

Couleurs de ce temps: Marc Chagall and the Psyche of his Works – **08/22/1953**

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Host: Couleurs de ce temps. [Colors of Our Times] [Music]

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Host: Radiodiffusion française [French radio broadcaster] invites you to listen to the recording of a show by Georges Charbonnier and Alain Trutat: *Couleurs de ce temps*. Today, Georges Charbonnier is introducing Marc Chagall. [Music]

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Georges Charbonnier: A man sitting on a chimney at the very top of a roof, a donkey, a man playing the violin, a house, above the house, a man, above the man, a crescent moon, a fish, a man. He looks like an Assyrian warrior on his goatskin, and angels, violins. A portrait of a woman, a violin, a tightrope walker on the woman's chest, a green dancer with white wings and a yellow bird's head. An arm goes through a clock and very dark red, the circus ring. On the ring, a rider and houses, and a dancer. And a donkey. And a man playing the violin. Never-ending, the poem could unfurl. Yet I made no attempt to write a poem. You can't decide to write a poem. It writes itself. The poem writes itself. I only wrote an enumeration. I made a list of what I saw on a few of Chagall's paintings. And the poetry that emanates from Chagall's world is so vibrant that it was impossible for me to convey it in its entirety. Chagall is a painter and Chagall is a poet. Poetry and painting are so intertwined in his work that to get in, you need the keys to poetry. It goes without saying that a work of art will stay, if it is timeless in some of its facets. In a Chagall painting, the ever-present element is the subjectivity of the painter, who is always a blend of both child and man, conveying unity, his joys, his laughter, and his suffering. Chagall's mood is constant and always present. His present, that present he expresses, is the sum of his past. For the third time, Chagall was in France. Every time he set foot on French soil, the artist expressed in his painting the joy of discovery or that of returning. During the war, he spent time in the United States. He lost himself in exploring an inner world. He's now expressing the joy of having found nature again and the sadness of no longer sharing this joy. Chagall's major themes remain animals, flowers, houses, men, and women. But their symbolic value is almost always ambivalent. A ragdoll brought to life, brought to death, white Ophelias flow along the canvases. Animals from the nativity. Birds, red moon, white, yellow... Tiny Saint Ursulas dripping with flowers who celebrate their weddings and decorate their deathbeds, a few houses, purple or blue skies, all heavy for the assumption of the dead young women and their lovers. But while the artist's obsessions were often the designs around which the paintings were organized, Chagall asserts the mastery of his art in his recent paintings, which also convey the soothing of a tormented soul. Marc Chagall, a surrealist said, "The role of the painter is to project what is visible in himself. As a way to achieve this vision, I suggested a marriage between two realities that appeared unfit for such a union, on a surface that appeared not to suit them. There seems to be a vast number of paintings, and especially those that you exhibited recently, that show your assertion. Would you agree to being called a surrealist?"

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Marc Chagall: It's just one part of a larger whole. Rather, it is a schematic or automatic part with a cerebral point. We were born to see simultaneously and instantly, not just within ourselves, but outside ourselves. And if we look outside ourselves, do we not see it within

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ourselves as well? Not only our gaze, but our entire life is an immense eye. We're here and there at the same time, which gives our vision that quality of having no end or no beginning, a little bit like a newborn, I would say, or a new reality. Or, as in 1911, in my studio, Apollinaire uttered the word "supernatural"! All things considered, a vision like this is the result of a psychic moment and can be imagined as a constructive element, as a new dimension, not literary in the least and outside the mindless habit so proclaimed by André Breton. This is how my first paintings came to me. "Death" from 1908, for example, where, to recreate a street, the one I saw in front of me, not in an impressionistic or cubist view, I put the dead man in the street on the canvas, surrounded by candles and, across from that, on the roof, a musician. I wanted to build my street or your street, or in the "I and the Village" paintings from 1911, I put a small cow in the cheek of the big cow, and to emphasize the movement of the man walking, I placed a shadow next to him who was walking upside-down, and so on. But it's always outside symbolism and literature. So in 1908, 1910, 1911, and later, the surrealist movement hadn't started yet. It appeared much later. If surrealism was the movement in which a certain natural, a malleable language plays the leading role, then I'm a surrealist. But what's the point of classifications? When I came back to Paris in 1923, I didn't calculate groups or personalities. I left the path open.

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Georges Charbonnier: When you stayed in France for the first time, from 1910 to 1914, you witnessed the birth of cubism. You exhibited your work at the same time as cubist painters, and in some of your paintings, the influence of cubism is apparent. You quickly shed this influence. In what way did cubism differ from what you cared about?

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Marc Chagall: Yes. When I arrived in Paris in 1910, I was astonished by the nascent cubism. Well, I did see the dangers, in a way, of decoration and stylization of the primitive arts. I quickly became myself again. It felt like I could glimpse that this cubist movement, like the previous movement of impressionism, was still following the same realism. Like before, the realism of a Courbet naturalism, like the realism of Delacroix's romanticism, or the neoclassicism of Dali and Ingres. I dreamt of a certain reality, built not only in an optical way, but also with psychic elements. Elements that, from afar, appear to be illogical. Yes, this is a new reality, another reality, but there is nothing outside reality. Because even in what's call abstraction, there's also a reality, an angle, a circle or a curve on a canvas. It's a figuration, or in a way, a subject, like a guitar for the cubists or the apple on the plate for Cézanne. In the end, I'm not talking about method, unless that method takes the form of a vision of the world, because haven't we moved past the era of pure theories in art?

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Georges Charbonnier: Do you think you've been influenced by other painters nonetheless? Which ones?

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Marc Chagall: In Paris in 1910, I was very enthusiastic about Van Gogh. I was attracted to Seurat, and in the Louvre, I saw Greco. It's hard to list, but it was life itself, the air of freedom in France that stunned me. Not the living being for me, wandering through the face, the faces of men, the clouds under the trees, at the market, everywhere the air of the

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country, that was the art. It didn't oppress you; rather, it gave you the ability to remember yourself, to not forget yourself. On the contrary, that malleable air sharpens your awareness of yourself even more. Blessed be those marriages. You're never alone here, in your solitude.

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Georges Charbonnier: In addition to your huge collection of pictorial work, you've composed many, many illustrations.

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Marc Chagall: Yes, Vollard invited me to illustrate *The Dead Souls* by Gogol. That was in 1923. I made 118 etchings. Afterwards I did La Fontaine's *Fables*, 100 plates. I did the Bible, 100 etchings. The Gogol was already published by Tériade, who recovered it from Vollard after Vollard's death. I made the Verve for Tériade as well, number 24, the Boccace, with 26 washes. But the bulk of the work for me was the Bible, which will be published, I hope, in three or four years. Recently I also made a few ceramics with biblical motifs. This small number of pieces in ceramic, this small number of samples are like a hint at... in a way, the result of my life in the South of France, where the meaning of this ancient profession can be felt so strongly. The very soil on which I tread is so luminous. It looks at me tenderly, as if calling to me. I wanted to touch that earth, that clay, like an old craftsman, but far from accidental decoration, remaining within the limits of ceramics, breathing into it the echo of an art both near and far. It suddenly seems that this clay, so light, is questioning the thick clay of my hometown, Vitebsk, from afar. But this clay, just like friendship, doesn't give in so easily. The fire returns my problems to me when the work comes out of the kiln, sometimes with recognition, sometimes in a grotesque and ridiculous way. Working with clay reminds me that I have modest resources. Wonderful examples of this Western and Eastern art often go through my mind. In these times when we're threatened with bombs and explosions, we yearn even more to be tied to the clay, the earth, and meld with it. The roots of my homeland stretch out and mingle with the roots of my adopted country, which helps me breathe with a smile. Isn't art like the face of my four-year-old son who expects a smile from me? When I speak of ceramics, etching, or painting, all of my words gravitate around the medium, which is abstraction itself, as long as it remains at a certain height. Even if this material is soaked in excessive sensitivity, isn't it best to linger rather than to lose yourself in a world run by mindless habits or an arrogant lack of sensitivity?

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Georges Charbonnier: Whether it's in your painting, in your ceramics, or through Bible illustrations, the religious sentiment seems to have been a major source of inspiration for you.

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Marc Chagall: Yes, an object on a table, or simply a stone in a field, can move me religiously for quite some time. As for my paintings with religious elements, I remember one of my first paintings in 1908, which I don't even have a photo of. The painting was of a Madonna with Christ on her lap. I painted the child with a beard—I don't put any special religiousness in it. To me, the crucifixes that I've painted since 1908-1912 and up to very recently, have a meaning of human decline rather than a dogmatic meaning.

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Georges Charbonnier: It's been said that the perspective of your paintings is a perspective of sentiment. What is the meaning of that?

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Marc Chagall: Yes, there is truth in what you say. I think it will be a rather beautiful truth, or, as my friend Venturi expressed it, an emotional truth. The old perspective died with the other methods. In its stead came a perspective not only of sentiment, but of time and of a certain moral.

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Georges Charbonnier: In your work, the major themes—I mentioned them earlier—are animals, flowers, houses, and human figures. It seems to me like these themes are symbolic in nature. What meaning do you give to these characters, these flowers?

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Marc Chagall: It's not the meaning that's often given to them. An animal can sometimes have the appearance of some object, and another object can recall a bouquet of flowers, a bouquet itself morphs into a house and the men walk backwards and forwards and occupy other planes. As for their meaning, I'd prefer to emphasize their value, their constructive character for my painting, even though they emerge spontaneously.

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Georges Charbonnier: The paintings Chagall has made since he came back to France have a special importance in his body of work. Of course, the painter is always himself, at a distance from realism, surrealist, without literature or mindless habit. The only means he is willing to call upon are still those specific to painting. The psychic elements he's introduced in his paintings act as malleable constructive elements. All that he himself has said of painting, he would say again. Don't emphasize, don't get attached to a movement. Movements happen all by themselves. You don't make them. Nothing in life can be done by intuition and will alone. Run away from dilettantism, the fantastical. Intuition guides the artist, but his completed work must be a logical whole. The greatest danger before a Chagall painting would be to get caught up in rudimentary psychoanalysis. Doing so would be to neglect the painter and the poet, and to get attached to an overly complex man so that explanations could be made through those means. Additionally, shouldn't the critic avoid such pitfalls, since, through psychoanalysis, his intention would be to summarize the artist? The answer is yes. However, one must never forget that an artist's work is related to his life. The word "related" isn't enough. Life and work are one and the same. They express each other, they explain one another. That's the way it is, Chagall says. But I project my drama. If I were to say that I see them as tragic or happy, I would make a false assertion; it would be realism. You see a tree, but you can make a fish, a donkey, a candelabra. But the fish will look like a tree. I can't help thinking, in the presence of Chagall's work, of the equivalence of the means of expression, or rather of their correspondence. As a poet, Chagall wrote a book called *My Life*. The book of a painter. The typographical arrangement of the book still evokes a painting. Sentences, paragraphs, and every paragraph is a painting. "What first caught my eye was a trough. [...] my sad and joyful city. I see the river getting further away, the bridge in the distance and up close, the eternal fence, the earth, the tomb of flowing blood. My

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aunt is lying on the divan. The yellow hands are folded, crossed, black and white fingernails, yellow and white eyes. The teeth are shining, nebulously. Black dress through which the reclining, exhausted body can be seen. Everything the painter writes, the poet could paint. Every sentence is the assertion of an object, and indication of shape, movement, or color. I'd like to quote some lines written by Chagall, writing that gives me the impression of being essential to understanding the painter's work as a whole. "I'm alone in the river, I'm bathing, barely stirring the water. Around me, the peaceful city, the milky, blue-black sky is a little bluer on the left and at the highest point a celestial happiness shines. Suddenly, on the opposite bank, under the roof of the synagogue, smoke pours out, as if one could hear the screams of the burning Torah scrolls and altar. The windows shatter. Quick! Out of the water, bare naked through the beams. I run to get my clothing. I love fires so much. Flames are shooting all around. Half the sky is already filled with smoke. It's reflected in the water. The shops close and everything's abustle: people, horses, furniture, screams, calls, tumbles. My childhood home has become dearer to me, more moving. I run to it to see it and say goodbye. Ashes are already falling on its roof. Shadows. Reflections of fire. The house seems to have fainted. My father and I, the neighbors, we water it. We get it wet. He saves it. In the evening, I climb onto the roof to get a better view of the burned city. Everything is smoking, cracking apart, crumbling, sad and tired. I go home." And Chagall finishes his book. "These pages," he says, "have the same meaning as a painted surface... If my paintings had a hiding place, I could slide the pages in... Or maybe they would glue themselves to the back of one of my characters, or to the pants of the *Musician* in my mural? Who can know what's written on his back?"

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Host: Radiodiffusion française has just broadcast a recording of *Couleur de ce temps*, a show by Georges Charbonnier and Alain Trutat. Today, you've listened to Marc Chagall. Next show: interview with Salvador Dalí.