

off the wall gallery

paintings · sculpture · original prints



MARC CHAGALL

MARC ZAKHAROVICH CHAGALL (1887 – 1985) was a Russian-French artist of Belarusian Jewish origin and widely considered among the greatest colorists of all time. An early modernist, he was associated with several major artistic styles such as cubism, surrealism, and fauvism. He created works in virtually every artistic format, including painting, book illustrations, stained glass, stage sets, ceramic, tapestries, and fine art prints. After studying in St. Petersburg, he moved to France where he lived most of his life, apart from a period in the US from 1941 to 1948.

“In our life, there is a single color, as on an artist’s palette, which provides the meaning of life and art. It is the color of love.” — Marc Chagall.

Marc Chagall was born in Vitebsk (Belarus, then an integral part of the Russian Empire) on July 7, 1887, to a poor Hasidic family. The eldest of nine children, Marc Chagall, studied first in a heder before moving to a secular Russian school, where he began to display his artistic talent. With his mother’s support, and despite his father’s disapproval, Chagall pursued his interest in art, going to St. Petersburg in 1907 to study art with Leon Bakst. Influenced by contemporary Russian painting, Chagall’s distinctive, child-like style, often centering on images from his childhood, began to emerge.

From 1910 to 1914, Marc Chagall lived in Paris and there absorbed the works of the leading cubist, surrealist, and fauvist painters. During this period, Chagall painted some of his most famous paintings of the Jewish *shtetl* or village and developed the features that became recognizable trademarks of his art. Strong and often bright colors portray the world with a dreamlike, non-realistic simplicity, and the fusion of fantasy, religion, and nostalgia infuses his work with a positive quality. Animals, workmen, lovers, and musicians populate his figures; the “fiddler on the roof” frequently recurs, hovering within another scene. Chagall’s work of this period displays the influence of contemporary French painting, but his style remains independent of any one school of art. He exhibited regularly in the *The Société des Artistes Indépendants* or *Salon des Indépendants*.

In 1914, before the outbreak of World War I, Marc Chagall held a one-man show in Berlin, exhibiting work dominated by Jewish images and personages. During the war, he resided in Russia, and in 1917,

off the wall gallery

paintings · sculpture · original prints



MARC CHAGALL

endorsing the revolution, he was appointed Commissar for Fine Arts in Vitebsk and then director of the newly established Free Academy of Art. However, the Bolshevik authorities frowned upon Chagall's style of art as too modern, and in 1922, Marc Chagall left Russia, settling in France one year later. He lived there permanently except for the years 1941 - 1948 when, fleeing France during World War II, he resided in the United States. Chagall's horror over the Nazi's rise to power is expressed in works depicting Jewish martyrs and refugees.

In addition to images of the Hassidic world, Chagall's paintings are inspired by themes from the Bible. His fascination with the Bible culminated in a series of over 100 etchings illustrating the Bible, many of which incorporate elements from Jewish folklore and religious life in Vitebsk. Chagall's other illustrations include works by Gogol, La Fontaine, Y. L. Peretz, and his autobiographical *Ma Vie* (1931; *My Life* 1960) and *Chagall by Chagall* (1979). Marc Chagall painted with various media, such as oils, watercolors, and gouaches. His work also expanded to other art forms, including ceramics, mosaics, and stained glass. Among his most famous building decorations is the ceiling of the Opera House in Paris, murals at the New York Metropolitan Opera, a glass window at the United Nations, and decorations at the Vatican Israel, which Marc Chagall first visited in 1931. The Tel Aviv Art Museum opening is also endowed with some of Chagall's work, most notably the twelve stained glass windows at Hadassah Hospital and wall decorations at the Knesset. Marc Chagall received many prizes and much recognition for his work. He was also one of very few artists to exhibit work at the Louvre in their lifetime.

Marc Chagall's involvement with printmaking dates to 1922 and his return to Berlin after World War I. In trying to recover the paintings, he had left behind with Sturm Gallery's director Herwarth Walden in 1914, Walter Feilchenfeldt, the director of the Cassirer Gallery, offered to publish Chagall's then-recently completed autobiography *Mein Leben* (*My Life*) to be illustrated with etchings. Although the book was never published due to translation problems, the artist created a suite of 20 etchings in the medium of dry-point etching depicting scenes and figures in Chagall's newly evolved naïve-realistic style. Chagall had never before been introduced to printmaking techniques and became very enamored, trying his hand with woodcuts and lithography. He felt that his narrative flair had found its proper expression in these mediums. Chagall wrote in 1960, "*Since I started using a pencil, I have sought for this certain something that could spread like a*

off the wall gallery

paintings · sculpture · original prints



MARC CHAGALL

stream toward unknown and alluring shores.” And again, “I thought I was touching a talisman when I held a lithographic stone or a copperplate in my hand. It seemed that I could put all my joys and sorrows in it... Everything that touched my life through the years, births, deaths, weddings, flowers, animals, birds, the poor workers, my parents, lovers in the night, the biblical prophets, on the street, at home, in the temple, and heaven. And as I grew older, the tragedy of life within us and around us.”

In this sense, Chagall did lithographs, and they have become the stream that carries the message of his painting into the wide world. Fortuitously, a printmaking commission brought Marc Chagall back to Paris in 1923. The famous dealer and editor, Ambroise Vollard, invited him to do some book illustrations, and the artist requested the book be the Russian author Gogol’s *Dead Souls*. So it was that Marc Chagall engraved 107 etchings on this theme in only two years. Although they are related to the *Mein Leben* dry-points in style, their technique is more elaborate and refined. Indicative of how the various creative mediums are related, the artist found that in developing engraved imagery to illustrate Gogol, he was able to revive his own Russian themes. As he longed to surround himself with the paintings he had lost in the course of WWI and his sojourn in Russia, he seized upon this inspiration to reconstruct many of his earlier missing canvasses. Other themes also evolved connected to his more recent Moscow theatre and mural experience. After his return, Chagall viewed Paris and the French countryside with fresh eyes, which was also reflected in his paintings. His colors, moderated by the special light of Provence, became more delicate although still laid on richly and spontaneously. He began to paint both the French landscape and floral bouquets accompanied by loving couples, musicians, and animals often depicted around the composition’s edges like poetic interpolations. These themes would continue to pervade his mature work through the end of his career.

In 1928-31, Marc Chagall produced a series of black and white etchings inspired by the *La Fontaine’s Fables*, also published by Vollard, who became Chagall’s mentor and source of inspiration with his concepts for print projects. The artist employed every conceivable etching technique to bestow a painterly quality in these works. At roughly the same time, Vollard had the vision to commission a series of gouache paintings based on circus imagery from Chagall. These two projects stirred the fertile imagination of Marc Chagall, and he spawned amazing imagery that influenced many of his later works — This was a happy, busy time for Chagall. He enjoyed the lifestyle of a successful artist in the French City of Light, which was reflected in festive,

off the wall gallery

paintings · sculpture · original prints



MARC CHAGALL

elegant, and romantic compositions he painted, often portraying his wife, Bella, and himself. In the early 1930s, the economic and political crisis that beset Europe also had its effect upon Chagall. Nazi persecution of the Jews made the artist more aware of his Jewish roots and caused him to long for a more serious type of artistic expression of deeper significance to the human condition. Vollard's 1931 commission of 100 etchings depicting the Bible coincided perfectly with the artist's mood. He responded immediately by traveling to the Holy Land to absorb the setting of the Old Testament. There he was moved by the solemn beauty of the area and its splendid light as he began work on a project and a body of images that would continue to play a major role in his future work. This commission marked the beginning of the religious side of the artist's work. At the outset of WWII, which nearly coincided with Ambroise Vollard's death in an automobile accident, two-thirds of the plates were completed, with most of the balance already started. In this same period, Chagall had traveled to Spain in 1934 to study the works of Velazquez, Goya, and El Greco, and in 1937 he journeyed to Italy to contemplate the works of Titian. He derived the concept of painting on a larger scale from these pilgrimages, with a more diverse color palette and a greater depth of meaning. In 1935, after a trip to Poland where he measured the extent of anti-Semitic sentiment, he was classified as a "degenerate artist" by the Nazis. In 1937, he finally obtained French nationality thanks to the support of Jean Paulhan. He then frequented the Maritain salon and became friends with writers: Breton, Delteil, Soupault, Cocteau, Reverdy, Arland whose writings he illustrated.

During WWII, Marc Chagall was reluctant to leave his adopted home of France. In 1940 he moved to Gordes in Provence in the hope of being left alone to paint. That winter, he was contacted by Varian Fry of the American Aid Committee and received the invitation of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City to come to the United States. At first, he declined, but as news reached him of the arrests and disappearance of friends, he decided to accept this invitation. With Bella, their daughter Ida and as many of his paintings as possible, they made their way to Marseilles, then Lisbon, finally embarking for the U.S. They arrived in New York on June 23, 1941, one day after Nazi troops marched into Russia, the home of Chagall's childhood. Cut off from his normal routine Chagall devoted himself to his painting at first in New York City, but as soon as possible, he and his family relocated to the countryside. Tragically, his beloved wife Bella took ill with pneumonia and died, leaving Marc and Ida alone and brokenhearted.

off the wall gallery

paintings · sculpture · original prints



MARC CHAGALL

After Bella's death, in an effort to proceed with his work, Chagall began to produce his first color lithographs, *Four Tales from The Arabian Nights*. Chagall chose just a few from the 1,001 stories in *The Arabian Nights* that deal with themes of lost love, reunion, and death, creating 13 compositions. The combination of these exotic tales of fantasy and the vivid color and imagery of Marc Chagall proved to be an intoxicating blend. Although he had created black and white lithographs earlier in France, Chagall, widely considered among the greatest colorists of all time, had never tried his hand at color lithography. The spectacular results published in 1948 confirm the artist's affinity for the medium. Chagall's *Four Tales from The Arabian Nights* are considered the finest examples of color lithography produced in the United States before 1950. He was honored in 1948 by being awarded the graphic prize of the Venice Biennial.

Following a comprehensive exhibition of his work at the Musee National d'Art Moderne, Paris, in the spring of 1946, Chagall moved permanently back to France in 1948, settling in Vence near Nice and the Cote d'Azur by 1950. Soon after his return, Chagall met with Teriade (1897-1983), the editor of *Verve* and heir to Vollard, who began to publish in rapid succession the Chagall projects remaining in Vollard's estate: *Dead Souls* in 1948, *La Fontaine's Fables* in 1952, *The Bible* (the balance of which had been completed between 1952-56) in 1957. In 1952, as the artist was about to remarry, Teriade commissioned Chagall to illustrate the ancient pastoral romance *Daphnis and Chloe*. With *Daphnis and Chloe* (M. 308-349), Marc Chagall embarked upon a new cycle of life and work. Together with his new bride, Vava, and literally on their honeymoon, he traveled for the first time in his life to Greece to seek inspiration for this adventurous tale. In Delphi, Athens, and on the island of Poros, Marc and Vava fell in love with Greece and the story of *Daphnis and Chloe*. At that time and in a series of later visits to Greece, Chagall created a series of drawings and gouaches, which formed the basis for the 42 color lithographs which comprise the *Daphnis and Chloe* suite. As published by Teriade in 1961 in the deluxe edition of only 60, they are universally accepted as the artist's most important original prints (it should be noted that an unsigned book state of 250 also exists).

These remarkable works were engraved by Marc Chagall under the watchful eye of the master printer Charles Sorlier and printed on the presses of the incomparable Mourlot workshop in Paris between 1957 and 1960. Chagall's color lithographs for *Daphnis and Chloe* set a new standard for excellence in this medium that may never be equaled. Abandoning the traditional practice of first producing a black stone or drawing stone which

off the wall gallery

paintings · sculpture · original prints



MARC CHAGALL

outlines most of the composition and reduces the subsequent color plates to merely adding detail, Chagall chose to create lithograph compositions completely from pure color just as he would a painting.

In 1958 Chagall was commissioned by the Paris Opera to create set designs and costumes for the ballet *Daphnis and Chloe* by Ravel, thereby bringing to life this classic story and paralleling his original prints on the same theme. His work with the ballet and its dancers influenced the grace and beauty of the movement of the figures portrayed in the lithographs.

Henceforth, Chagall continued to be fascinated with color lithography as a printmaking medium and retained the Mourlot atelier and especially Charles Sorlier as his creative collaborators. Sorlier advised him on all his future color lithograph projects and supervised their printing at Mourlot. *“Marc Chagall fabricated a mystical world of lovers, musicians, and artists in his work. He chose lithography as a print medium that could offer him almost unlimited painterly freedom to explore this world. Since lithography is a technique where the artist can work directly on the printing plate or litho stone, the resultant prints convey the spontaneity of his brushstrokes and drawn lines. Lithography also allowed Chagall to work in lush color, which he viewed as his métier, and for which he has become renowned. Chagall’s lithographs are now among the most collected artworks of the 20th century.”*

Following his triumphant *Daphnis and Chloe* suite, Chagall produced individual masterpieces in color lithography as *The Bay of Angels* (M. 350) and *Quai de la Tournelle* (M. 351). In 1962, encouraged by Teriade, he began work on another project that was first conceived by Ambroise Vollard, *The Circus* suite (M. 490-527). Vollard had been an enthusiastic fan of the circus and realized the potential of its lights, costumes, and performers as a stimulus for Chagall imagery. He had, therefore, as already noted, commissioned the artist to paint a series of circus gouaches in the late 1920s. Chagall now engraved 23 masterful color lithographs and 15 lyrical black and white lithographs on the circus theme, employing these gouaches as a point of departure. The color examples alone were published in 1967 by Teriade in a deluxe edition of only 24 and three artist’s proofs and rank with the *Daphnis and Chloe* color lithographs as the artist’s finest and most collectible. Chagall composed his text for the book state of these works, which were published along with the black and white examples as a true artist’s book in an unsigned edition of 250. Chagall’s colorful circus imagery

off the wall gallery

paintings · sculpture · original prints



MARC CHAGALL

is pure delight and speaks to the child within us all. Still, upon closer examination, the viewer discovers, in addition to the clowns, acrobats, and equestrians, unexpected but typical Chagall iconographies such as his bridal couples, musicians, and his ubiquitous chickens and goats, which add to the fun. Yet, the circus was a somewhat melancholy visual metaphor for life for the artist. "For me, the circus is a magic spectacle that passes by like the world's affairs and melts. There is an unsettling and a profound circus."

Even with the enormous success of the color lithography he had already achieved, Marc Chagall was still eager to experiment with the possibilities and limitations of this printmaking medium. Unusually formatted tableaux such as the oval-shaped *The Golden Age* (M. 542) and grand scale subjects like *The Magician of Paris II* of the late 1960s viewed in this exhibition are superb examples that added new excitement to his printmaking oeuvre. Chagall chose Homer's *Odyssey* for his final body of lithography based upon a single theme (M. 749-830), executing 82 lithographs, 43 of them in color based upon this epic. Mourlot published the *Odyssey* in two volumes in the mid-1970s. Marc Chagall's enthusiasm for color lithography was such that in 1980 Aime Maeght was able to induce the artist, then 93 years old, to engrave his largest color lithographs ever (M. 971-984) simply by informing him that he had obtained some large-sized litho stones. Maeght had hoped that the artist would be sufficiently interested in engraving one or two new compositions; instead, Chagall summoned his energy and talent to engrave 13 outstanding color lithographs, including *Couple at Dusk* (M. 972), *In the Sky of the Opera* (M. 973), *The Parade* (M. 981) and *Red Maternity* (M. 984) each measuring on average 95 x 60 cm. (37 5/8 x 23 7/8 inches). Together they constitute a complete compendium of his most recognizable imagery, including loving couples, floral bouquets, floating figures, circus performers, and the familiar landscapes of Paris, St. Paul de Vence, and Vitebsk all presented in a monumental size.

Marc Chagall was 63 years old when he first came to Mourlot in 1950 to study in earnest the technique of color lithography with Charles Sorlier. Already a world-famous artist with nothing to prove, Chagall nevertheless worked tirelessly to master this demanding medium's many nuances and subtleties for his satisfaction. As the majority of his works in lithography were created late in his career, the character of the work produced took on that of a dialogue between the artist and his earlier inventions, giving his lithographs the advantage of drawing upon a rich and personal iconography developed over a lifetime. Therefore, it is

off the wall gallery

paintings · sculpture · original prints



MARC CHAGALL

not surprising that these color lithographs are so endearing to those of us whose hearts and souls are touched by the message of Marc Chagall.

Left by his companion, Virginia Haggard (Vava), he married Valentina Brodsky in 1952, also of Russian and Jewish origin. In the South, he began to diversify techniques and worked with ceramics, which he practiced with the Ramiés at the Madoura Gallery in Vallauris, in the same workshop as Picasso. His relationship with Father Couturier led him to participate in the program of the Notre-Dame de très Grace church in Assy. There he created a large ceramic mural and his first stained glass windows for the baptistery. In 1955, the project to decorate the chapels of Calvaire, in Vence, began, which then became the cycle of the Biblical Message.

Marc Chagall died on March 28, 1985, in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France, where he is buried.