**Fiddler on the roof of modernism**

**Marc CHAGALL: 1887-1985**

# “He grabs a church and paints with the church,” wrote a poet of the cubist era, Blaise Cendarrs. “He grabs a cow and paints with the cow… He paints with an oxtail (With all the dirty passion of a little Jewish town).” “Soutine? Stangely enough, no: Marc Shagall.”

Cendrars’ rhapsody reminds one how different the late decades of that hugely productive painter were from his early ones. One does not think of late Chagall in terms of the “dirty passion” and “exacerbated sexuality” that struck his (mostly Gentile) friends in modern painting’s golden age, Paris before 1914.

Instead one thinks of an institutionalized, not to say industrialized, sweetness: the Chagall of the blue, boneless angels, the muralist of Lincoln Center and the fresco painter of the Paris Opera, the stationed-glass artist who flooded interiors from the U. N. headquarters in New York City to Reims Cathedral in France to the Hadassah-Hebrew University Medical Center in Jerusalem with the soothing light of benign sentiment. His quasi-religious imagery, modular and diffuse at the same time, would serve (with adjustments: drop the flying cow, put in a menorah) to commemorate nearly anything, from the Holocaust to the self-celebration of a bank. When he died at the age of 97 at his home near Nice, Chagall’s career had spanned more that three—quarters of a century of unremittingly active artmaking.

He was seen by an immense constituency of collectors and museumgoers as an artist of the 20th century. He had a lyric, flyaway, enraptured imagination, allied to an enviable fluency of hand; the former could waken into marzipan poignancy, the latter into routine charm. He left behind him an oeuvre of paintings, drawings, prints, book illustrations, private and public art of every kind, rivaling Picasso’s in size, if not always in variety or intensity. The number of novice collectors who cut their milk teeth on a Shagall print (Bella with bouquet, floating over the roofs, edition size 400, later moved to the guest bedroom to make room for a large photorealist painting of motorcycle handlebars) is beyond computation. Chagall may have given more people their soft introduction to art dreams then any of his contemporaries. He was the fiddler on the roof of modernism. If he sometimes paid his spiritual taxes in folkloric sugar, it may not matter in the long run – for at Chagall’s death one consults the paintings of his youth, whose wild eccentric beauty is indelible.

Chagall’s was a textbook case of the way some artists receive their subject matter, their grammar of signs, in childhood. He was a child of the Russian ghetto, born in the town of Vitebsk in 1887; his father was a herring packer, his grandfather a cantorand kosher butcher, his uncle an amateur violinist. The imagery of music and shtetl folklore, mingled with the face of his childhood sweetheart (and further wife), Bella Rosenfeld, furnished the unaltering ground of his work for 80 years, long after the close-knit and weak little societies it represented had been incinerated by Hitler. “All the little fences, the little cows and sheep looked to me as original, as ingenuous and as eternal as the buildings in Giotto’s frescoes,” he reminisced in the ‘20s.

He developed his wry and sweet visions in the two great forcing houses of modernism between 1900 and 1925: Paris and Russia. As a student in St. Petersburg up to 1910, he came under the wing of Diaghilev’s designer Leon Bakst; an enlightened Jewish patron, Max Vinaver, sent him to Paris that year. He took a studio in a rickety building near the slaughteryards and found that his neighbors were Soutine, Legel and Modigliani. Back in Russia by 1914, Chagall waited out World War I (and was plunged into the Revolution) in the company of Tatlin, Malevich and Kandinsky.

“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive” – especially for a young artist, eager to absorb what this supreme moment of untainted modernism offered. In cubism, he felt, the subject was “killed, cut to pieces and its form and surface disguised.” Chagall did not want to go so far, but the flattening, reflection and rotation of cubist form gave his early paintings their special radiance and precision. In “Paris Through the Window”, 1913, we enter a rainbow world, all prismatic light and jingling crystalline triangles. It is full of emblems of stringent modernity: the Eiffel Tower, a parachutist. a train upside down but still insouciantly chuffing. It owes a lot to his friend Robert Delaunay, who made abstractions of Paris windows. But the picture is plucked back from the analytic by its delicious strain of fantasy: a cat with a man’s head serenading on the sill, a Janus head (Chagall himself, looking forward to modernism and back to the village?) displaying a heart on his hand. He was unquestionably a prince of tropes. “With Chagall alone,” said Andre Breton, leader of the surrealists, “metaphor made its triumphant entry into modern painting.” And though the procession that followed its entry had its tedious stretches, involving some fairly shameless plucking on the heart-strings, the best of Chagall remains indispensable to any nondoctrinaire reading of the art of the 20th century.