. The influence of the Russian avant-garde--Kandinsky and Malevich, whose work he saw in Petrograd--is evident in the stark and sweeping shapes which play across the dancers' forms. It is a very gentle piece, with links to his other paintings of his wife. Only the beautiful movement of the dancers prepares you for the massive vibrancy of the two wall-length pieces alongside it.

Introduction to the Jewish Theatre leads the viewer from the back of the stalls to the edge of the stage. Over its length we see every aspect of the theatre. The theatre's artistic director, Abram Efros, is handing Chagall himself over to the stage director Aleksei Granovsky. Behind screens people are discovered drinking, animals lurk in odd corners, actors appear in half their costumes and huge rainbow arcs draw the eye nearer and nearer to the stage.

At the centre of the piece a Klezmer group plays with such enthusiasm that their instruments are disintegrating in their hands. If this work is Chagall's general view of the power of the theatre, he defined his perceptions of this particular theatre on the opposite wall.

In each of the four frames of *Music, Dance, Drama, Literature* a single figure personifies the art form within the context of a Hasidic wedding (a long *Wedding Feast* above them ties them all together). Again they are bursting with an exuberant entertainment for the society around them. "Music" has a green face and an orange fiddle and dances amidst peasant huts. The ecstatic "Dance" is accompanied by a figure standing on his hands, but is also backed by figures hard at work. In "Drama" an actor has reduced his audience to tears of laughter. Only "Literature" is a contemplative figure, but even behind his scroll stands a goat. This is a vibrant theatre inextricably linked to the people.

This becomes clearer in the second gallery where several of his costume and set designs are displayed alongside studies for the large wall pieces. It is clear as well that he regarded his work as an integral part of the creation of a piece of theatre. His costume designs pull actors into specific poses. Leading actor Solomon Mikhoels (who is shown in various designs with his hands creating monstrous shapes) said to Chagall. "I've been studying your sketches. I've come to understand them. They've made me change my interpretation of the role completely. From now on I'll be able to use my body, move and speak differently."

That this upsurge in artistic potential was intimately connected with the situation prevailing after the Russian Revolution is perhaps best seen in the two small sketches for banners commemorating the first anniversary of the revolution he executed as Commissar. These also highlight the use he made of such a development in his more personal pieces. It is difficult not to see a small piece like *The Rider*, where the revolutionary messenger blows his horn amidst tiny villages as a red banner sweeps across the canvas behind him, as being connected with *The Apparition*.

There it is imagination that invades the space; here it is revolution. The curators suggest, "It will come as no surprise that Chagall's designs were not considered sufficiently political by local party functionaries." Chagall's attitude to the revolution may have been complex, but the suggestion that his work was not adequately political does come as a surprise when we know that in the space of just under two months he produced 150 banners and seven arches for street decorations.

What links his expressly political work with his theatre designs (and indeed with some of the flying paintings, to which they provide the backdrop) is his close study of local Jewish life in Vitebsk. His genre paintings are perhaps the least interesting, but they do cast a light on his other works from the same period. Pieces like *Uncle's Store in Liozno*, *Street in Vitebsk* and *View from a Window*, *Vitebsk* sketch the backdrop to larger works like *Over the Town*. Studies like *Village Idiot* and *Uncle Zussy* not only capture an aspect of community life, but also fill in for us the theatre audience in the large canvases from Moscow. In his elegant and sparse black and white works he not only captures the same aspects of Jewish life, but also (in pieces like *Man with Marionettes* and *Acrobat*) earlier examples of Jewish theatre.

Chagall had returned to Vitebsk from Paris, where he was an active participant in the flourishing of a new art. (Apollinaire, whom Chagall knew, was close to Picasso; Robert and Sonia Delaunay were close friends.) In Petrograd he had been part of the avant-garde. In Vitebsk he was looking for the source of his modernism, his new art, and seeking inspiration from the social upheaval that surrounded him. As he put it, "No doubt I felt ripe to stay and work in my native town after the four years in Paris. I wanted to pursue this dream in the sky and on the soil of Vitebsk, and precisely in that revolutionary spirit that seemed to me favourable to the blazing up of a new art."

For the duration of his stay in revolutionary Russia, Chagall seems to have been aware of the potential coming from the world outside him, but he expressed it largely as a drive for a new art. That he expressed this in religious terms is apparent from his statement, "Basically we're all alike and we're probably nostalgic, not for what we would like to know or for things outside ourselves, but for our own dreams, our own impulse towards a revolution in our inner life, which is: the discovery of purity, of simplicity, of naturalness, such as the faces of children or the voice of the one whom we have the habit of calling Divinity." It is significant, however, that he hit upon a concept which was to acquire great weight amongst the surrealist movement, that of the inner life which could be revolutionised.

Perhaps the most striking example of this is the large painting *The Mirror*. Here the tiny figure of Bella is slumped in an outsize chair in front of a giant purple mirror. There is a world beyond the conscious perception of the subject, and the surrealists later acknowledged Chagall's place in its artistic formulation. In 1942, for example, Andre Breton could write in "Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism in the Plastic Arts," "At the beginning of the Dada and surrealist movements, which were to bring about the liaison of poetry and the plastic arts, insufficient credit was given to Chagall. That was a grave omission."

This exhibition, which displays the painter's responses to imagination and revolution, to reality and to theatrical representation, allows us to see Chagall momentarily linking an inner and an outer world and acting as a conduit between painting and theatre. For a brief time what Breton called Chagall's "resolutely magical" work flourished in response to the first attempt at creating a new society.

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