

Marc Chagall at 80: painter's portrait in Saint-Paul-de-Vence – 14/07/1967

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Marc Chagall: And I saw the color red on the grates.

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Adam Saulnier: Marc Chagall has just turned 80.

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MC: I don't know what used to be here.

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AS: He's among the world's best-known contemporary painters.

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MC: Pasha, come here! Great dog, right?

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AS: 65 of his pieces are currently on display at the Louvre. This is an exceptional retrospective for a living artist.

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MC: When I came over to his place, to sign the papers, from Russia. From Russia. And here, my writing wasn't clear. Pasha, don't destroy any flowers. Be careful. I should come over and draw a bit, paint this a little bit, if I can ...

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AS: Sometimes, when, from the hilltop, where he lives in the South of France, near Vence, his gaze resting far in the distance, he occasionally ceases to see the horizon in front of him, instead seeing the landscape that he has never stopped carrying with him, throughout his entire life. The landscape of his childhood. It was in Vitebsk, Russia, in 1887, where Marc Chagall was born. Vitebsk hasn't forgotten him. This woman is Anna Kuznetsova. She is a painter. She lives in Vitebsk and tells us how, in 1916, she studied under Chagall, in the painting academy shown behind her now. She tells us that some were opposed to the pictorial trends that Chagall supported, while others approved of them.

But everyone agreed that he was highly talented. She tells us that, into all of his works, he snuck the image of a Jew's daily life and the image of his country.

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AS: Marc Chagall's father was employed by a merchant in the city. He had five daughters and two sons. One of his sons, Marc, dreamt of traveling the world, equipped only with his talent, and wealthy only in memories.

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MC: Yes, for me, where I was born, the city, or now in France, it's a thing... it's a thing of color, it's a painting. It's a material we work with. And I can't express myself well. But now, since I'm far from the city where I was born and 50-60 years on, it belongs to us, this color. It has mixed with France, with Paris. It's a color, it's a blue, it's a green and a pink, it's a collection of messy lines. This is Vitebsk and this is France. From this point of view, I'm still out there and I'm still here. I'm everywhere, everywhere, but especially in France and in Vitebsk. I'll say that it makes the hue, it makes the painting. From this point of view, I am, one might say, true to the origins.

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AS: Painting by Chagall from around 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913. He depicts scenes from peasant life in old Russia, in the style of a painter-poet. This is why, better than anyone, a poet spoke about Chagall. That poet was Paul Éluard.

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Host: "The moon. It belongs to the family, just like the humble village, the village with the ripe heart, with roots of honey watered by the wedding night."

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AS: Unfailingly, Chagall drew the images that were set in stone in his mind, in his memories as a child, with a spontaneity salvaged from childhood.

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MC: What I do, I don't know, I don't understand. We do shows. No, I don't understand any of it, that, not for that. The only thing that I... with age, I've now realized that maybe a little thing you scribble, I guess, maybe you can put it next to the others, some of the others, but not name them. Those are the rewards of aging.

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AS: Paul Éluard, excerpt from a poem about Marc Chagall.

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Host: "I stir the earth around your pleasure. My garden gleams as a halo around your face. We're the first to dream of flying together and the universe follows us like a cork following a hooked fish, but the light doesn't suffer from it."

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AS: Chagall's thoughts are so closely linked to the biblical account that the main characters of the Old Testament, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, appear in his work, as close to him as his grandfather's. His work is made of the blend of the Old and New Testaments with customary life. His childhood dreams and his loves as a grown man.

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AS: Chagall, do you remember when you were 20 years old?

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MC: Yes.

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AS: You lived in La Ruche. What was La Ruche?

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MC: La Ruche was a collection of lowly buildings that are actually still around, and they're made of wood, aren't they? There were a bunch of studios you could rent, or that you could use without paying too. Well, I wanted to pay. I paid 37 francs per term. There weren't a lot of comforts, and when I saw the toilet in front of the door, that topped it all off. I was considered rich because I earned 125 francs a month, and that was good for three weeks. Since I made large paintings, I had to buy the canvases and the colors. But I was considered rich. And people, the neighbors, would come... come eat a bit at my place. Lunch. I don't know what I was doing there. We weren't selling anything. I thought that was completely appropriate because, somewhere inside myself, there was a feeling that if, God forbid, if I sold this or that thing, I would automatically be forced to do the same thing again, the same thing again.

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AS: So it was best not to sell anything.

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So maybe it's better to not sell, to leave things to yourself. But somewhere inside me, it was... I wanted to be a little, I still kind of wanted to have money, I wanted to, but it wasn't possible. I thought, it's okay this way.

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AS: And what if you fully accepted, in your whole life, being a painter who never sold anything?

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MC: Yes but it's not a profession, absolutely. The other artists and I, and the others, there was Delaunay who was a little wealthier though. His wife was a seamstress and he was from a wealthy family. But Léger, the others, we were all a little poor, and everyone was very happy. We didn't do any shows, we didn't show our work at exhibits... But we spent time in the drawing room doing battle ideologically and chemically, if you will, but to sell... No one thought, we kind of knew, that Bonnard would sell something. He was a bit older though. We knew that Matisse was making a little money, somehow. Yes, good for him, he's an old man. We knew that Van Dongen, who was older, he was making some money, and who else? Maybe Picasso, Braque, made around 100 francs as well, something. But we were left in peace. Well, I lived there until World War I. When I left La Ruche, I fastened the door shut with a metal wire, as protection, if you will. Because you know, it wasn't valuable. I left it all behind. And I wanted to return to La Ruche, even though I was already married to my wife, and we had a child. I wanted to go to Le Ruche, but La Ruche, there was no more La Ruche. Since I didn't pay for seven, eight years, how many years I didn't pay. Of course. Of course, I was evicted. And my paintings, a big painting... There's a painting, we bought and there was a large painting we used as fence for the chicken coop, we made a large canvas. Yes, but I'm not going to tell sad stories about the painting. A chicken coop, you know, there were remains of chickens that can't be washed off. It's a whole procedure.

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Host: Paul Éluard. "The days were long. The story was short. We, the lunatics, we thought of the rules of mirage. The blue golden rule. The black golden rule. The purple golden rule. The golden rule of space. The golden rule without borders. Tomorrow, the bird will return back down to the ground. Under the cover of rest, the violins will have handed out their bouquets and will dream of the harvest. The objective of the game is to be happy."

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MC: I work. I don't know. If I receive letters, if there are people who send me notes, kind notes, I'm very touched and I tell you, honestly, when I show my work, I think of those people. I have to tell the truth. I'm not thinking so much, forgive me, of the artistic writers. Am I supposed to say that?

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AS: Yes of course.

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MC: Of the others. I'm thinking of those thousands of people, young people, 15- and 20-year-olds, thousands, dozens, hundreds of thousands, people who love art and who love all sorts of messages. And I'm counting on them. It makes me extremely happy to think that they'll come. And I'd like to know how they'll critique me. I have a lot of letters. I don't have the strength to answer everyone and I can't show them. I show my wife the kind of letter that I get and that I receive. She's kind of used to it. In response, she might kiss me. And if my work is shown, if my work will be shown, this audience, this is the audience I love in particular. This is my audience.