

Interview With Marc Chagall About Nicolas Gogol – 01/01/1952

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Robert Sadoul: I'm Robert Sadoul, speaking to you about Vence. There were so many people on the day of the art opening for the exhibition of Chagall's work held by the city of Nice in the Galerie des Ponchettes, that it was impossible to interview the great artist that day. I'm here with Marc Chagall, at his studio in Vence. Marc Chagall is the most famous illustrator of *Dead Souls* by Nicolas Gogol. Marc Chagall, it seems, your numerous illustrations embody the text so well that you were called to illustrate better than any the book by Gogol.

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Marc Chagall: I must first say that destiny is what led me to Gogol. And yet, would he agree with me if he was alive today? When I went to France for the second time, in 1922, from my home country, Ambroise Vollard, the grand patron, along with Blaise Cendrars, a friend from my youth, came to find me on avenue d'Orléans, in Paris, and asked me: "Do you want to do something for me? You know that I'm a publisher of big luxury books." Instinctively I chose Gogol.

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Robert Sadoul: But why Gogol?

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Marc Chagall: Because, having just returned to France, all I had seen and experienced was still intact within me. And I was thinking to myself, "God knows when I'll see my home country again." Who would remember me there? When all my loved ones had passed away. I had the feeling that everything that was familiar to me would go away later with the fire... So I chose Gogol. As an artist, he alone, apart from my parents, my grandparents, suited my tormented soul. He, Gogol, loved his river, the Dniepr. In the evening, under the bridge, under the moon, like me, I loved my river, the Dvina, which flows through Vitebsk. Like me, he had to love climbing onto the roof to see a fire that colors the sky red. He also saw a fantastical world, more real than reality. He was the first surrealist expressionist in Russia. He could be my brother. And to me, he was the one who characterized Russia. And that's why I got lost in the river of lines and dots in my etchings, searching for the dead souls of my homeland. I don't know if another way of seeing was better suited to expressing the love for Gogol and for his book. He said on the cover of his book that it was a poem. That attracted me as well. Ambroise Vollard accepted my offer with a slight smile, in his way, and asked me, "Do you know the Countess of Rostopchine and her book *The General Dourakine*?" Or, if that doesn't interest you, would you like *Père Ubu*?" I illustrated this book with more than 100 etchings 25 years ago and, when Vollard died, it was taken over by my friend Tériade, the great publisher, and published by him. It's pleasant for me to think that here, in France, Vollard, the Imprimerie Nationale, and Tériade took care of *Dead Souls* by seeking only artistic perfection, without letting themselves be dissuaded by material concerns. Achieving perfection honors Gogol, his country, and France. It's hard for me to talk about Gogol, like it's hard for me to speak about my art, about my friends who are no longer with us. I memorized Gogol as a little boy, flipping through the pages, like for example those of *Dead Souls*: "And you, Russia of mine? Are not you also speeding like a troika which nought can overtake? Is not the road smoking beneath your wheels, and the bridges thundering as you cross them, and everything being left in the rear, and the spectators, struck with the portent, halting to wonder whether you be not a thunderbolt launched from heaven? What

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does that awe-inspiring progress of yours foretell? What is the unknown force which lies within your mysterious steeds? Surely the winds themselves must abide in their manes, and every vein in their bodies be an ear stretched to catch the celestial message which bids them, with iron-girded breasts, and hooves which barely touch the earth as they gallop, fly forward on a mission of God? Whither, then, are you speeding, O Russia of mine? Whither? Answer me!”

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Robert Sadoul: But in your opinion, Marc Chagall, is Nicolas Gogol Ukrainian above all, or, on the contrary, has he painted the Russian character, more generally speaking?

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Marc Chagall: Gogol, like all great artists, took some of his defining features from his province. It's very clear. When, describing life in a small town, it can be universal. As a child, I knew nothing of all of this, and yet, even though Gogol was Ukrainian, in my view he represented the Russian soul.

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Robert Sadoul: Does the painting of Gogol in *Dead Souls* apply more specifically to the nineteenth century? And do you believe it is still valid today? To be specific, I'm not referring to its validity as a work of art, but as a picture of the Russian character.

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Marc Chagall: One could speak that way of an artist whose work is dominated by local color. But is it possible to speak of limitations in time and space, when the subject is the Bible, Shakespeare, or certain other books? In human nature, there are vices and virtues that exist in every era, in forms that are relevant to those times. Some types of characters found in Gogol's work existed before him, during his lifetime, after him, and will exist in the future. Is that not the sign of his genius? Like for Shakespeare and Molière?

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Robert Sadoul: What does the character of Chichikov symbolize to you?

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Marc Chagall: Of course, Chichikov is the fantastic kind of guy you can't take literally. Like an artist mustn't take a tree and copy it down as-is on canvas. Otherwise, we wouldn't have Cézanne and Monet, who painted trees that we know well. It must be said that the great Pushkin had the subject of *Dead Souls* and that he's the one who gave it to his young friend Gogol. Because of course, he himself wouldn't have been able to reveal that illogical and unreal world. Pushkin was a classical realist barely influenced by nascent romanticism, but a realistic romanticism. And Gogol took this fantastical subject and made it burst into a supernatural reality.

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Robert Sadoul: Why did Gogol title the poem *The Dead Souls*?

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Marc Chagall: Because I think that fantastical beings are inclined towards the poetic, towards a kind of extreme subjectivism. There are no other examples in classical Russian literature of a similar mind. Not Tolstoy, nor Turgenev.

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Robert Sadoul: And is this the aspect of the poem that tempted you in particular?

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Marc Chagall: It's exactly what attracted me. And it's what made me suspect there was a world close to my own in Gogol's work, a kind of weightless world.

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Robert Sadoul: Marc Chagall, would you like to illustrate other books by Gogol, *The Saint Petersburg Tales*, or *The Vigils of the Hamlet*?

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Marc Chagall: What a question! I told you that Gogol is like my brother. And if there's something I'd like to do, after the Bible, Shakespeare, Cervantes, not to mention La Fontaine's *Fables* which are coming out this year, it's Gogol and more Gogol. Also, in the first years of the Revolution, I designed the stage sets and costumes for Gogol's *Wedding*, for the Ermitage theater in Petrograd. As well as later on, in 1920, the sketches for the stage sets and costumes for *The Government Inspector*, a play at the satirical theater in Moscow. That remained at the sketch phase because, unfortunately, not all stage managers are fans of Gogol.

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Robert Sadoul: But how can one explain that Gogol kept such a typically Russian inspiration, despite his many long trips abroad: Germany, Switzerland, France, and mainly Italy?

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Marc Chagall: I'm not a historian, nor a literary critic. Not long ago, I learned that Gogol had written *The Dead Souls* at Place de la Bourse in Paris. Throughout his whole life, he was kind of in exile. He wasn't the only one. Turguenev was in Paris too. There's not doubt that being anonymous allowed Gogol to feel his country better, to see it in more depth, to better observe its features to give his work a universal aspect. In his creation, at night, Russia appeared to him like a kind of vast painting full of sunny nightmares, like riding a horse ardently into an attack on the celestial cloud and the depths of the earth. At these points of view, it's interesting to recall that Poussin and Corot, for example, went to Rome to crystalize their personality. Like, closer to us, the Dutchman Van Gogh and others came to develop their personalities in France.

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Robert Sadoul: To finish, it would be interesting, Marc Chagall, to know what the ties are that could link Gogol to our era.

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Marc Chagall: At a time when art seems to be gently fading away into a kind of haughty formalism, when the soul hesitates before any palpitations, and when a straight line and a sharp shape give a semblance of strength. Or if we observe, on the other hand, photographic realism, saturated with academism, it's good to remind ourselves of another artist: Nicolas Gogol. This is why it's good to think with him, these days, about the destinies of art and culture. Just at the time of the centenary of this strange world expressionist, who is so close to Bruegel and Bosch, or even closer to us, Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Edgar Poe, and some others. These hundred-year-old writers could be a celebration of art even freer than

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freedom itself. They could be like the symbol of flight in a world without borders. Must we wait 100 more years for this world of physical force to slowly transform into a world embellished by a rainbow of love and art, like a religion of the highest order, for which it is worth living and working? Let's remind ourselves that, after this first book of *Dead Souls*, in which he freely shared his satirical fantasy, Gogol intended to write a second volume in which he would give his characters a more idealistic light. But he burned his manuscripts. I see this poor Gogol on his knees next to the fireplace, lit by the flames of his burning manuscript. But in the light of these flames, he surely saw and foresaw another error that future generations must accomplish.

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Robert Sadoul: Thank you so much, Marc Chagall.