

"The Poet with the Birds," Marc Chagall, Russian, 1911, #61.36.7 – G377



Questions:

1. What feeling does the artist create in this painting? [Dream-like, serene, peaceful, other-worldly, happy, free, joyous.] How does he achieve that affect?
2. How is the figure in this painting depicted? Describe his dress, his expression, the set of his body? What do you think he might be thinking?
3. What are the colors the artist uses? How does that affect the feeling and power of the piece?
4. Put yourself in the place of the poet in this painting and look up. Describe the setting, the weather, the feeling of the air, the appearance of the sky and trees, and the birds in the trees.
5. Some people describe the man in the picture as seeming to float, how does that affect your impression of the piece?
6. Who is freer – the man or the birds? What gives you that impression?

Introduction:

Marc Chagall is one of the most prolific, beloved and long-lived artists of the 20th century. His richly colored, dream-like compositions fill a huge variety of work: paintings, book illustrations, stained glass windows, stage sets, ceramics, tapestries and prints. Called "the quintessential Jewish artist of the 20th century," Chagall drew on folk and religious images from his Russian-Jewish *shetl* with nostalgic scenes of peasants, snowy streets, wooden houses and fiddlers. He painted in Paris during the "Golden Age" of modernism, later incorporating the major artistic influences of his time – Cubism, Symbolism, Fauvism and Surrealism - in his work. He was also inspired by the theater and circus, suspending acrobatic figures between heaven and earth in a reflection of his own quest for artistic and religious freedom. His paintings are infused with a joyous spontaneity and simplicity. He was a master of color. "When Matisse

dies," Pablo Picasso remarked during the 1950s, "Chagall will be the only painter left who understands what colour really is."

Historical Background:

Chagall lived in, survived and prospered through nearly a century tumult that included the anti-Semitism of the Russian Empire, world wars, the Russian Revolution and Nazi pogroms.

From the late 18th century to World War II, the Russian tsarist government confined Jews to the Pale of Settlement, a geographic area that included parts of modern Ukraine, Belarus, Poland and the Baltic states. To survive, Jews created *shtetls*, Jewish villages with their own markets, schools, hospitals and civic institutions throughout today's Eastern Europe. As outsiders in a frequently hostile society, they became cultural innovators.

Paris was the artistic capital of the world, one where Russian artists, painters, poets, writers, composers and dancers flocked.

After Hitler took power in Germany, anti-Semitic laws were introduced. Hitler, a mediocre artist himself, extolled German realism. Nazis began their campaign against modernist art as "degenerate," targeting Expressionism, Cubism, Abstraction and Surrealism - anything intellectual, Jewish, foreign, socialist-inspired or difficult to understand. This included work by Chagall, Picasso, Matisse, Cezanne and Van Gogh. Some 20,000 works from German museums were confiscated and either destroyed or sold to finance the Nazi war machine.

Germany invaded and occupied France. With the help of the Vichy government, French Jews were collected and sent to German concentration camps. In 1940, the Vichy government approved anti-Semitic laws. French citizenship was "redefined" to strip "undesirables" of their French nationality. Many French Jews were trapped. Their only refuge was America, but many could not afford the passage to New York or the bond immigrants had to pay to insure they would not be a financial burden on the country.

Artist's Biography:

July 6, 1887 - Marc Chagall was born **Moishe Shagal** in Vitebsk, near the Polish border in Belarus near the Polish border, then part of the Russian Empire. About half of the town's 66,000 inhabitants were Jewish. Chagall was the oldest of nine children in a family of observant Hasidic Jews. His mother sold groceries from their home. His father worked for a herring merchant, carrying heavy barrels but earning just 20 rubles a month. Chagall later incorporated fish motifs in his work out of respect for his father.

At the time, Jewish children were not allowed to attend public schools or universities. Chagall received his primary education at the local Jewish religious school, where he studied Hebrew and the Bible. When he turned 13, his mother successfully bribed the public school's head master with 50 rubles to let him attend.

Chagall, who had grown up in a home devoid of art, was amazed to see a classmate draw, saying it was "like a vision, a revelation in black and white." When asked how he did it, the friend replied, "Go and find a book in the library, idiot. Choose any picture you like and just copy it."

Chagall studied at a number of art schools, starting in 1906 in the Vitebsk studio of portrait artist Jehuda Penn. Through his life, he was peripatetic. When he realized that Penn's realistic style didn't fit his own style, he moved to St. Petersburg, the artistic capital of Russia, using an internal passport of a non-Jewish friend. He tried to become a sign painter but failed the exam.

1907 - Chagall was painting naturalistic self-portraits and landscapes. For the next two years he studied at the prestigious Zvantseva School of Drawing and Painting with Leon Bakst in St. Petersburg. His work was noticed and he received a postponement of military service. In St. Petersburg, he also discovered experimental theater and the work of Paul Gauguin and other post-Impressionists.

1910 - He relocated to Paris with an allowance from his patron. He was 23. Cubism was the big thing. Chagall challenged it with his sentimental exuberance, naïve, exuberant color and humor. He enrolled in the Parisian art academy, La Palette. At the Louvre, he studied works of the masters. During one of his visits home in 1910, Chagall met Bella Rosenfeld, the love of his life, later to become his first wife. "It is as if she knows everything about my childhood, my present, my future, as if she can see right through me."

1911 – Chagall rented a miserable studio in La Ruche, where he got to know avant-garde luminaries Robert Delaunay and Fernand Leger, Modigliani, Laurens and Soutine. There, at 25, he painted his first large masterpiece and the MIA's "**The Poet with the Birds.**"

Homesick for Russia, Chagall developed a repertoire of quirky motifs drawn from his Russian-Jewish village life: ghostly figures floating in the sky, a gigantic dancing fiddler, livestock and transparent wombs with tiny offspring sleeping upside down - "supernatural" figures that had a formative influence on Surrealism. Chagall, however, did not want his work to be confined to any movement. He considered his personal language of symbols to meaningful only to himself.

1912 – Chagall exhibited at the Salon des independents.

1914 – Hoping to make enough to marry Bella, Chagall exhibited at Herwarth Walden's Sturm Gallery in Berlin (with 40 canvases and 160 watercolors, gouaches and drawings). German critics sang his praises. He went on to Russia, planning to stay just long enough to marry. War broke out, preventing their return to France.

1915-22 - Chagall married Bella and had a child. His euphoric paintings from this time show the young couple floating balloon-like over Vitebsk. These are the most light-hearted of his career. WWI broke out, followed by the Russian Revolution. He was unable to leave Russia. His Moscow exhibit in 1915 brought him fame. Wealthy collectors began buying his art. He began illustrating Yiddish books and designing huge and stage murals - forerunners for his murals at the Paris Opera and NY Met. He was lauded as one of the Soviet Union's most distinguished artists and member of the modernist avant-garde. He started the Vitebsk Arts College, one of the Soviet Union's finest art schools.

1923 – Chagall returned to France via Berlin, hoping to retrieve works he left there 10 years before. He was unable to find or recover any of them. With all his early works lost, he painted and sketched the scenes from memory.

1924 – Birth of Surrealism. Chagall refused to join Surrealist group.

1931-42 – Chagall traveled extensively. To illustrate the Jewish Bible, he traveled to the Holy Land, where he found “part of my own being.” He wrote, “I did not see the Bible. I dreamed it. Ever since early childhood, I have been captivated by the Bible. It has always seemed to me and still seems today the greatest source of poetry of all time.”

1930s - German critics once “swooned” over Chagall’s work. New Nazi authorities made a mockery of his works, describing them as “green, purple, and red Jews shooting out of the earth, fiddling on violins, flying through the air...representing [an] assault on Western civilization.” Chagall was so wrapped up in creating art, that his family naively remained in France, unaware that the Vichy government was helping Nazis send French Jews to German concentration camps.

1940 – After Jews were removed from public and academic positions, Chagall woke up to the fact that his family was “trapped” in France. America was the only refuge. Many other well-known Russian and Jewish artists sought to escape: Chaim Soutine, Max Ernst, Max Beckmann, Ludwig Fulda and author Victor Serge.

1941. With the help of Alfred Barr, from the New York Museum of Modern Art, Chagall was saved by having his name added to the list of prominent artists whose lives were at risk. It was almost too late. The Chagalls arrived in New York on June 23, 1941, the day before Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Pierre Matisse (son of Henri) became Chagall’s dealer.

1944 – Bella died suddenly from a viral infection, untreated due to wartime shortages of medicine. Chagall was overcome with grief and was unable to work for 10 months.

1945 – He resumed painting, his work filled with images of Bella. He designed sets and costumes for Stravinsky’s “Firebird.” After living with daughter, Ida, for a year, Chagall had a romance with Virginia Haggard that lasted seven years and produced a son, David McNeil. Haggard eventually left Chagall.

1948 – He returned to France.

1951 – Traveled to Israel.

1952 – Met and married his secretary, Valentine (Vava) Brodsky. Began a new phase of his career. After six years they divorced.

1985 – Chagall died at the age of 97 in Saint-Paul, France.

The art object: The Poet with Birds:

Speaking of this painting in his autobiography, “My Life,”?? Chagall says that his intention had been to paint “a landscape a la Corot...from a photograph...but the more I tried to paint like Corot, the father I got from it and I ended up a la Chagall.” The painting:

- Was done during Chagall’s second year in Paris.
- Illustrates the profound, new sense of artistic and religious freedom he experienced in his new surroundings.
- Evokes the joyous, dream-like quality that would become a Chagall trademark
- Shows Chagall’s evolving individual style and development of his craft in its clarity, precision and sense of reality.
- Is filled with emotion - happiness mixed with homesickness.
- Refers nostalgically to Jewish peasant life (especially in the Russian peasant tunic and baggy pants).
- Blazes with vivid colors that contrast with the somber earth colors of his Russian youth.
- Features easily identifiable figures in a pastoral setting, yet evokes fantasy within a sense of tradition.
- Portrays people, animals and objects with affection and intensity. He believes that God is present in each manifestation of life on earth.
- Occurs in a straight-forward pastoral setting. Has none of the Cubist elements prevalent in Paris at the time.
- Sense of poet’s shape is repeated in trees and clouds. Repetition of the same line is seen in the dark area under tree and in the shape of the land. The birds look as if they were cut out and pasted on. His youthful sign painting may have heightened his awareness of the distinctive shapes and characters of objects.
- Shows the influence of landscapes by Van Gogh, whom Chagall greatly admired, especially in the painted fence and freely painted foliage.
- Brushstrokes – Strong, vertical brushstrokes create a sense of motion through color and line.
- Offers no sense of perspective.
- Sets Chagall’s creative vitality against the vagaries of man’s fate, yet speaks of his own life – its tragedy and gaiety.
- Gives overall impression of keeping a “child’s innocence of eye”

Resources:

“My Life,” Marc Chagall’s autobiography.

“The Rape of Europa,” Lynn H. Nicholas.

Docent files.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qioqruaTwh4&feature=related> – Utube video of the many paintings he did of his love for wife, Bella.

- Kay Miller