

Marc Chagall, Flowers, and the French Riviera: The Color of Dreams

By Dr. Carol Ockman

At the very mention of Marc Chagall, what likely comes to mind is a floating couple, a flying cow, an Old Testament scene or Crucifixion, or a fiddler on the roof.

Thanks to the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, we can now think of flowers. *Marc Chagall, Flowers, and the French Riviera: The Color of Dreams* offers an unprecedented opportunity to see paintings by the artist, two of which have never before been shown publicly, and to experience the color and light of the natural world he knew on the French Riviera.

This groundbreaking exhibition is the first to explore the significant role of flowers in Chagall's work. For this artist, flowers were life itself. His granddaughter, Bella Meyer, recalls that her mother Ida would often buy "a generous spray of flowers" at the market in the south of France.

"Colors were more important [for him] than the type of flower. I doubt he knew the names of flowers but he was in awe of bouquet gifts," said Meyer, who is herself a floral designer in New York City. "As a child I always brought them so I associated them with him. They were always around. A flower is like a tree—between earth and heaven—in a way spiritual," Meyer recalled during a conversation with this author in the winter of 2016.

Flowers are as much a response to Chagall's traumatic experiences of Twentieth-century diaspora, or displacement, as is the boundless hope of his pictures.

About *The Lovers*

In *The Lovers* (1937), an archetypal Chagall painting on loan from the Israel Museum, a huge bouquet in the left foreground encircles the airborne figures of Chagall and his first wife and great love, Bella (née Bertha Rosenfeld). It arches over the *shtetl* or Jewish village at bottom right while an angel, hovering in the top right corner, reaches both arms toward white blossoms that mirror their

movement and lead our eyes in all directions toward the flowers spilling across the surface. The artist's penchant for richly-hued foregrounds - shown here in blue, red, and white - reflect his tendency to organize his paintings around primary colors or their complementaries - orange, green, purple. The painting also pays homage to the tricolor of France, where the Chagalls were granted citizenship that same year, only to have it snatched away in 1941 under Vichy France.

The two works to be exhibited for the first time - "Bouquets de Lilacs à Saint Paul" (ca. 1978) and "Le Couple aux Muguets" (1973)— have been graciously loaned from a private collection. Lilacs features two large vases containing lilacs that tower over the distant sunlit village framed in the background and a figure stretched out in the left foreground. In Couple a man and woman standing behind a light-filled window affectionately embrace - a theme common in Chagall's work - behind two vases holding abundant bouquets of white lilies-of-the-valley nestled in their large emerald-green leaves. Above Chagall's artist's signature, the piece is inscribed to his daughter Ida: "Pour Ida, Papa."

Who was Marc Chagall?

Along with Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, Chagall was the most revered and long-lived modernist of the twentieth century (1887-1985), as well as one of its most important colorists. Born in Vitebsk in "Jewish" Lithuania, his desire to be an artist and the need to flee Russian pogroms and the Holocaust led him to Saint Petersburg, Paris, Berlin, back to Vitebsk, Moscow, again to Berlin and Paris, Palestine, Vilna, if not Vitebsk, Paris, New York, and finally to the French Riviera.

A Russian artist, a French artist, and the quintessential Jewish artist, Chagall was multicultural before the term came into use. Nourished by his relationship to both European avant-gardes and Jewish artists in Paris and New York, Chagall's art is unthinkable without his formative years (1906-20) in Jewish Russia.

His magical imagery, poised between the real and the imaginary, is also an apt description of memory. Chagall's phantasmagorical world was rooted in the Russia he left, but never ceased to paint. Although the homeland he knew had vanished, his art was steeped in its Jewish mysticism, folk traditions, fairy tales,

and modern Yiddish secular literature. Chagall's fiddlers on the roof might not exist without Sholom Aleichem's *Tevye Stories*.

Experiencing the Exhibit

For this exhibition Chagall's world becomes the entire garden:

- In Payne Mansion:
 - Hand-selected by the artist's estate, archival photographs of Chagall, his family and artist friends, and the places he lived and worked will be displayed;
 - Botanical illustrations from Selby Gardens' rare books and prints collection that enable visitors to speculate about which flowers he painted; and
 - The paintings, along with four ceramic vases, their luminous glazes typical of the south of France, once owned by the artist.
- In the conservatory:
 - Brilliantly colored replicas of stained glass designed by Chagall will be woven among the living plants from Selby Gardens' research collection. Chagall once called stained glass "the transparent partition between my heart and the heart of the world," and the works represented will draw from cycles Chagall made for the Cathedrals of Metz and Sarrebourg (France), St. Stephan's in Mainz (Germany) and the Abbell Synagogue at the Hadassah University Medical Center in Jerusalem (Israel). All highlight botanicals indigenous to the French Riviera, where he lived.
- In the gardens:
 - With the scents and sights of southern France everywhere in evidence, Chagall's poems and writings about flowers, color, music, and place chart the visitor's path.

The Color of Dreams capitalizes on the sun-kissed climate of Sarasota to conjure the French Riviera—long understood to be a mythic site where dreams come true and a special lure for artists, Monet, Renoir, Van Gogh, and Matisse among them.

Evoking Chagall's last home, the fairytale village of Saint Paul de Vence, the exhibition makes Sarasota both refuge and utopia, or truly a "promised land."

"Marc Chagall, Flowers, and the French Riviera: The Color of Dreams" will be on view at the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens from February 12 through July 31, 2017. A keynote lecture by the curator will take place February 13. An audio tour for the exhibition will be available on site.

About the author:

*Carol Ockman, Curator at Large, Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, Sarasota, FL and
Robert Sterling Clark Professor of Art, Williams College, Williamstown, MA*