

L'Art et la Vie of July 26, 1950: Chagall and Ceramics

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Georges Charensol: From among the artistic events in the past few months, we noticed several exhibitions where ceramics by today's great painters were on display. Picasso, Braque, Dufy, and Chagall tried their hands at this technique, which was new for them. And in particular, when visiting the Chagall exhibition a few weeks ago, I found two great ceramic artists in front of the display case where Chagall's first trials were shown: master Decœur and Artigas. So I asked Chagall to come to our studio this evening with Decœur and Artigas to ask these two professionals how they felt about painters entering the world that's familiar to them. Master Decœur is here. I ask him what he thinks about Chagall, as a ceramicist, and whether he thinks painters entering his domain is a good thing.

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Émile Decœur: I was very, very interested because I didn't expect to find ceramics from a painter, real ceramics, right? It's interesting not only because of the composition of the decor, which is rather rare among painters, isn't it? But also because of the quality of the material, especially with simple means like he has, given that it's ceramics...

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Georges Charensol: Technically rather simple.

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Émile Decœur: Technically.

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Georges Charensol: Because I believe you are sometimes in front of these ceramics from painters, a little disconcerted, precisely by the simplicity of the material, because these masters of painting are mostly using household pottery in general.

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Émile Decœur: Yes, and their means of expression is very limited. It's not only primitive, but they don't have vast amounts of colors, like a painter with his palette. It's limited to a few colored oxides, you know, which aren't always perfectly successful.

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Georges Charensol: And do you think that Chagall saw the problems better than his comrades?

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Émile Decœur: Much better. I see it as a ceramic artist.

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Georges Charensol: Because you yourself began with decoration, I believe.

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Émile Decœur: With decoration, little by little, I arrived at simplification when I was in possession of a medium, material. Once I owned that material, I devoted myself solely to shapes to adapt this medium to the shape.

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Georges Charensol: Artigas, you heard what Decœur has just told us. Do you share his feelings? Are you as hard to please as he is about the trials by these painters? And yet,

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you're in a good position to judge them, because you were, I believe, the initiator of masters such as Dufy, Braque, and Miro.

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Artigas: Yes, I share Master Decœur's opinion, but only with the painters I worked with a lot. I was very concerned about the medium. And Dufy's ceramics, and Miro's, those were noble materials. Dufy's was high-temperature earthenware. Miro's was 300-degree stoneware. The material was serving the decorators. The decorators over there are guided by the technicians. Some artists lack the technique. His talent is given to the material he's working with.

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Georges Charensol: As a result, do you think, Artigas, that it would be appropriate to establish a close collaboration between the ceramic artist, the technician, and the painter? And also the opinion of Mr. Decœur?

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Émile Decœur: Oh, it's crucial. It has to be a collaboration above all, because even with the elements of this collaboration, you have to take the firing into account. So if you don't have the technique, well you can't go further in your research. You'll remain a painter forever and you won't be a ceramic artist.

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Georges Charensol: A painter on ceramics and not a ceramicist. And now, I'd like to ask of Chagall: How did you come to ceramics? What made you want to explore this technique? Was it your contact with the clay of Provence, since you now mostly live in Antibes and Vence?

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Marc Chagall: Yes, this small number of pieces in ceramic, this small number of samples are like a hint or, 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.

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Georges Charensol: I'd like to ask Master Decœur, who has just listened to Marc Chagall, to tell us if he thinks that painters like him can still add something new to ceramics. If even these rather simplistic decorations still can't put ceramics onto paths that can have value.

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Émile Decœur: It's easy to see, it would be something to absolutely encourage. And I'd like the example of Master Chagall, right, to be followed because he's a man who is so in touch with the material, and if he doesn't achieve what he feels, it's because he doesn't have the means, the technical means, just technical. Without which he's amongst those, from the painters I know who have tried ceramics, who understand the medium.

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Georges Charensol: And you Artigas, do you also think that this collaboration, that this painters' contribution to ceramics, to the current school of ceramics, shining so brightly in every country, since we have, here at the table, a Frenchman, a Russian, and a Spaniard. Well, do you think these painters can truly bring something to the profession that is your own?

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Artigas: I think, I agree with Master Decœur. A lot of it is what all these artists can bring to the decoration of ceramics. Decoration had become obsolete and repetitive and had fallen out of fashion because of the mediocrity of the people who decorated ceramics. Whereas these artists, they are bringing something new, their whole fantasies, their know-how and even their genius.

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Émile Decœur: They can even be a complement for the ceramicist who is, who knows nothing about decoration, right? Through this collaboration a whole can be formed.

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Artigas: Exactly.

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Georges Charensol: I'd like Chagall to say a few more words about this subject that's so dear to him.

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Marc Chagall: Yes, this clay, just like the profession, 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. Fire and earth remind me that I have modest resources. The roots of my homeland have mingled 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, painting, or etching, all of my words gravitate around the medium, which is abstraction itself, as long as it remains at a certain height. All the rest is literature. 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 Charensol: You've just heard three grand masters of contemporary ceramics: Decœur, Artigas, and Marc Chagall, discussing this admirable technique.