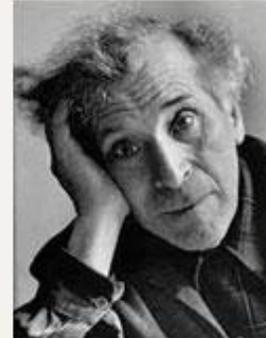
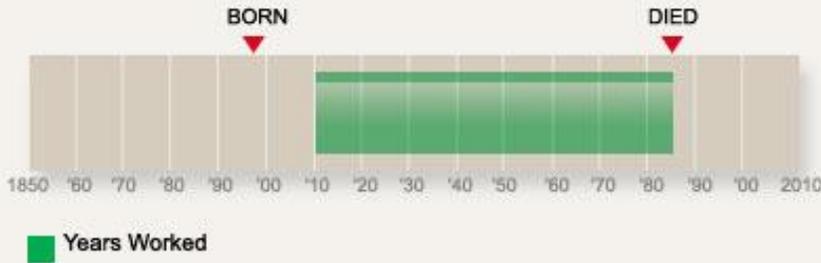


Marc Chagall (born Marc Zahharovich Shagal)

Born: July 7, 1887, Vitebsk, Russian Empire (present day Belarus)

Died: March 28, 1985, Saint-Paul, France



"My hands were too soft.. I had to find some special occupation, some kind of work that would not force me to turn away from the sky and the stars, that would allow me to discover the meaning of life."

SYNOPSIS

Marc Chagall's poetic, figurative style made him one of most popular modern artists, while his long life and varied output made him one of the most internationally recognized. While many of his peers pursued ambitious experiments that led often to abstraction, Chagall's distinction lies in his steady faith in the power of figurative art, one that he maintained despite absorbing ideas from **Fauvism** and **Cubism**. Born in Russia, Chagall moved to France in 1910 and became a prominent figure within the so-called *Ecole de Paris*. Later he spent time in the United States and the Middle East, travels which reaffirmed his self-image as an archetypal "wandering Jew."

KEY IDEAS

- Chagall flirted with many radical modernist styles at various points throughout his career, including **Cubism**, **Suprematism** and **Surrealism**, all of which possibly encouraged him to work in an entirely abstract style. Yet he rejected each of them in succession, remaining committed to figurative and narrative art, making him one of the modern period's most prominent exponents of the more traditional approach.
- Chagall's Jewish identity was important to him throughout his life, and much of his work can be described as an attempt to reconcile old Jewish traditions with styles of modernist art. However, he also occasionally drew on Christian themes, which appealed to his taste for narrative and allegory.
- In the 1920s, Chagall was claimed as a kindred spirit by the emerging **Surrealists**, and although he borrowed from them, he ultimately rejected their more conceptual subject matter. Nevertheless, a dream-like quality is characteristic of almost all of Chagall's work; as the poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire once said, Chagall's work is "supernatural."

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Childhood

Marc Chagall was the eldest of nine children born to Khatskl Shagal and Feige-Itte in the settlement town of Liozna, near Vitebsk, an area that boasted a high concentration of Jews. Raised in a Hasidic family, Chagall attended local Jewish religious schools - obligatory for Russian Jews during this time, since discrimination policies prohibited mixing of different racial groups - where he studied Hebrew and the Old Testament. Such teachings would later inform much of the content and motifs in Chagall's paintings, etchings and stained-glass work.

During his school days, Chagall adopted the habit of drawing and copying images from books, which quickly developed into a love for art and the choice to pursue it as a career, a decision that did not please his parents. In 1906 Chagall began his tutelage with the famous Russian portrait artist **Yehuda Pen**, who operated an all-Jewish private

school in Vitebsk for students of drawing and painting. Although grateful for the free formal instruction, Chagall left the school after several months.

That same year Chagall moved to St. Petersburg to continue his studies at the Zvantseva School of Drawing and Painting where he briefly apprenticed under the artist and set designer Leon Bakst. Bakst, a devout Jew himself, is believed to have encouraged Chagall to introduce Jewish imagery and themes in his work, a practice that was unpopular at this time, especially given the Russian Empire's hostility towards Jews.



Early Period and Training

Chagall moved to Paris in 1910, just as Cubism was emerging as the leading avant-garde movement. At the impressionable age of 23 and speaking no French, Chagall aligned himself with **Cubism** and enrolled in classes at a small art academy. In early paintings like *The Poet*, or *Half Past Three* and *I and the Village* (both 1911), Chagall is clearly adopting the abstract forms and dynamic compositions that characterize much of Cubism, yet he came to reject the movement's more academic leanings, instead infusing his work with touches of humor, emotion and cheerful color.

While in Paris, Chagall kept close to his heart his home town of Vitebsk, often using subject matter from memory in his paintings. Subjects included pastoral village scenes, weddings, and fiddlers playing on rooftops. In many of the pictures, the figures seem to float

freely in the sky, signatures of Chagall's lyrical and melancholic love of his far-away home.

Parisian scenes also found their way into Chagall's repertoire, with paintings like *Les fiancés de la Tour Eiffel* and *Paris Through the Window* (both 1913), which recall the work of Henri Matisse, and Chagall's friend Robert Delaunay. Complementing these elements, his work contained near-supernatural qualities that are considered key precursors to Surrealism.

Mature period

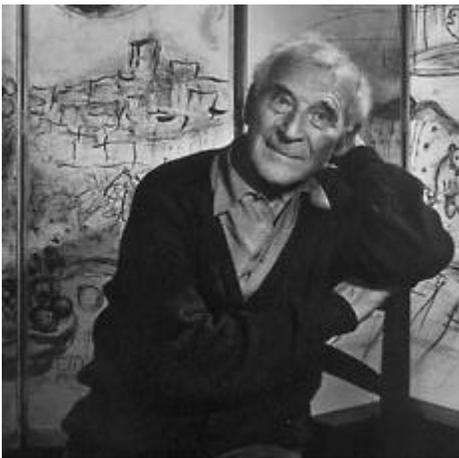


During one of his brief visits to Russia during this time, Chagall fell in love and became engaged to Bella Rosenfeld, who came to be the subject of many of his paintings, including *Bella with White Collar* (1917). In 1914, Chagall returned to Vitebsk via Berlin (where he enjoyed a well-received exhibition of some 200 works at the Sturm Gallery, all of which he would never recover), with plans to marry Bella and subsequently move back to Paris. The two did marry, but the outbreak of World War I that same year put a stop to their plan to return to Paris, and for the next nine years Chagall and his wife would remain in Russia.

Not long after the war's outbreak, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 occurred, an event that essentially obliged Chagall to remain in Russia and thrust him into the political post of Commissar of Arts for Vitebsk,

a teaching position that conflicted with his nonpolitical nature. He exhibited some new paintings in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but his overall work ethic and pace lessened due to the tense climate.

After years of scraping by in Vitebsk, Moscow and other towns, Chagall and Bella had saved enough to move back to Paris in 1923. At this point, Chagall's name had some caché in modern art circles, affording him the opportunity to travel throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. Notably, Chagall formed a friendship with dealer **Ambroise Vollard**, who commissioned Chagall to draw and paint multiple religious scenes from the Old Testament and similar sources. In addition to Chagall's Jewish themed works, such as *Green Violinist* (1923-24) and *Dancing Mirjam* (1931), he often drew inspiration from the Christian Bible. He also travelled to Palestine and the Holy Lands in 1931. In addition to his many oil canvases and gouaches, such as the iconic *White Crucifixion* (1938), Chagall created some 100 etchings illustrating scenes from the Bible.



In the coming years, World War II crippled most of Europe and forced many of its greatest modern artists, both Jew and gentile, to seek refuge in the United States. Hitler's Third Reich reigned over a large portion of the continent, including Vichy France, where the Chagalls were then living, and it is said that Joseph Goebbels personally ordered the artist's paintings to be burned. In 1941, thanks to Chagall's daughter Ida, and the Museum of Modern Art's director **Alfred H. Barr, Jr.**, Chagall's name was added to a list of European artists whose lives were at risk and in need of asylum, and that June, Chagall and Bella arrived safely

in New York City.

Late period

Just before the war in Europe came to a close, Bella died from a virus infection, and it came to Chagall's attention that Vitebsk had been razed during the German invasion of Russia. Crippled with grief, Chagall's work lessened dramatically, yet he continued to take commissions for theatrical sets and costume designs (a medium for which Chagall received great praise at the time, but which has since garnered little posthumous attention).

Chagall never truly made New York his home, and in 1947 the widower returned to France and settled in the southern city of Vence. He was remarried in 1952, to Valentine 'Vava' Brodsky, and he continued to paint, but his later canvases are remarkably different than his better-known earlier works. His colors and subjects appear more melancholy, and his painterly touches became increasingly lyrical and abstract, almost reverting back in time to **Post-Impressionist** motifs. This led several mid- and late-century critics to label Chagall's later work "clumsy" and lacking in focus.

The crowning achievements of the last two decades of his life were a series of large-scale commissions. The first came in 1960, for stained-glass windows. These represented the twelve tribes of Israel, and were installed at the Hadassah University Medical Center in Jerusalem. Similar commissions followed in both Europe and the U.S., including the memorial window *Peace* (1964) for the United Nations, and *The America Windows* (1977) for the Chicago Institute of Art, which Chagall considered tokens of gratitude for his brief asylum in the U.S. during World War II. Significant commissions for murals also helped define Chagall's late career, and included the ceiling of the Paris Opera House (1963) and the juxtaposed murals *The Sources of Music* and *The Triumphs of Music* (1966) for the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

In 1985 Chagall passed away at the age of 97, by now the last surviving of the original European masters of modern art. He was buried in Saint-Paul, in southeastern France.

LEGACY



Marc Chagall's influence is as vast as the number of styles he assimilated to create his work. Although never completely aligning himself with any single movement, he interwove many of the visual elements of **Cubism**, **Fauvism**, **Symbolism** and **Surrealism** into his lyrically emotional aesthetic of Jewish folklore, dream-like pastorals, and Russian life. In this sense, Chagall's legacy reveals an artistic style that is both entirely his own and a rich amalgam of prevailing Modern art disciplines. Chagall is also, much like **Picasso**, a prime example of a modern artist who mastered multiple media, including painting in both oil and gouache, watercolor, murals, ceramics, etching, drawing, theater and costume design, and stained-glass work.

*Original content written by **Justin Wolf***

ARTIST QUOTES

"When I am finishing a picture, I hold some God-made object up to it - a rock, a flower, the branch of a tree or my hand - as a final test. If the painting stands up beside a thing man cannot make, the painting is authentic. If there's a clash between the two, it's bad art."

"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."

"All colors are the friends of their neighbors and the lovers of their opposites."

"Chagall will be the only painter left who understands what color really is." - Pablo Picasso, ca. 1954, following the death of Henri Matisse

"Some become painters by controlling or deflecting their gifts - and even attain greatness - but Chagall was born into paint, into the canvas, into the picture, with his clumsiness and all." - Clement Greenberg, 1946

Major Works:



Title: I and the Village (1911)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York

Description: This early work clearly shows both the Cubist and Fauvist influences at play in Chagall's canvas, yet unlike the works of Picasso or Matisse, Chagall is far more playful and liberal with decorative elements, creating a pastoral paradise out of the Russian countryside. It is an early sign of the approach that would make the artist famous and influential: a blend of the modern and the figurative, with a light, whimsical tone. Chagall depicts a fairy tale in which a cow dreams of a milk maid and a man and wife (one upright, one upside down) frolic in the work fields. Abstraction is at the heart of this work, but it exists to decorate the picture rather than invite analysis of the images.



Title: Paris Through the Window (1913)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Description: *Paris Through the Window* appears to reflect upon Chagall's feeling of divided loyalties - his love both for modern Paris and for the older patterns of life back in Russia. Hence the figure in the bottom right looks both ways, and the couple below the

Eiffel Tower seems to be split apart. Upon first glance, the picture may recall one of Robert Delaunay's many fractured portraits of the Eiffel Tower, rendered in a style often referred to as Orphic Cubism. But Chagall makes no attempt here to dissect the subject or view it from multiple angles. Instead he searches for beauty in the details, creating what writer Guillaume Apollinaire called "sur-naturalist" elements, such as a two-faced head and floating human figure. The end result is a brilliantly balanced and visually appealing snapshot of Paris, juxtaposing the imaginary and the real, all seen through eyes that are both eccentric and loving.



Title: Bella with White Collar (1917)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Private collection

Description: This portrait of Chagall's first wife, Bella, whom he married in the summer of 1915, also doubles as a love letter of sorts. Her demure face and figure stand over a lush pastoral landscape, larger than life, and may have been inspired by the traditional subject, The Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Chagall once remarked that, "Only love interests me, and I am only in contact with things that revolve around love." *Bella with White Collar*, while certainly expressive and vibrant, stands as a lasting example of Chagall's mastery of more traditional subjects and forms, yet he no less maintains the faintest of sur-naturalist elements throughout. At Bella's feet we can see two tiny figures which presumably represent Chagall and the couple's daughter, Ida.



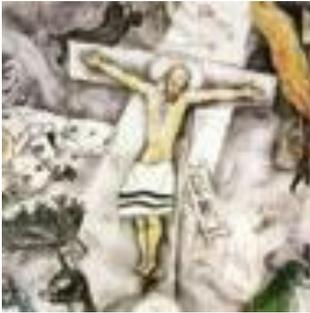
Title: Green Violinist (1923-24)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Description: Nostalgia for the artist's rustic village is at the heart of this painting. Fiddlers on rooftops were a popular motif of Chagall's, stemming from his memories of Vitebsk and the Russian countryside he called home as a child. This motif also reflects the artist's deep devotion to his Jewish cultural roots. In *Green Violinist*, his subject (who may represent the prophet Elijah) is an extension of the rooftops, indicated by the windows and geometric shapes in his pant legs; he is literally a colorful man, a pillar of the community, poised in rhythmic stance. Chagall also recalls with this painting the

belief among the Chabad Hasidim in Vitebsk that music and dance represented a communion with God. Incidentally, the 1964 musical "Fiddler on the Roof" got its name from Chagall's paintings.

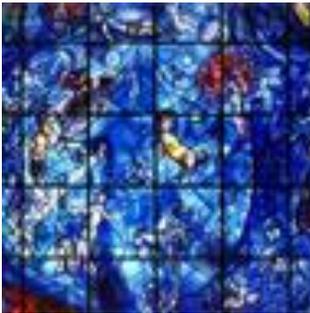


Title: White Crucifixion (1938)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: The Art Institute of Chicago

Description: Although Chagall became well known for his religious and Biblical motifs, the blatant Christian symbolism present in *White Crucifixion* and other works (particularly his stained-glass windows for several churches) is surprising given Chagall's devout Orthodox Jewish background. However, this work is a clear indication of Chagall's faith and his response to the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe at this time; here Jesus's suffering parallels that of his people. Jesus wears a Jewish prayer shawl, and whilst he suffers on the cross, Jewish figures on all sides of him suffer as well, fleeing from marauding invaders who burn a synagogue. The painting rather poignantly inverts the notion that the crucifixion is purely a Christian symbol - indeed that might only serve as a reminder of what divides Jews from Christians. Instead it makes the Crucifixion into a sign of their common suffering.



Title: Peace (1964)

Materials: Stained glass window

Collection: United Nations Building, New York

Description: Following the sudden death of the UN's secretary general, Dag Hammarskjöld, killed in a plane crash in 1961, the Staff of the United Nations set up a Committee and a Foundation to provide a "living memorial" to Hammarskjöld and all those who died in the cause of world peace. The committee invited Chagall to contribute a piece of his work, and it was soon decided that the monument would be a free-standing piece of stained glass. The breadth and detail of the window is staggering, comprised of free-floating figures and faith-based symbols throughout, co-existing blissfully in a heaven-meets-earth setting. Chagall considered this window, today referred to as the "Chagall Window," not just a memorial to one man, but a thank-you

card of sorts to the country that granted him asylum during his time of need in World War II.