

Cole Funston

Dr. Wilson

If there is at least one clear message in the multilayered nuance of Marc Chagall's early "Esquisse Pour L' Exode," (Sketch for the Exodus) it is the extreme, viscous, and often sadistic persecution of the Jewish people for much of recorded human history. Chagall deliberately uses religious and historical imagery, to convey the truly painful message among the beautiful brushstrokes and ethereal figures; The Jewish race has been under attack for centuries.

To understand a piece, the meaning and emotion behind every etching and symbol, it is crucial to consider the artist's perspective. In order to do so, you must take a magnifying glass to their roots. Chagall was born in 1887 in Vitebsk, Belorussia, a predominantly Jewish city bordering Poland, in the far western region of the Russian Empire (McCullen). He was raised along with eight siblings in a devout Orthodox Jewish family, and attended a Jewish elementary school. Chagall displayed great interest and talent in artistry from an early age, leading him to go to great lengths to pursue this passion. In 1907 at the age of twenty-one, he traveled to St. Petersburg to study for three years, eventually under the stage designer Léon Bakst. Here, Chagall began to develop and pioneer his avant-garde approach to painting, often fusing elements of various styles such as cubism, realism, and surrealism, which he would only further flesh out and distinguish as he moved to France in 1910.

While developing his style through various works over the next four years, some of which making up the bulk of his masterpieces, he fell under the influence of various

revolutionary artists, but much more importantly, poets. Chagall famously preferred the company of poets rather than artists, as he saw the art world at the time as too restrictive with its many differing, yet conforming movements, and had a strong distaste for art theory. He viewed poetry as much more freeform and truly expressive, which are qualities he would express for the entirety of his seventy eight year long career. Many of his pieces from his time in France featured images from his hometown of Vitebsk, to which he would return to visit in 1914, but became trapped with the outbreak of the first world war. (Katz)

While trapped, Chagall met Bella Rosenfeld, who would later become his wife and the subject of many of his works. He eventually became the commissar of art for the region, working to establish an art academy and museum in Vitebsk (McCullen). After too much political and artistic quarrel, he moved to Moscow, and in 1922, left Russia for the last time. (McCullen) He moved to Berlin, then with his family in 1923 to Paris, and traveled all around the world for his work and exhibitions. In the years to follow, as the rise of antisemitism and the Nazi party loomed overhead, it became clear that for the Jewish people, much was going to change. As Chagall watched Hitler seize power in Germany and antisemitic ideology fully took hold, even finding out that his paintings in Berlin were burned by the German Gestapo, he and his family moved to the Loire district of France. Seeing the Third Reich's blitz through Belgium and eastern France, and realizing the severity of the threat posed towards Jews all across Europe, they fled further and further south to evade detection. They hid until a US agent gave them a government invitation to flee to New York (Holocaust Museum), but Chagall looked back in agony,

as his brothers and sisters in Europe were slaughtered and exterminated on an industrial scale.

Chagall would return to France in 1948 and begin working on many more larger projects than he ever had in his career. He even explored working with stained glass, which was certainly an influence on the style of his famous piece “The Exodus.” Chagall would begin working on The Exodus in 1952 and would eventually finish in 1966, as he was working on several grand projects during this time. The piece under examination is one of the earliest sketches of his final work (Brochure), and is titled “Esquisse Pour L’Exode,” or, “Sketch of The Exodus.” The painting depicts a scene that is very dear to Chagall’s heart: on the right, the exodus of the Jews from the shackles of slavery in biblical Egypt, and on the left, the massacre and genocide of Jews in modern Europe, with the image of Christ crucified in the center. Two events separated by three millenia, yet in many ways are similar. On the left Chagall depicts a shtetl, a small Jewish town, being burned to the ground in a “progrom.” These were attacks carried out by specially designated Nazi death squads. They were formed for the sole purpose of purging and razing local Jewish cities, much like Vitebsk, as the Third Reich wrenched their dagger deeper and deeper into Chagall’s native Soviet territory. By merging arguably the two most significant events in Jewish history, Chagall tells a story of genesis and destruction, but more importantly, a chaotically beautiful story of hope. While the liberation of the Israelites seems to contrast the the horror of the Holocaust, they are intertwined stories. Before Moses freed the israelites, they were bound in the shackles of slavery for years. They were subjected to forced labor by the pharaoh, who ordered the slaughter of all

male Hebrew newborns. This was in order to systematically reduce their population, reminiscent of Hitler's concentration camps fulfilling the same purpose. Fortunately, as it is prominently depicted in the piece, they are freed and led to mount Sinai by Moses(Britannica), who is seen in the bottom right holding the commandments. Just like the Israelites, modern Jews were eventually freed from their shackles and could begin anew, except this time instead of traveling to mount Sinai, they established the state of Israel in 1948. Both events tell a story of genesis after destruction, one just has yet to depict the liberation.

As both of these events occur simultaneously in Chagall's painting, Christ's Crucifixion is perched directly above the Jews. As Christ was a martyr persecuted by the Romans, Chagall uses his depiction as a metaphor for the persecution of the Jews. Above the crucifixion is more Christian imagery; the rooster, which represents the light of christ, and the ram, which represents sacrifice. Despite being a devout Jew, Chagall decided to implement a considerably hefty amount of Christian imagery, which is a common theme in a number of his works, such as in one of his most acclaimed masterpieces, "White Crucifixion" (1938). With Chagall placing these representations of Christ alongside two major Jewish events, this instills a sense of religious cohesion between the Jews and the Christians.

Like a poet, Chagall tells a personal and emotional story of great despair imposed on the Jewish people, followed by a greater triumph, with Jesus Christ watching over them throughout the entire journey. The true beauty of a work lies beyond the

brushstrokes and colors, and Chagall deeply illustrates that true appreciation requires not only asking “*What* is it?” but more importantly, “*Why* is it?”

McCullen

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marc-Chagall>

Katz

<https://blog.oup.com/2017/07/marc-chagall-religious-artist/>

Britannica

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Exodus-Old-Testament>

Holocaust Museum

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/marc-chagall>