**Marc Chagall’s *Purim***

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Creativity grows in the worlds unknown and that ideal is nowhere better displayed than in the world of art. The beauty in the visual, paintings, and sculptures is wondrously absorbed by the human eye. So much information and emotion can be derived from what comes from the creative minds of others. But there is no better way to delve and capture precisely what a piece of artwork holds and how the artwork behaves in the world than to see it in a museum.

When taking a look at a museum map, the museum is divided up into sections based on year, region, and more particularly, style. Chinese art of the 17th century is not in the same area as the impressionist paintings. This serves a purpose not only to categorize the art but to build a history to the viewer of what they see in front of them. Beyond this, the rooms in each section are even more detailed in what they portray. Themes and color stories and different lighting are on display in each division. Each painting is highlighted on its own and is complemented by the rest of the paintings in the room as well as the overall setting. This style of presentation is present in Marc Chagall’s painting *Purim.* It is the first painting immediately to the right in a small corner room close to the back of the late European section. The room is not expansive and rather confined, and all the paintings and few sculptures in it are quite symmetrically hung across the four walls. *Purim* stands out among the other artistic works in the room mainly due to color, as one of the first things to jump out about this Chagall painting is the use of bright blocks of warm tones and that even the neutral areas still carry great warmth. When viewing paintings next to and directly opposite *Purim,* all heavily contrasting to the Chagall paintings including mostly cool tones of greens, blues, and black with small amounts of orange tones. At first it may seem that Chagall’s does not belong there.

However, with a deeper look, it can be quickly seen that Chagall is right at home in this section of the gallery. Next to Chagall’s *Purim*, is Chaim Soutine’s *Portrait of Moïse Kisling* and Amedeo Modigliani’s sculpture *Head of a Woman*. What may seem like an innocuous connection is actually a very important one as all three artists are modern Jewish artists who created art relating to their Judaism. Around the other walls are paintings of Mattise, Chagall’s contemporary and acquaintance. Adjacent to *Purim* is Pablo Picasso’s *Three Musicians*; Picasso was a longtime friend of Chagall and Picasso held Chagall in incredibly high regard. The paintings in this room are not obviously related at first glance—even after a long look—but their creators are in many ways connected whether personally, by time, or by identity and a small world of stories is created through these intrinsically connected pieces of art.

It is deeply difficult to categorize the feelings felt when looking at any paintings but that is only exacerbated when the painting is one by Chagall. In the lengthy time period that was spent observing both the space and Chagall’s *Purim,* the word that stood front and center was tumultuous. There was a deep connection felt to this painting likely due to the imagery. The Russian village filled with small wooden houses, the celebration overflowing with food and gifts, and knowledge that these villages were regularly struck with pogroms was all too familiar. Chagall was a Russian Jew from Vitebsk and he portrayed his memories of village life frequently. The painting is *Purim* a Jewish holiday, and that moment of celebration is felt. The two people in the painting exchanging gifts provided a semblance of comfort and joy. In *Purim* there is a massive feeling of love. Where that feeling comes from precisely in the painting is hard to tell, but after just looking and enjoying the painting, it is overwhelmingly felt. There was, however, the drift of a grim awareness. Whether it was caused by seeing the date the painting was produced—1916-17—or just knowing the historical context involved the Russian revolution, a small dose of fear was ever present. So many ups and downs can come from just one painting, but feelings in the arts are the foundation and for the viewer it can build a whole perspective.

Furthermore, knowing Chagall’s work prior, the different themes covered in his art were not new discoveries. What I first wondered and had many questions about was the field of red that two of the people in the painting stand on. It was the most vivid color in the painting, and it was throughout every part of the composition. Chagall has primary colors dispersed among this painting in yellow neutrals and a small patch of blue, but the red meant something. Blood, evil, death, Russia, and of course in this painting, the revolution, red could have meant all these things. Though what did Chagall mean by his blanket of red? What is a tragedy and bloodshed, or was it joyous and connected to the holiday? Whatever red was, it disturbed and interested. Chagall had a purpose in it and the hope was it was not tragic. Red is associated with so much and leaving the museum the red was a mystery to solve. *Purim* seemed to be building up more and more questions as the next thought was: Why Purim at all? What made Chagall pick this holiday and paint it in this context. Many questions about art are difficult to answer and historians give many theories, and though Chagall is known for his dream-like imagery, he pulls his themes from his own life and history.

In the most magical and whimsical of ways, *Purim* shows a Russian village in Vitebsk celebrating the only non-tragedy based Jewish holiday of Purim. Though it seems simple and folkish nothing could be further from the truth. The painting holds a litany of symbols that connect to the historical and social context of life for Jews in Russia, Chagall’s personal life, and to Chagall’s artistic world. *Purim* is both a representation of Chagall’s connection to Judaism as well as to Russia.

Chagall’s *Purim* was created in the vital years of 1916-17, aligning with the first years of the Russian revolution. Were the painting produced at any other time, much of the symbolism, color choice, and even the choice of holiday would be aimless. The start of the Russian revolution for Russian Jews, including most Russian Jewish artists, was a signifier of freedom. It was meant to end the violence and subjugation of Russian Jews. Before the revolution, all that Russian Jews knew were constant pogroms instigated by people they once thought peaceful, anti-Semitic conspiracies of blood libel, and the Czarist system constantly calling for dissemination and the murder of Jews. The system went as far as forcing the Jews into a separate part of the Empire from which they could not leave known as the Pale of Settlement. Restrictions upon Jewish religious practices were in place, and due to this, from the end of the 18th century to 1917, Jews were in a constant state of being persecuted and ostracized from general society. When the Bolshevik party rose as the leader of change in the Russian Empire, it came with a promise to fully end everything connected to the Czars. There was hope that Jews would be saved.

Moreover, to understand the connection of the revolution to Purim, it is necessary to know the history of this important holiday. Purim is a Jewish holiday that celebrates the thousands of Jews that were saved from murder by the Persians. The story of Purim can be simplified to the following: Haman is appointed prime minister by King Ahasuerus. When he was appointed to this position Mordecai, King of the Jews, refused to bow down to him. When Haman finds out that Mordecai is Jewish, he plans to kill not only Mordecai but all the Jews. Concurrently, King Ahasuerus had taken a new wife, Queen Esther, who had not disclosed her ethnicity. Mordecai, who was Queen Esther’s cousin, had disclosed Haman's murderous plan to Queen Esther; she in turn told the King that she was Jewish and notified him of Haman’s plan. Haman and his sons were hung for their crimes (Larissa). Purim is a deeply meaningful holiday for Jews and has great similarities to the beginning of the Russian Revolution which may not be immediately obvious (Alexander 168). The story of Purim is a a story of Jews being saved from a mass murder. The idea of the Russian Revolution, in the eyes of Chagall and many others, was that it would save Russian Jews from further extermination. Once this idea or theory of Chagall’s *Purim* is uncovered, many other aspects of the painting are much easier to understand and connect together into a history of Jewish life.

Furthermore, Purim is a celebration and Chagall is celebrating many things in his painting. He is celebrating the holiday, the idea that Jews will be saved, the chance of a better life, and the birth of his daughter. The mysterious red field in the painting seemed so ominous at first, but it remains in line with the historical Russian tradition of representing celebration and good things happening. It is also inescapable in this context that the red is connected to the Russian Revolution which was covered in red from beginning to end; the color and its symbolism was then passed on to the Soviet Union once it was created, and the Soviet Union used it endlessly in the same way the revolution did. The red portrays Chagall’s readiness for the future and acceptance of it. He was ready for the changes and for freedom. Red is not often a color of happiness and is not in this painting either, it represents a necessity that Chagall perceives. His necessity to escape persecution, but he had no choice but to feel joy at the prospect of no longer living in fear. Contrastingly to the celebrations of freedom, Chagall celebrated the birth of his daughter Ida who was born in 1916. In *Purim,* Ida is the large crying baby on the table. The odd size of baby Ida in this painting portrays an example of hierarchical scale made by Chagall. As often as he did disregard convention in his art, in *Purim* the normal planes of size and space did not matter. What mattered is the importance of the object or person, which led to his unique use of canvas space. Ida is big in comparison to others in the paintings because she matters so much to Marc Chagall. This choice is not related to the overarching themes of Purim but more displays Chagall’s way of thinking when creating art. *Purim* has an almost unbelievable number of intertwined parts and the connection to real life seems to never end.

Marc Chagall grew up in a Chasidic Jewish family in Vitebsk, Russia, now Belarus (Chagall 15). Vitebsk was a majority Jewish city in the Pale of Settlement. Chagall's family were able to keep their Jewish traditions because they were in the Pale with other Jews; they would not have been allowed to practice in other areas. Chagall's religious and cultural Judaism were always an important part of his life and it permeated his art almost always. He constantly used Jewish traditions, religious texts, and Jewish symbols in art. Chagall discussed the plight of Jews and the treatment of Jews quite often in his art at different stages. So much of the imagery that is characterized as whimsical or dream-like in his work is inspired by the Kabbalist teachings that he grew up with. The spiritual aspects of his very religious Chassidic upbringing never left him as he continued to read the Hebrew bible and studied it throughout his life. The flying goats, two faced people, heads turned upside down, and the flying people always present in his work are inspired by the religious stories he heard as a boy in Vitebsk. In *Purim,* the connection to religion is quite obvious as everything is connected to the Jewish holiday. In the upper left corner are small figures that, unlike in usual Chagall fashion, are not floating but hanging. The reason Chagall most likely has hanging figures in *Purim* is they represent Haman and his sons from the story of Purim. A grim detail bringing the story and the painting closer together. Though, it is not really a Chagall painting without a flying goat. At the very top on the blue roof flying overhead is a goat with a man in blue sitting upon him. Goats in Chagall’s world were most often representation of a god-like figure while men blue were often him. Chagall hid himself away in paintings. Could it be that in *Purim* Chagall is watching over the occasion next to god? With Chagall anything is possible. As a Jewish artist, and one of the first Jewish artists, Chagall was deeply connected to his religion, though sometimes in unorthodox ways, and it was a mainstay in his art his entire life.

As Chagall’s life goes, there is little that truly inspired him and created him as an artist, more than his beloved home of Vitebsk. In Vitebsk there was his childhood, there was his first dive into art, there is where his art was born, there is the reason why Chagall paints the way he does. Chagall lived in a home where he knew love his entire childhood. He knew no pain and was not ready for the world. In his home is where he had daydreams and where he formed his view of his family, of himself, and of the world. He loved his family and he loved himself. Those who he loved were special and they deserved to be seen as special. What may sound like benign information is the most formative to Chagall’s art. When people in his paintings float above cities and other people, those are the special people in Chagall’s life (Alexander 27). He believes that they do not belong on earth with the regular people. A select few people in his paintings even floated while he stood on the ground because those were the people most dear to him. The reason Chagall paints in a dreamy, childlike way is because he does not know how to comprehend what he sees in the cold, dark world, so he resorts to creating his paintings of memories, childhood, and love. Chagall remained in his childhood imagination and looked to those beautiful, fantastical, and best times of his life to show even the dark aspects of life. He was well aware of all the terrible occurrences in the world, some of which he had to live through, so he could not imagine violating the art that was created in the image of his childhood with misery from real life. The very being of Marc Chagall as an artist was built off his childhood in Vitebsk; what the world knows of Chagall would not have been possible without his childhood (Alexander 32).

The number of personal characteristics that Chagall puts into his paintings is often immense, but in the case of *Purim,* it is counterbalanced with great historical and social context that can be analyzed and studied. Chagall enjoys leaving mystery and playing around with what he is actually trying to say, so despite *Purim* having many clear and grand ideas, one can never say what Chagall truly attempted to portray. Nonetheless, Chagall is obvious enough when needed and comprehension of his paintings is only aided by learning his history and enjoying his art. Chagall creates some of the most creative and wondrous paintings in modern art. His work is culturally and historically valuable and it is important to see it more.

There are multiple ways to look at a painting, in a museum with specially designed lighting and the ability to analyze the context of the room, or online where information about it is a click away, but no matter what manner a painting is looked at it is important to stop and focus on the painting just as art. It is of the highest importance to look at a painting and enjoy it. Though analysis, recording feelings, and asking questions can be important, it is not what art is there for. Consider a quote not by Chagall but by Claude Monet, “Everyone discusses my art and pretends to understand, as if it were necessary to understand when it is simply necessary to love” (Claude Monet). Chagall was all about love in his paintings, so just enjoy the art that humans have created because it is not always necessary to overthink; that takes the beauty away. Get people to enjoy art because there is no other way to keep the love and passion for art alive.

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