

## Marc Chagall: Works from the 1950s – 02/01/1954

00:00:03

*Robert Sadoul:* We're here in Vence, at Marc Chagall's studio, and as always, Chagall is at work. He still agreed to receive us very kindly and I'll ask him the first question. Marc Chagall, you're continuing to make illustrations. And after *The Dead Souls* and La Fontaine's *Fables*, you tackled the illustration of the Bible, which you're particularly fond of. Well, I'd like to know if you're happy with this illustration.

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*Marc Chagall:* Nothing fills me with more joy, if during these times I can feel joy about something, than knowing that the Bible will soon be published by Tériade, Verve. Work had already started on the Bible long ago. It was commissioned by Ambroise Vollard, the same Vollard who commissioned the illustration of *The Dead Souls* by Gogol and La Fontaine's *Fables*. I'm thrilled, even though it seems like humanity is so far away from the Bible. But that's the point: the further away it is, the closer it should be.

00:01:16

*Robert Sadoul:* Thank you Marc Chagall. And now I'd like to know exactly what you're preparing for Paris. I know there's an exhibition in the works.

00:01:27

*Marc Chagall:* Yes. It will take place at the Maeght gallery, in Paris, in early June and will last all through the summer season.

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*Robert Sadoul:* So? Could you tell us about the theme of this exhibition? I believe you've chosen a theme and the theme is devoted to Paris, which is "Fantastic Paris!"

00:01:46

*Marc Chagall:* Or Paris as I felt it for the first time, after the war and the liberation, when I came back from America. When I first arrived in Paris in 1911, I almost hadn't seen it. I felt how fantastic Paris was because Paris, after Jerusalem and Athens, is an otherworldly city. It's so moving. And in our tragic era, it moves us even more than Athens or Jerusalem, which have already played their historical roles. I'd like to compare Paris to the fate of humanity. No city looks at the world this way today with such eyes.

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*Robert Sadoul:* Well, we're thrilled in advance, Marc Chagall, about this exhibition. And now, I'd like to know if you think you'll return to stage sets for the ballet or theater.

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*Marc Chagall:* When I was younger, absolutely young, I thought I would work for the theater or ballet. And I worked in Moscow during the Revolution. I don't know what became of my mural painting there. I worked in America during the war, at two ballets. The first, the stage set and costumes, for *Aleko*, set to music by Tchaikovsky and choreographed by Massine. And the second, *Firebird*, to music by Stravinsky and choreography by Balanchine. Right now, it seems, I've cooled down a bit. I mean, I think we've done enough talking and it's better to work.

00:03:37

*Robert Sadoul:* Well, I completely agree with you, Marc Chagall, especially since your work makes us so happy. But I still hope that one day you'll return to stage sets for ballet and

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theater. Thank you so much. At his property in Vence, Les Collines, Marc Chagall works continuously and I'm under the impression that the sun in the south of France, that the flowers in his garden don't stop him from perpetually working. Marc Chagall, painting takes up much of your time, but there are also the illustrations. And after La Fontaine's *Fables*, after the celebrated *Dead Souls* by Gogol, the Imprimerie Nationale, currently, I believe, is printing the Bible. This Bible you have been attached to for many years. I'd like to know, Marc Chagall, why you chose the Bible first.

00:04:38

*Marc Chagall:* I took the Bible because, instinctively, I'm attracted to this source in which I see the beginning of the entire beginning. I'm attracted not only by the formal tangible reasons, but because I see there what's going beyond borders and what forms a message. I haven't often seen, except in silent nature, if you will, another source of human creation quite like the Bible. And I'm still grateful to my parents, those poor people, who unconsciously led me down this path, to the point that my home and my city were for me the highest academies of art and life. If I illustrated the Bible, La Fontaine's *Fables* and Gogol, I owe it to two men, the great publisher Ambroise Vollard—who 25 years ago commissioned the Bible, and Gogol and La Fontaine's *Fables* before that—and to Tériade, the publisher of *Verve* magazine, who took over these books to publish them after Vollard's death. I hope that in 1956 the Bible will come out with its 105 etchings, illustrations I have been working on for 25 years and for which, in 1931, I made a special journey to Palestine.

00:05:58

*Robert Sadoul:* Well, Marc Chagall, we're really looking forward to this Bible and the Old Testament in particular, right? And I'd like to know now, when did you come to the south of France for the first time?

00:06:13

*Marc Chagall:* I came to the south of France when I received Vollard's commission for La Fontaine's *Fables*, around 1923, in Toulon and then in Nice. I noticed for the first time that surprising light, which is unlike the light in any other place, and the world of flowers. Ever since, my secret desire has been to live in the south of France. That's what I did after the war, when I came back from America. I moved to Vence. A muted harmony is always before your eyes.

00:06:46

*Robert Sadoul:* Marc Chagall, I'd also like to know why you started working in ceramics.

00:06:53

*Marc Chagall:* My work in ceramics, here in the south of France, is another experience, a kind of approach towards nature. But avoiding, if possible, exterior decorations which, it seems, are not worthy of either the clay or the fire through which ceramics pass. Also, it's very difficult to dupe nature. This temple can't be entered by just anybody.

00:07:17

*Robert Sadoul:* Now, could you tell me what differences there are, for you as a painter, between painting and making ceramics?

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*Marc Chagall:* One could say that through it all, even with age, both goals are clearly visible

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in the future. The point of departure and the point of arrival of ceramics and of painting on canvas. But it's difficult to develop these problems right now. I just wanted to allude to these contrasts, which resemble each other so closely, despite their goals and their means which are completely different.

00:07:55

*Robert Sadoul:* Thank you, Marc Chagall, and I hope that for many years to come you'll be able to continue working, in the quiet and peaceful atmosphere of Vence. Marc Chagall has been back in Vence for a few days now, where he has resumed his daily work. I believe Chagall is not only a conscientious artist, but a very hard worker. Marc Chagall has a lot on his plate. Many, many projects and I believe the closest one, the one that's nearest to his projects, is undoubtedly the ballet *Daphnis and Chloe* set to music by Ravel, which will take place at the Paris Opera House for the 25th anniversary of Ravel's death. And Marc Chagall is responsible for both the stage sets and the costumes. Marc Chagall, I believe this ballet isn't recent, is it? Hadn't it already been on the program thanks to Diaghilev? Did you want to do something completely new in terms of design?

00:08:52

*Marc Chagall:* You know, I don't know if I did anything new. At any rate, I didn't see the first ballets by Fokine or by my first teacher, Bakst. I really like Ravel. I travel to Greece. That's it. Quite simply, I did what I could. It's up to you and others to judge the results.

00:09:17

*Robert Sadoul:* Will it be a modern ballet or a ballet that retains its old-fashioned character?

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*Marc Chagall:* It's very difficult to answer that. I can't say.

00:09:32

*Robert Sadoul:* Well, Marc Chagall, if you'd like to, we'll now discuss your projects for painting and illustration, since the ballet will take place on December 24 or 25, I believe. We know that several books have come out recently. Books that not only are about you, but also books that you illustrated. Could you talk to us about them and tell us what they're called?

00:09:55

*Marc Chagall:* I started La Fontaine's *Fables* for my friend Tériade, the publisher, four years ago already. My work on that book is what took me to Greece more than once, and the book with its 42 lithographs will be ready, I believe, next year. The trip that I took to Greece helped me and made it possible for me to create the artwork for the ballet *Daphnis and Chloe*. And I'm happy that Skibine will be taking over the choreography for this ballet. I printed the lithographs at Lacourière and I hope they'll really be finished. They'll give an idea. It will turn out how it turns out.

00:10:44

*Robert Sadoul:* The art critic Jacques Lassaigne also just published a book about you through Maeght publishing, Chagall. And I think you also placed original drawings and lithographs in this book too, didn't you?

00:10:58

*Marc Chagall:* Yes, there are original lithographs and there are drawings. There are photos

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and color reproductions. And I think that makes my impression, not bad. The text by Lassaigues is very comprehensive. It's good. Again, it's not for me to judge.

00:11:14

*Robert Sadoul:* And at the same time, Marc Chagall, you worked with Jean Paulhan who wrote a piece specifically for you, which you illustrated.

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*Marc Chagall:* Yes, I made about ten colored engraving lines for a novel called *De Mauvais Sujets* [Bad Subjects] for him. I've been friends with Paulhan, for maybe the past forty years.

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*Robert Sadoul:* And can we know yet what this subject, this "bad subject," represents?

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*Marc Chagall:* Oh no, I recommend you don't ask me that. It's hard to tell the tale of Jean Paulhan. Everybody knows him and he's a fantastic man! A writer too. You'll see what you'll see and read.

00:12:03

*Robert Sadoul:* Marc Chagall, now I'm going to allow myself a small liberty, or perhaps a large liberty, I don't know. But we've been talking for quite some time about a project in Vence and it's already been several years. We're always talking either about a chapel or a museum decorated by Marc Chagall. Are you still thinking about this?

00:12:25

*Marc Chagall:* I only think about one thing: work. I've been working. Not long ago I finished "The Creation of Man." I finished two from the hall of songs. I made about forty sketches. I'll work on it and then we'll see. It's not my job to do projects, projects other than working. And I'm not the one who can take care of all the technical things, and so on and so on. And I wait. I wait and I work.

00:12:54

*Robert Sadoul:* Marc Chagall, now I'd like to know if you're planning any exhibitions.

00:13:00

*Marc Chagall:* I think I'll have exhibitions, but it's a little too early and it will be in a museum in Germany, a museum in France, in the Pavillon Marsan. I'd prefer to talk about it in detail as the time approaches, next year.

00:13:12

*Robert Sadoul:* Well, Marc Chagall, I thank you very much for providing all of those details and I hope you'll continue to paint for a long time to come. It makes all of us happy. Thank you!

00:13:25

*Robert Sadoul:* In a very short time, the second Marc Chagall exhibition will take place at the Galerie des Pohchettes, in Nice. The first, as you recall, was a grand retrospective exhibition of the works of Marc Chagall. But this time, Marc Chagall, could you tell us if this exhibit at the Galerie des Ponchettes is devoted solely to your engraved works and your illustrations?

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00:13:49

*Marc Chagall:* It's a selection of etchings begun in about 1922, commissioned by the German publisher Cassirer in Berlin, for whom I did *My Life*, and the encounter with the great publisher Ambroise Vollard in Paris, who commissioned *The Dead Souls*, La Fontaine's *Fables*, and the Bible, later taken over by my friend the great publisher Tériade. A selection of lithographs published by Maeght is also displayed at the exhibition. There are also a few *Thousand and One Nights* lithographs completed in New York during the war, and others. I made about 500 or maybe 600 plates, from which a selection must be made. It isn't possible to exhibit everything.

00:14:30

*Robert Sadoul:* And now, could you tell us which are the main works in your career as an illustrator?

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*Marc Chagall:* I can't speak about my own work personally. As always, I have a lot of doubts about the subject. But I can say that I'm very happy to have done *The Dead Souls*, a sign of love for my home country, to have done La Fontaine's *Fables*, a symbol of love for my second homeland, and all of humanity, and to have done the Bible, a religious and cultural symbol. I'm happy that my friend Tériade gave me the chance to express my love for Greece by doing *Daphnis and Chloe*. I can't speak about all the other plates and lithographs, most of which were published by Maeght. But I'm happy that this exhibition is taking place at the Ponchettes, in Nice, the region where I live. Allow me to express my gratitude to the city of Nice for providing space for me in its gallery, and to Mrs. Ferry (?) who works with such passion and knowledge.

00:15:36

*Robert Sadoul:* Has this exhibition already been presented elsewhere?

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*Marc Chagall:* Yes. This exhibition was presented when the Bible was published, at the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris. It was presented afterwards at the Basel museum, in Switzerland, in California, at the Pasadena museum, and it's currently on display in New York, at the Museum of Modern Art. In 1956, it was exhibited in Bern, at Klipstein. A large portion of the lithographs were exhibited. The Bible was also displayed in all the museums of Israel, in a few cities in France, and in Germany, in Berlin and elsewhere.

00:16:13

*Robert Sadoul:* Well, Marc Chagall, I'll allow myself to ask you one final question. I know you created, at the behest of Father Couturier and Father Domini, five works of art that are now located elsewhere, in that famous chapel of the Plateau d'Assy. There are stained glass windows, low-reliefs depicting the psalms of David, and a large ceramic work depicting the crossing of the Red Sea. But could you tell us if you have other projects, in addition to these works that have already been accomplished?

00:16:44

*Marc Chagall:* Yes. I'm now busy preparing two stained glass windows for the cathedral in Metz, which were commissioned by Historical Monuments, and also the stage sets and costumes for *Daphnis and Chloe*, commissioned by the Paris Opera House for the twentieth

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anniversary of the death of Ravel. My dream is to finish a biblical series. I've already done all the sketches and a few murals for a kind of building as yet to be named and which, I hope, will be located on land belonging to the town of Vence, where I live, or elsewhere.

00:17:17

*Robert Sadoul:* Well, Marc Chagall, I thank you. We're eagerly awaiting this exhibition at the Galerie des Ponchettes and I hope we'll also have the chance one day to admire this chapel, shall we say. Maybe it will be called something else, and I especially hope that it will be located in this Mediterranean region.