



# Marc Chagall biography

## SYNOPSIS

Born in Belarus in 1887, Marc Chagall was a French painter, printmaker and designer associated with several major artistic styles, synthesizing elements of Cubism, Symbolism and Fauvism. One work in particular, *I and the Village* (1911), pre-dated Surrealism as an artistic expression of psychic reality. An early modernist, Chagall created works in nearly every artistic medium, including sets for plays and ballets, biblical etchings, and stained-glass windows. Chagall died in France in 1985. Today, he is widely regarded as one of the most successful artists of the 20th century.

## EARLY YEARS

Marc Chagall was born on July 7, 1887, in Vitebsk, Belarus (in the Russian Empire), and was raised in a devoutly Jewish environment with eight other siblings. His father worked in a fish warehouse, and his mother ran a shop where she sold fish and sundry baking supplies. As a child, Chagall attended heder (Jewish elementary school) and later went to public school, where lessons were taught in Russian.

After learning the elements of drawing at school, from 1907 to 1910, Chagall studied painting in St. Petersburg at the Imperial Society for the Protection of the Arts, eventually under stage designer Léon Bakst. A characteristic work from this early period is "The Dead Man" (1908), a painting that depicts a violinist (a recurring image for the artist) amid a nightmarish rooftop scene.

Chagall moved to Paris in 1910, and then moved into a studio on the edge of town in a Bohemian area known as La Ruche ("the Beehive"). There, he met several writers and artists, including [Guillaume Apollinaire](#), [Robert Delaunay](#) and Albert Gleizes. In such artistic company, experimentation was encouraged, and Chagall quickly began developing the poetic and innovative tendencies that had begun to emerge in Russia at the time—tendencies that may not have previously been encouraged. At the same time, he came under the influence of the Impressionist, Post-Impressionist and Fauvist pictures he saw in Paris museums, and was introduced to Fauvism and Cubism. Before long, he was participating in the Salon des Indépendants and the Salon d'Automne (1912), annual French exhibits, staging his first solo show in 1914 in Berlin to great adulation.

This period—during which he created several images of his childhood and hometown of Vitebsk—is considered Chagall's strongest, artistically, and the style he developed would remain with him for the rest of his life. His works during this time include "Hommage Apollinaire" (1911-12), "The Fiddler" (1912) and "Paris Through the Window" (1913).

## QUICK FACTS

**NAME:** Marc Chagall

**OCCUPATION:** [Illustrator](#), [Painter](#)

**BIRTH DATE:** [July 07, 1887](#)

**DEATH DATE:** [March 28, 1985](#)

**EDUCATION:** Imperial Society for the Protection of the Arts

**PLACE OF BIRTH:** Vitebsk, Belarus

**PLACE OF DEATH:** Saint-Paul de Vence, France

**AKA:** Marc Chagall

**ORIGINALLY:** Moishe Shagal

**FULL NAME:** Marc Zaharovich Chagall

**AKA:** Moshe Shagal

## BEST KNOWN FOR

Marc Chagall was a French artist whose work was generally based on emotional association rather than traditional pictorial fundamentals.

## WORLD WAR I

After the Berlin exhibition, Chagall returned to Vitebsk, Belarus, where he intended to stay long enough to marry his fiancée, Bella. A few weeks later, though, he was stranded by the outbreak of World War I, as the Russian borders were closed indefinitely. Instead of despairing, Chagall embraced local scenes in his art, working at the time in an unusually realistic style.

Paintings such as "The Praying Jew" (or "The Rabbi of Vitebsk"; 1914) and "Jew in Green" (1914) emerged during this period.

Chagall married Bella in 1915, and the flying lovers of "Birthday" (1915-23) and the playful, acrobatic "Double Portrait with a Glass of Wine" (1917) serve as testaments to the joyousness of the artist's spirit during the early years of his marriage.

At first, Chagall was enthusiastic about the Russian Revolution of October 1917, and he decided to settle in Vitebsk. In 1918, he was appointed commissar for art, and then founded and directed the Vitebsk Popular Art School. Disagreements with the Suprematists (a group of artists primarily concerned with geometric shapes) resulted in Chagall's resignation from the school in 1920, after which he moved to Moscow, there undertaking his first stage designs for the State Jewish Chamber Theater. Chagall then left Russia for good. After a stop-over in Berlin in 1922, the artist returned to Paris in 1923 with his wife and daughter; his first retrospective took place there the following year, at the Galerie Barbazanges-Hodebert.

Chagall had learned engraving while in Berlin, and he received his first engraving commission in 1923, from Paris art dealer and publisher Ambroise Vollard, for creating etchings to illustrate a special edition of Nikolay Gogol's novel *Dead Souls*. Over the next three years, Chagall completed 107 plates for the Gogol book, 100 gouaches for poet Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables*, and a series of etchings illustrating the Bible; his career as a printmaker was in full swing.

During the 1930s, besides painting and engraving, Chagall traveled extensively: to the Netherlands, Spain, Poland, Italy and Palestine, where he stayed for two months, visiting the Holy Land to inspire his Bible etchings. In Palestine in 1931, Chagall immersed himself in Jewish life and history, and by the time he returned to France, he had completed 32 of biblical plates (he would create 105 in total).

## WORLD WAR II

With Hitler rising to power, a full-blown war was waged in Germany against artists, and, subsequently, anything deemed modern or difficult to interpret being confiscated and burned (with some of Chagall's works being singled out). The once-impressed German press now turned on Chagall, and in response, Chagall's paintings struck a different tone, with terror and persecution taking on foreground roles.

In "Solitude" (1933), Chagall's anxiety over the fate of humanity is represented by an atmosphere of despondency and in the figure of the huddled, pious Jew; in "White Crucifixion" (1938), Jewish and Christian symbols are mixed in a depiction of a Nazi crowd terrorizing Jews. The artist would be dealt another blow in 1939, when Ambroise Vollard died and Chagall's various etching projects were put on hiatus. (Another publisher later picked up where Vollard had left off, issuing *Dead Souls* in 1948, La Fontaine's *Fables* in 1952 and the Bible in 1956.)

With the outbreak of World War II, Chagall moved farther and farther south in France, as the Nazi threat became increasingly real for European Jews.

A group of Americans ran a rescue operation trafficking artists and intellectuals out of Europe to the United States via forged visas, and Marc Chagall was one of more than 2,000 who escaped this way. He arrived in New York with Bella on June 23, 1941—the day after Germany invaded the Soviet Union—and spent most of the next few years in the New York area.

In New York, Chagall continued to develop his signature themes, but in 1942, a new commission came his way: to design the sets and costumes for a new ballet, *Aleko*, by Léonide Massine, which would stage Pushkin's *The Gypsies* and be accompanied by the music of Tchaikovsky. When *Aleko*—Chagall's first ballet—premiered on September 8, 1942, it was a great success. Also during this period, Chagall designed the backdrops and costumes for Stravinsky's ballet *The Firebird* (1945), another success.

The course of Chagall's life and art was changed yet again in 1944, when his wife, Bella, passed away. Thereafter, depictions of memories of his wife recurred in Chagall's work; she appears in several forms—a haunted weeping wife, an angel and a phantom bride—in "Around Her" (1945), and as a bride in "The Wedding Candles" (1945) and "Nocturne" (1947).

Before moving back to France for good in 1948, Chagall was honored with retrospective exhibitions at both the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Art Institute of Chicago.

## LATER YEARS

In 1948, Chagall settled again in France, on the French Riviera at Vence. During the 1950s, he forayed into painting and modeling ceramics, stone sculptures and mosaics. In 1958, Chagall designed the scenery and costumes for the ballet *Daphnis and Chloe* for the Paris Opera, from whom, five years later, he received a commission to paint a new ceiling for its theater.

The choice of artist, however, stirred controversy, as some objected to having a French national monument redesigned by a Russian Jew, while others disliked the idea of a modernist working on such a historic building. Nonetheless, the project went forward with Chagall at the helm, and when it was unveiled, it was a huge hit with all factions, surprising many and vindicating others, Chagall included.

Over Chagall's decades-long career, his use of color captured the attention of viewers, and his varying projects in his later years were no different: In 1960, he began creating stained-glass windows for the synagogue of Hebrew University's Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem—a project that became a spiritual journey for Chagall, once again linking him to his Jewish heritage. Chagall later took on more stained-glass projects, including at the United Nations building (1964); the Fraumünster Cathedral in Zurich (1967); St. Stephen's Church in Mainz, Germany (1978); and the All Saints' Church in the United Kingdom (1978).

Marc Chagall died in Saint-Paul de Vence, France, on March 28, 1985, leaving behind a vast collection of work in several branches of the arts, as well as a rich legacy as a major Jewish artist and a pioneer of modernism. Pablo Picasso famously once said of the artist, "When Matisse dies, Chagall will be the only painter left who understands what color really is."

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