

## Perspectives Chagall's "Lost" Masterpiece

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One of the behaviours that defines life is rehearsal. When we are small we call it “play”. Those who shape their lives as artists, dancers, writers, and singers call it preparation. We usually only see the fruits of these great works but the small sketches, the half-written pieces, the discarded images before they ripen to maturity tell us a great deal about how the person is thinking and what affects them on their journey towards that final representation. Accordingly when what appeared to be an unknown sketch by Marc Chagall entitled *Apocalypse in Lilac: Capriccio* turned up in the catalogue of leading French auction house, Tajan, in October 2009, it caught the attention of David Glasser, a co-chairman of Ben Uri, The London Jewish Museum of Art. Every week the Museum is inundated with auction catalogues from around the world as they have added over 100 works to their collection in the past eight years. Going through each of them on behalf of the Museum has become one of Glasser's weekly routines. Glasser is a Scot with a powerhouse of energy and enthusiasm. “I actually flicked past it at first,” he says. “Then I thought, what did I half see from my left eye when I was concentrating with my right eye? My first response was amazement. Eighty-five percent of what I was looking at was without question Chagall but the figure in the front, the Nazi, to me looked like George Grosz.” Then Glasser noticed the date -1945. Chagall was a man who worked regularly every day, even drawing at the supper table, yet he stopped working for seven months after the sudden death of his wife, Bella, on 2nd September, 1944, from an untreated virus infection due to the wartime shortage of medicine. Chagall's correspondence, published by Benjamin Harshav, makes it clear he was back at work in March 1945. In April 1945, in the dying months of World War II, horrific images of the concentration camps began to flood the world. Glasser was assailed with questions. Could the shock of the camps have taken Chagall beyond his personal grief? Could this gouache have even been the work that brought him back to the easel?

Chagall lived in Russia from 1914-1922 and, as a member of the modernist avant-garde and the aesthetic arm of the revolution, became one of the Soviet Union's most distinguished artists. Life grew harder with the spread of famine after the War ended in 1918, and in 1923 Chagall left Moscow to return to France where he had lived from 1910 to 1914. Art historian, Chagall scholar and Professor Emeritus at Hebrew University of Jerusalem Ziva Amishai-Maisels believes Chagall's importance begins here. “As a major modernist artist at the heart of artistic developments in Paris and then in both St Petersburg and Moscow he could have gone completely cubist like Picasso (1881-1973) or taken on the style of orphic cubism like Delaunay (1885 -1941), or back in Russia, he could have become an abstract artist like Malevich (1879-1935) and Lissitzky (1890-1941). Instead he kept the primitivism, combined it with Fauvism and Cubism and, with his own personal story and his own personal iconography, created a world that nobody had seen and nobody has equalled.”

Back in Paris, Chagall formed a business relationship with French art dealer Ambroise Vollard who commissioned him to illustrate the Old Testament. Chagall used the project as a catalyst to explore Palestine, to connect with his Jewish roots in an entirely original way, and to feel anew the history of

the Jews. As a leading contemporary painter, to move away from modernist themes was to take a risk. Chagall was, however, his own person. By 1939, at the outbreak of World War II, and the year Vollard died, Chagall had completed only 66 of the envisaged 105 plates. Naively they remained in Vichy France. However, in October 1940, when the Vichy government, under the command of the Nazi occupying forces, began passing anti-Semitic laws, Chagall recognised what was happening. By now all of Europe was a dangerous place for Jews. America was the only location that offered refuge, yet the passage to New York was beyond their financial means, as was the large bond required of each immigrant. With the help of Varian Fry, Chagall's name was added to the list of prominent artists whose lives were in jeopardy. Fry risked his life to get him and other artists and their families over the Pyrenees to sail from Lisbon. The Chagalls left Europe in May 1941 and arrived in New York on 23rd June, 1941, the day after Germany invaded Russia. As he eased into life on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, an outsider in a foreign environment unable to speak the language yet with international standing, reports of the life he and Bella had left behind began to percolate through the Yiddish press. News such as the German destruction of Vitebsk, the town where he was raised, caused him great distress. By 1944, months before the Allies attempted to liberate France, he was struggling with the implications of the war in Europe. By September his dear Bella was dead.

In April 1945 as World War II drew to a close, information about the concentration camps poured out of Europe. The horror was immense; the lack of regard for human life appalling. Even *Vogue Magazine* published Lee Miller's photographs from Buchenwald and Dachau. It contrasted in every way with where Chagall found himself, a fortunate life in a safe environment without bombs dropping around him. In Russia he would have been slaughtered. In France he would have been captured. This was a situation tailor-made for guilt and a plethora of other emotions.

"I was stunned by the work when I first saw it," says Glasser, "by the naked Christ, by the Tefillin, by the fact that the prayer shawl, the Tallit, was running down his back, and that Christ had female hips. Above all I was deeply moved by an area on the right hand side. Beyond the man clutching the Torah, a motif Chagall used many times, is a woman with outstretched hands holding the Ten Commandments. Above her plunging upside down is a clock and the hands are falling off. However, the Ten Commandments are not touching that clock. Now this was a man who knew exactly what he was drawing and, to me, that said he feared for the Jewish race. He feared the Nazis had actually succeeded. If he had been certain we would survive, he could have placed the Torah on the clock or drawn it in ink. I suddenly realized this could have been Chagall's response to the Holocaust." Amishai-Maisels agrees. "Chagall was painting pictures that involved Bella. His personal grief was linked with her memory. However, the shock of the camps would have taken him beyond his personal grief into a much wider grief."

Such a jolt in the early hours of the morning drove Glasser to his Chagall library. He found nothing on the work. The next day he and Suzanne Lewis, the Museum's Director of Operations, began an intense search "reviewing every book, every magazine, every article, and every piece of the web," says Lewis. By mid-afternoon they were convinced this was the real thing. With the sale at Tajan in Paris only a week away, Glasser and Lewis applied to the V&A/MLA Purchase Grant Fund and The Art Fund, the 106-year-old philanthropy that helps British institutions acquire works and which had provided assistance in the purchase of several of the Museum's recent additions. "The application had to be compelling," continued Glasser. "We were asking them for all their due diligence and a lot of money in four days."

The Art Fund agreed with their assessment and provided up to 110,000 Euros to help secure the work. With the necessity for silence surrounding such a rare work it was not possible for the Museum to

approach their private supporters. Paris and New York dealer Lionel Pissarro, who had inspected the work for Ben Uri, was to be in New York on the day of the sale. To maintain complete discretion, all agreed Glasser should travel and bid. He positioned himself in front of the auctioneer, focused on her and the bank of phones, raised his hand high and kept it there. Within sixty seconds the auctioneer called “Pour vous!” and the gavel fell. “It felt like three years!” laughs Glasser, then he sobers. “I went from elation to despair. I walked the streets petrified that the rationale for why we had got it so reasonably was that a French Museum had proposed an Act of Pre-emption to the French government meaning they could acquire it at the price we paid for it and so didn’t need to bid against us.” This Act had to be instigated within fifteen days but no-one could say definitively whether this was calendar or working days. Glasser placed an embargo on news of the acquisition for a month. Within ten weeks of the sale, on 7th January 2010, the work, plus catalogue, was on display for the first time - ever - at the Osborne Samuel Gallery in Mayfair as part of the Museum’s “Apocalypse” exhibition.

“Chagall was trying to reach out to both the Jewish and Christian communities,” says Amishai-Maisels, “so he took on commissions for baptisteries, cathedrals, synagogues, and many others. His work is entirely accessible and yet in each one the man is very much himself. There’s a word in Hebrew and Yiddish *dovkeist* which means ‘in despite of’ and there’s a little bit of spite in that ‘in despite of’, so his work contains a twist that makes him unique and that nobody else can rival and immediately distinguishes one of his works from an attempt to forge it.”

According to Amishai-Maisels, this piece fits in exactly to a group of drawings that have recently emerged from the estate which depict Chagall’s private and personal reactions to the Holocaust. In *Sketch for The Martyr* (1940), for example, a Nazi points a gun to a child’s head. This does not appear in the finished painting. In *Sketch for The Soul of the City* (1945) the many immigrants, and the tombstones that fall out of the painting within the painting, do not appear in the finished work. “What we get with *Apocalypse*,” says Amishai-Maisels, “falls into the same category. You also see the changes he made in pencil under the ink, such as the cock. At first I couldn’t figure out what was going on with his breast. It looked like an eye and what’s an eye doing on the breast? As I enlarged it, I started to see a bird, and that gives a whole different understanding to later paintings such as *Resistance* (1937-48 det.) where the cock is holding Christ, variously interpreted as the spirit of God, or the Shekhinah. However, no Jew would use that kind of image as merged with Christ, as he has done in *Apocalypse*. Therefore it suggests the idea of sacrifice and atonement and that idea is pertinent to both Jews and Christians and it’s within his genre. So it tells us how he got to the image in *Resistance* which was never clear, and it tells us what the meaning of that image should be, and in itself that makes the work extremely important. It also shows us he was capable of dealing with the realities but was not willing to tell other people that.”

“It’s the dream of every collector and Museum!” says Glasser. ‘Most importantly, Ben Uri, a small Museum, has discovered and secured a work of international importance that adds significantly to the scholarship of this period of Chagall’s oeuvre. Surely a principal ambition of every Museum is to add a paragraph that hadn’t been written before. It’s a dream come true and a triumph for scholarship over resources!’”