

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53 STREET, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

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SPECIAL MARC CHAGALL EXHIBITION ON VIEW

In honor of Marc Chagall's forthcoming 70th birthday, the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, will present a special exhibition from December 18 through February 23, of paintings, prints and watercolors from its Collection. Included are etchings for the Old Testament, the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Bernard J. Reis, which are being shown in New York for the first time * and Chagall's original illustrations for La Fontaine's Fables, purchased through the Larry Aldrich Fund.

The five major paintings from the Museum Collection are Chagall's most famous painting, I and the Village (1911), the Calvary (1912), Birthday (1915) Over Vitebsk (1920) and Time Is a River without Banks (1930 - 39). Selections from his illustrations to Gogol's Dead Souls and his designs for the ballet Aleko will also be included.

Born in Vitebsk in Russia**, Chagall has worked in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Berlin, Paris, New York and Mexico. He now lives in Vence in the south of France. But it is the memories and experiences of his native Vitebsk that have been the chief inspiration of his fantasy. Vitebsk, situated near the former Russo-Polish border, lies on both banks of the river Dvina. At the time of Chagall's birth about half of its inhabitants were Jews. Allusions to the Russian provincial architecture of Vitebsk, to his family, their pleasures and occupations, appear in all five of the Museum's paintings to be placed on view.

Remembering his childhood in 1911 Chagall painted I and the Village in Paris where he had gone in 1910. The cubists had broken up, superimposed and rearranged the objects they depicted. Influenced by them Chagall painted his fantasy in which scale, color, even gravity are handled with poetic, playful freedom. I and the Village was acquired in 1945 through the Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund.

The Calvary (1912) was also painted in Paris. The first and most important of a series of paintings by Chagall on the theme of Golgotha it was not publicly exhibited for two decades and then, by its German owner, was hidden from the Nazis. It was first exhibited in the United States when it was acquired by the Museum in 1949. Chagall has explained his personal variations in the traditional iconography.

*Chagall's Bible published in Paris last year. As a series, the illustrations have been previously shown in the United States at Dayton and at the Pasadena Art Museum. This is therefore the first New York showing, not the first showing in this country as erroneously announced in the Museum Schedule of Exhibitions and Events.

**To obtain a permit to go to St. Petersburg his father had to advance Chagall's age two years. As a result the year of his birth has regularly been given as 1887 instead of 1889.

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The symbolic figure of Christ was always very near to me and I was determined to draw it out of my young heart. I wanted to show Christ as an innocent child. Now I see him otherwise.

Of the two figures by the cross he writes:

When I painted Christ's parents I was thinking of my own parents. My mother was about half the size of my father...as I wrote in my book, My Life. The bearded man is the child's father. He is my father and everybody's father.

The Birthday celebrated Chagall's own anniversary in 1915, a few weeks before his marriage in Vitebsk. Bella, his fiancée, had brought him a bouquet of flowers. In her autobiography she recalls their rapture: "Soon I forget the flowers. You work with your brushes...Your canvas quivers...You pour on color...Suddenly you jump into the air...You float among the rafters. You turn your head and you twist mine too...and both together we rise over the clean little room..."

The winter scene, Over Vitebsk, painted in 1920, is a replica of an earlier version painted in Vitebsk shortly after Chagall had returned from Paris. When asked whether the floating figure represented the Wandering Jew, the artist replied that he had not intended any specific symbolism but that perhaps, in spite of himself, he had indeed painted that legendary figure. This painting, together with Calvary and Birthday were acquired through funds from the Lillie P. Bliss bequest.

Begun in 1930 and completed in 1939, Time is a River without Banks recalls once again Chagall's native town. Over the banks of the river Dvina, floats the pendulum clock from his parent's house. His father worked in a herring depot but in this dream of passing events the fish not only flies but plays a violin.

Although the Museum owns many prints by Marc Chagall, the director of the exhibition, William S. Lieberman, has limited the selection of prints to Chagall's three major series of book illustrations.

The Bible, an inspired testament to Chagall's own faith, was the artist's last commission for Ambroise Vollard. The illustrations are his most important series of etchings and of them Jacques Maritan has said:

To illustrate the Bible was a unique test of Chagall's art...An inventive technique, dictated by an alert sensibility, miraculously causes the black and white to sing, and black in black, with subtle modulations, like the chanting in a synagogue...At the same time greatness also appears - as in the descent of the angels with Abraham, the surging solitude of Moses, or the marvellous Creation of Man that is so noble in its movements...

La Fontaine's Fables teaches the wisdom not of prophets, kings and angels but of women, cats, donkeys, lions, larks and farmers. Chagall's illustrations were etched between 1927 and 1931 after the artist had made paintings in gouache for each illustration. The prints were conceived primarily from a painter's point of view and black and white surfaces, reminiscent of brush strokes enrich the printed images. The titles of the poems have been taken from Miss Marianne Moore's translations published in 1954.

Dead Souls has attracted many illustrators but none better suited than Chagall to describe the adventures of Tchitchikov, Gogol's hero. Although a century apart the artist achieved perfect collaboration with the author. Borrowing freely from his own knowledge of provincial life in Russia, sharpening his fantasy on humor and pathos, the warmth and wit of Gogol's text, Chagall produced his first piece of book illustration. The etchings are more linear than either the Bible or the Fables.

The watercolor designs of the costumes and decor for the ballet Aleko were commissioned in the spring of 1942 by the famous choreographer Leonide Massine. Chagall and his family moved to Mexico City where he made the designs. The plot of the ballet is taken from a Russian folk tale by Pushkin. The watercolors idealize Chagall's youth in Russia and many of the characters and scenes are quotations from his earlier work.

For photographs and further information please contact Elizabeth Shaw, Publicity Director, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N. Y. CI 5-8900