

A Modern Moses: Echoes of Jewish History in Chagall's "Exodus" by Ella Ritter

Jesus is crucified once more. Gray figures flood the bottom half of the canvas. Fire caresses a collection of buildings. A man in white cradles the ten commandments. Marc Chagall's "Exodus" retells the Biblical story of the same name, tying the Hebrew escape from Egypt in the Bible to the 20th-century Jewish persecution Chagall himself witnessed. Through this painting, Chagall preserves both Jewish stories and Christian imagery even while alluding to his own childhood memories. Hanging in the HCU Museum of Fine Arts, Chagall's "Exodus" testifies not only to the exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt but to the repeated displacement and destruction of the Jews within Chagall's lifetime while echoing his own personal experiences and wandering lifestyle.

In Russia, on July 7, 1887, Marc Chagall was born to Jewish parents ("Marc Chagall"). "Against considerable family protest" (Kuhn 87), Chagall pursued a career as a painter, leaving Russia for Paris to study art in 1907, his first long-term experience of life outside his homeland. He was home for a visit in 1914 when the Great War broke out, preventing him from returning to his work in France. Stuck in Russia, Chagall became the Commissar for Art in 1918, founded the Vitebsk Popular Art School, and helped design the State Jewish Chamber Theatre before leaving the country once more at the end of the war to travel around Europe until the Second World War

began. He spent the duration of WWII in America. After the war ended, Chagall returned to France, but he continued to wander, frequently traveling around Europe, even after he settled in Paris.

Chagall's work "Exodus" testifies to the beginning of a life of wandering. It shows people fleeing a fire and likely mimics one of the two village burnings Chagall experienced in childhood. The first burning was "the burning of his village at the moment of his birth" (Weisstein 43), and the second of which was "one afternoon when he was bathing" (43) during his youth. While he could not remember this first fire, Chagall's own description of the second fire expresses a sharp contrast between the peace of the river and the sudden chaos of the shore. By 1887, the year of Chagall's birth, the Russian Jews were no strangers to fire and chaos, as they were considered "aliens, outsiders" (Simpson 18) and faced regular pogroms, or organized killings. The Russians considered the Jews to be "largely responsible for such woes as were besetting the country" (17-18), including the assassination of their czar. Similarly, the Germans blamed the Jews for the problems faced by their country before the start of WWII. Centuries earlier the Hebrews appeared to be the reason for the woes besetting Egypt, since the plagues described in Exodus generally affected only the Egyptians. Facing the deadly pogroms, many Russian Jews fled for their lives, and those Jews living under Nazi occupation who were not able to hide were unfortunately herded into concentration camps and killed. The Jews living in Egypt were forced to flee after the plague which killed the eldest sons of the Egyptians. There is a mirroring of Exodus in the repeated displacements of the Jewish people that Chagall highlights in his work.

Chagall's style belongs to no specific country or culture. Allyn Weisstein describes Chagall's art as a "concentration mingling two lines of art tradition" (39), the "concentric,

circular” (Weisstein 39-40) style of Eastern art and the “radiating, linear” inclination of Western art. “Exodus” shows Christ’s halo encompassed by a further circle, nuzzled on either side by shapes that are both organic and round with an upside-down woman holding a baby to Christ’s left and a rooster, also with a child, to his right. While the circular nature of these shapes is easily noted, closer inspection of the painting reveals dark and thin lines that seem to radiate unpredictably primarily from Christ. The overlapping of Eastern and Western styles may together mimic a third art style, as “in Russian folk-art, one peels the outermost layer to a small precious interior, a relic, a minute carved artifice” (40). As a child in Russia, Chagall would have been familiar with Russian folk art, but his studies in Paris as a young adult resulted in a mixed style that displays “a Russian Jewish heritage mixed knowingly with modern French art and always integrated by a deeply personal idiom” (Kuhn 87). Within “Exodus,” Chagall shows both Moses with the Ten Commandments and Christ crucified, Jewish and Christian imagery. Chagall’s own layering of style and subject forces viewers to consider more than just what they see at first glance. His works are perhaps perfectly representative of no style other than his own.

Chagall represents himself through more than just his ethnic connection to the Jewish experience in “Exodus.” He painted himself into the picture. He is Moses holding the Ten Commandments (“Exodus 1952-66 – by Marc Chagall”). Just as Chagall became an artist against the advice of his parents, he also became an artist against “the wide misrepresentation that the Second Commandment prohibited Jews from making pictorial imagery” (Silver 632). The Jewish people were considered an auditory people, where “hearing and the word dominated over sight and the image” (Silver 633), and the commandment forbidding the creation of idols could be interpreted as a commandment against the creation of specific art and imagery, particularly biblical imagery. However, a commandment against idolatry does not equate a ban on artistic

endeavors. Chagall chose to represent himself as a man who saw the struggles of the Jewish people and spoke out against these hardships. While Chagall's outcry may not have always been verbalized – that is auditory, – he saw the suffering of his people and told the world of these hardships through the visual means of his paintings. He may not have led the Jews out of their captivity, but he was like Moses in his protest of the wrongs they faced.

Chagall's paintings do not fall neatly within any style or culture, but therein may lie their appeal. These paintings are a witness to a wandering people who lost their country and waited hundreds of years to reclaim a place of their own. These paintings testify to the hardships faced by both Chagall and the Jewish people, not only in Russia in the twentieth century, but also many millennia earlier in Egypt. These paintings retell a story known all too well yet forgotten too easily, a story of humanity's willingness to blame those around them for the troubles they face, the willingness to hurt others because one is hurting. But Chagall's silent, visual protest carries an offer of hope. After the exodus, the Jewish people wandered in the wilderness for forty years but eventually entered the Promised Land. The Jewish people were slaughtered, but those who survived saw Israel becoming a nation once more. Chagall wandered around the world, but he did settle in Paris. "Exodus" depicts the beginning of a life of wandering, but the promise of an end to wandering, and there lies hope.

Works Cited

- “Exodus 1952-66 – by Marc Chagall.” Marcchagall.net. <https://www.marcchagall.net/exodus.jsp>
- Kuhn, Katharine. “Marc Chagall.” *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago (1907-1951)*, vol. 40, no. 7, 1946, pp. 86–92. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4112361>. Accessed 18 Jan. 2025.
- “Marc Chagall.” *The Guggenheim*. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/marc-chagall>
- Silver, Larry, and Samantha Baskind. “Looking Jewish: The State of Research on Modern Jewish Art.” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 101, no. 4, 2011, pp. 631–52. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41300161>. Accessed 7 Feb. 2025.
- Simpson, Mark S. “The ‘Svyaschonnaya Druzhina’ and Jewish Persecution in Tsarist Russia.” *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, no. 2, 1978, pp. 17–26. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40921080>. Accessed 11 Mar. 2025.
- Weisstein, Allyn. “Iconography of Chagall.” *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1954, pp. 38–48. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4333462>. Accessed 20 Mar. 2025.