

## Artistic Archives of Nice: Chagall in the South of France – 02/12/1952

00:00:03

*Host:* And Marc Chagall is in Vence too. We found him in his retreat, a sunny retreat. You get there by way of a gentle slope, amidst the trees, olive trees, in this magnificent countryside, this sunny countryside that's so delicious. Marc Chagall, you're a seasoned traveler. You've seen, truly—you've taken your palette all over the world. Why did you come to Vence, Marc Chagall?

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*Marc Chagall:* You know, really, I was incredibly fortunate to discover this village of Vence. I think I don't even deserve it. It's a miracle to me. So I set up my studio here. I knew that Renoir lived nearby, the great Renoir. The great Bonnard lived here. He discovered miracles in painting. And I was getting started. By chance, I found a wonderful house and I got ready to do something, to do painting.

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*Host:* "Finally!" you would happily say, Marc Chagall. Finally, you'll be doing something. It's very enjoyable. Marc Chagall, I now know that you also have a violin by Ingres. You also have ceramics. Tell us about the ceramics. Was it the clay that attracted you to Vence?

00:01:14

*Marc Chagall:* Well, I honestly have to say, the clay was yet another discovery for me. I started, I wanted to dabble in ceramics, I didn't know what it was. All of a sudden, I had something, a burning in my hand. That clay, it started tickling me. And I discovered that it wasn't watercolor, it wasn't drawing, it wasn't etching. It was ceramics. I don't know what it is. It was something special, and I think that maybe now I'm beginning to guess what it is. I made 25 pieces in all. When I get to 100, well, or 60 or 75, I'll exhibit them. You'll see, you'll judge.

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*Host:* But I already saw, Marc Chagall, I saw those admirable platters. I know that you make those platters yourself in this magnificent Vence clay, and I know that you fire them in the kiln with that anxiety of the artist who awaits the end of the firing, right? How's it going to turn out? The colors are so admirable, really. The compositions are absolutely splendid. Marc Chagall, I'd like you to make a lot of ceramics, and I also don't want you to abandon your palette. Marc Chagall, in conclusion—I don't want to take more of your time—just another, another word about this wonderful clay, this clay from Vence that welcomed you and will retain you, I hope.

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*Marc Chagall:* Well, you know, I repeat the word *paradise* and it isn't an exaggeration. Be careful in Vence. It's a truly magnificent place for an artist. Living here is a great responsibility.

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*Host:* What lovely words you've just uttered. Thank you, thank you Marc Chagall.

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*Host:* Marc Chagall, could you tell me when you came to Provence for the first time?

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*Marc Chagall:* I arrived here around 1923 or 1924. When Vollard asked me to illustrate La

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Fontaine's *Fables*, I wanted to immerse myself in the atmosphere of dreams in reality. I wanted to find something that didn't resemble Vitebsk and that didn't even resemble Paris. I stopped first in Marseille, then in Toulon and in Nice after that. And in the South of France I finished all the sketches for the *Fables* by La Fontaine. And that's where I got to know the world of flowers for the first time. They appeared to me like a kind of *Arabian Nights* in painting. That journey to the South of France was the second turning point in my life. The first was when I came to Paris in 1911.

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*Host:* Does the climate encourage you to work?

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*Marc Chagall:* Not only the climate, but I think it does invite me to work. It fills my body with a special air and even a flame from which the only escape is to work, as I can manage. But to feel that, the revolution had to take place, war, immigration, and a lot of other events.

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*Host:* Does the light attract you?

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*Marc Chagall:* The light? Yes. It seems like I can only feel this light here, and even my hometown seems to me now like a white candle that doesn't burn anymore. But perhaps it's the far-off echo of Mediterranean sounds that are within me. I don't know.

00:05:00

*Host:* Why did you come to Vence?

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*Marc Chagall:* Vence. Above all, the name sounds so nice. One senses a softness here, and after Bella, I think, that beautiful Vence is like her. And now two or three more times. [Change of document] The costume for *Aleko*, to music by Tchaikovsky and choreography by Massine. And the second, *Firebird*, to music by Stravinsky and choreography by Balanchine. Right now, it seems, I've cooled down a bit. I mean, I think we've done enough talking and it's better to work.

00:05:47

*Host:* Well, I completely agree with you, Marc Chagall, especially since your work makes us so happy. But I still hope that one day you'll return to stage sets for ballet and theater. Thank you so much.

00:06:10

*Host:* The city of Nice undoubtedly has a major role to play in the arts, in particular when it comes to painters. It's no accident that, after Renoir, after Bonnard, painters like Matisse, Picasso, and Chagall came to settle on the Mediterranean coast, to find a new source of inspiration in the light. That's why, after an exhibit devoted to Henri Matisse, the Pochettes gallery opened a show devoted to the works of the wonderful artist Marc Chagall. I use the word *wonderful* in its most literal sense, meaning that one can speak of a grandiose world full of wonder. The extent of this exhibit and the meaning it takes on today give the show all of the magnitude that a great master of contemporary painting deserves. And this master of contemporary painting is gracing us with his presence in our studio, and in a moment we'll

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ask him to say a few words. I'll speak first to Mrs. Guinet, the curator of the museums of Nice. She gave all of her devotion, all her skills, and all of her love of painting to this exhibit. Mrs. Guinet, would you like to tell us how you feel on the day before this exhibit of Marc Chagall's work will open?

00:07:42

*Mrs. Guinet:* I'd say it's one of the privileges of this coast, as you said so eloquently earlier, which over the centuries has inspired the greatest masters in our history, to remain in modern times the chosen land of so many famous artists, which our American visitors call the Tuscany of the twentieth century. Nice, which in sum is the capital of this new Tuscany, must follow the tradition it has started with the Matisse exhibit. The city intends to show its visitors and inhabitants, each in turn, masterpieces that are born under its sky every day, for generations. Its goal will be to glorify the living artists and to celebrate the memory of the illustrious artists who've passed on. When I arrived in Nice to assume my position as museum curator two months ago, Nice, imitating New York, Paris, and London, was offering to open the 1952 season with an exhibit devoted to the master Chagall. I was in charge of organizing it and nothing could have been more enjoyable.

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*Host:* Was that the first time you met the master Chagall?

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*Mrs. Guinet:* No. In fact, I had... It was even more enjoyable since I'd had the chance to meet him when he returned from America. When, in 1947, my colleagues Jean Cassou and Bernard Dorival held their first exhibit at the *Musée d'Art moderne*, under the aegis of the curators of the national museums, the exhibit was actually designed to show the works of Chagall to the people of Paris. At that time, things were still difficult. Paper and nails were only being rationed, and Chagall and his daughter Ida were reminding me those days how modest our little catalogue was, and how difficult it was to get a hold of the nails we needed to hang the paintings.

00:09:51

*Host:* But I think that today, you didn't run into as many problems for the Nice exhibit.

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*Mrs. Guinet:* Today, everything was easy and everything was charming. I must say that those three days I spent hanging paintings in the company of the master and his daughter, assisted by the staff members of the museum of Nice, will remain one of my most cherished memories. Hanging paintings is the time when the conservator is in direct contact with the works of art, and it's undoubtedly one of the most fascinating aspects of the job.

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*Host:* Thank you very much, Mrs. Guinet, for sharing your experiences. I'm sure that I speak for everyone when I express our gratitude for what you do and what you'll do in Nice for painting. I believe you'd like to say something else. Please, go ahead.

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*Mrs. Guinet:* I wanted to say that since Chagall brought good luck to my colleagues at the *Musée national d'Art moderne*, it seems appropriate for me as well to begin my work in Nice

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with a Chagall exhibit. And I wish this exhibit the greatest success and hope that it will be very popular with our audience.

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*Host:* I'll now make way for Marc Chagall and ask him to talk to us about the French Riviera in particular, about its light, about this world that now also belongs to the enchanted realm of his artwork.

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*Marc Chagall:* I'm deeply moved to see my paintings on the same wall where our great predecessor Henri Matisse's paintings were hanging not so long ago. I'm touched more than I can say. I thank the exhibit committee, the curators of the fine arts and national museums, the city of Nice, Mrs. Guinet, the Mediterranean Union for Modern Art, and everyone who put so much hard work into this. More than 40 years ago, young and poor, I arrived here in France from my hometown of Vitebsk. I came with just one goal: to drink up a new color, unknown, a color that appeared to me like a dream and that nothing could conceal. The French art museums showed me a glimpse of a new world. My poet friends, Apollinaire, Cendrars, Canudo or others, Max Jacob, André Salmon, and the rest encouraged me. Nature itself, people, their appearances were more meaningful to me than the Academy. I started to feel what a color could be, a color that would be like a ray of freedom. The source and foundation of art. Speaking of color that way, I'm not thinking of that purely decorative or even abstract color. Because the color of a Le Nain or of a Chardin seems highly pure to me. And I now understand that this color, freedom, lived in France for centuries, that everything that was authentic in the world of art came through Paris and through France. And what's even more essential than discovering what that purity of color was made of, is glimpsing the right tone, like a golden rule in music, which would act as a key to the development of your own personality in the utmost absolute, in its national and international diversity. That is how France became like a temple where its artists each create their religion. But he who possesses color creates a single religion: the religion of love and humanism. I could have stayed in my poor hometown without rights under the rule of the tsar. Perhaps I would have been any old artisan on my street. I would have drowned in my browns and grays, colors that would generally have nothing to do with the browns and grays of Daumier or Corot. I've lived here almost my entire life, on French soil, but I don't disown my origins. Here in the South of France, I saw flowers for the first time. I believe they transformed my palette. Here in France, I met Ambroise Vollard, who introduced me to etching. Nearly 30 years ago, I began working on the great illustrated book *The Dead Souls* by Gogol for him, the *Fables* by La Fontaine, and the Bible, which, after Vollard passed away, were taken over by my friend the great publisher Tériade. Here, in the South of France, I have the revelation of this clay and the fire that opened me to the world of ceramics. I know that my words aren't heard very loudly today. What are they worth in a world of physical force? Who will say today the color of the soul or its colorful truth? But nonetheless, there is no better place than France to talk about this. It seems that the very stones in the paths are listening to you, they understand you. You can go out in the middle of a field, speak about the challenges of art, of freedom, of poetry, of colors and lines, of the zig-zags and curves of your own spirit. Something in this natural world listens, and like a distant echo, it answers you. For all of that and for many other things, I thank you.

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00:17:12

*Host:* What the master Marc Chagall has just said takes on a special meaning today and we thank him for expressing it with such faith. Those visiting the Ponchettes museum will be glad to think back on them as they stand before the great artist's paintings. They will be able to remember that poem written by Jacques Maritain in a book devoted to Marc Chagall, whose title "Enchanted Storm" so accurately summarizes the world of Chagall. Here is the poem: "With no home other than the sky, like the bird on a branch, on the branches of the cross, your cruel rest will be. In the peacefulness of this refuge, bitterness very bitter, rest like the bird without roots in the earth, on this tree where your God is perishing."