

Marc Chagall Exhibition at the Musée des arts Décoratifs – 06/11/1959

00:00:14

Host: Georges Charensol presents the weekly arts program *L'art et la vie*. [Art and life]
[music]

00:00:40

Georges Charensol: This evening, *L'art et la vie* will be entirely devoted to the vast Marc Chagall exhibition opening tomorrow at the Pavillon de Marsan. Before giving the floor to Chagall and his friends, who are together in our studio, I'd like to ask a question of the museum curator, Michel Faré. My dear Faré, why is a museum of decorative arts holding exhibitions of paintings such as those by Picasso, Fernand Léger, and now Marc Chagall?

00:01:18

Michel Faré: These three very large events organized by my colleague and friend François Mathey mustn't throw the audience off base, and the audience mustn't be surprised at seeing them at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, because it has always been evident that painting, just like sculpture and etching, have contributed to the expression of this art as applied to life, at least. And it just so happens that the three great names you've mentioned have all played an important role in decorative arts. Picasso, with his stage sets, his ceramics, Fernand Léger with his frescoes and his monumental decorations.

00:02:06

Georges Charensol: As for Marc Chagall, last night, we were applauding at the opera house. Those very large decors and the 100 costumes he designed for *Daphnis and Chloe*, the ballet by Maurice Ravel. But next to Michel Faré, here is Marc Chagall himself, surrounded by four of his friends. The oldest one is André Salmon. Next, Florent Fels and finally Jacques Lassaigue. But I'd like to ask François Mathey to tell us what the difference is between the paintings we're seeing currently at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs and the Chagall exhibitions that just took place successively in Hamburg and Munich.

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François Mathey: A certain number of paintings that were not included in the German exhibitions are coming to Paris, and they are very considerable paintings in Chagall's body of work. I'm thinking of *Birthday* from the Guggenheim collection in New York. I'm thinking of *I and the Village* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. I'm thinking of seven paintings that come from the Tretyakov gallery in Moscow, of the painting *The Blue House* from the Musée de Liège and a certain number of very important paintings that belong to Parisian collectors.

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Georges Charensol: As a result, an exhibition unlike what we saw in Hamburg and Munich, and perhaps a stricter selection giving a clearer idea of the evolutionary trajectory of Chagall's work.

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Michel Faré: We take Chagall, so to speak, at his birth as a painter, meaning around 1907, and he leads us by the hand up to the year 1959, with the most recent paintings he made in Venice.

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Georges Charensol: Marc Chagall, I'd like you to hark back towards your younger years and

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speak about a very old painting, one of your first, which I believe is called *Funeral*. Had you not painted, on the same canvas, a nude of the woman who would become your wife, Bella?

00:04:17

Marc Chagall: I made that painting in Russia, in Russia, near our kitchen. I had a little bedroom and I wanted to present it once and for all. Which means they posed for me in the nude, my female friends. Bella, she dared to do it. I made this so-called nude. I hung it on the wall. Well, my only critic and the judge was Mom. My mother came home and said, "Take that woman off the wall."

00:04:47

Georges Charensol: As a submissive child, Marc immediately obeyed.

00:04:52

Marc Chagall: And I made another painting. It was a funeral. Well, apparently there are workshops who are making discoveries.

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Georges Charensol: Yes, X-ray images.

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Marc Chagall: Well, today you can find Bella under *The Funeral*.

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Georges Charensol: Under what circumstances did it occur to you to make paintings so different from what was being done at the time?

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Marc Chagall: Have you read a little? Really, I hated realism. I saw it everywhere, everywhere, all the time. I'm not talking about Russia, because over there it's something else. I came to Paris and I saw realism. Of course, illuminated realism by Monet is realism. I saw realism with the cubists. I wanted another realism and I wanted to construct paintings in a different way. When I was in Russia, I was dark, if you will. I didn't know deep down, really, what color was. I didn't know anything. When I came to France and I saw the Louvre, I saw the rainbow, in the color. When I calmed down a little, I saw, there is too much realism everywhere, even by the romantics. And when Apollinaire came later on, when we offered to do the prefaces for the Der Sturm exhibition in Berlin, and I was scared, I was scared to show my paintings at La Ruche, because he did have to see *something*. I showed it because I knew he was involved in cubism. I really appreciated my friendship with Cendrars. I really appreciated the smiles of Apollinaire and Jacob, if you will. Cendrars encouraged me quite a bit, it's true. And he came to La Ruche almost every day. Apollinaire was a great [?]. ... not like today. I showed him. He uttered, "Supernatural!" To me, the word supernatural, is like, I don't know which word or what. I wasn't looking for any "isms." I was looking for... I fought against realism everywhere and this is what happened. That's the whole story.

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Georges Charensol: But this is an era when, far from Russia, we're under the impression that you're constantly returning to your youth, to your childhood, and that you're trying to recreate that life from the past in your paintings.

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Marc Chagall: Well there had to be an object. For the others, it was a guitar, a moon, a... I don't know what. For me, it was cows if you will, or the donkeys or the clock. It was what I knew best.

00:07:16

Georges Charensol: Yes, what you had closely observed throughout all of your teenage years.

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Marc Chagall: These are objects that were close to me, like for Monet, or like for the cubists, the guitar is what was close to them and for me it was... I didn't do the guitar because I didn't see any in my childhood.

00:07:34

Georges Charensol: When you came back to France in 1922, Cendrars took you to see Ambroise Vollard, who commissioned, I believe, from that time, an illustration for *Fables* by La Fontaine. And that was, I believe, a turning point in your art. Am I wrong?

00:07:53

Marc Chagall: No. The meeting with Vollard was really a monumental encounter, like arriving in Paris, for me. He's the one who encouraged me to do it. And when I received the commission for La Fontaine's *Fables* that you are talking about ... I finally saw France again. I had to paint it all over again and open it up, that window.

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Georges Charensol: André Salmon, you're probably one of Marc Chagall's oldest friends.

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André Salmon: Yes, I met Marc Chagall long ago, in 1914. We immediately spoke about art, painting, and we also talked about Russia, where he came from. He's Russian. Russia that I'd known myself well before then, because I'm his elder, which doesn't make either one of us seem any younger, might I add. And we didn't speak as travelers or as indigenous people, but I had reasons to be insistent, because to me, it's something that explains a part of Chagall's very special genius.

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Georges Charensol: It's indisputable. He definitely owes a lot to his hometown of Vitebsk, and I believe that you, André Salmon, were one of the first to say that. But I'd like you to remind us what an impression such extraordinary artwork was able to make in that environment you spent so much time in at the time, and which was still essentially a cubist environment.

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André Salmon: In front of me I found a painter in whom I recognized the temperament of a poet. And before seeing, we spoke first, before I saw Chagall's painting. I did have a bit of anxiety which increased when I saw those first paintings, which I loved. I first asked if there wasn't more poetry in them than painting. And that, that feeling, is kind of cubism's fault. It's too full of ideas and constructions, and there weren't many.

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Georges Charensol: Which is to say that it was a time when people were really suspicious of literary painting.

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André Salmon: Yes, but the thing that reassured me was the memory of Russia, because I experienced Russia and I experienced life in working-class Russia as closely as I could.

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Georges Charensol: But in his book, which he entitled *My Life*, Chagall didn't hide the fact that he lived in an essentially Israeli community. And I believe there is a reflection not only of Russia, but of what could be called the Jewish ghetto in the works of his youth.

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André Salmon: But at the time, there were no—except in certain parts of Poland, around Warsaw, for example—there were no ghettos in the truest sense of the term. If I have correctly understood what I've been told, what you said and what Chagall wrote, he lived in a working-class suburb, almost rural, and the Jewish house was very close to the Orthodox house of the peasant or of the little Russian shopkeeper.

00:11:00

Georges Charensol: Florent Fels, when did you meet Marc Chagall and when did you see his first paintings?

00:11:08

Florent Fels: Well, I first became familiar with Marc Chagall's work and then I met the painter himself, at two very different times. I saw Marc Chagall's first paintings in the little attic where Blaise Cendrars lived, at 4 rue de Savoie, because the walls of Blaise Cendrars's dwelling were studded with paintings by Modigliani, Robert Delaunay, and Marc Chagall. And when I entered the Permissionnaires, where Blaise Cendrars lived, and when he asked me, "Do you know these painters?" and I said, "Oh yes, I do think so," but in truth I had only heard of them. I was especially troubled by the repeated violence in tone that existed between these three people and by a certain aspect of fantasy, useful even in the facial expressions of Modigliani. But in Chagall there was something very special that enchanted me. It had something of sublime imagery. And when I saw Chagall for the first time, several years later, exactly three. Then, I saw that a certain fantastical quality was asserting itself in Chagall's painting, a kind of levitation, that could only be angels or saints rising above the earth and floating in space. In the Pavillon de Marsan exhibition as a whole, it appears that most works, relevantly, are works where the projection of beings, objects, and animals through the sky has a purely dreamlike aspect. But I wanted to look again, room by room and after a rather in-depth study of a work that I was already very familiar with, I see the logic in how the painter moved from folklore, Russian folklore, and from an often *ex voto* appearance, one can feel that Chagall's work comes from the fantasy of Gogol. It follows in the footsteps of a man he admired, a poet who detached himself from the earth as he often detached the most realistic elements.

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Georges Charensol: But Florent Fels, I'd like you to tell us which painting or paintings struck you the most out of this very important collection.

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Florent Fels: Well, a painting that I hadn't seen in person before, only in reproduction and quite often. It's a painting that Chagall made between 1913 and 1914, the date isn't certain, and it was dedicated at once to Apollinaire, to Blaise Cendrars, to Canudo and to Walden, that famous Berliner who was meant to hold an exhibition of Marc's work in Berlin and who took advantage of the events in the First World War to retain a portion of Chagall's paintings, which Chagall struggled to recover later on. This painting depicts a double nude on a sketched zodiac background, but in a frenzy of colors where the influence of both Robert Delaunay and cubism can already be felt. There, Chagall detaches quite clearly from the folkloric side that presides in his previous paintings, and deep down, he would never return to surrealism, except in a few paintings that depict members of his family.

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Georges Charensol: And you, Jacques Lassaigne, when did you meet Marc Chagall for the first time?

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Jacques Lassaigne: I came into contact with Chagall's body of work a little later, around 1932-1933, when he was working on the Bible. I was especially sensitive, obviously, at the time, to the mystical aspect of Chagall and to his great attempt, which was beginning at the time, and which took him so far, since he accomplished all the great works, great biblical paintings coincidentally, if you will, with the world crisis beginning in 1936. But he had already done the preliminary work, the prolegomena in this biblical work that had already begun five or six years earlier. I must say that, at the time, even the portion, the French portion, which you speak of, in Chagall's work, the flowers, the bouquets, the lovers, seemed perhaps less important to me. It didn't move me as much. Maybe because I was young and maybe more critical. I had more ambition. And on the contrary, when I saw that part of that work again, which is sometimes slightly criticized for Chagall, or at least considered less important than others, when I saw it again in depth, much later on, when I did the Chagall exhibition in Turin in 1951 or 1952, I realized that this portion was very significant, also because it actually marked a kind of transposition of that entire past, which was nearly abolished this time. At least, which Chagall wasn't supposed to see again, basically. In reality, it was becoming purely spiritual, purely mythical. It was a transposition in terms of eternity, in very general terms overall, and very beautiful. And it's a language that, deep down, always remained his own, because those vast paintings of flowers, those great lovers, he was able to return to them over and over again, with very subtle variations each time, very different yet with great consistency at the same time. He also remade some very beautiful ones around 1946 and 1947, when he came back to France and recently he made even more in Greece.

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Georges Charensol: I'd like to ask Mathey if this portion of his work, which for me is indeed crucial, is represented well in the exhibition we'll see tomorrow.

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François Mathey: It will be very well represented insofar as we are able to do it. Because, to tell you the truth, that entire era for Chagall is devoted to his lithographic works. ("It's true that the work isn't very abundant" - Lassaigne) and the painted works are not very

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abundant, but we still have sensational paintings. Since I'm beginning with *The Trough* from the Noailles collection of 1924. I'm thinking of the paintings in the window, ("The portrait of Ida at the window" - Charensol) on the island of Bréhat and the portrait from the Zumsteg collection, depicting the same theme and which is a wonderful painting, and a tiny painting that you yourself, Mr. Chagall, that you yourself don't believe is very important, but that I like very much. It's that ravishing little landscape of Montchauvet.

00:18:11

Georges Charensol: The exhibition will continue into 1959. As a result, it's really an overall judgment of Chagall's work that we'll be able to make. It's truly 50 years of painting. So for you, you who have perhaps followed less attentively than we have, due to your age, the development of this body of work, do you see unity in it or does it seem to you that there are still eras, approaches that vary quite significantly from one to the next?

00:18:41

François Mathey: There are different approaches, but unity remains. There is, and if you will, perhaps by following the progress of the exposition it becomes evident. We're entering a system, a labyrinth system, narrow and dark, where the previous four years come together: the years 1907 to 1910. We're in Russia. Chagall said it very well: to him it was a dark, gray, brown era. And all the paintings exude that contained atmosphere, where the artist attempts to express himself, has already discovered his genius but hasn't expressed it yet. And we arrive in Paris in 1910 where light suddenly appears. That famous "light-freedom" that Chagall speaks of and the objects start to come to life, to breathe in their own atmosphere. At that time, Chagall was probably allowing himself to be influenced. He was frowning, but it's true, he became Orphic. He became a cubist. But he still remained Chagall, because at the same time he was mocking both Delaunay and Picasso. After 1914, back in Russia, [he] gave us a series of small paintings depicting Chagall's world, or more precisely his inventory, and which sort of foresaw the future in a bit of a fantastical way. And it's rather interesting to see that in 1914 and 1915, Chagall painted all his loved ones, the world that was familiar to him, his village, and even the most common objects from his daily life, as if he felt that he would soon lose them. Up until that time, in Chagall's work, there is a very obvious effort put into construction. Beginning in 1920, it gradually vanished, and was replaced by another aspect of his talent which is perhaps the most crucial: substance. And it was a personal conception of substance that Chagall defined himself, without us even knowing it ourselves, how to define what he calls his "chemistry." And then we see another Chagall appear, who is no longer the Chagall, let's say the literary Chagall.

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Georges Charensol: Keep showing us around this exhibition.

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François Mathey: So, all throughout 1920 until, until the present day, it's the unfurling, your active ownership of your chemistry. The entire problem is there until the end. The themes disappear more or less. They take on less and less importance and painting is what, alone, becomes the focus of the picture.

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Georges Charensol: Do you really believe that the series, for example the series of paintings devoted to Paris, the subject has no importance?

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François Mathey: Except the biblical series and it's clearly inspired by a... But it's an event that was imposed on Chagall. (Yes, that's true.)

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Georges Charensol: Chagall?

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Marc Chagall: What you're saying is interesting.

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François Mathey: I would go further. What I liked about that era of Chagall was the abstract facet of his work, which he himself is probably the last to consider.

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Marc Chagall: An abstract element. One mustn't... a long time ago, if you will, the Piero della Francesca and Mantegna and Titian on old age are enormous abstract works, and the Claude Monets, the last ones, are abstract. Not because he made *Nymphaea*, because he's in the era of Argenteuil just as abstract, if you will. Yes. And if you discover a certain chemistry in me, I'm flattered. It comes with age, it reveals itself. But I was busy, as Charensol says, when he speaks about my compositions, I was busy with the constructivity of the paintings. If you will, we're talking about a geometric plane. That's it. In my art, I couldn't sense and who could sense, "What is chemistry?" There was no one. No one in 1911 thought of chemistry. We thought about constructivity, meaning constructing the painting. Well, I didn't like their constructions of their paintings.

00:23:11

Marc Chagall: Tonight's episode of "L'art et la vie" was entirely devoted to the Chagall exhibition that's opening tomorrow at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. It was produced in partnership with Michel Faré, François Mathey, André Salmon, Florent Fels, Jacques Lassaigue, and Marc Chagall. [music] You've just heard the 632nd episode of the weekly arts program "L'art et la vie," by Georges Charensol and Jean Dalevèze, broadcast every Thursday at 10:00 p.m. on France 3.