

Marc
Chagall
The Third Dimension
シャガール
三次元の世界

Lecture:

Bella Meyer

Marc Chagall's encounter with the 3rd dimension through his stage work

Date and Time: March 10, 2018 / 14:00 p.m. — 15:30 p.m.

Location: Theater hall, Aomori Museum of Art

Thank you for giving me the immense pleasure to be here today; and to share with you my love for my grandfather and for his work; to be able to celebrate the most beautiful and revealing ensemble and juxtaposition of Marc Chagall's paintings and sculptures exhibited here.



Slide: Portrait of Marc Chagall, Photograph by IZIS

What an extraordinary moment to be here today, and what an honour to partake in having this very thoughtful exhibition come together with the 4 monumental Aleko backdrops, of which 3 have found their happy home here quite some time ago! And what excitement to actually witness all four backdrops hanging together!

What connects these two worlds of Chagall? The world of stage design, here so formidably represented by Aleko, and the one of sculptures, introduced with the exhibition?

What vision did Chagall have? What need pushed him to be attracted, as a painter, not only to go towards sculpting, but also, during most of his career, to embrace the challenge of designing stage décor, whether for theatre, ballet or opera?

In fact Chagall loved Matter and Materials!!!

Let me tell you few personal stories which might make it clearer why I believe that my grandfather's daily quest was about trying to understand the mass, and the material he was working with.

When we were little, grandfather lived in South of France, first in Vence, and then later near St. Paul-de-Vence. We'd go and visit him with our mother Ida and we'd go straight to his large studio, where he'd be busy painting.

He was a very small man, delicate; he seemed to nearly disappear behind a landscape of brushes...yet his presence was so luminous and when we entered the studio, his face would light up, and he smiled at us with such intensity...you thought that the whole space was suddenly flooded with brilliant light. He admired the fabric of my mother's dress, gently touched our faces and then turned towards the large bouquet of flowers which we had just grabbed at a neighbouring outside market, put in a simple vase and placed in the middle of his large work table. He would exclaim: "Look they are so much more perfect than any Chagall!". And as you know, he painted them anyway!

It was wonderful to watch him pick out few long brushes, then choose one, to scoop up some paint and add numerous small, thus essential dots, here and there on the already quite telling canvas. His gestures were delicate, quick and precise, similar to a dance; he would call it "picoter", to "prick" to "peck".

Chagall was a shy man, and very shy about his paintings. In fact, when we, grandchildren would watch him engrossed in painting, he would suddenly turn to us and ask, quite sheepishly, if we liked his paintings, if we liked Chagall.....so, of course we answered:

"Oui, grand-papa!" Genuinely relieved, he'd usually turn back to his canvas, scrutinize it and then say: "Ah, il faut un peu plus de Chagall" ("Now it just needs a little more Chagall!").

And so appeared more dancing and flying figures and branches, lines and dots, followed by sudden forceful etching into the still wet oil paint...sometimes he used the dull end of his brush to work into the mass of the pigment on his canvas, other times he would even sculpt and attack the surface with his thumb...giving us the impression that what actually really mattered to him was to conquer the material and tool he was working with.

In a way it seemed very much the same when he would take my hand, play with my fingers, and then dig his nail into my fingertips...as if he was sculpting...or as if he needed more tactile contact to experience us more fully.

And so I understood that he needed to touch and dig into the depth of a child's finger, or any fabric, to try to find what could possibly reveal itself by touch, from within the mass and the matter, from deep inside the body and the soil. It's as if he needed to understand the innate truth of the physical and tactile world.

We can trace his inquisitive eye, open to all wonderment surrounding him, back to his earliest of childhood. He was in awe before the clouds over the river Dvina, and wondered about the fur coats hanging in his grandfather's entry hall, trying to understand the essence behind each matter.

Nothing gave him more delight than to dissect the lace worn by his sister Lisa. He even seemed to embrace having to use rough burlap as a support for his painting, thus pushing him to really get into the depth of the woven fabric, sculpting and carving the pigments into it, caressing it, and succeeding in coaxing out a most gentle rendering of Lisa, highlighting the delicacy and transparency of her lacy top. The constraint of the chosen support challenged him to go beyond what he already knew.

It is this curiosity for the material, and the techniques to work with, which remains a guiding force during our grandfather's whole life.

When you look at the cemetery in Vitebsk [*Cemetery*, 1917, Musée national d'Art modern, Centre Pompidou, Paris], you wonder if he was actually sculpting his painting! Or is it that he thinks like a sculptor??

Remember, Chagall had just spent 4 most prolific years in Paris, from 1910 to 1914, discovered cubism and surrealism, took on and transformed all he needed from anything he saw...whether it is from the explosion of volumes as proposed by the analytical cubism, or the poetic colours taking over with Orphism and Chagall's friend Delaunay, or even from the mysterious pictorial space brought forward by Douanier Rousseau, exhibited in Paris in 1911.

In a state of feverish excitement, he absorbed all this new plastic vocabulary unfolding before him, and incorporated it, in his own most personal of ways into his fantastical world.

Enriched, he returns to Vitebsk, in 1914, to claim his beloved fiancée Bella as his wife. Oh I so loved when he would talk to us about her, his muse, our grandmother, whom we unfortunately never met, since she died still quite young, in 1944.

Whenever he would paint her, she'd always appear with her deep and far reaching gaze, as if to open his horizons. He would tell us, how her love, and her respect for his artistic quest became the guiding force for all of his creation. Indeed Bella understood him, and stood by him, supported him, quite literally carried him and pushed him to search further.

Both my grandparents had grown up speaking Yiddish. He studied at the Heder. She studied Hebrew at home. Both were allowed, against all odds, to attend the Russian public school. Both, completely imbued in an orthodox Jewish upbringing, turned away from all religious tradition once they were married. Art and Poetry became their religion. Although without ever forgetting that they were Jewish, their belief in artistic creation became the main pillar for the young Chagall Trio.

Not only that, grandfather seemed to have understood very early on, that for him art had to spring from one's whole being — including the unconscious. He fought for freedom in art, a fervent belief which was much rewarded with the Russian revolution!

The Revolution of 1917 brought equal rights to all, and to Jews! It called for freedom of artistic expression! Chagall played an active and passionate role in the revolution, eventually creating, not only an Art Museum in his hometown of Vitebsk but also a Free Art Academy...which soon counted over 600 students, taught by the most varied of artists, from the more classical Pen to the most revolutionary and contemporary ones, such as Malevitch and Lissitzky, thus transforming his hometown into a major artistic hub.

For the 1st anniversary of the revolution, Chagall, with the help of all inhabitants, painted the whole city, creating kind of a total art stage!

It is in the same way, in 1920, that he explored theatre and its space on stage in Moscow, after having been pushed away and misunderstood by the very artists whom he had invited to teach and to form the large artistic community in Vitebsk.

Thank goodness, the Experimental Yiddish Chamber Theater offered Chagall to paint the scenery for Sholem Aleichem's pieces. With these designs he succeeded in overturning all established parameters for the theatre. Look how all surfaces, textures, forms and colours, even though all painted on 2 dimension, dance together to establish a world in itself.

In fact Chagall, completely enthralled in this new visual adventure, continued, for the opening of the Yiddish Theatre, to paint all the walls of the theatre, essentially a rectangular room, later known as the Chagall box where the audience was sitting, thus creating an extraordinary manifesto for the Freedom of Expression, and for the rebirth of Yiddish Jewish Culture!

Let's not forget that Marc Chagall was born into a hassidic family: he used to accompany his pious father to synagogue, to pray and to celebrate holidays. Hassidic ceremonies were rhythmized by enthusiasm and frenetic dancing, and what's more, the wardrobe of the rabbi and the most respected members of the congregation was carefully designed and chosen. The mere idea of performance in the service of spiritual ritual was fundamental!

Thus, materials, texture and fabric, as well as staged performances, were most familiar to my grandfather. It doesn't come as a surprise that, during the avant-garde's fervent discussions about theatre and the role of the artist introducing an essential new visual reality, Chagall was passionately defending the necessity of a total theatre.

I remember a most special and inspiring moment with my grandfather, once I visited him, as a young student, taking the night train from Paris, and then spending the day with him in his studio. He liked to talk about Paint as a tool, as a medium-transgressed by mystery, by chemistry, "la Chimie" as he liked to say!

Once he led my gaze to the very texture of the paint; he pointed to what he was trying to find while painting, and longingly reminisced about that time, some 50 years earlier, when he painted this very Panel [*Love on the Stage*, 1920, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow], which is also part of the Introduction to the Yiddish Theater, which we just saw. He felt that, back then, he had succeeded to give real meaning to the colours, such as white and black, even grey, something he confessed to me, he had been trying to achieve again ever since!!!

He would talk about colours, and the singing of the pigments, but never about the subjects he was depicting. Look how the brush stroke barely skims over the canvas, but still succeeds in the most delicate of ways to describe the dress of the dancer.

The sculpted space remains light and airy, following a rhythm like in a dance. See how the silhouette of the couple underlines this most ephemeral of moments, while celebrating time. Their gestures are strong and emerge from deep inside the dancers, already underlining the cosmic axis between earth and heaven!

It is this attention and questioning of the textile, and texture, which urges the artist to come



Slide: Marc Chagall, *Love on the Stage*, 1920
[Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow]

closer to a conceptual understanding of painting. When he talks to us about Chimie, chemistry in painting, he talks in fact of the expression of this other reality, only path to total theatre, and total art!

And I guess it is this same passion for a total vision which explains the incredible success for the décor, sets and costumes created for the ballet Aleko, 22 years later, in NYC, where my grandparents had fled, in 1941, from France, where they had settled after leaving Russia in 1922, most disillusioned about the hopes of freedom overturned. They had become French citizens, and really did not want to have to leave their new found home despite the looming Holocaust. But in fact once in NY, they were greeted by a great community of friends, old and new, artists, writers, visionaries, all immigrants, many Jewish and Russian.

The Ballet Theater of NYC, with its prominent Russian choreographer Leonide Massine, invited Chagall to create the décor for a new Ballet, Aleko. Chagall leapt at the offer, and immediately set out to work.

Each day, for months, Massine, joined Chagall in his new makeshift studio on East 74th street in NY, as they worked on the choreography and sketches for the show, immersing themselves into the music of Tchaikovsky, as Bella read aloud Pushkin's verses.

Chagall the painter, and Massine the dancer, delved into the fantastical world of their most familiar Russian folklore, and each in their own ways, carved out the story into space, sculpting volumes and movements onto the stage. They worked together on the choreography, and often discussed movements of the individual dancers.

Much of the familiar imagery in Chagall's paintings found its way into the staging of the ballet, reincarnated into dreamlike figures, hybrid female characters, or humanized musical instruments. Peasants and Gypsies were drawn all in folkloric, coloured and patterned outfits, similar to the ones Chagall had already fashioned 20 years earlier for the characters of Sholem Aleichem. Dancers were imagined in elegant, wide skirted dresses, dotted with lace, narrow waists and generous wide open collars, very much in the style Bella liked to dress.

As you might know, the production of the whole project was transported to Mexico City, where big workshops were transformed to accommodate the construction of at least 64 outfits, and innumerable accessories, which have been celebrated here, in a marvellous exhibition 12 years ago! And all four enormous backdrops were painted in less than a month!

What is so astounding is the way Chagall succeeded, just as he did for the Yiddish Theatre 22 years earlier, in creating a huge open space on the stage, even though the backdrops are 2 dimensional.....Out of the flatness of the support emerge volumes, chiselled into the mass of

space, even of time, thus creating an extraordinary imaginary world for the audience.

Bella was instrumental in having the costumes built in very much the same way. She determined all combinations and juxtapositions of textures, wool, cotton, velvet, and gauze, thus sculpting each garment, which would then be enhanced and painted onto by Chagall, giving birth to an illusion of richly textured layers.

3 years later, in 1945 Marc Chagall was asked, again by the Ballet Theatre, to create new scenery and costume design for the ballet "The Firebird", set to the music by Igor Stravinsky. My grandfather, having recently lost his beloved Bella, our grandmother, embraced this opportunity to immerse himself into the passionate and colourful world of the Russian fairy tale. And I can't but recognize here in this opening curtain Bella appearing to him and watching over him. This time, after Chagall had drawn and painted hundreds of designs, the production was built in NYC this time. My mother tells us, who at this point stood by him and helped, that her father had a very hard time trying to convince the various studios to build the costumes and props as if they were sculptures!

He passionately wanted the seamstresses to understand how to mould each costume, how to use textile and his colours to coax out the essence of each character to appear on stage. Actually it was only much later, in 1969, long after he had moved back to France when Balanchine decided to rebuild the decor for the Firebird and asked his friend madame Karinska to reinterpret and rebuild the costumes that his wish was rewarded.

Their most symbiotic collaboration inspired Chagall to actually resume using fabric swatches to create special moments within the monumentality of his work.

The texture of the fabric pieces allowed him to dream big, and to give rhythm to the story, by letting the depth of the matter surface, thus again, sculpting the whole.

Chagall had been given other opportunities to design for the stage; the ballet Daphnis and Chloe for the Paris Opera, in the 50s, as well as the Opera "the Magic Flute" for the MET in NY.

Marc Chagall was a genius for monumental art because he knew how to compose partitions within the large space, by respecting and learning about the inherent mysteries of each support. Like music, or like a song, he used the most varied textures to create an energetic composition of vibrant colors, luring in dancing and flying figures.

The same fashion of sculpting into the volume can be felt, as well in the panels highlighting the façade of the MET Opera in New York, or you can see in any of the grand commissions Chagall accepted to create, such as his extraordinary work with stained glass window, where he seemed

to be able to go even further, challenged by this difficult craft, by understanding the mystery and chemistry, not only of the technique, but of the material and foremost of light.

By touching, etching, chiselling, carving, scratching, digging, caressing, Chagall listened to the soul of the material, and thus was able, after long hours, days and months to coax out the pure essence of the mass, something he might have called truth, or the ideal!

My grandfather's need for touch and for learning about textures and materials, was essential to tell his story. Each volume presented, with mass or none, became like a theatre stage for him, where a whole vision to be expressed was possible. Thus layers after layers, space was sculpted.

It seems quite natural that, after having moved to Vence in South of France, in 1950, Chagall was intensely attracted to its soil and clay. Even though he never stopped painting and drawing, he started a whole series of plates, formed by the potters, and then painted by him. But soon he needed further challenge and started building, turning and moulding the most voluptuous forms out of clay, forming it, and chiselling into it, once the clay had dried a bit. Once the piece was fired, he painted over it, reinforcing the story through an explosion of colours.

Well, this surely reminds me of Chagall's frantic need to colour all costumes, whether with paint or with a piece of fabric, adding here and there, even at the last moment before the actor or the dancer would go on stage, yet another dot, to insure that it would be an integral part to the whole.

Look at the similarities of this moulded piece [*Lovers and Animal*, 1957, Private Collection], engraved and painted, with the costumes for the Magic flute, such as this most adorable animal [Horse or Donkey, costume for the Magic Flute] or look at the monster imagined for the Firebird [yellow monster drawing] with the curves of this open bowl [*Sculpted Vase*, 1952, Private Collection].

In the exhibition you will see some astonishing drawings and sketches for the various ceramic pieces, which have the same feel and touch as any of the nu-



Slide: Marc Chagall,
Costume design for the yellow monster in "Firebird", 1945
[Private Collection]



Slide: Marc Chagall,
Sculpted Vase, 1952
[Private Collection]

merous sketches Chagall had drawn to envision the costumes of all the various stage productions.

Are they the same vehicle for the painter? the artist who so needed tactile contact?

In a sense they are.....they each become the receptor for Chagall's story to be told. But the musicality of his colours, the soul of his story, only emerge from within the mass, because he has been in dialogue with the material before him, listening to its physical resistance, using it, all with utter respect. As Chagall liked to remind us: "In front of matter, we have to stay humble, and submitted. Matter is natural, and all what is natural is sacred."

Which leads us to his courage to even consider carving a stone!

He approached each matter with great candor, and even religiously he knew that ultimately it was the material he was working with, which would generate the image. He was in awe before the soil, before the stone, in the same way he, and all his ancestors have been, praying to the ominous Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

It must have been an extraordinary experience for my grandfather to chisel into a stone for the first time!

He ever so carefully shaped figures out of the soft rock, similar to a prayer...He indeed stated: "When I paint, I pray!" Colours were not necessary anymore, because the fabric of the stone brought out all its light. He must have been most inspired by Romanesque sculpture, like this one from Moissac or from Souillac, where a deep religious humility by the sculptor of the 12th century can be felt.

In Chagall's bas relief the story unfolds in conformity with its movement of the slab. The same way as figures establish themselves in the round or the verticality of the block, as seen much later in a late marble sculpture called *Jacob's Ladder* [1973, Private Collection].

Sculpture is the language of touch...Grandfather used this language for all of his work, since he needed, foremost, the tactile experience of any texture, whether it was in a collage of paper and even lace, or on canvas, in this gigantic oil painting, called *Life* [1964, Fondation Marguerite and Aimé Maeght, Saint-Paul].

Whether it was to help build a ballet costume with layers of fine gauze, here Zephira for Aleko, or a winged spirit for the Firebird in 1945 or even by etching into the copper plate to coax out his vision.

He relentlessly, uncompromisingly, unfashionably, passionately, timelessly, always searched for the true essence of colour, sounds, words and thought. The forms would become — as he stated

once: sonorous forms like noises — passions-forms.

This was his way, his only way to fight in life, the only way to fight for harmony; his way to come closer to the ideal. This ideal which he tried, again and again to coax out of each texture before him, by sculpting, shaping and painting into it - this ideal which he so much hoped for us grandchildren to find.

Because over the many years of grandfather's long life, it became more and more clear to him that what he tried to transmit in his work, in whatever medium, was his very own message, through inspiration, of peace and love on earth.

As Chagall once said: "For those who love, everything is clear. For those who don't, what can we do?????"

Thank you.



Bella Meyer

Owner, Creative Director
FleursBELLA

Born in Paris and raised in Switzerland, Bella Meyer grew up immersed in the world of art. She always painted while studying and obtaining her Ph.D in medieval art history from the Sorbonne in Paris. Bella taught art history, and wrote numerous academic papers. Invited to take on responsibilities for the Visual Arts at the Cultural Services of the French Embassy, Bella settled in New York, where she held this position for a number of years. She started writing and lecturing on various aspects of her grandfather Marc Chagall's work, sourcing from extensive research and personal experiences. Adding to her expanding list of accomplishments, she has had her hand in costume design and mask-making for a number of theatre performances and also created many puppets for her own puppet show productions. Bella's passion for beauty and aesthetics, led her to become a floral designer. In a recent publication Bella describes her love for flowers, "to discover its essence—opening, life, death—is to experience an unimaginable mystery." Bella founded FleursBELLA, a floral design and décor company, in 2005, focusing her talents on creating floral arrangements much in the way an artist paints.