

The Elusive Marc Chagall

By Joseph A. Harriss, *Smithsonian*, December 2003

With his wild and whimsical imagery, the Russian-born artist bucked the trends of 20th-century art



"Art seems to me to be above all a state of soul," wrote Chagall (in 1942 in his studio in New York City) in his 1931 memoir, *My Life*.

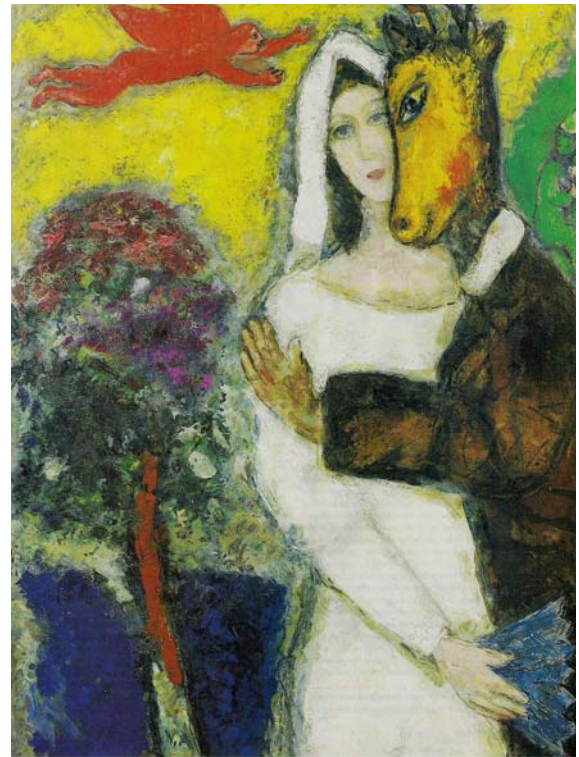
DAVID McNEIL fondly remembers the day in the early 1960s his father took him to a little bistro on Paris' Ile St. Louis, the kind of place where they scrawl the menu in white letters on the mirror behind the bar, and masons, house painters, plumbers and other workmen down hearty lunches along with *vin ordinaire*. Wearing a beret, a battered jacket and a coarse, checkered shirt, his father-then in his mid-70s--fit in perfectly. With conversation flowing easily among the close-set tables, one of the patrons looked over at the muscular, paint-splotted hands of the man in the beret. "Working on a place around here?" he asked companionably "Yeah," replied McNeil's father, the artist Marc Chagall, as he tucked into his appetizer of hard-boiled egg and mayonnaise. "I'm redoing a ceiling over at the Opéra."

Chagall, the Russian-born painter who went against the current of 20th-century art with his fanciful images of blue cows, flying lovers, biblical prophets and green-faced fiddlers on roofs, had a firm idea of who he was and what he wanted to accomplish. But when it came to guarding his privacy, he was a master of deflection. Sometimes when people approached to ask if he was that famous painter Marc Chagall, he would answer, "No," or more absurdly, "I don't think so," or point to someone else and say slyly, "Maybe that's him." With his slanting, pale-blue eyes, his unruly hair and the mobile face of a mischievous faun, Chagall gave one biographer the impression that he was "always slightly hallucinating." One of those who knew him best, Virginia Haggard McNeil, David's mother and Chagall's companion for seven years, characterized him as "full of contradictions--generous and guarded, naïve and shrewd, explosive and secret, humorous and sad, vulnerable and strong."

Chagall himself said he was a dreamer who never woke up. "Some art historians have sought to decrypt his symbols," says Jean-Michel Foray, director of the Marc Chagall Biblical Message Museum in Nice, "but there's no consensus on what they mean. We cannot interpret them because they are simply part of his world, like figures from a dream." Pablo Picasso, his sometime friend and rival ("What a genius, that Picasso," Chagall once joked. "It's a pity he doesn't paint"), marveled at the Russian's feeling for fight and the originality of his imagery. "I don't know where he gets those images...." said Picasso. "He must have an angel in his head."

Throughout his 75-year career, during which he produced an astounding 10,000 works, Chagall continued to incorporate figurative and narrative elements (however enigmatic) into his paintings. His warm, human pictorial universe, full of personal metaphor, set him apart from much of 20th-century art, with its intellectual deconstruction of objects and arid abstraction. As a result, the public has generally loved his work, while the critics were often dismissive, complaining of sentimentality, repetition and the use of stock figures.

A major retrospective of Chagall's unique, often puzzling images was recently on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, following a highly acclaimed run at the Grand Palais in Paris. The first comprehensive exhibition of Chagall's paintings since 1985 brought together more than 150 works from all periods of his career, many never before seen in the United States, including cloth-and-paper collages from the private collection of his granddaughter Meret Meyer Graber. The exhibition, says Foray, the chief organizer of the show, "offered a fresh opportunity to appreciate Chagall as the painter who restored to art the elements that modern artists rejected, such as allegory and narrative--art as a comment on life. Today he is coming back strong after a period of neglect, even in his home country." Retrospectives are planned for 2005 at the Museum of Russian Art in St. Petersburg and at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.



His lyrical *Midsummer Night's Dream*, from 1939, plays on the theme of Beauty and the Beast.

Movcha (Moses) Chagal was, as he put it, "born dead" on July 7, 1887, in the Belorussian town of Vitebsk, near the Polish border. His distraught family pricked the limp body of their firstborn with needles to try to stimulate a response. Desperate, they then took the infant outside and put him in a stone trough of cold water. Suddenly the baby boy began to whimper. With that rude introduction to life, it's no wonder that Marc Chagal, as he later chose to be known in Paris, stuttered as a boy and was subject to fainting. "I was scared of growing up," he told Virginia McNeil. "Even in my twenties I preferred dreaming about love and painting it in my pictures."

Chagal's talent for drawing hardly cheered his poor and numerous family, which he, as the eldest of nine children, was expected to help support. His father, Khatskel-Mordechai Chagal, worked in a herring warehouse; his mother, Feigaita Chernina, ran a small grocery store. Both nominally adhered to Hasidic Jewish religious beliefs, which forbade graphic representation of anything created by God. Thus Chagal grew up in a home devoid of images. Still, he pestered his mother until she took him to an art school run by a local portraitist. Chagal, in his late teens, was the only student who used the vivid color violet. A pious uncle refused to shake his hand after he began painting figures.

For all his subsequent pictorial reminiscing about Vitebsk, Chagal found it stifling and provincial--"a strange town, an unhappy town, a boring town," he called it in his memoirs. In 1906, at age 19, he wangled a small sum of money from his father and left for St. Petersburg, where he enrolled in the drawing school of the Imperial Society for the Protection of Fine Arts. But he hated classical art training. "I, poor country lad, was obliged to acquaint myself thoroughly with the wretched nostrils of Alexander of Macedonia or some other plaster imbecile," he recalled. The meager money soon ran out, and although he made a few kopecks retouching photographs and painting signs, he sometimes collapsed from hunger. His world broadened in 1909 when he signed up for an art class in St. Petersburg taught by Leon Bakst, who, having been to Paris, carried an aura of sophistication. Bakst indulged Chagal's expressive, unconventional approach to painting and dropped names, exotic to the young man's ears, such as Manet, Cézanne and Matisse. He spoke of painting cubes and squares, of an artist who cut off his ear.



Chagal (with his wife Bella and their daughter, Ida, in his Paris studio in 1924) called himself a dreamer who never woke up.

"Paris!" Chagal wrote in his autobiography. "No word sounded sweeter to me!" By 1911, at age 24, he was there, thanks to a stipend of 40 rubles a month from a supportive member of the Duma, Russia's elective assembly, who had taken a liking to the young artist. When he arrived, he went directly to the Louvre to look at the famous works of art there. In time he found a room at an artists' commune in a circular, three-story building near Montparnasse called La Ruche (The Beehive). He lived frugally. Often he'd cut a herring in half, the head for one day, the tail for the next. Friends who came to his door had to wait while he put on his clothes; he painted in the nude to avoid staining his only outfit.

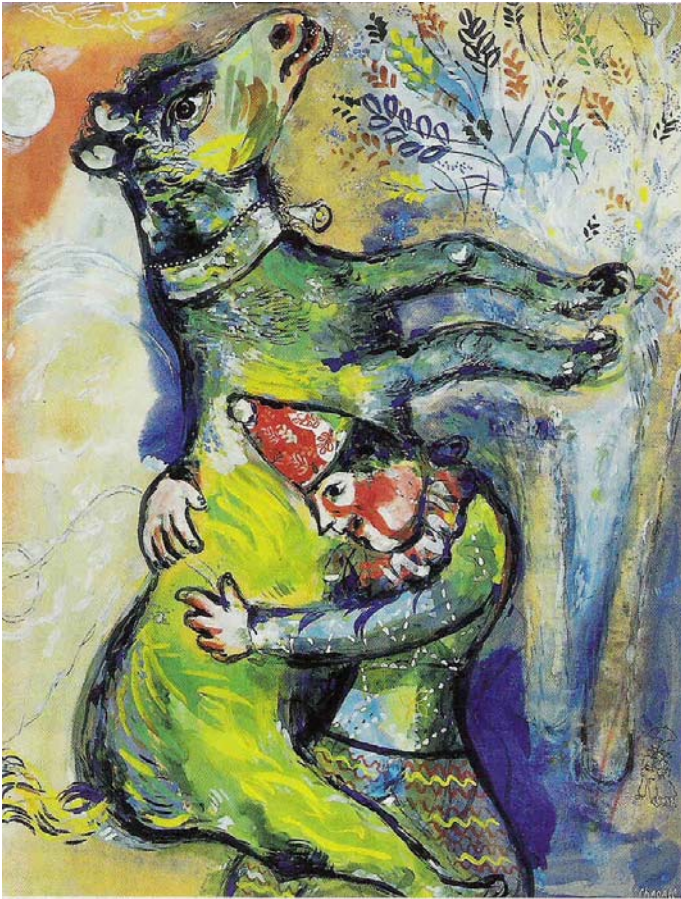
At La Ruche, Chagal rubbed shoulders with painters like Fernand Léger, Chaim Soutine, Amedeo Modigliani and Robert Delaunay. True to his nature as a storyteller, however, he seemed to have more in common with such writers as French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who described Chagal's work as "supernatural." Another friend, Blaise Cendrars, a restless, knockabout writer, penned a short poem about Chagal: "Suddenly he paints / He grabs a church and paints with a church / He grabs a cow and paints with a cow."

Many consider Chagal's work during his four-year stay in Paris his most boldly creative. Reconnoitering the then-prevalent trends of Cubism and Fauvism, he absorbed aspects of each into his own work. There was his Cubist-influenced *Temptation (Adam and Eve)*; the disconcerting *Introduction*, with a seven-fingered man holding his head under his arm; and the parti-colored *Acrobat*, showing Chagal's fondness for circus scenes. At La Ruche he also painted his explosive *Dedicated to My Fiancée*, which he tossed off in a single night's feverish work and later submitted to a major Paris exhibition. It took some artful persuasion on his part to convince the show's organizers that the topsy-turvy mix of hands, legs and a leering bull's head was not, as they contended, pornographic.

Returning to Vitebsk in 1914 with the intention of staying only briefly, Chagall was trapped by the outbreak of World War I. At least that meant spending time with his fiancée, Bella Rosenfeld, the beautiful, cultivated daughter of one of the town's wealthiest families. Bella had won a gold medal as one of Russia's top high-school students, had studied in Moscow and had ambitions to be an actress. But she had fallen for Chagall's strange, almond-shaped eyes and often knocked on his window to bring him cakes and milk. "I had only to open the window of my room and blue air, love and flowers entered with her," Chagall later wrote. Despite her family's worries that she would starve as the wife of an artist, the pair married in 1915; Chagall was 28, Bella, 23. In his 1914-18 *Above the Town* (one of his many paintings of flying lovers), he and Bella soar blissfully above Vitebsk.



Chagall and Bella, his partner and muse for 30 years, float magically over their hometown of Vitebsk in *Above the Town*, 1914-18.



"Suddenly he paints," wrote poet Blaise Cendrars of Chagall. "He grabs a church and paints with a church / He grabs a cow and paints with a cow." Chagall's *Clown with Donkey* was part of a circus series done in Paris in 1927. Chagall and Virginia McNeil (below, in 1948 in High Falls, New York) lived together for seven years.

In 1917 Chagall embraced the Bolshevik Revolution. He liked that the new regime gave Jews full citizenship and no longer required them to carry passports to leave their designated region. And he was pleased to be appointed commissar for art in Vitebsk, where he started an art school and brought in avant-garde teachers. But it soon became clear that the revolutionaries preferred abstract art and Socialist Realism--and how, they wondered, did the comrade's blue cows and floating lovers support Marxism-Leninism? Giving up his job as commissar in 1920, Chagall moved to Moscow, where he painted decorative panels for the State Jewish Chamber Theater. But ultimately unhappy with Soviet life, he left for Berlin in 1922 and settled in Paris a year and a half later along with Bella and their 6-year-old daughter, Ida.

In Paris, a new door opened for Chagall when he met the influential art dealer Ambroise Vollard, who commissioned him to illustrate an edition of the poetic classic the *Fables* of La Fontaine. Chauvinistic French officials cried scandal over the choice of a Russian Jew, a mere "Vitebsk sign painter," to illustrate a masterpiece of French letters. But that blew over, and Chagall went on to do a series of resonant illustrations of the Bible for Vollard.

Increasingly alarmed by Nazi persecution of the Jews, Chagall made a strong political statement on canvas in 1938 with his *White Crucifixion*. Then 51 and in his artistic prime, he portrayed the crucified Christ, his loins covered with a prayer shawl, as a symbol of the suffering of all Jews. In the painting, a synagogue and houses are in flames, a fleeing Jew clutches a Torah to his breast, and emigrants try to escape in a rudimentary boat. Not long after, in June 1941, Chagall and his wife boarded a ship for the United States, settling in New York City.

The six years Chagall spent in America were not his happiest. He never got used to the pace of New York life, never learned English. "It took me thirty years to learn bad French," he said, "why should I try to learn English?" One of the things he did enjoy was strolling through Lower Manhattan, buying strudel and gefilte fish, and reading Yiddish newspapers. His palette during these years often darkened to a tragic tone, with depictions of a burning Vitebsk and fleeing rabbis. When Bella, his muse, confidante and best critic, died suddenly in 1944 of a viral infection at age 52, "everything turned black," Chagall wrote.

After weeks of sitting in his apartment on Riverside Drive immersed in grief, tended to by his daughter, Ida, then 28 and married, he began to work again. Ida found a French-speaking English woman, Virginia McNeil, to be his housekeeper. A diplomat's daughter, and bright, rebellious and cosmopolitan, McNeil had been born in Paris and raised in Bolivia and Cuba, but had recently fallen on hard times. She was married to John McNeil, a Scottish painter who suffered from depression, and she had a 5-year-old daughter, Jean, to support. She was 30 and Chagall 57 when they met, and before long the two were talking painting, then dining together. A few months later Virginia left her husband and went with Chagall to live in High Falls, New York, a village in the Catskills. They bought a simple wooden house with an adjoining cottage for him to use as a studio.



Though Chagall would do several important public works in the United States--sets and costumes for a 1942 American Ballet Theatre production of Tchaikovsky's *Aleko* and a 1945 version of Stravinsky's *Firebird*, and later large murals for Lincoln Center and stained-glass windows for the United Nations headquarters and the Art Institute of Chicago--he remained ambivalent about America. "I know I must live in France, but I don't want to cut myself off from America," he once said. "France is a picture already painted. America still has to be painted. Maybe that's why I feel freer there. But when I work in America, it's like shouting in a forest. There's no echo."

In 1948 he returned to France with Virginia, their son, David, born in 1946, and Virginia's daughter. They eventually settled in Provence, in the hilltop town of Vence. But Virginia chafed in her role, as she saw it, of "the wife of the Famous Artist, the charming hostess to Important People," and abruptly left Chagall in 1951, taking the two children with her. Once again the resourceful Ida found her father a housekeeper--this time in the person of Valentina Brodsky, a 40-year-old Russian living in London. Chagall, then 65, and Vava, as she was known, soon married.



"I don't know where he gets those images . . ." Picasso said of Chagall. "He must have an angel in his head." Chagall (below with second wife, Vava, in 1980 in Provence) painted his surreal *Time Is a River without Banks* (above) in 1930-39.

The new Mrs. Chagall managed her husband's affairs with an iron hand. "She tended to cut him off from the world," says David McNeil, 57, an author and songwriter who lives in Paris. "But he didn't really mind because what he needed most was a manager to give him peace and quiet so he could get on with his work. I never saw him answer a telephone himself.

After Vava took over, I don't think he ever saw his bank statements and didn't realize how wealthy he was. He taught me to visit the Louvre on Sunday, when it was free, and he always picked up all the sugar cubes on the table before leaving a restaurant." McNeil and his half sister, Ida, who died in 1994 at age 78, gradually found themselves seeing less of their father. But to all appearances Chagall's married life was a contented one, and images of Vava appear in many of his paintings.



In addition to canvases, Chagall produced lithographs, etchings, sculptures, ceramics, mosaics and tapestries. He also took on such demanding projects as designing stained-glass windows for the synagogue of the Hadassah-Hebrew University Medical Center in Jerusalem. His ceiling for the Paris Opéra, painted in 1963-64 and peopled with Chagall angels, lovers, animals and Parisian monuments, provided a dramatic contrast to the pompous, academic painting and decoration in the rest of the Opéra.



Symbols from Chagall's deeply religious upbringing in Russia are found throughout his work, as in *The Fall of the Angel* (above), which he worked on from 1923 to 1947. His *Sketch for the Harlequin* (top), a paper-and-fabric collage, dates from 1968-70.

"He prepared his charcoal pencils, holding them in his hand like a little bouquet," McNeil wrote of his father's working methods in a memoir that was published in France last spring. "Then he would sit in a large straw chair and look at the blank canvas or cardboard or sheet of paper, waiting for the idea to come. Suddenly he would raise the charcoal with his thumb and, very fast, start tracing straight lines, ovals, lozenges, finding an aesthetic structure in the incoherence. A clown would appear, a juggler, a horse, a violinist, spectators, as if by magic. When the outline was in place, he would back off and sit down, exhausted like a boxer at the end of a round."

Some critics said he drew badly "Of course I draw badly," Chagall once said. "I like drawing badly." Perhaps worse, from the critics' point of view, he did not fit easily into the accepted canon of modernity. "Impressionism and Cubism are foreign to me," he wrote. "Art seems to me to be above all a state of soul.... Let them eat their fill of their square pears on their triangular tables!"

Notes veteran art critic Pierre Schneider, "Chagall absorbed Cubism, Fauvism, Surrealism, Expressionism and other modern art trends incredibly fast when he was starting out. But he used them only to suit his own aesthetic purposes. That makes it hard for art critics and historians to label him. He can't be pigeonholed."

When he died in Saint Paul de Vence on March 28, 1985, at 97, Chagall was still working, still the avant-garde artist who refused to be modern. That was the way he said he wanted it: "To stay wild, untamed...to shout, weep, pray."

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By Joseph A. Harriss



Author JOSEPH A. HARRISS writes about art and culture from his home in Paris. His article on Louvre copyists ran in October 2002.