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Art 114 Online
25 October 2015

“To Shout, Weep, Pray”

The Village (Le Village) 1950-52
Marc Chagall
Painted Ceramic Tile

Palm Springs Art Museum, Palm Springs, CA

Artist Marc Chagall (1887-1985) was committed to honesty and vulnerability in his creative expression. “To stay wild, untamed...to shout, weep, pray,” was how he verbalized his intention to present his romantic and religious themes in a style that refused to be constricted by the opinions or powers of the times (Smithsonian, “The Elusive Marc Chagall,” Dec. 2003). For years, his work has intrigued me because of his unique approach. In a recent visit to the Palm Springs Art Museum, I was delighted to stumble upon a piece of his which was part of the Weiner Family Collection. *The Village (Le Village)*, dated 1950-52, is a ceramic mural (see p. 5, Figure 1). It is a unique piece in that there are fewer than a dozen of Chagall’s works done in this format (Palm Springs Art Museum, Didactic No. 156-2009). Although the medium is unusual for him, the subject matter is instantly recognizable as Chagall. This discovery made it possible for me to learn more about this artist who has charmed and engaged me with his paintings for so long.

Marc Chagall remains an elusive figure in the art world - nearly as elusive as the figures and objects he included in his body of work. Chagall was born July 9, 1887, in the tiny Russian village of Vitebsk which borders Poland. He was the eldest of nine children in a poor, Jewish family. His propensity toward art was not an avocation his parents approved of because of their lack of money. Furthermore, his depiction of religious references in his art was frowned upon by his faith (for Jews, it was thought to be blasphemous to even speak the name of God). But the young artist Chagall was a dreamer, perhaps even an escapist. His creative expression provided a way out of the emotional distress he suffered. He stuttered as a young child and has been quoted to say, “I was scared of growing up. Even in my twenties, I preferred dreaming about love and painting it in my pictures.” (Smithsonian, “The Elusive Marc Chagall,” Dec. 2003) Because the themes of his work revolve around love relationships, “genre” style depictions of his home town, Jewish folklore, Judaism and Christianity, critics viewed him as overly sentimental and

often dismissed his work. Compounding the critics' disapproval was the fact that Chagall could not be neatly categorized as an artist (History of Modern Art, p. 187). While he may have been influenced by movements such as Cubism, Fauvism, and artist friends such as DeLaunay and Picasso, Chagall remained committed to his peculiar style and subject matter throughout the entirety of his long career.

The art movements of Chagall's era concentrated on provocative messages and breaking down recognizable subjects, often in response to the violence and outrage related to World Wars I and II. Chagall, however, stayed consistent with his style and imagery of dreamy, lyrical, and poetic subject matter. While modern artists rejected the tradition of allegory and narrative, Chagall brought it back. Because of his storytelling nature, he is thought to have more in common with the writers of his time, namely French poet, Guillaume Apollinaire whom he painted in *Homage to Apollinaire* (1911-12) (Smithsonian, "The Elusive Marc Chagall," Dec. 2003). Another poet (also a principal theorist of Surrealism), Andre Breton, referred to Chagall as a major artistic influence due to his "liberation of the object from the laws of weight and gravity." (History of Modern Art, p. 188)

There is no better way to describe *The Village* than to refer back to Breton's statement of Chagall's liberation of the figure from gravity. In this abstracted genre painting, a large male figure floats over a moonlit village as a peasant girl and her livestock look above. There is a diagonally implied line which provides movement, dividing the picture plane in half. The man floats above, the village, girl and animal, are grounded below. The subtle pastel palette of color is also divided along this diagonal. Blues, greens and yellows make up the luminous night sky and floating figure, while the village and girl are bathed in a warm, pink and orange glow. Therefore, Chagall uses both complementary (blue/orange) and analogous colors (yellow/orange) in this painting. The obvious emphasis is the floating male figure, mostly due to his proportion. His body consumes nearly half of the composition. His body shape, along with that of the girl and animal are organic, as are the flowers and leaves of a bouquet depicted in the lower left and upper right corners (another popular motif Chagall includes in many of his works). The buildings of the village are geometric and provide a sense of repetition that moves across the picture plane.

Rendering a realistic scene was not important to Chagall. He completely fills the space with imagery, yet there is only a minimal use of perspective in the village buildings' size which diminishes slightly toward the horizon. His use of warm color in the foreground (advancing) and cool color in the background (regressing) conveys a sense of dimension - yet ever so slight. There is a rhythm in the movement of the village buildings under and away from the floating figure, as well as the flowers and leaves that erupt from the basket across the picture plane. There is no structured pattern in the imagery itself, yet pattern is revealed in the square tile shapes which support the painting. Variety is addressed in the geometric vs. organic shapes and color which are successful in moving the viewer's eye around the painting. Finally, the positioning of the figures with their implied line of sight, create an interaction and unity in *The Village*.

The figures of the man, woman and goat in *The Village* tell a story of deep significance. Because the male figure floats alone above the village rooftops, there doesn't appear to be a suggestion of romantic love (which is a often the theme in Chagall's paintings). He also grasps a hatchet in his right hand which is another clue to the painting's meaning. Additionally, the Jewish heritage of Chagall makes his subject matter in *The Village* indicative of the story of the Passover (Holy Bible, Exodus 12). In this religious event, the Jewish people (known at that time as Hebrews) were enslaved by the Pharaoh of Egypt. The Hebrew God, Jehovah, issued plague after plague to convince Pharaoh to release His people from captivity and the Passover was the height of His warnings. The Hebrews were to paint the blood of a sacrificial animal (a goat is depicted in the painting) over their door frames as a symbol and protection from plague for their family - specifically, the first born male child. God's Spirit "passed over" the city at midnight and slew those who were not deemed His own (thus the hatchet wielding figure which floats above the village in the moonlight). In the Passover story, the Hebrews remained protected while the firstborn son of Pharaoh was slain. This led to Pharaoh's surrender and release of the Hebrews. Chagall managed to appropriate this story to the setting and time period of his hometown village of Vitebsk (Palm Springs Art Museum, didactic 156-2009).

Chagall never shied away from representing his truth in his work. Much like his ancestors of ancient times, his Jewish identity caused him to suffer persecution and flee from his home country of Russia (the Soviet Union only supported artists' work that was political useful), and then from France during the Nazi occupation. Chagall became the wandering Jew he depicted in his paintings (Chagall, p. 62). He continually sought liberation - not only as a individual, but also as an artist. No government, or critic for that matter, would stop him from expressing himself in an indomitably emotional and spiritual way. Chagall painted up until the time of his death at age 98 and was determined to "shout, weep, (and) pray" in his body of incomparable work.

Figure 1



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Works Cited

1. Harris, Joseph, "The Elusive Marc Chagall," Smithsonian, Dec. 2003, Print.
2. Palm Springs Art Museum Didactic No. 156-2009
3. Arnason and Mansfield, History of Modern Art, 7th ed. USA, Laurence King Publishing, Print.
4. Leviticus 12. Webservice. (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+12>)
5. Walther and Metzger, Chagall, Original ed. China, Taschen, 2012. Print.



(Here's proof of my visit - this was my second time in two weeks. We just bought a place in the desert and I am enjoying exploring the art scene. The Palm Springs Art Museum impressed me to no end. I will return for future exhibitions.)