

L'art vivant, December 8th, 1969: the diversity of technics experimented by Marc Chagall

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Georges Charensol: Tonight's show will be entirely devoted to Marc Chagall because, for the first time, France is holding a vast retrospective of his work. This includes not only his paintings from all eras, but all the complex forms of his artistic creation. Naturally, this means the gouaches, etchings, sculptures, ceramics, tapestries, and stained glass. My dear Marc, could I ask you why, after having been just a painter in your younger years, you then developed an interest in all techniques, all forms, shall we say, of crafts and art?

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Marc Chagall: As for the stained glass, I myself wondered why I was getting involved in stained glass, and I sort of guessed. When I was a boy, I always looked out the window, always. What was I looking for in the air, in the sky? I was looking for something divine, something, a luminosity, a certain luminosity, which I kind of caught by doing the stained glass windows for Reims.

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Georges Charensol: Because, it's true, in a lot of your paintings, there are windows, landscapes through windows. There are strange creatures, rabbits flying over the rooftops, seen through the window. So it makes sense that you're interested in stained glass and it just so happens that you were fortunate, it must be said. As for commissions, those prodigious stained glass windows in Metz that we'll be able to discuss on Friday at the Grand Palais, and also, naturally, the series of stained glass windows for the Jerusalem synagogue, which were presented a few years ago in the Carrousel gardens. But you're also interested in sculpture. Even though, it appears, your genius is that of a colorist, essentially, while sculpture is about shape.

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Marc Chagall: Yes, but when you'll see these so-called sculptures up close, you'll discover a certain touch which is very close to color and even to stained glass. Because what I wanted to put into those stones was a fourth dimension. If you study them thoroughly, it doesn't look like etchings, it doesn't look like a painting, but there is still a bit of everything in them. I fought hard with the paintings, with the canvases from my younger years in Paris where I was hugely enlightened. I became enlightened in Paris because, starting in 1908, the paintings you saw there were all dark. Also, all the artists were dark before they came to Paris.

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Georges Charensol: We're glad that you came to our studio on your own, accompanied by a few of your friends who'll talk about your stained glass windows and your tapestries a bit later. And first Jacques Lassaigne, to whom I pass the microphone.

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Jacques Lassaigne: He's an extremely elusive man; or at least, an extremely elusive artist. And I admit I'm expecting a lot from this exhibition, because I'm certain it will surprise us even further. I also think it's impossible to categorize Marc Chagall. I have to admit I laugh every time I read Chagall being described as a Fauvist, a surrealist, or an expressionist somewhere, because he has absolutely nothing in common with any of these movements. He aligns with them perhaps like every great painter aligns with many things, but really, he

L'art vivant, December 8th, 1969: the diversity of technics experimented by Marc Chagall

doesn't fit in those boxes. And he's very resourceful. And he uses those resources, well, to create something completely unexpected which often the technicians who are most aware of those resources have never even seen before. So I don't think we should try to define Chagall. You have to wait and see what he brings you. And you have to try to feel his emotions with him, because it's obvious that his art is always an outpouring of emotion. He never obeys a purely intellectual drive; he is never trying to prove anything. I think that's his characteristic. He is placed completely outside all of these movements that are shaking up modern painting, where theories play a certain role and the painting doesn't always follow. He's the exact opposite of an intellectual painter. He doesn't have the Ingresian or Picasso trait at all; on the contrary. He always starts with something extremely vague, extremely subtle, and something gradually emerges from that. I did see him working once—I believe it was his first experience with sculpture. He wanted to make a commemorative tombstone for a cherished female friend who had just died. He had never sculpted before and someone brought him some plaster which he shaped very, I might say, timidly and respectfully. And I must say that very quickly, he created something extraordinary which was given to the founder and made a very beautiful plaque. He has a huge respect for materials, a certain, I wouldn't say a, a fear of the material, no, but a respect. And he uncovers possibilities quickly because he's extremely gifted with his hands. We saw it with ceramics, when he started doing ceramics. He did that, my God, for fun essentially, because others had done it. All the great artists were doing it. So he started trying and very soon he was capturing things that others had never, ever seen. And it's this kind of mixing of shapes and colors that I think is completely particular to him.

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Georges Charensol: At your side, there's someone who had, I believe, more luck than you or me, even though we've known Chagall for so many years, someone who saw him at work. It's the director of *Mobilier National*, Mr. Jean Coural, who had loaned Chagall a huge gallery at the *Mobilier* so that he could use it to execute the celebrated Opera House ceiling. So the question I'd like to ask of Mr. Jean Coural is this: from time to time, did you not feel such curiosity that you wanted to enter the gallery to see how the project was going?

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Jean Coural: To tell the truth, I only witnessed Chagall painting once. And I must say that I was extraordinarily impressed. We showed Chagall a portion of the Opera House ceiling that his assistants had prepared, and he started talking, discussing it, explaining what he wanted. And then, all of a sudden, he decided to show what needed to be done. And I can still see him, taking his jacket off, donning a white smock, sitting down in an armchair. He started painting and he did it with such intensity, such gravity, that at that moment I had to leave, because it was too much for me.

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Georges Charensol: It was also in Les Gobelins, in the basement, that the three most important tapestries in the Grand Palais exhibition were accomplished. And here again, I believe, before re-boxing them or when he gave them to the tapestry weaver, he provided explanations that were undoubtedly similar to those he gave the craftsmen who prepared the ceiling for the Opera House.

L'art vivant, December 8th, 1969: the diversity of technics experimented by Marc Chagall

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Jean Coural: There were three mockups. You know they depict the Creation, the Exodus, and the Entry into Jerusalem. Three mockups. And then, the photographs of these mockups that Chagall had touched up and simplified had to be enlarged, because it was about simplification. There was the problem of color. There was the problem of dyes, which in our profession, our jargon, we refer to as sampling. This was supervised by Chagall, meaning that all the shades were those he wanted. And then afterwards, there was the problem of weaving and the problem of that second creation, you know? And Chagall was there often. He had many conversations with the weavers. He would explain to them how he had to address the challenge of creating these tapestries. But he was obviously dependent on the weavers who wove them.

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Georges Charensol: We'd now like to talk about stained glass, which is Chagall's most recent and perhaps his most important activity, because it can be said that the stained glass windows for the Jerusalem synagogue, and for the Metz cathedral, are perhaps the most beautiful stained glass windows created in our century. But, as a partner, he worked closely with Charles Marq at his studio in Reims. Charles Marq is here. And I'd like you to try to show us Chagall at work in your studio.

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Charles Marq: He gave me mockups and naturally left me the most absolute freedom. He's very attached to the idea of not encouraging me to copy anything from his work. He insists that these mockups should inspire a lead setting, color seen in light. That they should inspire me to etch in a certain way, meaning I should search for whites in acid etching. He says, "Do it, do it. I'll take it all." When he says "I'll take it all," that means I'll take the good, but I'm going to take the bad too. You'll see. We'll have fun taking the bad stuff too. You have to accept the good sides and also the bad sides that every person, every artist, carries within themselves. He's humble enough to know that as well. And I take everything. And with that, we'll try to do something. We'll try to finish this project with a genuine creation.

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Georges Charensol: Yes, but in that case, his hand will be involved—unlike what happens with tapestry weaving, for example. He still has the grisaille to work with. He'll draw.

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Charles Marq: Maybe that's what gives him a fair deal of confidence. And even if, when he arrives at the studio, the stained glass is set in its structure, so to speak. You know that the grisaille, which is the value that can draw the finest line to the most opaque lines, ranging from the darkest black to the sheerest gray. Grisaille can justify all the colors in the glasshouse in front of him.

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Georges Charensol: Accentuate it.

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Charles Marq: Yes, accentuate it. And if you especially want all the leads the stained glass artist has brought, all the color he translated into value, by using grisaille, Chagall is redoing

L'art vivant, December 8th, 1969: the diversity of technics experimented by Marc Chagall

his. And there's no question that this is a prodigious moment, completely astonishing to see the imagination, the sensitivity, the emotivity of a painter like him. While color is still there and he can't go back and change it, once he's made the various color corrections he had to do, he simply accepts it and paints in grisaille.

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Georges Charensol: Can you say that in this work there is a heavy dose of improvisation, or does reflection still precede creation?

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Charles Marq: Given that Chagall is in front of the stained glass, it's really a recreation we're dealing with. He looks at the mockup sometimes so as not to get lost, as he says, because the windows are ten meters [32 feet] high, sometimes. So it's important not to get lost, but it's only there to avoid getting lost. It's more like a guide, so as to remain within certain limits, if you will. But in the work of painting itself, there is complete freedom, because there are leads that weren't there. The colors aren't the same. Light enhances the tones 100 times more as compared to the gouache he made.

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Georges Charensol: But now you're talking about drawing, because those grisailles are still drawings. Earlier, Lassaigne was saying that when he asked him about the design process, his projects, and so on, he would make a rather rough drawing. And now, on the contrary, the drawing is very precise and well placed.

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Charles Marq: It's absolutely well placed, but he can improvise if you will, while in the mockup, there are sometimes vast areas that are just blue, blue that's naturally modulated by the power of grisaille. He modulates it in another way, which is to say he'll suddenly switch off vast swaths of very light gray. And in those grays, he sometimes injects a drawn flower or bird—invisible from a distance, by the way.

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Unknown speaker: Jacques Lassaigne, Jacques Lassaigne. As both a fan of stained glass and a friend of Chagall, what do you think?

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Jacques Lassaigne: No, I think that in stained glass, Chagall was perhaps served by his experience with etching.

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Georges Charensol: That happens to be the opinion held by Charles Marq.

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Jacques Lassaigne: It's completely different, if you will. Earlier I spoke about those little sketches he would make almost before thinking about things formally. Here, on the contrary, the drawing serves to amplify, to fully realize his thought process. And in etching, he had an experience which was necessarily very different, because the etching was a sort of anticipation of what he does in stained glass. When Vollard asked him to do, you know, La Fontaine's *Fables*, first in colors and gouaches, which were mechanically reproduced. And

L'art vivant, December 8th, 1969: the diversity of technics experimented by Marc Chagall

then, since the results were disappointing—not the gouaches, which were admirable, but the translation which reproduced them in a mediocre way. Vollard said to him: “Well, take the risk yourself. And with the simple means of etching, black and white, give me the equivalent of that colored magic you created in gouache.” That’s where he really did the most extraordinary experiments in translation through black and white, and only in etching, of his richest, most magical world as a whole.

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Georges Charensol: A fourth aspect of Chagall, and not the least, is that of engraver. He illustrated some of the greatest books. A few years ago, the Bibliothèque Nationale presented us with a stunning selection of his engravings, etchings naturally, as well as lithographs. And the person who made that decision was, at the time, the director of the Bibliothèques de France. It was our friend Julien Cain, and I think he’s the one you should ask to tell us about Chagall as an engraver.

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Julien Cain: This body of work, in the field of graphic arts, is immense. It started late but has become very abundant. He started etching in order to illustrate *Mein Leben*, having taken a few very quick lessons from a German engraver named Hermann Struck, who obviously taught him the basics of etching. But those were only trials. And the truth is that the actual beginnings of Chagall were in Paris, when Ambroise Vollard attempted to persuade him to illustrate *The General Dourakine*. And in fact, Chagall preferred *The Dead Souls* by Gogol. And he was right. And for three years, he worked on *The Dead Souls*. The extraordinary illustrations take us into old Russia, and these works of art are extraordinarily valuable. 107 etchings that were published only after the war, when Tériade, who we’ll discuss again later, made them into a volume. After *The Dead Souls*, Vollard persuaded him to try La Fontaine’s *Fables*, and perhaps you’re familiar with the resulting illustrations. About 40 etchings he prepared over the course of three years, which are marvels of spontaneity, grace, and at the same time truth.

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Georges Charensol: I still believe one could consider that his greatest work is the illustration of the Bible, for which he traveled to Palestine.

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Julien Cain: Exactly. Well, Vollard asked him to do the Bible and he wanted to go out there, to Palestine. He traveled through Egypt to get there. And that’s where a series of Bible illustrations began, which had already come quite far along in 1939, but he had to take them back up again later, after he returned from the United States. But at the same time, it must be said that he was doing portraits. First his own self-portrait, a series of self-portraits, which are extremely precious works of art. But we’re still in the field of etching and lithography. He’ll arrive at that later. There were—starting in 1946 or 47, mostly at the behest of Tériade, and here we have a great publisher. There were those admirable Verve albums. There were the editions both of La Fontaine and of Gogol, which hadn’t taken the form of volumes and which became volumes, and prestigious volumes. Well, that was the grand era of lithography. There’s a series of top-notch works of art, Paris suites, circus suites, *Daphnis and Chloe*, and the interpretation in various forms of the Bible, an inexhaustible subject for

L'art vivant, December 8th, 1969: the diversity of technics experimented by Marc Chagall

him. He comes back to the Bible again and again, which he illustrates with lithography in black sometimes, more often lithography in color, and it gives extraordinary results.

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Georges Charensol: After going over the various techniques used by Chagall, with Charles Marq, Jean Coural, and Julien Cain, Jean Dalvaize must take us into these new galleries at the Grand Palais in the company of conservator Reynold Arnould.

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Jean Dalvaize: Well, Reynold Arnould, perhaps the first thing would be to tell our listeners what these new galleries are, this new set of spaces. Because, in fact, this is a series you're opening about the Chagall exhibition.

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Reynold Arnould: Indeed, it's a space for cultural expression, insofar as it may be possible to give one about a body of work. And the beginning of this purposing, thanks to the grand tribute to Marc Chagall, will be a chance to start taking stock of its capacity. And I must say that this is thanks to the multi-purpose room used to screen television films, 16 mm or 35 mm cinema films, concerts, and also thanks to the consultation library which is a means of information. But I must say that in the case of this enormous exhibition, we have here an exceptional chance to use what has been the subject of ceaseless efforts, in reality, for nearly the past four years, at the behest of the minister.

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Jean Dalvaize: You speak of a huge series. You're right, because there are nearly 500 numbers. The idea, of course, isn't for us to inventory each one after the other. But still, Marc Chagall, since you graced us with your presence this evening, perhaps we could stop before some of these paintings which, for the most part, perhaps you haven't seen for quite a while. Right now I'm thinking specifically of canvases you painted and that are opening the exhibition. The collection of paintings from when you were still in Vitebsk, and in particular there are, I believe, two paintings close together that accurately show the changes you underwent, meaning your self-portrait painted in Russia, and "Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers" right next to it. A whole world separates these two paintings.

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Marc Chagall: We came to France in the dark, being dark, such and such a talent or genius, that's something else. Otherwise, everyone was dark. Or perhaps not yet in existence. Well, when you mention portraits, I don't remember the portrait you're talking about from before the war. But I do know that I painted a self-portrait with the seven fingers in Paris, which in fact wasn't a portrait. It was seven fingers, you know. It was a kind of deformation. Unreal. You mustn't forget that my ideal was to be unreal. Unreality as a constructiveness and as a formalism, a certain formalism. I didn't spin any tales, as they say of me... My artist friends, I won't say who, Delaunay or Léger, whatever you want, they held it against me: "Oh Chagall, you're writing fiction!" Well, I said... I thought, when they do still lifes, a beauty lounging on a straight table, that's a form of literature, because it's a tale told immediately. Two and two equal four. I always said a painting isn't a tale that can be told.

L'art vivant, December 8th, 1969: the diversity of technics experimented by Marc Chagall

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Jean Dalvaize: But this unreality already existed in some paintings you made before coming to France, and right now I'm thinking of a painting called *Death*.

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Marc Chagall: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Oh yes, yes and because, in Russia, I didn't want to fight against reality. There was no reality. He didn't want to make paintings for the walls. And actually, there were never any paintings in my home town. And didn't want to make paintings to decorate the walls, still lifes, all that. Since childhood, I have been bitten by dogs. I looked at the moon, I looked at little girls who tormented me profoundly.

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Jean Dalvaize: About that, Marc Chagall, I'd like to talk with you about another one of these paintings, called *The Funeral*. I'd like you to tell us what this painting was at the beginning.

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Marc Chagall: Under this painting lies another painting, because my fiancée, if you will, she was my fiancée. I was still very young, Bella. And a friend and our friend, there were young people who said we needed emancipation, as they say. We have to pose for our artists. It was, maybe they read books, certain books, by I don't know whom. I was very scared, because it forced me to do a nude. I wasn't used to it. Actually, she posed, the other friend too, Théa. And you'll see, she's in red. Maybe, she's over there in red, that's the friend. She, she posed, I did it, nude, completely naked. Maybe it's kind of reminiscent of Goya, let's say, without the genius of Goya, I'm not pretentious, but she's nude over there, under that painting. My mother came in and said, there was a studio near the kitchen, it was a maid's room. She said, "Get rid of that prostitute." And I was so scared. I didn't know what "prostitute" meant. I had to obey my mom. I painted *Funeral*, but underneath it there's Bella, nude.

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Jean Dalvaize: Chagall, there's a painting that seems to me to be a rather extraordinary painting, and I don't clearly see the deeper meaning that could be attributed to it, or maybe more than one meaning could be attributed to it. But I know that you don't attach too much importance to the meaning of your paintings and to the keys one could apply to them. The painting is *Homage to Apollinaire*, which is actually a rather extraordinary painting within the overall body of your work. It doesn't fit well with what you usually paint. So?

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Marc Chagall: I think that, you know, guys... Apollinaire was an incredible guy, incredible. Cendrars, of course, next to him, a bit like a shadow. They had the same genius, if you will, a proportion of genius like Apollinaire, the poet, because I love that. I love that. But for us, I said for us. I was younger than the others, than Picasso and Braque. For us, it was a great, sacred monster if you will. Despite the fact that I was scared of him, because he was very involved in cubism. And I was a poor man. He came and asked, make a preface. He made a preface. He came to my place the first time and the last time to see my paintings.

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Jean Dalvaize: Yes, but still, Marc Chagall, what I'd like to say is that this painting depicts a

L'art vivant, December 8th, 1969: the diversity of technics experimented by Marc Chagall

human couple entwined with one another, surrounded by a kind of zodiacal sky, or a wheel of destiny, or a wheel of fortune. And it seems utopic, and the precision in this painting, that kind of, how can I say it? It reminds me of, if you will, the drawing by Leonardo da Vinci for the human proportions. That. That precision and exactitude. And that's very surprising in your work.

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Marc Chagall: I'm not smart enough. You speak of Leonardo da Vinci... I don't understand. You know, if you asked me frankly to myself, it isn't by feigned modesty and because I'm an adult. I know myself. No, really often, I don't know. One thing I know, we're born with something satanic.

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Jean Dalvaize: And that, do you express that when you put goats in your paintings?

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Marc Chagall: No, those are formal things.

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Jean Dalvaize: Yes, of course.

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Marc Chagall: There are no stories. Severed heads, and whatever you want, those are formal things. Like Monet taking blue shadows. I cut off heads. It isn't fighting with realism... I don't know. I wanted to build a painting psychically.

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Georges Charensol: But tell me, Jean Dalvaize, it's still 1913, and now that we're in the present, in 1969, if we continue at this pace, our show is going to have to last at least three hours.

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Jean Dalvaize: Well listen, I think that to simplify, we could maybe ask Chagall a question. It's a much more general question, which is also related to what he just said, because earlier he mentioned Apollinaire and severed heads and Cendrars. His friends from La Ruche. I'm thinking of a painting called *To Russia, Asses, and Others*. And the story goes that Apollinaire, when he saw your works, uttered the word *surrealism* for the first time. So? Is your overall body of work a work of surrealism?

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Marc Chagall: Listen, when he uttered [Supernatural] at La Ruche, truly, I wasn't... I don't know what it is... a wise man, you know, I don't know what that is. And then, he said the word *surrealism*. I didn't ask him to. What is that? Why this? But when he said that, he was even more swollen than before. Oh yes, very swollen. Before, he was red. Apparently he was good-looking, but he was swollen.

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Georges Charensol: Chagall, we recognize the illustrator of La Fontaine's *Fables*! [laughs]

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Marc Chagall: I don't know.

L'art vivant, December 8th, 1969: the diversity of technics experimented by Marc Chagall

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Jean Dalvaize: Lastly, I'd like to ask you one final question. Since you are naturally very familiar with your own work, does this exhibition as a whole give an accurate summary of all you've done, especially in painting? Since we see the works before your arrival in Paris, in Paris. After that, the time you spent in Russia during the war, and then back in France, and finally in America, and perhaps it was that time in America that isn't represented quite so well in the exhibition. And after your return to France and to Vence, well, does all of this give a rather comprehensive image of what you did with it in your life?

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Marc Chagall: When I see people's eyes light up, I'm happy. I hope I'll visit my exhibition and I'll see the eyes.

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Georges Charensol: The eye that haunts you and that's found in *The Green House*.

00:28:23

Marc Chagall: Truly. Thank you very much.