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Marc Chagall with Louise Averill Svendsen, 1962

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

[01:25] Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. May I welcome you to the first of a series of five lectures called "Fantasy in Modern Art." This series will alternate on Thursdays at this time with that called "Cubism and Abstraction," which is given by my colleague, Daniel Robbins, assistant curator here at the museum. I'm sure some of you have heard his lectures already.

In this Thursday series, [02:00] we wish to present the major movements of the twentieth century through an examination of the contributions of outstanding artists. Today, we will look at the work of Mark Chagall, and on alternate Thursdays, subsequently, that of the (inaudible), two weeks from today, Marcel Duchamp, Paul Klee, and [Juan Mureaux?], all of whose work has been loosely described under the term "fantasy."

In relation to this, I should like to explain that these five artists do not belong to any movement. They are not members of any school, nor have they ever been. In counter distinction [03:00] to the group of artists who Mr. Robbins is discussing, who are directly related with the movement of cubism and its later development.

If we look back over the mainstream, perhaps, after 60 years of it, the mainstream of development in the twentieth century, it's probably true that the major [current?] has been the development from nineteenth-century realism, through impressionism, to cubism and, finally, to non-figurative, or completely abstract painting. But it's also true that there are certain artists who have not been associated with this main development, who do not belong, and never belonged, to this movement. Who stood, as it were, against this stream. These are not related to one another. They're not influenced by one another. Although, of course, not unacquainted. [04:00] But they are individual personalities who, by their own right, in their own contributions are well-known to all of us today, and who had a tremendous influence on various artists and generations of artists throughout the intervening years. The Dadaists, for example, who were much interested in the pioneering work of Marcel Duchamp, the surrealists who tried to claim both Chagall and (inaudible) as one of their members, and the whole group of younger men today who are, to a degree, fighting against the influence of abstraction and non-figurative painting.

I would like, also, just at this introductory point, to examine the word "fantasy," for, as I said before, it's a sort of loose word or term to describe, in a very general way, certain relations these men have to one another. [05:00] But, I also must point out that Chagall himself has objected strenuously to having his art categorized as fantasy. Of course, fantasy does mean, in certain ways, a figment of the imagination. It means devoid of relationship to the real world. Beyond our power of comprehension.

And, if I may quote a well-known nineteenth-century author, I'm sure all of you grew up with, or at one point are reading to your children, or to your grandchildren, "They do all manner of things that begin with M, such as mousetraps and the moon and memory and muchness. You know, you say things are much of a muchness. Did you ever see such a thing as a drawing of a muchness? 'Really, now, you asked me,' said Alice, very much confused. 'I don't think --' 'then you shouldn't talk,' said the Hatter." [06:00] And perhaps I shouldn't talk today, either. But,

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one, I think if anything, today, we are more intrigued, we are more entranced, we're more interested in the problem of the inner world, the visions which the artist can contribute, which stand in antithesis to the logic or the science which describes our century so much.

The poetry which is a part of our living, and in this, the fantasy of Chagall, I think, is probably the most enchanting, and he is, therefore, I think, the most beloved.

And for [the?] Chagall has said, "Our home in a world is reality." Perhaps more so than the visual world. [07:00] If we describe everything that appears to us illogical as "fantastic" or "fairy tale," we are admitting we do not understand nature. And it is, I think, the understanding of nature in its completest form which has fascinated us and some of the artists of our time. The inner nature, the more real than real, what [Ponair?] called the surreal, the "sur naturelle," which, again, Chagall rejected; what Breton called the surreal, and which, again, Chagall rejected.

But it is the inner life of man, his dreams, his visions, his relation to his past, his hopes, of which Chagall has reported, from a very young and poor and struggling artist, born near the Polish border of Russia, to, now, [08:00] the create the creator, and the windows you saw this winter at the Museum of Modern Art. From a beginning as a kind of anecdotal fairy-tale painter, relying on his early visions, his early experiences, broadening them, as he, himself developed, until finally, he has given us something which is no longer his own private world, but something which is related to all our private worlds.

Now, Chagall's life is probably one of the most documented of any, because he wrote an autobiography in 1922, explaining a lot about his background, his childhood, his memories, talking about his artistic development. His beloved wife, Bella, wrote also about her childhood experiences, and, he has been very free in his trips [09:00] around the world and to this country, to explain much of what has bothered people about his art. And I hope I won't be misquoting him today. There's always a chance of it. Because, again, Chagall has said that he does not care too much how his work is interpreted, that it is for all of us, after all, to look at what he has created, and not try to admit... yet back into the personality of the creator by itself. He said, "It's all one to me if people are pleased and relieved to discovering those innocent adventures of my relatives, the enigma of my pictures. How little that interests me, my dear fellow citizens, help yourself."

Let us look, then, [10:00] briefly, at the stylistic development, and the way in which he takes the ingredients of his background and weaves them into poetry of painting. We know from his autobiography that he came from a very, very poor family. His father was a herring worker, whose major job was pushing around and loading the heavy bells of herring. And fish has always entered into his pictures, as part of his early vocabulary. They were poor. There were nine other children. They lived in the poor section of a poor city of Vitebsk, which was about 60,000, about half of which were Jewish. However, the particular -- he belonged, in his family, to the Hasidic denomination, [11:00] which accounts for much of the intensity and the passion and the closeness of feeling -- of fellowship of feeling which you will find in his paintings. They are all intensely religious. The customs were something which had meaning. The imagery had meaning, a direct meaning, in their lives. And this is something which I think is important to remember in thinking of the early work of Chagall, but also to watch it as he, himself, develops

out of an immediate experience into the broader one.

As to his artistic development, he says he began to want passionately to paint around the age of 13. There was no money. He finally took some lessons from one of the painters in Vitebsk. He managed to get a little money to go to Saint Petersburg, [12:00] where he had a very hard time, partly because he was Jewish, and partly because he had no money. He was even thrown into jail because of his false papers, which were necessary at that time. And, he studied at a mediocre art school, and then later, with the most fashionable painter in Saint Petersburg of that period, internationally-known Léon Bakst. Three months later, he was back in Vitebsk, saying that he had learned as much as was possible for him to learn. And his family apprenticed him to a photographer, as a way of making his livelihood. Fortunately, however, he was able, through some friends and patrons, to get money enough to go to Paris, where in 1910, he arrived.

The earliest painting which I can show you dates of the year [13:00] when he had returned to Vitebsk, just before he left for Paris, and this is the portrait of his fiancée, Bella, with black gloves, which belongs in the Basel Museum. There, one sees that quite true, Chagall had learned all there was he could be taught, in an academic kind of way, his facility of draftsmanship. The understanding of form. The understanding of craft is there, but there is also something more there, that which gave faith to his friends and to his patrons that he would one day become a great artist. For there is a kind of passion here, a coolness on the one hand, an intensity on the other. An almost unflattering view of his fiancée in the posture, for example. [14:00] An (inaudible) disquieting note of the black gloves. In congress, [would you like?], and it is this incongruity -- now, after all, it's perfectly possible for ladies to wear black gloves with white, but there's something in the thrust of the fingers, which brings your attention to them, as beyond the scope of a simple wearing apparel, and it is this incongruity, the setting up of an extra proportion of feeling, which goes beyond the simple descriptive exterior which will characterize his work throughout his development.

When he arrived in Paris, he said he went to the Salon de [Anne de Pendant?], and he said he met all the development of French painting in one day. He had come out of a very provincial background, and he had never been exposed [15:00] in the museums of Saint Petersburg, in the private collections he had visited, the artists he had known, the main sweep of painting which Paris could present for him. He feasted in the Louvre, in Jericho, in the artists of the nineteenth century, and particularly the older generation just behind him, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne. He lived in the very poor but interesting haven for artists, a studio building made out of pieces of old lumber, which housed studios of artists who have now become so famous -- Léger, (inaudible), Modigliani, had the studio next to him. And he very quickly was thrown into the young, fermenting generation of artists whose names are now so familiar to you. Soutine became one of his dearest friends. [16:00]

And with that, the whole range of young poets, also, who were interested in the developments in visual way which they themselves were experimenting with. Some of them like Guillaume Apollinaire were to aid him in a critical way. [Ablaie Son Doits?] was one of his very good friends. The editor [Canoodle?] and so on. And if we look at this painting here of my studio, in 1910, one will see how he has immediately leaped into -- or under the influence of van Gogh. The swirling brush strokes, the unusual perspective, the writhing legs and arms of the chairs.

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The intense color. And one will also point out that he loved to surround himself with the appurtenances of home, and you'll note at the top of the picture, [17:00] the reproduction of his painting, *The Portrait of My Fiancée with Black Gloves*.

Excuse me. From the same year, one sees the more characteristic painting of the experiences of his own background in Russia, in this work called *The Wedding*. This is not the first of wedding compositions, but it's the earliest, I'm sorry to say, that I had available to me. But already, his contact with the cubist artists like Gleizes, Delaunay, and Léger, with whom he used to meet on Friday nights and spend the evening talking art and poetry. Already, the abstract point of view of cubism has begun to influence his work. One sees the familiar [18:00] symbols of his Russian background, the Russian houses, low, high-pitched rooves, the water carrier, all the characters which belong in Jewish wedding -- the drummer, the violinist, the drunken soldier, and there's bystanders, all described lovingly with great care as to the rightness of their detail. But what has happened is that the perspective is now closing in. There's no background. The houses act as a backdrop, almost, limiting the space, and the people come forward, from the shallow background of the houses, in a kind of planal relation made up of large triangles. Here, the major triangle of color, of blues, and broadbands of reds and yellows and blues [19:00] everyone finds in the background.

More familiar to you, I'm sure, than that of *The Wedding* is this painting, *I and the Village*, which is in the Museum of Modern Art. Here, one sees again the familiar recollection of Vitebsk, in the upper section, the onion dome churches so familiar to all of us in Russia. The cows being milked, the head of a cow facing in the outer ground, at the face of the artist. And one will see the farmer with his scythe, and his woman, Rina, beside him. But, one will see two other things, that these are not brought together in the same kind of way [20:00] that their [current?] nature. People (inaudible) are not seen upside down. Houses you will see above the floating lady are upside down, as well as right-side-up. And within the eye of the animal -- within the head of the animal is the whole animal, and the lady concerned with milking her. In a structural way, all these disparate members, differences in scale, dislocations of position, are brought together into flat bands of planes which the artist has divided in a kind of cubist way, here, a flat patterning interrupted by a semicircle, and then one will see in the large, is all brought together in a series of circular planes in segments which break into that, expanding and making layers behind layers of planes, within which these objects are placed. [21:00] That it is a fundamental structure within which the artist has placed these, which brings together the painting. It is if, almost in a poetic way, one were thinking in terms of the inner eye, of the inner mind, which is brought together out of relation of time and space, at one moment of time, expressed in plastic terms.

Another painting from this Paris period, *To Russia, Asses, and Others*, from 1911, the next year, which belongs to the Museum of Modern Art in Paris. And by this time, his poet friends were beginning to have a hand in some of the titles, [22:00] which had had more pedestrian titles, here, the too. And there is a certain satire, perhaps, in his reference to Russia -- mother Russia and all that. But, much more disturbing is what's going on in the painting, the way in which we have the cow, which seems to float on top of -- or be situated on top of a house, above the roof of the town, and what is, of course, going on here, the milkmaid, who has lost her head.

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Now, as usual, everyone says, "What does this mean?" And this is when Chagall replies, "It's more or less up to you." Actually, visually, it's strange, unreliable, difficult. Yet, is it so when we turn to, say, a sister art of poetry? If one reads Chagall's autobiography, you will find always, "I floated in happiness. [23:00] My head felt as if it were floating on the ceiling. I flew out of the window." We're familiar with that expression in poetry, in literature, and Chagall finds nothing strange in portraying it for us visually.

What, perhaps, is stranger, is the way in which the lady has been divided up into geometric sections and riveted together with large rivets. This adds a certain extra dimension to the enigma, as he calls it. But again, we are bringing together recollections, ideas, poetic fancies, juxtapositions, into visual focus. Even going back into (inaudible), into the Romulus–Remus connection, which is but a further projection, in a poetic way, with the familiar motif of the cow. [24:00]

Some of you remember this painting which was on exhibition here last winter. It's called *Half Past Three (The Poet)*, and we borrowed it from the Philadelphia Museum at the time we had the Arensberg collection here. Here, again, the influence of cubism has become even stronger, but we have, substantially, and if one remembers the cubist portraits Braque and Picasso, a portrait of a man who is seated at a table, writing with a pen in his hand, and his little notebook here by his side. Here are the familiar cubist still lifes, apples, a bottle which is made up into cubist geometric sections. What, however, is not cubist about it is that the poet's head has floated gently off his body, and there sits a satiric cat on one side with his tongue out, [25:00] as much as to say, "I dare you write another true word."

Again, one finds the vocabulary, the symbols he uses -- I perhaps should not use the word "symbols" since they do not have the symbolic quality of classical iconography, but the painterly vocabulary which he uses is either Paris or the recollections of Vitebsk. The background of this, the [catadille?], which you see here on the left, is that which is described in *Ma Vie*, in his autobiography, as recollections of trips he used to take out into the country with his uncle Neuch, who was a butcher, and when he was not a butcher, in the evening, he played the violin, rather, as Chagall said, "like a cobbler." These visits to the country, to the slaughtering house, were rather harrowing for young Chagall, [26:00] and you see here the picture of the cow being carried off to the slaughtering house, tended by members of his family, and young Chagall, perhaps, here. And there is something in, say, the quality of gentle, passive pathos combined with the violence in the color, which reminds us of the origin, or perhaps one should say the end goal for this subject.

I show you here a small gouache of the same subject, which we happen to have in the Guggenheim Museum collection. And there, one can see, perhaps, a more spontaneous, more expressionist, immediate portrayal of the scene. There, the face with its eye stands out more, almost diabolically. [27:00] The cow looks more moved and more moving. And the young boy down here refuses even to look or be a part of the scene.

But I show them to you particularly because one is direct -- the gouache on the right is a direct working out of a theme from its emotional background, and what Chagall has done with it here is to encompass, and to bring to this scene, this recollection, the fruits of his cubist training, to turn it into a formal painting, a painting which has logic, which has direction, which has organization. The wheels of the cart no longer are shown in perspective. They're large round circles, which

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make a kind of monumental freeze across the painting. It is the figures within its stand, within this single line of progression. Nothing is allowed [28:00] to retreat backward, and very little is allowed to come forward, and the foreground is woven into the background by color and by shape. The contrasts of the purples woven into semicircular and triangular rhythms which are repeated within the figures themselves, even within the cow, making shallow planes which help to organize and to repeat the pattern, the slow, monumental, elegiac progression to death.

A familiar painting in the Guggenheim Collection shows another side of Chagall's poetry. This is called *The Soldier Drinks*, and shows a soldier seated at a table which has been tilted in the usual cubist fashion before a large [samovar?]. And out the window are, say, a handsome patterns and color [29:00] of scenes of Vitebsk. What has happened, however, as we spot almost immediately, in that he's lost his head, both literally and poetically, and although his finger points to what might be a cup of tea, his imagination, say, is stimulated towards something which probably comes out of something stronger. Vodka, perhaps. It has a charm without brutality, or rather, more mournful and whimsical overtone.

Here, more violence, but this, again, almost in a fairytale way, he tells of an early childhood experience when the wooden town of Vitebsk almost burnt down. Great sections of it burnt. He climbed to the roof of his own house to watch the city being [30:00] consumed in flames, and people rushing out of their houses, throwing out their furniture from their windows. Their animals stampeding in panic. But he has made of it not simply the story out of his memory, but he's organized it plastically. He's organized it in strong, again, almost diagonal structure, but in this curvilinear fashion, and the also, and most obviously here, in color, which comes in these bands of reds and whites and ochres. And then in contrast to that, he's broken up the color on this other half of the canvas, almost as Delaunay in his early work two years before, or [Sera?] would have done. Not in a formal, scientific way, as interested Delaunay in his contrasting color theories, [31:00] but to add animation to the body, and to give variety, to give strength to this tale.

A painting which some of you may know, shows Chagall at work in his studio. It's called *The Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers*, and it belongs, I'll say, to the Museum in Amsterdam. Here, one sees Chagall in perhaps a darker mood, almost diabolical, is the expression here, which reminds you in the treatment of the eye.

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