

Marc Chagall

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Marc Chagall as photographed in 1941 by Carl Van Vechten

Marc Chagall was a French painter of Russian-Jewish origin who was born in Belarus, at that time part of the Russian Empire. He is associated with the modern movements after impressionism. the eldest of nine children in the close-knit Jewish family led by his father, a herring merchant Khatskl (Zakhar) Shagal, and his mother, Feige-lte. This period of his life, described as happy though impoverished, appears in references throughout Chagall's work.

After he began studying painting in 1906 under famed local artist Yehuda Pen, Chagall moved to St. Petersburg some months later, in 1907. There he joined the school of the "Society of Art Supporters" and studied under Nikolai Roerich, encountering artists of every school and style. From 1908-1910 Chagall studied under Leon Bakst at the Zvantseva School of Drawing and Painting.

This was a difficult period for Chagall; at the time, Jewish residents were only allowed to live in St. Petersburg with a permit, and the artist was jailed for a brief period for an infringement to this restriction. Despite this, Chagall remained in St. Petersburg until 1910, and regularly visited his home town where, in 1909, he met his future wife, Bella Rosenfeld.

After gaining a reputation as an artist, Chagall left St. Petersburg to settle in Paris to be near the burgeoning art community in the Montparnasse district, where he developed friendships with such avant-garde luminaries as Guillaume Apollinaire, Robert Delaunay, and Fernand Léger. In 1914, he returned to Vitebsk and, a year later, married his fiancée, Bella. While in Russia, World War I erupted and, in 1916, the Chagalls had their first child, a daughter they named Ida.

Chagall became an active participant in the Russian Revolution of 1917. Although the Soviet Ministry of Culture made him a Commissar of Art for the Vitebsk region, where he founded an art school, he did not fare well politically under the Soviet system. He and his wife moved to Moscow in 1920 and then back to Paris three years later, in 1923. During this period, Chagall published his memoirs in Yiddish, which were originally written in Russian and translated into French by Bella Chagall. He also wrote articles, poetry and memoirs in

Yiddish, published mainly in newspapers (and only posthumously in book-form). Chagall became a French citizen in 1937.

With the Nazi occupation of France during World War II and the deportation of Jews, the Chagalls fled Paris, seeking asylum at Villa Air-Bel in Marseille, where the American journalist Varian Fry assisted in their escape from France through Spain and Portugal. In 1941, the Chagalls settled in the United States of America.

On September 2, 1944, Chagall's beloved Bella, the constant subject of his paintings and companion of his life, died from an illness. Two years later, in 1946, he returned to Europe. By 1949 he was working in Provence, in the South of France. That same year, Chagall took part in the creation of the MRAP anti-racist NGO.

The depression Chagall experienced following Bella's death was alleviated when he met Virginia Haggard, with whom he had a son, David (McNeil). At this time, Chagall received financial aid from theatrical commissions and, in his painting, rediscovered a free and vibrant use of color. His works of this period are dedicated to love and the joy of life, with curved, sinuous figures. He also began to work in sculpture, ceramics, and stained glass.

Chagall remarried in 1952 to Valentina Brodsky (whom he called "Vava"). He traveled several times to Greece, and in 1957 visited Israel, where in 1960 he created stained glass windows for the synagogue of the Hadassah Ein Kerem hospital in Jerusalem and in 1966, wall art for the new parliament being constructed in that city. During the Six Day War the hospital came under severe attack, placing Chagall's work under threat. In response to this, Chagall famously wrote a letter from France stating "I am not worried about the windows, only about the safety of Israel. Let Israel be safe and I will make you lovelier windows.". Luckily, most of the panels were removed in time, with only one sustaining severe damage.

At the age of 97, Chagall died in Saint-Paul de Vence, France on March 28, 1985 and was buried at the local cemetery. His plot is located in the most westerly aisle upon entering the cemetery.

Chagall took inspiration from Belarusian folk-life, and portrayed many Biblical themes that reflected his Jewish heritage. In the 1960s and 1970s, Chagall engaged in a series of large-scale projects involving public spaces and important civic and religious buildings.

Chagall's artworks are difficult to categorize. Working in the pre-World War I Paris art world, he was involved with avant-garde currents, however, his work was consistently on the fringes of popular art movements and emerging trends, including Cubism and Fauvism, among others. He was closely associated with the Paris School and its exponents, including Amedeo Modigliani.

Abounding with references to his childhood, Chagall's work has also been criticized for slighting some of the turmoil which he experienced. He communicates happiness and optimism to those who view his work strictly in terms of his use of highly vivid colors. Chagall often posed himself, sometimes together with his wife, as an observer of a colored world like that seen through a stained-glass window. Some see *The White Crucifixion*, which is rich with intriguing detail, as a denunciation of the Stalin regime, the Nazi Holocaust, and the oppression of Jews in general.