

Interviews during the retrospective exhibition of Marc Chagall at the Grand Palais – 12/12/1969

00:00:04

Dominique Bromberger: Sophie Dumoulin, a few minutes ago you were at the Grand Palais, at the Grand Palais, where the authorities, first Mr. Chaban-Delmas, inaugurated this morning the grand Marc Chagall retrospective, a tribute to Marc Chagall.

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Sophie Dumoulin: Yes, well it's a wonderful exhibition. I think Albert Cartier already told you about it and will speak to you about it again. And Prime Minister Chaban-Delmas toured the entire exhibition accompanied by Mr. André Malraux, Mr. Edmond Michelet, and also Marc Chagall. I'd like to tell you the little story of this tour. You know, when you follow ministers very closely and you listen in on their conversations, you always pick up on a few words. Marc Chagall was there. Mr. Edmond Michelet was there. Mr. Chaban-Delmas was there. That was before the inauguration. And we were waiting for him in an unruly crowd of photographers. As you can guess, we were waiting. We were running a bit late. And someone said to Mr. Chaban-Delmas, "Do you think Mr. Malraux will come?" Mr. Chaban-Delmas answered, "Yes, but Mr. Malraux is a man who we'll have to wait for."

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Host: Yes. You had the opportunity to record André Malraux's impressions this morning.

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André Malraux: Wonderful, excessively important because it shows a huge number of paintings and works of art that we'll probably never see together again, some of which are not in France.

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Sophie Dumoulin: Were there any that you hadn't seen yet?

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André Malraux: Yes, yes, yes. A rather high number, and as a result those that I hadn't seen, the others hadn't seen either. Well.

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Sophie Dumoulin: Mr. Prime Minister, would you like to tell me what you thought of this tour with Marc Chagall?

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Jacques Chaban-Delmas: I am overwhelmed by Marc Chagall, who is the most intense expression of youth. And youth is absolutely the secret of the world.

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Sophie Dumoulin: Do you know Marc Chagall?

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Jacques Chaban-Delmas: Yes, we're old friends. Yes, yes.

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Sophie Dumoulin: What do you intend to do for the visual arts in France, sir?

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Jacques Chaban-Delmas: For now, I can't say that I have a personal and specific plan, but let's say we'll never be able to do enough.

Interviews during the retrospective exhibition of Marc Chagall at the Grand Palais – 12/12/1969

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Sophie Dumoulin: Edmond Michelet, I'd like to know what you thought of this exhibition. It's so beautiful.

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Edmond Michelet: I should be the one to ask you. It can't be put into words, I believe. It's sensational. And to inaugurate this right wing of the Grand Palais, which was André Malraux's doing, how could one choose a better master than Marc Chagall? We're all speechless before what we've seen and we'll come back, just the two of us.

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Marc Chagall: Thank you, my dear. Thank you very much.

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Edmond Michelet: Thanks to you, dear Chagall. [music]

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Jean-Albert Cartier: Charles Sorlier, you've worked with Marc Chagall for twenty years. How have you worked together? Introduce yourself.

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Charles Sorlier: I'm an engraver at the Mourlot establishments, where Chagall came after he returned from America, to execute an original lithograph for the first time, for a poster that was used at Maeght. And Chagall, having done a bit of lithography before, except for "The Thousand and One Nights," which he had engraved in America, was drawn to the atmosphere in the lithography studios. A deep friendship took root amongst him, myself, and Fernand Mourlot. And there he discovered lithography, in fact, and it was the starting point for many pieces that he subsequently gave to us. And he came to work as a craftsman, truly, because Chagall is a craftsman and he loves to mingle with the laborers, who love him because he's a much better artisan than they are. They don't admire him because he's the painter Chagall. But for them, he's a laborer who comes, who mingles with them, who works and really stuns them because he's the best.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: About how many lithography plates by Chagall are there to date?

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Charles Sorlier: About 500 plates, if you also count the books he illustrated, such as *Daphnis and Chloe*, which already has 42 plates. There is *Circus*, which was published by Tériade and has 35 lithographies. So 500 plates counting the greeting cards, invitations, and little things. But one could say, in the main engravings, about 200 major pieces.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: And in his house in Provence, is Chagall continuing to do lithography?

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Jean-Albert Cartier: He mainly does lithography in Paris. It's kind of his way of resting when he's not working in Paris. He doesn't paint and he takes advantage of his time in Paris to make lithographs and engravings in copper, which he does with Lacourière, I mean with Frélaut.

Interviews during the retrospective exhibition of Marc Chagall at the Grand Palais – 12/12/1969

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Jean-Albert Cartier: And is he still coming to the Mourlot studio and working with you?

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Charles Sorlier: Yes, he works. He loves the contact and he always says it's very, very good. It's like Gogol for him. It's Gogol to come to a studio. He needs human contact, contact with the workers. For him, that's very, very important.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: And what is your artisanal contribution with Chagall, in lithography?

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Charles Sorlier: I mean, I oversee the prints, he engraves the plates, I oversee the colors, the prints, because, well, he can't always be at the studio. He needs to have a person who keeps track of his intentions, exactly what he wants. But in the end, he's often, Chagall is very, very tough to please. He has very high standards for himself and he always says, and he comforts himself by saying it, that it's impossible to capture the bluebird anyway. [music]

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Dominique Bromberger: Last night, Jean-Albert Cartier, you met Mr. Jean Chatelain, the director of the museums of France.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: Mr. Director, what does this new retrospective exhibition of Marc Chagall represent for the museums of France?

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Jean Chatelain: At least two things. The policy of the museums, of the minister of Cultural Affairs, has amounted to, for a certain number of years, to successively honoring all the great contemporary masters of French art. Some have passed on and the others, thank God, are still alive. Chagall is a natural part of this series. We've already celebrated a certain number of them. We'll celebrate others in the years to come. Leger, Rouault, Braque... Once again, Chagall is a natural part of this series of tributes given to the greatest artists of our time. Furthermore, the Chagall exhibition is also a manifestation of gratitude towards a great donor. You know that Marc Chagall donated his entire series of *Biblical Message* works to the French state. He's adding to the series, by the way. It isn't, I don't think, unveiling a secret to state that he's currently still adding to the series by creating other works of art.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: We spoke about the Chagall museum in Nice.

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Jean Chatelain: It isn't... [laughs] Chagall would disapprove of the term itself. The *Biblical Message* and his additions to it will be presented in Nice, in a building constructed by the government, on a plot of land—it's important to specify—donated by the city of Nice. The cooperation is tri-directional: city of Nice, French government, and fundamentally, of course, Chagall. It's a museum in the sense that works of art will be on display there, but in the spirit of the founder. And what we're attempting to do, in close collaboration with him, is to recreate the very expression of Chagall. If we succeed in doing what we want to do together, it will be a place where we'll come to relax by looking at beautiful things.

Interviews during the retrospective exhibition of Marc Chagall at the Grand Palais – 12/12/1969

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Dominique Bromberger: Jean-Albert Cartier, perhaps now you could present this exhibition in more detail.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: Yes, and it must be said that we're lucky to have Mrs. Isabelle Fontaine with us. She was Mr. Jean Leymarie's assistant. Jean Leymarie, the curator of this exhibition, is unfortunately bed-bound by the flu as well. Mrs. Fontaine, you participated in creating this exhibition. I'd first like to know how it differs from the grand retrospective held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs a few years ago.

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Isabelle Fontaine: It differs in the sense that it's not an exhibition. I would say that it's several exhibitions in one. Since we've already seen, I don't know, in Toulouse for example, Chagall and theater. Well here, there are paintings as well as stage sets, and ceramics, and sculptures.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: So it's a whole.

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Isabelle Fontaine: It's a whole.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: Well. And among the paintings, I believe there are a lot. I believe there are more than 200 paintings.

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Isabelle Fontaine: Yes, more than 200 paintings and gouaches.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: Was it easy for you to obtain very rare paintings from the collectors?

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Isabelle Fontaine: Listen, I think everyone gave it their all in organizing this tribute to Chagall together. Special attention must be drawn to the four paintings from Russia, which come from Moscow and which are extremely important. I'd specifically like to mention, *Promenade*, which shows a pair of lovers hanging in the air above Vitebsk, Chagall's home town.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: It's a very famous painting.

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Isabelle Fontaine: Very famous and very beautiful.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: So is this how you put together all the steps in Chagall's body of work, beginning in Vitebsk?

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Isabelle Fontaine: All the steps, I believe, are layered in the three levels of the exhibition. It

Interviews during the retrospective exhibition of Marc Chagall at the Grand Palais – 12/12/1969

must be said, as well, that one of the main attractions of this exhibition are the galleries. The presentation itself, because this marks the opening of new spaces at the Grand Palais.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: Which will be specifically devoted to these tributes.

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Isabelle Fontaine: Which will be specifically devoted to these tributes.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: The exhibition other than paintings. I'm thinking of ceramics, theater, sculpture, stained glass. Tell us about that.

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Isabelle Fontaine: Well, theater, let's start with theater because it's presented, well, it's the mockups and stage sets for *Aleko* in 1942. It's all on display in the *hall d'honneur*. So we are introduced to Chagall through theater. And then it's paintings on two floors. The ceramics are presented in a rotunda with a rather striking presentation. And lit display cases. And down below, the display cases are across from the tapestries. Lastly, there's an end. The end of the exhibition on a monumental accord. [music]

00:10:41

Jean-Albert Cartier: Now that you've done so many paintings, gouaches, stained glass, book illustrations, drawings, are you continuing, at the point you've reached, to work with what you see around you, or are you working with memories? Do you work looking within yourself?

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Marc Chagall: I love your word, the last ones, "within yourself." We always have to look inwards. Because when you look within yourself, you see the outside clearly. You see. And my whole life, I've looked... I didn't do things, what was outside, because I loved the things that were inside, because our reality is within ourselves. You see.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: At your age, with the work you've accomplished, is inspiration something that still exists? Do you still want to paint?

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Marc Chagall: Oh, my dear, I have nothing to do. I love my wife, I love good people, good friends, and I've worked for myself. It's like loving my friends, my wife and my friends, more than eating. Because that, that still isn't suitable.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: For you, color is an essential element in your body of work. With the perspective of time, do you think of color differently from earlier times, in relation to older eras?

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Marc Chagall: I'll tell you, when I was very young, when I came to Paris in 1910, I was 20 years old. I didn't think about chemistry, how do I say it, about color. I was, I fought with realism, with an "ism." I was busy introducing so-called illogical elements like shapes in

Interviews during the retrospective exhibition of Marc Chagall at the Grand Palais – 12/12/1969

construction. I didn't think about so-called quality, as you say. It was only later, when I came back from America on the boat, that I asked myself, Where is true color? Who has it in the twentieth century? And I found that Monet was the greatest chemist. Since then, well, with my age, I'm now seeing that instead of "isms," chemistry is what counts. Stability, the... the... How can I tell you...

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Jean-Albert Cartier: The quality of the color.

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Marc Chagall: Yes, it's a more ordinary word, but it's the truth. Yes, that's it, if you will.

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Jean-Albert Cartier: It seems, listening to you, that Chagall's work is strictly inward-facing. Can so much be said for Chagall's legends? There are a certain number of themes one finds in your paintings. Are these legends the stuff of dreams, or do they have an element of reality?

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Marc Chagall: They have an element of inner reality. You have the same legend as well. You were born at your mom and dad's house, you had cats, you've seen a broom, you've seen a watch. I saw that. I saw a cat, I saw a watch, I saw the moon, I saw little girls, right? And then, they transformed and built new paintings, in a way other than the realists. Even the impressionists, the cubists, I rebuilt it as a means for shapes in construction. Those are my legends, and France shed light on the inner world. Understand, let's say, I don't know, when he did *The Dead Souls*, Gogol went to Rome. He transformed that magic into a hugely visual thing. I used Gogol or some others who didn't go to France. Do you understand? You can't say, I really love Provence in France. I went there mostly for health reasons. I thought I wouldn't do this or that operation. Afterwards I stayed, and the light is incredible. It was incredible for Renoir and for Bonnard. I think that maybe that will still touch me. But the legends, there aren't any legends. There are shapes, the shapes we have here, at our parents' house. But it isn't a literary thing. [music]

00:14:55

Host: Marc Chagall, you're 82 years old. In France, you're considered the greatest artist, with Picasso. You are the most well-known by the public, let's say. Do you think your body of work still has something to expect from you, at age 82?

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Marc Chagall: Scary question. I hope to live. I hope, I don't know, I can't imagine not living anymore. I often, at night I wonder, in my bed, how it will be when I am no longer? In what way? But until that moment, I don't have anything else to do. I have to work. I can't promise that I'll still make ceilings, well or poorly. I can't promise that I'll make stained glass for Jerusalem, but I don't see anything else. If my health allows and if I don't eat too many impossible things, I'll work and my wife will love it, and maybe you too. And I hope. But I can't say anything more about myself and about my work. It's over. [music]

00:16:46

Marc Chagall: That was the tribute that we cared so deeply about giving here, at Inter

Interviews during the retrospective exhibition of Marc Chagall at the Grand Palais – 12/12/1969

Actualité, to Marc Chagall. So now, dear Parisians and people visiting Paris, all you've got to do is go view this exhibition, this tribute that France and all the participating nations have made to this Marc Chagall exhibition at the Grand Palais.