

Artist

Marc Chagall



Getty Images, *Portrait of Marc Chagall*, n.d., photograph.

Marc Zakharovich Chagall (born Moishe Shagall, 1887 - 1985) was a Jewish artist born in Russia (modern day Belarus). As one of the most successful artists of the twentieth century, he forged a unique career in virtually every artistic medium including painting, book illustration, stained glass, stage sets, ceramics, tapestries and fine art prints. Known for his unique style, his artwork with their themes of animals, village life, Jewish imagery, symbolism, flying figures, and dreamlike imagery continues to be popular today.

Growing up, Chagall experienced discrimination for his religion: “I felt at every step that I was a Jew - people made me feel it.” Jewish people were not allowed to attend non-Jewish schools, but his mother was able to persuade a local principle to admit him to a non-Jewish high school. It was at this school that he first discovered his love for creating art that would lead him to becoming an artist. He spent the next decade living in Paris, Berlin, and St. Petersburg. He lived in Russia through the Russian Revolution, before eventually moving to Paris with his family.

In Paris, Chagall painted scenes of Jewish and Russian country life in a non-realistic artistic style and was a stage designer for the Jewish Chamber Theater. It was here that he changed his name to Marc Chagall since he thought it sounded more French. Meanwhile in Germany, the Nazis were coming to power. In 1937, the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda confiscated more than 16,000 works of art that they considered too modern, too “Jewish”, and degenerate. As a result of Chagall’s subject matter and style, many of Chagall’s pieces were taken from various museums and displayed in the 1937 *Degenerate Art* exhibition in Munich. Of the 112 artists shown in the exhibition, only six of them were Jewish.

When the Nazis invaded France in 1940, Chagall first believed that he and his family would be safe. Then, as anti-Semitic laws were passed and state organized violence against Jewish populations began to occur, Chagall realized the danger that he and his family faced. Fleeing France to seek refuge in America was expensive, but thanks to assistance from the Emergency Rescue Committee (later the International Rescue Committee), an underground operation to help French writers, artists, and other intellectuals who were at risk, Chagall and his wife were able to escape to New York City. Much of his art was saved by his daughter, Ida, who was able to bring it to New York City as she and her husband fled for their own safety.

The Chagalls found refuge in New York City where Marc Chagall remained until the end of the war. In September 1944 after the sudden death of his wife, Bella, Marc Chagall entered a mourning period and stopped painting until April 1945 when news of the Holocaust began to spread. Chagall felt compelled to respond to this tragedy through art. After the war, he returned to France where he created artwork that promoted peace and healing, including the stained glass windows for which he is well known.

Composition Fantastique

Take a moment to look at Chagall's *Composition Fantastique*. There is a larger image of this artwork on page four.

What do you notice? What are the figures doing? Is the size of the animals and humans realistic? What is the setting in which this artwork takes place?

In *Composition Fantastique*, we can see Chagall's fantastical artistic style. This piece is characteristic of Chagall, as he often portrayed animals, winged and two-faced figures, unrealistic scale, and scenes of village life. The theatrical elements of this work may reflect Chagall's work as a set designer. The man in the bottom right corner with the pipe is believed to be Chagall's self-portrait.

This artwork represents village life, probably the village of Vitebsk where Chagall grew up. When you think of a village, what kind of imagery comes to mind?

What more can you find? How does this artwork make you feel?



Marc Chagall, *Composition Fantastique (Fantastic Composition)*, 1976, color lithograph, 2013.68.9

Prompt

As you consider your entry for the Henry Pestka Art and Poetry Contest, first remember that the Holocaust was a real experience; millions of people, both Jewish and non-Jewish, died due to government policy. We honor the survivors, and do not want to trivialize their experiences, even unintentionally. As you think about your poem or art piece, remember that your piece should be respectful of those real experiences.

Consider Chagall's quote, "Art must be an expression of love, or it is nothing." Even though Chagall experienced hardship and discrimination, and he often painted difficult subjects, he believed that the art must be created through love. He often painted people so joyous they floated through the sky.

Look at other works by Marc Chagall, both in the GVSU Art Museum Collection and online. What kinds of images/objects can you see him use throughout his works?

Create a portrait of Chagall. Use his dream-like style to show him floating in the sky. Perhaps include a village scene, to represent his childhood, Paris to show where he lived and worked as an artist for many years, or New York, where he lived in safety during World War II. You could think about including his family, or animals he commonly used, such as fish, birds, and farm animals.

You can use any art materials that are available to you.



Unknown photographer, *Marc Chagall*, 1921, photograph.



Boris Lipnitski, *Marc Chagall*, 1934, photograph.



35/50

Marc Chagall

Marc Chagall, *Composition Fantastique (Fantastic Composition)*, 1976, color lithograph, 2013.68.9.

Bibliography

Bishara, Hakim. "How Marc Chagall's Daughter Smuggled His Artwork to the US." Hyperallergic, 23 Sept. 2019, hyperallergic.com/518597/how-marc-chagalls-daughter-smuggled-his-artwork-to-the-us/.

Honigman, Ana Finel. "I and the Village | Description & Facts | Britannica." [www.britannica.com, www.britannica.com/topic/I-and-the-Village](https://www.britannica.com/topic/I-and-the-Village).

"Marc Chagall." Elliott Gallery, www.elliottgallery.com/marc-chagall/.

"Marc Chagall Biography." www.chagallpaintings.com, 2021, www.chagallpaintings.com/biography/.

"Provenance Case Study: Marc Chagall's Purim." [Philamuseum.org](https://philamuseum.org), 2024, philamuseum.org/collection/provenance-marc-chagall-purim.

Roy Donald McMullen. "Marc Chagall | Russian-French Artist." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 24 Mar. 2019, www.britannica.com/biography/Marc-Chagall.

Schuhmacher, Jacques. "'Entartete Kunst': The Nazis' Inventory of 'Degenerate Art' · V&A." *Victoria and Albert Museum, V&A*, 2019, www.vam.ac.uk/articles/entartete-kunst-the-nazis-inventory-of-degenerate-art?srsId=AfmBOoqoacUG6rZIDEXLbG-M8A8JUOTXQQ9kFEgCeHlgE4JVWbAiXv5Y.

to, Contributors. "Marc Chagall." [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marc_Chagall), Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 28 Mar. 2015, [sco.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marc_Chagall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marc_Chagall). Accessed 4 Nov. 2024.

Wikipedia Contributors. "Degenerate Art Exhibition." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 20 Feb. 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Degenerate_Art_Exhibition.