

Chagall

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Exhibition Facts

Duration	28 September 2024 – 9 February 2025
Opening	28 September 2024 6.30 p.m.
Venue	Propter Homines Hall The ALBERTINA Museum
Curator	Gisela Kirpiczenko Serena Ligas (Assistant)
Works	about 100
Catalogue	Available for EUR 39,90 (English & German) onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via https://shop.albertina.at/en/
Contact	Albertinaplatz 1 1010 Vienna T +43 (0)1 534 83 0 info@albertina.at www.albertina.at
Opening Hours	Daily 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. Except Wednesday and Friday 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.
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Chagall

September 28 – February 9, 2025

Back in 2004, the ALBERTINA Museum presented an exhibition on Chagall's exploration of the Bible as one of the first exhibitions under the direction of Klaus Albrecht Schröder. 20 years later, around the 40th anniversary of the artist's death, the ALBERTINA Museum is showing the entire fascination of Chagall's world of themes and motifs in its major autumn exhibition. The show also closes a circle: it is the last major exhibition of modern art and a grand finale to Klaus Albrecht Schröder's quarter of a century as Director General.

Marc Chagall (1887 - 1985) is one of the great artists of the 20th century. His oeuvre spans more than 80 years and is characterised by a versatility that never ceases to amaze. His art – known for its vibrant colours and poetic compositions – is familiar to us. Despite this familiarity with his paintings, Chagall's art has lost none of its mysteriousness and mysterious, spiritual aura. His unmistakable artistic expression, which reminds us of the magic of dream images, remains an inexhaustible cosmos.

The magic of everyday life

Born in 1887 in a small Jewish shtetl in Belarus, Chagall found the inspiration in his homeland and origins that would accompany him throughout his life. His works combine traditional, everyday motifs from his childhood such as village scenes, violinists, the circus and clowns alongside animals such as goats, cows and herrings. Spiritual motifs from the Bible and rabbis are also often found in his art. In his pictures, however, there are countless possibilities for their interaction. Again and again, he reflects on his themes in a new context, against the backdrop of his personal experiences and current world-political events.

At first glance, Chagall's paintings - glowing with intense colour - convey an artistic expression filled with happiness. And yet his universal themes of birth, motherhood, love and death hint at a profound dimension. A look at his biography also tells a different story.

Having grown up as a Jew in what is now Belarus, he is a perpetual 'displaced person' who is forced to lead an unsettled life. He lived in Vitebsk, St. Petersburg, then in Paris, back in Russia and once

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again in France, finally fleeing into exile in New York and only then returning to France. Here he settled down and brought his rich oeuvre to completion.

The often simultaneous experience of joy and suffering characterises his work and heightens it to a brilliant expression – at once cheerfully exhilarating and evoking the dark and threatening. The pictures invite the viewer to enter a world in which the boundaries between reality and dream, heaven and earth become blurred.

His work is and remains unique in this reconciliation of the contradictory. Chagall never allowed himself to be reduced to a single style, but developed an unmistakable, poetic visual language that merges the fantastic and the everyday.

The exhibition shows 100 works by the artist: from the early pictures painted in the Russian Empire between 1908 and 1910, to the large poetic compositions of the Paris years from 1910 to 1914, to the large formats that Chagall painted in the south of France until the 1980s.

The exhibition is a co-operation between the ALBERTINA Museum and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf.

Exhibition Texts

Marc Chagall—Lightness in dark times

Marc Chagall's pictorial world defies the usual order of things. Nothing seems to be in its right place. There is only one constant in his life and work: the memory of his childhood and youth in Vitebsk.

In keeping with his roots in Orthodox Eastern Judaism, Chagall took a stance towards reality and its depiction different from that of his emancipated artist friends in the West. His doubts about visually verifiable reality led him to an original way to overcome the Jewish image ban. For the sake of the poetic representation of reality, he consciously accepts folkloristic simplifications and distortion of protagonists and houses. The people in Chagall's pictures behave in outlandish ways: they walk through the air, play the violin on the roof. Chagall makes his figures larger or smaller according to their significance, not according to the optical laws of perspective. He piles spaces on top of each other and represents animals as equal to humans. In his late work, Chagall finally sacrificed form and construction altogether to the luster and transparent glow of sheer color.

100 works by the artist from all his creative years show the diversity of an oeuvre that never ceases to amaze. Chagall's central themes are birth and motherhood, love, the circus, the Bible and death - with ever-recurring motifs: rooster and cow, goat or bull and fish, violinists, rabbis and clowns. Again and again, he reflects on his themes against the backdrop of personal experiences and world political events.

Chagall's paintings give the impression of a human existence full of joie de vivre and happiness. In fact, it is the conflictful experience of joy and suffering that characterizes this work, cheerful and buoyant as it is, though without leaving out the dark and menacing: love, dance and play in times of persecution and displacement.

“My sad, my joyful town”

Marc Chagall grew up in a Jewish Hasidic family in the small town of Vitebsk, today in Belarus. The language spoken in the home was Yiddish; he only learned Russian in elementary school. Everyday life in the shtetl informed his approach to the world and his art. In his memoir, Chagall describes the crooked wooden houses, the churches and synagogues, the workers and the free-roaming animals as well as omnipresent religiosity and the Jewish festivals, the only thing to punctuate a dreary small-town life. From an early age, he had the wish to become an artist to escape the everyday banality. At the age of 13, he enrolled in a private painting school where he learned to do realistic paintings of Jewish everyday life. It was during these years that Chagall found his preferred subjects: family, life in the shtetl, and the “great themes” of birth, love and death. The mysticism of Hasidism, seeking to open the soul through dance and music, had a profound influence on him. This becomes palpable in recurring motifs such as the violinist, but above all in his desire to make his paintings artistic expressions of sentiment. Studies in St. Petersburg finally brought him closer to Western European modern art—Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, and the Fauvists. In early experiments with glaring, non-natural colors and expressive, contoured areal designs, his focus shifted from the narrative style of the early period to the will to pictorial construction.

“Paris, you are my second Vitebsk!”

In St. Petersburg, Chagall came into contact with collectors and patrons. In the spring of 1911, a scholarship enabled him to travel to Paris to continue his studies. He visited galleries and museums and put his own narrative style to the test against influences of the French avant-garde. He appropriated the geometric dissection of shapes of Cubism, the expressive colorist power of Fauvism, experimented with narrow perspectives, with distorted spaces like van Gogh and the decorative disintegration of the picture surface like Matisse. Chagall puts the formal inspiration to stylistic use to heighten expression. “Let them eat their fill of their square pears on their triangular tables!” he said of the Cubists. He vehemently rejected rules in art, which for him was to be solely the expression of a state of mind and soul.

Chagall brought his themes with him from his homeland. Unlike other Jewish artists like Modigliani or Soutine, who belied their Jewish origins in order to achieve success in Paris, he made his roots the central content of his art. His “exotic” themes and “fantastic dream worlds” were much appreciated

by the literary avant-garde around Guillaume Apollinaire and Max Jacob. They saw the poetic genius in him, and in his art a fantastic supernaturalism, which became conceptualized only in 1924 under the name of Surrealism.

“The place counts, not the formal theory”

Chagall returned to Vitebsk in the summer of 1914. He had been planning on just a short stay, but the outbreak of the First World War prevented him from returning to Paris. He remained in Russia for eight years. Pivotal events during this time were the death of his mother in 1915 and his wedding with Bella Rosenfeld in the same year. Marriage brought a new impulse to Chagall's life and art: Bella became a central motif. Once back home, he also fell back on themes from his familiar environment: portraits of his parents and siblings, self-portraits, and the landscape of Vitebsk. Formally, Chagall oscillates between the avant-garde achievements of his time in Paris and traditional stylistic devices such as realism and naturalistic coloration, reserved mostly for scenes from everyday life and family. Chagall calls his paintings “documents”, not in the sense of a reproduction of the visible, but as a testimony to a sentiment that a motif or subject evokes in him.

“Why is the cow green and why is the horse flying through the sky, why?”

During his years in Russia, the achievements of abstractionism had no stylistic bearing on Chagall. Although he was actively involved in teaching art, he did so without any underlying theory or doctrine, but solely “out of love for my city and my parents laid to rest there.” Unperturbed, he kept depicting the simple life in the shtetl: Chagall painted rabbis and beggars, Jewish cemeteries and landscapes with synagogues and onion domes. His poetic approach to art did not fit the uncompromising ideals of the abstract avant-garde of Malevich and his followers. Chagall's art was declared old-fashioned. Disillusioned and embittered, he left Vitebsk for good and moved to Moscow in 1920. Finally, he permanently went back into the West, to Paris.

“Contrasts in which the harmonic truth is hidden”

After returning to Paris in 1922, Chagall hoped to pick up on his pre-1914 success. The loss of the paintings he had left behind before the war had robbed him of his past. He turned down an invitation from the Surrealists to join their group. Chagall reverted to his artistic past and painted repetitions, new versions, and variations of his lost paintings, which met with enthusiastic reception from collectors and the public.

For the first time, he was able to embark on a carefree, elegant lifestyle life. A new lightness enters his paintings, a delicate, transparent application of colors. Chagall painted floating bouquets of flowers and winged creatures, combined humans and animals into mythical creatures and ensouled simple objects. In his paintings, the earthly and cosmic spheres fuse into a unity in which everything is connected to everything else. Scenes and motifs from Vitebsk are now juxtaposed with new impressions gained in France. From then on, there is hardly any chronologically describable stylistic development discernible in Chagall any more. He repeats pictorial motifs and themes, creates new contexts for them and, by repeating a subject, also harks back to earlier stylistic stages.

“... like a person in love, chasing the moon.”

With Hitler coming to power, Chagall came to be defamed as a “degenerate” artist. His paintings were publicly burned. After the occupation of Paris, Chagall first fled to Southern France. In 1941, in view of the collaboration of Vichy France with Nazi Germany, he eventually decided to go into exile in the USA. Chagall arrived in New York in 1941.

Chagall's life in exile in New York brought profound changes, but also a reencounter with the familiar. Jewish culture was very much alive in some New York neighborhoods. Among the exiles, Chagall met friends from the past, but remained a foreigner in a foreign land nonetheless. He refused to learn English, longing for a return to France and expressing this longing in dream worlds as a refuge from reality. Once again, Chagall started working on, and reworking, the paintings he had brought with him: a new beginning by holding on to the past. When his wife Bella unexpectedly died in 1944, it was a tragic blow for him, which also cost him a piece of home. He tried to keep the past alive by painting reminiscences of the time he had spent with her. Pictures of lovers and wedding couples floating away into the air are filled with melancholy, a far cry from the feelings of happiness that Chagall had

experienced in France. What once had meant ascending into bliss was now an escape from the present.

“A timeless dancing play”

In his biblical scenes, Chagall reflects personal experiences as well as the current political situation. He is not interested in illustrating a biblical event, but in working out its universal significance. Of central importance for him is the probably strongest pictorial motif of Christianity, the Crucifixion. The suffering of Christ epitomizes the persecution and sufferings of the Jews. The crucifixion of Chagall's Jesus with the Jewish prayer shawl as a headscarf or loincloth takes place in the shtetl. In these parables, the artist seeks an explanation for the collective fate of Jews and also his own.

Aside from paintings in which Chagall explored the dark sides of life, he also created works that celebrate the expression of total bliss. As crucially significant for him as the Bible was profane circus life: “I have always looked at the clowns, acrobats and actors as tragic creatures who remind me of figures in religious paintings. When I paint a crucifixion scene today, I feel the same emotions as when I paint circus people.”

The life of acrobats had fascinated Chagall from his early childhood days. It is the old motifs from Vitebsk that keep reappearing in his circus paintings: bull-headed, violin-playing creatures, clowns and the fish as a reference to his father, who had been a laborer in a herring plant. Circus life reflects the longing for freedom and the desire to escape reality. After the painful experience of homelessness and flight, Chagall finds in the traveling circus folk a parallel to his own homeless life.

“Paris, mirror of my heart”

Chagall returned to France from his American exile in 1948. It was a return to his second home. His devotion to France, his love of Paris, finds expression in the paintings of the 1950s. At the same time, these pictures speak to his enduring attachment to his Russian homeland. Parisian motifs such as Notre-Dame or the bridges over the Seine are intermingled with motifs from Vitebsk. The pairs of lovers, the wedding couples, and the mothers with children suspended in the air over the silhouette of Paris imagine the uniting of what was separated. This idea recurs in many late paintings of wedding

couples and lovers: love as the highest good, the starting point and culmination of everything creative, as a symbol of overcoming and reconciling opposites.

Even more so than during his American exile, the carrier of expression in the paintings is color. Chagall segments the composition into large, monochrome blue and red color zones that translate the play of light and color seen in medieval stained-glass windows into painting. The dominant color sets the musical mood, as it were, and is accompanied by subordinate color chords. The linear construction of the early paintings is replaced with the harmony of colors as a means of composition.

Marc Chagall (1887 – 1985)

Marc Chagall was born in 1887 in Vitebsk—today Belarus, back then a small town within the Pale of Settlement in Tsarist Russia where Jews were allowed to reside—in poor circumstances. Early on, he came to experience humiliation and pogroms. A lifelong exile and wanderer between countries and continents, he always kept longing back to his childhood.

After artistic beginnings in Vitebsk and studies in St. Petersburg, a scholarship took Chagall in 1910 to Paris, then the center of the avant-garde. There, he garnered his first successes.

In 1914, Chagall planned on spending the summer in Vitebsk, but was unable to return to the West after the outbreak of the First World War. In Vitebsk, he marries Bella Rosenfeld, whom he immortalized in countless paintings.

In the wake of the October Revolution of 1917, Chagall became principal and teacher at the Vitebsk People's Art School that he himself had founded. Following growing tensions with the proponents of abstract art, his students turned against him and towards his fellow teacher Kazimir Malevich and Suprematism. Chagall's representational paintings were dismissed as old-fashioned by comparison.

Embittered, Chagall returned to Paris in 1922, where his pre-war paintings had meanwhile been sold or lost. He retrieved those lost pictures by repainting them in variations and repetitions. In the 1920s, he was one of the most successful artists of his time.

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When Hitler came to power, his paintings were seized in Germany, and he was labeled a “degenerate artist”. After the occupation of France, he fled first to the unoccupied south of the country in 1940, and in 1941—following further reprisals—to New York at the invitation of the Museum of Modern Art. America, whose language he did not speak, remained foreign to Chagall. His wife Bella died there in 1944.

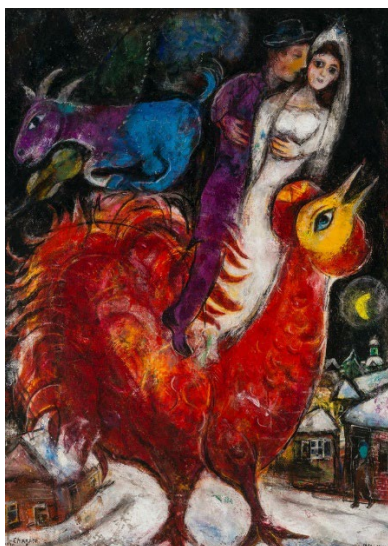
After the war, Chagall returned to France in 1948. The French Riviera became his second home. With Matisse and Picasso, he was now part of the great triumvirate of modernism. Retrospectives and monumental commissions like the decoration of the opera houses in Paris and New York as well as important churches and synagogues with stained-glass windows underscored Chagall's international success.

Aged 98, Chagall died in Saint-Paul de Vence in 1985.

Press images

The following images are available free of charge in the Press section of www.albertina.at.

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Marc Chagall
Fiancés ou Mariés sur Coq, 1939-1947
Oil on canvas
90 x 65 cm
Burda GmbH, Offenburg
© Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



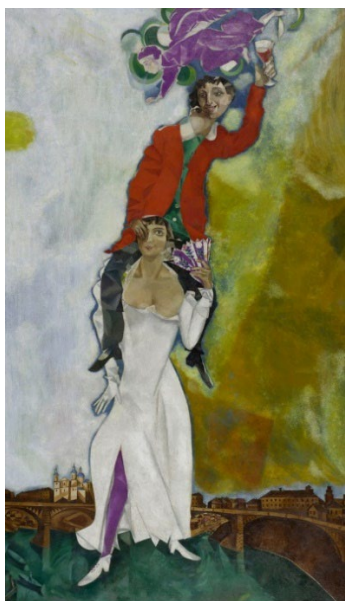
Marc Chagall
Sleeping Woman with Flowers, 1972
Oil on canvas
145 x 120 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – The Batliner
Collection
© Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Marc Chagall
Birthday (detail), 1923
Oil on canvas
80 x 100 cm
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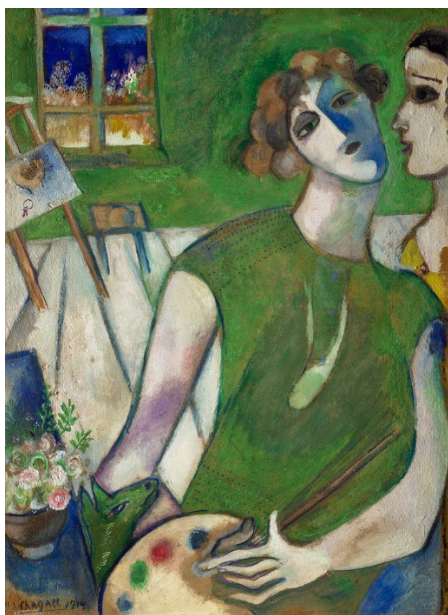
Marc Chagall
The Blue Circus, 1950-1952
Oil on canvas
230 x 180 cm
Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne
– Centre de création industrielle, datation en 1988, en
dépôt au Musée national Marc Chagall, Nice ©
Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



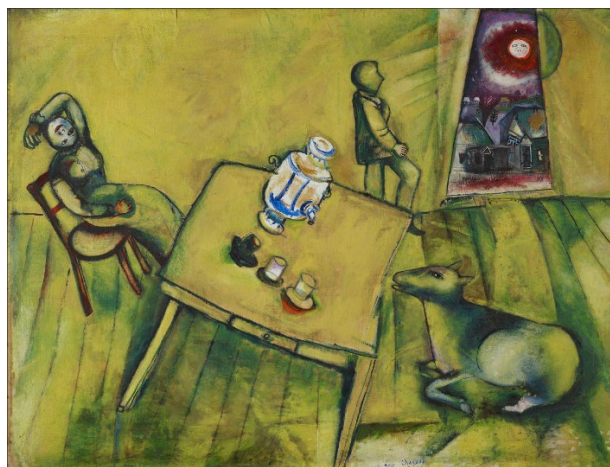
Marc Chagall
Double Portrait with a Glass of Wine, 1917/18
Oil on canvas
235 x 135 cm
Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne – Centre de création industrielle, don de l'artiste en 1949
© Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Marc Chagall
The Lovers, 1913/14
Oil on canvas
110 x 135 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection, 1998
© Bildrecht, Vienna 2024 | Photo: bpk | The Metropolitan Museum of Art | Malcolm Varon



Marc Chagall
Self-Portrait in Green, 1914
Oil on cardboard mounted on canvas
50 x 40 cm
Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne – Centre de création industrielle, datation en 1988, en dépôt au Musée national Marc Chagall, Nice
© Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Marc Chagall
The Yellow Room, 1911
Oil on canvas
85 x 110 cm
Riehen/Basel, Fondation Beyeler
© Bildrecht, Vienna 2024

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Marc Chagall
The Kite, 1925-1926
Gouache
50 x 65 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – The Batliner
Collection
© Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Marc Chagall
The Great Circus, 1970
Pencil and gouache
70 x 100 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – The Batliner
Collection
© Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Marc Chagall
Rabbi in Black and White (The Praying Jew), 1914-1922
Oil on canvas
105 x 85 cm
Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia, Galleria
Internazionale d'Arte Moderna di Ca' Pesaro
© Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Marc Chagall
Self-Portrait, 1914
Oil on cardboard, on canvas
50 x 40 cm
Kunstmuseum Basel, Inv. Im 1081, Im Obersteg
Foundation, Depositum im Kunstmuseum Basel 2004
Martin P. Bühler © Bildrecht, Vienna 2024



Marc Chagall
To Russia, Asses and Others, 1911
Oil on canvas
160 x 120 cm
Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne
– Centre de création industrielle, don de l'artiste en
1953
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