Scholar sees Chagall differently

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Scholar paints different picture of Chagall

By Ellen L. Weingart

WORCESTER —

People floating in air. Musicians on roofs. Flying livestock. Hardly works that define a “Jewish artist.” Unless the artist is Marc Chagall.

“He could have been painting grim triangles and there would have been considered a Jewish artist,” said Olga Litvak, the Michael and Lisa Leffll Chair in Modern Jewish History at Clark University. “There is a cultural process going on here that I think has very little to do with art history and very little to do with actual visual evidence.”

Chagall was born Moshe Shagal in 1887 in Vitebsk in what was then White Russia and is now Belarus. While living in Paris from 1910 to 1914, he was a member of the avant-garde. World War I turned his 1914 visit back to Russia into a multi-year stay.

He returned to Paris in 1923 and remained in France, where he became a citizen in 1937, only to be stripped of his new status by anti-Jewish laws passed after the German invasion. He was deported from the Nazis in 1941 and lived in the United States for seven years, returning to France in 1948, where he died in 1985.

Chagall was a prolific painter, muralist, graphic artist and book illustrator. His stained glass designs grace not only the Auschwitz Synagogue at Jerusalem’s Hadassah Medical center, but several churches and the United Nations building in New York. He also designed sets and costumes for the theater and ballet.

Whether Chagall’s upbringing — the oldest of eight children in a poor Chassidic family, living in a community where about half the 50,000 townpeople were Jewish — influenced his paintings, it at least in part accounts for his reputation as a Jewish artist.

“He was known to have two basic preoccupations: as a pioneer of modern art, he was a major Jewish artist,” according to art historian Michael J. Lewis. “He synthesized the art forms of cubism, symbolism and fauvism and the influence gave rise to surrealism. Yet he remained most emphatically a Jewish artist.”

It is how that reputation came to be that interests Litvak.

“I am not a trained art historian,” she said, noting that her primary interest is literature. However, her advisor at Columbia University, where she earned her doctorate in Jewish history and is now teaching Chagall’s memoir, noted that her primary interest is literature.

She started to read about Chagall and also read two volumes of his correspondence and his Yiddish writings, including the Yiddish version of his memoir.

“I am not a huge fan of his paintings, but this piece of writing floored me,” said Litvak of the memoir. “The best known version, Ma Vie en French, is not anything like the original 1925 Yiddish version (Epigraf).” She became interested in Chagall and began to examine some of the documentation and literature on him. “What emerged for me was an interest in the construction of his Jewishness,” she said “And his public Jewishness had absolutely nothing to do with his work.”

That belief will be the basis for the book she plans to work on over the summer, a book she expects will have no pictures because she doesn’t believe the question can be settled by studying Chagall’s works.

“There’s a documentation, a public moment when Chagall becomes associated with Jewishness in art,” said Litvak. “You can actually track his evolution from a kind of Russian modernist, largely untaught, a marginal figure trying to carve out a reputation for himself. You can see how right after the Russian Revolution, he becomes invested in this vision of himself as a Jewish artist, a Jewish prophet. The evolution of his visual artistic style has nothing to do with it. He’s trying to make those connections, but they’re not intrinsic to the art. People have to be taught to see Chagall’s art as Jewish.”

What is now seen as among his most Jewish works, the art he did immediately after World War I, were viewed as “peasant art” by contemporary critics, she said.

“In the beginning, they weren’t seen as Jewish,” said Litvak. “Today their status as exemplary Jewish paintings is unquestioned — largely based on biographical evidence that Chagall himself presented. Because we’ve been taught to see his paintings as Jewish, the actual visual sources on which he drew for his work have been obscured.”

Many would disagree with Litvak.

Writing in The New York Times in March 1996 in advance of the opening of Marc Chagall: 1907-1917 at the Jewish Museum in New York, art critic Michael Kimmelman reminded readers that Chagall belonged to a Chassidic family. “This partly explains the mystic and miraculous qualities of his art,” he said. “It’s hard not to think that these figures flying over Vitebsk, or however, symbolized freedom for Chagall who, as a Jew in Russia (before the Revolution), couldn’t even leave town without official permission.”

In 2002, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, in collaboration with the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, presented some 80 works by Chagall drawn from the collection of the Minturin foundations and private collections.

The exhibit “highlighted the images that have made Chagall such an important figure in the history of modern art worldwide, with a particular emphasis on works inspired by his Jewish heritage and connection to Israel,” according to the Israel Review of Arts and Letters. Chagall visited Israel eight times — the first time before the Jewish state was founded, the last at the age of 90.

“He’s paintings are characterized by the confluence of his Jewish and Russian background and modern European art trends. These variant strands were then woven into a very personal tapestry and both the reviews and art critic continued. “In part this individual idiom was the result of the Chassidic traditions that permeated his home life in Vitebsk. The use of surnames was ubiquitous in his Jewish heritage. Often his subjects include aspects of Jewish life, portraits of Jews and everyday life in the shtetl. He translated these into visual metaphors, flights of fancy unbound by the laws of logic or gravity.”

Despite the fantastic aspects of his work, the Israel Review claims Chagall was also a realist. “The majority of the people and places he depicted were grounded in his immediate surroundings and much of his poetic imagery, once deciphered, proves to be an expression of a concrete, historical or autobiographical reality,” the reviewer said. “Biblical subjects as well tended not only to recall ancient stories but are often imbued with additional meanings that reflect the artist’s hope and world view. Yiddish sayings take on concrete form and intermesh within overarchings of the natural world.”

It is evident in his work, the Israel Review said, that the people, the surrounding countryside and the culture of Vitebsk, “steeped” in the traditions of Chasidism, left an “indefable mark.”

“Memories from his early years and his Russian-Jewish background proved to be a source that continuously inspired his work. Chagall’s portraits of his shtetl pay homage both to a lifestyle that has disappeared and to the values it propagated. In the 1930s and early 1940s, when the world that Chagall remembered was being brutally crushed, he chronicled the disasters that befall the Jews of Europe in symbolic images against the background of Vitebsk. This terrible destruction did not however deter him from continuing to include Vitebsk scenes in his paintings until the end of his days.”

The lovers floating in air, the flying cows and the musicians performing on rooftops, make it seems as if “Chagall is Yiddish,” wrote Jonathan Wilson in Marc Chagall, a book in the Jewish Encounter series. Chagall, Wilson said, read the Yiddish papers daily while living in Paris and would say, “All I paint, all that I do, all that I am, is just a little Jew of Vitebsk.”

Wilson asserted that Chagall never abandoned his past, but carried with him the images of village life, trying “repeatedly to translate (them) via poetry or painting into art.”

Wilson acknowledged that Chagall had “a perceptible ambivalence about his role and status as a Jewish artist,” citing his use of crucifixion imagery and painting featuring portraits of Christ. “It is the Jesus of a Jewish child who grew up in an environment of churches and Russian Orthodox icons; of a Jewish painter both attuned to and rebelling against a 2,000-year-old tradition of Christian iconography in art; … of a Jew who wants to argue Christ with the Lubavitcher rebbe but must decry religion as a Soviet revolution; … and of a Jew painting, obsessively and sometimes, seems on the cross.”

Chagall was buried in a Christian cemetery, although he never converted.

Litvak isn’t convinced.

“For years, people said that the reason everybody flies in Chagall’s painting is because of Chasidism,” she said. “And how exactly does this flying dovetail with any school of Chasidism? Especially in Vitebsk. Their interest wasn’t in flying girls.” Now, she said, people are comparing these flying beings to angelic figures used in Russian icons.

Chagall’s early paintings of Jews in his hometown, she noted, are frequently interpreted as peasants without any Jewish content. During a visit to the Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton with her students, Litvak placed an icon next to Chagall’s Jew in Green (1914) — Chagall did a series of paintings that juxtaposed a Torah scroll or prayer book and frequently wearing the accoutrements of prayer — with saying it was a Chagall. “The museum director gasped because the similarities were so profound,” said Litvak. “If you didn’t know Chagall was a Jewish artist, you would have said he was influenced by iconic art.”

“Somewhere the biographical image of (Chagall) has become a substitute for the real art history that is still to be written,” she said.

“Whatever’s interesting is how people have been taught to see Chagall as a Jewish artist. It’s sort of like asking what is it about the Chasidic tradition that makes people see the Madonna...
Chagall

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and child when all there is is a young girl and a baby.”

Litvak said the process isn’t necessarily a product of the visual but rather of the public cultural process of education. “It’s tied to the development of a community that’s prepared to invest intellectually, morally, religiously in that vision, to say this is not just a girl and her baby, but is G-d and His mother,” she said. “What are we invested in when we make those claims about Chagall being a Jewish artist? What is the nature of our desire to invest a Jewish nature in this work?”

In “the countless” biographies she has read of Chagall, she said, no one has asked such questions. “Because the stated assumption is that he’s Jewish and that’s a kind of sine qua non, an absolute in his work,” said Litvak. “As far as the authors are concerned, he’s a Jewish artist and that’s it, end of discussion.”

Benjamin Harshav, who has written several books on Chagall, does have a somewhat different take on what influenced the artist:

“Perhaps he was too much of a ‘public artist,’” Litvak said Pablo Picasso asserted that “Chagall is not an artist; he’s a business.” In his Times article, critic Kimmelman noted that first thoughts of Chagall are likely to be “Chagall, Inc., purveyor of ethnic kitsch.”

“I don’t think that the nature of an artist is understandable without understanding the marketing of that art,” said Litvak. “If you look at someone who is such a successful artist and yet had little cachet in art history circles — there’s a perception that Chagall created sentimental work that’s marketed to Jewish housewives — it’s a great aperture through which to see this process of construction.”

Litvak hopes her book will help people realize they can’t take popular assumptions for granted.

“We need to think about what’s at stake in these kinds of constructions,” she said. “We need to think more carefully about our own motivation and our own investment in this creation of a modern Jewish culture — and what the implications of that are for us. What kind of gap we’re closing are we doing? For something to be Jewish art now, does it have to be like Chagall? Is someone who doesn’t paint like Chagall betraying his or her Jewish heritage?”

“I’m interested in the evidence. The accumulation of the statements and the public moment when you can actually see the intervention of key figures in this process — New York art critics, the mayor of Jerusalem, Chagall’s wife, French Catholic philosophers, the people who rescued him from Nazi-occupied Nice — the collective labor that made him what he’s known as.”

After Chagall, Litvak will be working on a biography of Jewish literary icon, Sholem Aleichem.

Archives

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In addition to the emotional impact of researching one’s family history, the developers hope that information detailing stolen Jewish possessions might aid in restitution battles.

The project also has a considerable social networking component: Footnote’s technology allows visitors to search for names and add photos, comments and stories, share their insights and create pages to highlight their discoveries.

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum official records on Footnote.com will supplement data already on the museum’s website and bring the stories of Holocaust victims and survivors to a wider audience, thus creating a richer research experience.

The information on Footnote.com will link back to additional material on the museum’s website, said Michael Gurn berger, the museum’s director of collections.

Gurnberger believes that having several sites featuring the material will increase the potential for learning and meaningful research.

“Any initiative that provides access to Holocaust-related documentation is positive,” said Menachem Rosensaft, vice president of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and Their Descendants.

“Having it in conjunction with the National Archives and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum provides a serious legitimacy to the project.”

He added, however, that while the database includes a large amount of historical material, it represents only a sliver of the records kept during the Holocaust and does not make for a complete picture of events during that time.

Rosensaft also voiced concern over the project’s social networking element, saying that scholars and users need to “keep in mind the difference between an objective document and a subjective one that is being created based on memory.”

Access to the collections has been free, but full access eventually was expected to be reserved for those with paid memberships.

Rosensaft expressed displeasure that access to the records ultimately would become fee-based. Documents that have been in the public domain, he said, should not be part of a profit-making venture, especially in regard to research for Holocaust survivors and their heirs.

Still, he anticipated that Holocaust survivors and their descendants would welcome the resource. — JTA

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