



CHAGALL

14 February to 20 May 2012

Curator: Jean-Louis Prat

The first retrospective on the Russian artist Marc Chagall to be organised in Spain open on 14 February at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza and Fundación Caja Madrid. More than 150 works from public and private collections and institutions around the world will be on display in the two venues, offering a complete overview of the career of one of the leading artists of the 20th century: a unique creative figure with a highly distinctive style who played a key role in the history of modern art. The MoMA and the Guggenheim in New York, the Kunsthaus Zurich, the Kunstmuseum Berne, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and Tate Modern in London are among the twenty international museums that have lent key works from their collections, to be seen alongside others from private collections. Particularly important is the loan from the Centre Pompidou in Paris, which is sending 20 works, and that from the artist's family, which has been particularly generous in this respect. The result is a large and comprehensive group of masterpieces selected by the exhibition's curator, Jean-Louis Prat, President of the Comité Chagall. Together they will make this exhibition a major and unrepeatably artistic event and one that will offer visitors a unique opportunity to appreciate the wide-ranging and incomparable oeuvre of this essential figure.

“The Poet with Painter’s Wings”

Marc Chagall developed a highly expressive and colourist pictorial style that was closely linked to his own life and to the religious and popular traditions of the Russian Jewish community. Chagall combined elements from Cubism, Fauvism and Robert Delaunay's Orphism to create a personal style that is difficult to categorise. Born in the small Russian town of Vitebsk, Chagall's long life (he lived to be almost 100) was marked by the major historic events of the first half of the 20th century. A tireless creator and one always open to new experiences and to learning, Chagall's output is rich and varied. Using his particular and unique style, he was permanently open to exploring new techniques (oil, printmaking, sculpture, ceramics, stained glass, etc) and to undertaking new projects. One important section of this exhibition, for example, is devoted to his

Images from left to right: *Midsummer Night*, 1939. Musée de Grenoble. Gift of the artist, 1951; *Above Vitebsk*, undated. The Anna Slazmann Collection, Paris. Present from Israel State. On permanent loan to The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; *The Cat and the Two Sparrows*, 1925-1926. Collection Larock-Granoff.

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significant activities as a book illustrator. Throughout his life Chagall was surrounded by poets and writers who were his friends and with whom he maintained close and mutually creative relations. Breton, Malraux, Cendrars and Apollinaire were among those who considered him a “literary painter” and it is evident that Chagall loved literature, particularly the message of freedom contained within words, which he was able to enrich with his fantastical and colourful compositions.

Chagall was essentially a master of colour; his tones vibrate in different intensities and function to highlight the subjects of his paintings. His blues, greens, reds and yellows fill with life his real or imaginary characters, who inhabit a special universe of their own. Everything is possible in this constantly surprising world based on real or imagined stories: a violinist, a rabbi, two lovers, an acrobat, a landscape and a wide range of fantastical animals fill his compositions. In this world, colours and surprising figures and animals come together in previously unknown ways, resulting in a unique combination that made Chagall a forerunner of Surrealism, as that movement’s theoretician, André Breton, noted: “With Chagall, metaphor made its triumphant entry into modern painting.”



The Fiddler, 1912-1913. Oil on canvas 188 x 158 cm. Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

Russia (Vitebsk, 1887) – France (Saint-Paul-de-Vence, 1985)

In the summer of 1911, the young Chagall arrived in Paris from the remote provincial city of Vitebsk in Russia with the aim of making his way in the international capital of the art world at that date. He made friends with the painters Léger, Modigliani and Soutine and with the poets André Salmon, Max Jacob and Guillaume Apollinaire among others. Over the next few years he exhibited at the Salon d’automne and at the Salon des Indépendants. Through Apollinaire,



The Bride with the Double Face, 1927. Oil on canvas, 67 x 97 cm. Private Collection

Chagall met the Berlin art dealer Herwarth Walden who chose three of his works for the first Herbstsalon in Berlin in 1913. Chagall held his first solo exhibition in Walden’s gallery in 1914. Accustomed to Expressionism, the German public received his works with enthusiasm and Chagall progressed from being a young and talented painter to one who enjoyed international recognition.

From Berlin the artist went back to his native city where he was surprised by the outbreak of World War I. In 1915 he married his fiancé Bella Rosenfeld and following the Russian Revolution was employed as Director of the Vitebsk Art School for two years. Due to differences of opinion with Kazimir Malevich he was obliged to leave the academy and in 1920 began to work for the State Jewish Theatre in Moscow for which he created sets and costume designs.

In 1922 Chagall left Russia for ever and after a short period in Berlin settled in France in 1923. He lived there for the rest of his life with the exception of a brief period between 1941 and 1948 when he lived in the USA in order to avoid deportation

by the Nazis. It was during this period, in 1946, that the Museum of Modern Art in New York held a retrospective exhibition of his work that fully established his international reputation.

Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza acquired his first painting by Chagall, *The Madonna of the Village*, in 1965, followed by three further exceptional works that are now part of the Museum's Permanent Collection, namely *The Cockerel*, *The Grey House* and *Nude*. In one of the biographies of the family, the Baron recalled: "I once asked Chagall why he always painted cows playing the violin in the skies in his paintings. Very simply, he replied that he had grown up in the countryside and had therefore always been surrounded by cows, 'which is why I always paint cows in the sky'".



The Madonna of the Village 1938-1942.
Oil on canvas, 102, 5 x 98 cm. Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

The present exhibition at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza and Fundación Caja Madrid follows a chronological order. The first part, "The Path of Poetry", runs from Chagall's earliest years in Russia and his early period in Paris to his enforced exile in the USA and includes his experiences in revolutionary Russia and his return to France in 1920. The second part, "The Great Play of Colour", to be shown at the exhibition space of Caja Madrid, analyses Chagall's artistic evolution from 1950 onwards, focusing on the principal themes within his work in his final decades including the Bible and the Circus, his relationships with contemporary poets and his sculptures and ceramics.

The Path of Poetry

Chagall lived in Paris for the first time between 1911 and 1914. He arrived there in the company of Leon Bakst, his teacher in Saint Petersburg, and according to his own account felt immediately attracted to French art:

"Bakst gave my life a new direction. I will never forget him. In 1911 he invited me to accompany him to Paris as his assistant but we parted ways there and I graduated towards the circles of the European contemporary artists. In the Louvre, in front of Manet's *Olympia*, Courbet and Delacroix, I understood the nature of Russian and Western art. I was captivated by the proportion and the aesthetic of French painting."

Despite his ongoing fascination with the French art scene and the Parisian way of life, Chagall remained faithful to the world of his native Russia, which he missed and constantly recalled in his paintings. In addition, his desire for artistic freedom meant that he did not ally himself with any of the avant-garde movements (Cubism, Fauvism, etc) although his work reveals their influence at



The Yellow Room, 1911. Oil on canvas, 84,20 x 112 cm. Fondation Beyeler, Riehen / Basel

this period. As a result, he produced a type of art that puzzled his contemporaries but which they admired. Chagall's initial intention to devote himself to painting was made with the aim of liberating himself from the Hasidic Jewish tradition in which the depiction of images of man is considered sacrilegious, and it may be for this reason that Chagall always adhered to figuration and never moved towards abstraction, in contrast to most of his fellow Russians. The *Yellow Room*, *The Violinist*, *Dedicated to my Fiancé* and *The Wedding* are outstanding examples of his Paris output that open the present exhibition. They are large-format works with complex compositions and already feature Chagall's unique and completely

new universe: a poetic, fantastical and imagined world in which everything is possible and in which recollections of his youth and his innate sense of colour combine with the geometry and de-structuring of forms characteristic of Cubism or with the vibrant colours of Fauve painting.

In the summer of 1914 Chagall returned to Vitebsk to see his fiancé Bella. He intended to return to Paris after a brief stay but the outbreak of World War I followed by the Bolshevik Revolution obliged him to remain in Russia until 1922. The marked contrast between the liveliness of the flourishing Parisian avant-garde art scene and the tranquillity of life in provincial Vitebsk, “sad and happy” as Chagall described it in his autobiography, resulted in a new direction in his painting. During the six years that he lived in this small Jewish city before moving to Moscow, Chagall executed a series of painting that he termed “documents” on its people and landscapes, including *Bella on the Bridge*, *Landscape of l’Isle Adam* and *The Livestock Dealer*. They include a series of views of Vitebsk that fuse opposing sentiments. Idyllic, nostalgic or apocalyptic, they convey Chagall’s happiness following his recent marriage as well as the emotional tensions resulting from the Revolution in which the artist actively participated in its early years. Chagall depicts the churches and modest homes of his fellow Russians and transforms Vitebsk into an idyllic city over which he and his beloved Bella or other characters fly in works such as *Flying over Vitebsk* or *Man-Cockerel flying over Vitebsk*. In contrast, he also shows it as a sad and apocalyptic town as in *The grey House* in the Museo Thyssen’s collection.



The Poet Reclining, 1915. Oil on board, 77,2 x 77.5 cm. Tate: acquired in 1942

In 1927 Chagall signed a contract with the art dealer Georges Bernheim that marked the start of his years of success. Five years earlier the artist had decided to return to the West, moving firstly to Berlin for a brief period until his friend the poet Blaise Cendrars persuaded him to return to Paris in September 1923 and to accept Ambroise Vollard’s commission to illustrate a series of prints for his editions of Gogol’s *Dead Souls* and La Fontaine’s *Fables*. For the Gogol text Chagall



The fox and the Grapes, 1926-1927. Watercolor and gouache on paper, 50 x 40 cm. Collection Larock-Granoff

produced 107 prints between 1924 and 1927 in which he reveals his complete mastery of drypoint and etching. Using his profound knowledge of the Russian people and his boundless imagination, Chagall invented characters that he depicted with absolute freedom and with an almost caricatural and acerbic irony. In 1927 he turned to La Fontaine’s *Fables*, producing a series of illustrations that are perfectly adapted to that writer’s imagination and irony, expressed in poems filled with heroes of classical and popular mythology and with a cast of animals that behave in the manner of humans. During this period Chagall also produced a series of gouaches and independent works that are clearly based on these themes. The present exhibition brings together a comprehensive group of more than 40 of them (*Cat transformed into a Woman*, *The Fox and the Grapes*, *The two Doves*, *The Cockerel*, and others), shown alongside copies of the two books and a framed selection of the illustrations.



Solitude, 1933. Oil on canvas 102 x 169 cm
Collection of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.
Gift of the artist, 1953

Years later Chagall received a new commission from Vollard to illustrate the Bible, a project that took him back to his childhood and to the Hasidic tradition of his native town. Chagall brilliantly handled the different techniques of printmaking that he used, playing with black and white and with thick and thin lines to produce a uniquely powerful series of images. Universally esteemed, these books constitute an important phase in his work and thinking in the first part of the 20th century. The artist himself spoke about this facet of his work:

“Apart from colour, I think that I would have been missing something if I had not worked in intaglio and lithography at various moments in my life [...] When I picked up a lithographic stone or copper plate it was like touching a talisman. It seemed to me that I could express all my sadness and joy through them [...] Everything that had happened to me over the course of my life: birth, deaths, marriages, flowers, animals, birds, poor workers; parents, lovers in the night, the biblical Prophets, on the street, at home, in the Church and in the Sky. And, with advancing age, the tragedy of life, within us and around us.”

The Great Play of Colour

Bella died suddenly in 1944 and Chagall ceased painting for some months. A year later his assistant Virginia McNeill became his new companion. He returned with her to France to settle there permanently in the spring of 1950 in Saint-Paul-de-Vence in Provence. A new light, that of the South of France, began to fascinate Chagall and the region offered him a new homeland of celestial colours that flooded his works of his final decades. These were compositions that focused on his traditional themes of religion, the family, dreams, fable and the circus. The blue Circus, The Dance, Red Roofs, Red and black World, War and Lovers at the Post are among the paintings on display in the central gallery of Fundación Caja Madrid.

During these years Chagall embarked on the new artistic adventure of ceramics. The invention of forms and the application of colours to the clay or the glaze allowed him to investigate a popular art form that soon gripped his imagination. This experience would shortly lead on to sculpture and he began to work in marble, stone and bronze, imperishable materials that could be used to express the forms and associations of a primitive art form and which thus led him back once again to his origins, to religion and to fantasy:

“What could I bring to ceramics and sculpture? Perhaps the memory of my father, my mother, my childhood, my family. One has to be humble with this material and submit oneself to it! It is natural and everything that is natural is religious.”

The exhibition brings together a group of sculptures, ceramics and reliefs, some never previously exhibited, which represent the focus of Chagall’s activities from 1950 onwards. During these years the artist also returned to various projects that he had abandoned due to the war including book illustration, while also starting new ones. A retrospective in Jerusalem in 1951 took him to Israel, which he would regularly visit from then on. In 1952 he separated from Virginia and shortly afterwards married Valentina Brodsky (Vava). Their honeymoon in Greece inspired a new illustration



The Peasant in the Well, 1952-1953. Vessel with engobes, oxides, etching and partial enamel, 32 cm. Private Collection

project for Daphnis and Chloe, while he also designed the sets and costumes for its production at the Paris Opera. In 1958 Chagall started to design stained glass, which he produced for Metz cathedral, the synagogue of the University Clinic of Hadassah in Jerusalem, and the Art Institute of Chicago, among other places. In 1963, André Malraux, the French Minister of Culture, commissioned him to paint the frescoes for the ceiling of the Opera in Paris. Chagall used these 200 square metres to create an homage to the great composers – Mozart, Ravel, Stravinsky and Debussy – and the present exhibition includes a preliminary study for this project.

The exhibition ends with a space devoted to one of Chagall's great themes, namely the Circus. This magical world particularly interested him throughout his life and connected him with his childhood in Vitebsk, which was frequently visited by troops of strolling acrobats whose liberty and sense of joy fascinated the local children who impatiently awaited their arrival. As early as the 1920s Vollard, who had a box at the Winter Circus in Paris to which he often invited Chagall, commissioned him to illustrate a book on the subject, however it was in the 1960s that the artist most focused on this theme, producing a series of gouaches and a book published in 1967.

The most important retrospective of Chagall's work was presented at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1969. In 1973 the Russian Minister of Culture invited Chagall to visit his native land, to which he had not returned since 1922. That same year, the Marc Chagall National Museum of the Biblical Message opened in Nice, while in 1984 the Maeght Foundation organised a major retrospective on the artist, now aged 97. Chagall died soon afterwards in his house at Saint-Paul-de-Vence, leaving numerous unfinished projects.



The Blue Circus, 1950/1952. Oil on linen canvas, 232, 5 x 175,8 cm. Centre Pompidou, Paris. Musée national d'art moderne / Centre de création industrielle. Acquired 1988. On loan on the Musée national du Message Biblique Marc Chagall, Niza

EXHIBITION INFORMATION

Title: *Chagall*

Organiser: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza and Fundación Caja Madrid

Dates and venues: Madrid, Thyssen-Bornemisza and Casa de las Alhajas, Fundación Caja Madrid, 14 February to 20 May 2012

Curator: Jean-Louis Prat, President of the Comité Chagall

Co-ordinator: Clara Marcellán, Department of Modern Painting, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza

Number of works: around 150

Catalogue: published in Spanish and in English

Parallel activities: Monographic course, "Chagall", from 15 February to 11 April 2012; led by Guillermo Solana, Artistic Director of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza

VISITOR INFORMATION

Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza:

Address: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Paseo del Prado, 8. 28014 Madrid. www.museothyssen.org

Opening times: Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 7pm. Saturdays from 10am to 11pm. Ticket desks close half an hour before the galleries close.

Ticket prices:

Temporary exhibition:

- General ticket: 9 Euros
- Reduced price ticket: 6 Euros for visitors aged over 65, pensioners, students with proof of status and Large Families.
- Free entry: children aged under 12 and officially unemployed Spanish citizens

Temporary Exhibition + Permanent Collection:

- General ticket: 14 Euros
- Reduced price ticket: 8 Euros
- Free entry: children aged under 12 and officially unemployed Spanish citizens

Pre-booked tickets for sale at the ticket desks, on the Museum's website and on 902 760 511.

More information: www.museothyssen.org

Audioguide, available in various languages

Fundación Caja Madrid

Address: Plaza de San Martín, 1. 28013 Madrid

Opening times: Tuesdays to Sundays, 10am to 8pm. Closed Mondays

Free entry

Information service: 902 246 810

Audioguides available in Spanish, English and French

Guided tours: prior booking required on www.fundacioncajamadrid.es. More information on tel: 913 792 050 from Tuesdays to Fridays, 10am to 2pm. Free service

More information: www.fundacioncajamadrid.com

PRESS INFORMATION:

<http://www.museothyssen.org/microsites/prensa/2012/index.html>