

# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



Opening on June 1, 2018

## Chagall. The Breakthrough Years, 1911–1919

Sponsored by

Fundación **BBVA**

The continued participation of Fundación BBVA in the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao's ambitious exhibition projects underscores its commitment to this institution. And here, we applaud the chance to bring Bilbao a selection of glorious paintings by Marc Chagall, one of the most interesting painters of the twentieth century.

The exhibition *Chagall. The Breakthrough Years, 1911–1919* delves into an essential period of the artist's work, during which he gave birth to the style that would come to characterize his whole production. The show reveals the profound motivations that guided his art, the avant-garde movements that influenced him, and the crucial themes he developed throughout his career. It is an exploration of the origins of Chagall's wholly personal and distinctive language and an immersion into the lyricism and underlying currents of his bright, colorful scenes; a voyage through his enigmatic and expressive universe, replete with creatures that are the product of his particular mythology, figures from tales and poetry, Jewish traditions and characters, flying lovers, in images like windows that open onto new horizons.

Visitors to the exhibition will get a closer look at the lesser-known interpretive aspects of Chagall's work and come to understand how the artist's own life and experiences are reflected in them and made part of their story. Some of the issues addressed in the exhibition include the importance in his work of his native Vitebsk and the Jewish community of his childhood; his training in St. Petersburg and traditional Russian art; his encounter with the avant-garde movements in Paris at a time when it was the capital of the arts, and where he also discovered the works of great masters in the Louvre; and lastly, his experiences of World War I and the Russian Revolution, which fostered harbored illusions that never materialized.

Chagall believed that one's inner world could be much more real than the visible world or the realm of appearances, and was devoted to painting it. He saw life as a celebration of art and his art was a celebration of life, in all its beauty and tragedy, love and joy, the ordinary and the extraordinary. "I do not want to be like all the others; I want to see a new world," he claimed. We invite the public to enjoy his unique vision.

I am certain that *Chagall. The Breakthrough Years, 1911–1919* will once again make Bilbao the focus for those wishing to achieve a more thorough understanding of our present and of the immediate future through art. I would like to congratulate the excellent Guggenheim Museum Bilbao team, with Juan Ignacio Vidarte on the lead, and also curator Lucía Agirre for developing, designing, and bringing to life this benchmark exhibition.

**Francisco González**

President of the BBVA Foundation

### *Chagall: The Breakthrough Years, 1911–1919*

- Dates: June 1–September 2, 2018
  - Curator: Lucía Agirre, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
  - Exhibition organized by the Kunstmuseum Basel in collaboration with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
  - Sponsored by: Fundación BBVA
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- During his first stay in Paris, Chagall experimented with colors, abstract and geometric forms, movement, and his own fantasies.
  - Transcending labels such as Cubist, Expressionist, or Surrealist, Chagall's work is an amalgam of styles used in a personal way to tell his own story.
  - He combined reminiscences of Russian folk art and his family culture with the latest stylistic experiments that the Parisian avant-garde had to offer.
  - “Art seems to me to be above all a state of soul.” Marc Chagall

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is pleased to present *Chagall: The Breakthrough Years, 1911–1919*, featuring more than 80 paintings and drawings from the early career of a unique artist, whose seemingly simple universe conceals a complex reality where opposing worlds intertwine. Esta exposición, organizada por Kunstmuseum Basel en colaboración con el Museo Guggenheim Bilbao, está patrocinada por la Fundación BBVA.

Born in 1887 to a Hasidic Jewish family in the small town of Vitebsk, then under the control of the Russian czars, Marc Chagall grew up in a very confined world, where access to Russian culture and art was limited by his own community and the government policy of relegating Jews to ghettos and denying them basic rights. Even so, the young Marc Chagall soon made a break with convention, securing a place in a Russian school, studying art with Yehuda Pen in Vitebsk, and later moving to St. Petersburg, a major city which Jews could only enter with a special permit.

However, the decisive turning point for Marc Chagall came in 1911, when he moved to Paris and began a new life there. He worked in the French capital for three years, until May 1914, producing works that combined recollections of life in the Hasidic community of Vitebsk with the icons of the modern metropolis. Thus, reminiscences of Russian folk art intermingled with the most progressive stylistic experiments of Parisian avant-garde leaders like Pablo Picasso, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, and Jacques Lipchitz.

In 1914 Chagall returned home to attend his sister's wedding and see his fiancée, Bella Rosenfeld, but the unexpected outbreak of World War I turned what was supposed to be a short visit into an eight-year confinement. At that point, the artist entered into a phase of intense soul-searching that is reflected in his

works from this period, comprising self-portraits, everyday depictions of his family and community, drawings of the ravages of war, and images of the new Russia that emerged after the October Revolution.

### Gallery 305: Paris, Hive of Artists

“Impressionism and Cubism are foreign to me” \*

In May 1911, after studying at Léon Bakst’s school and securing financial support from Maxim Vinaver, an important Jewish philanthropist and lawyer who fought for the rights of his community, Marc Chagall left St. Petersburg for Paris. Although Bakst had already introduced him to the modern creations of Cézanne, Manet, Monet, and Matisse, it was not until arriving in the French capital that Chagall was able to contemplate the art of the early avant-garde movements and the old masters hanging on the walls at the Louvre.

During a brief visit to his native Vitebsk, before leaving Russia, Chagall produced several drawings of his hometown and his parents, relatives, and fiancée, as well as paintings of life in the Jewish community marked by the influence of Russian folk art and a “free” use of color developed during his time in St. Petersburg. This is apparent in *My Fiancée in Black Gloves* (*Ma fiancée aux gants noirs*, 1909), *The Street Sweeper and the Water Carrier* (*Le balayeur et le porteur de l’eau*, 1910–11) and the drawings of his family.

Upon arriving in Paris, Chagall lived in a studio in Montparnasse for several months, but he soon moved to an artists’ residence in the same area called *La Ruche* or “The Beehive” where, in his own words, he mixed with “the artistic bohemia of every land.” In this great hive of reasonably priced rooms and studios for creative minds, he became friends with Blaise Cendrars and Sonia and Robert Delaunay, who introduced him to poet Guillaume Apollinaire. The latter soon became a staunch supporter of Chagall’s work, describing it as “supernatural,” which in this period denoted experiments with color, abstract and geometric forms, movement, and the artist’s own fantasies.

Although the influence of the “isms” flowing around him is apparent in his work, Chagall narrated his own personal world, comprising different universes. Chagall’s art, like Yiddish, is a singular fusion of languages; transcending labels such as Cubism, Expressionism, Orphism, or Surrealism, it is an amalgam of styles transformed in a personal way to tell his own story.

This gallery presents works from his early days in Paris, such as *The Yellow Room* (*La chambre jaune*, 1911) or *I and the Village* (*Moi et mon village*, 1911), and others painted at his studio in La Ruche, including *The Poet Mazin* (*Le poète Mazin*, 1911–12), *The Cattle Dealer* (*Le marchand de bestiaux*, 1912) and *Paris through the Window* (*Paris par la fenêtre*, 1913), a clear example of how he perceived the French city which nevertheless incorporates memories and images of his native Vitebsk.

\*Chagall quote from *My Life*, first English edition in 1960, Orion Press, New York

**Gallery 306: From Paris to Vitebsk by Way of Berlin**

“I lie between those two worlds, looking out of the window.” \*

No work better illustrates Chagall's relationship with Paris than *Homage to Apollinaire* (*Hommage à Apollinaire*, 1913), stemming from the painter's admiration for Guillaume Apollinaire. At the center of this painting he depicted the birth of Adam and Eve according to the Jewish oral tradition of Genesis, in which God created man and woman as a single body. Beside them he wrote Apollinaire's name as well as those of Blaise Cendrars, a Swiss poet and novelist, Ricciotto Canudo, an Italian journalist and playwright considered the father of film theory, and German gallerist Herwarth Walden, all members of Chagall's inner circle.

In 1914 Herwarth Walden (Georg Lewin) invited Chagall to exhibit at his Berlin gallery, Der Strum, in what would be his first major solo show. There he presented a total of 40 paintings and 160 drawings, gouaches, and watercolors from his Parisian period, which made quite an impression on the German Expressionists. A few days later, Chagall left for Vitebsk to attend his sister's wedding and found himself trapped in Russia for eight years due to the outbreak of World War I.

During that time, Chagall reflected the implications of war in paintings like *Soldiers* (*Soldats*, 1914), *Departure for War* (*Le départ pour la guerre*, 1914), and *Wounded Soldier* (*Le soldat blessé*, 1914), but he also depicted landscapes and genre scenes using a more restrained language of limited forms and colors, with “logical” associations and scales, as illustrated by *Maryasenka: Portrait of the Artist's Sister* (*Maryasenka. Portrait de la sœur de l'artiste*, 1914), *Liozno* (1914), and *The Barbershop* (*Uncle Sussy*) (*Le salon de coiffure [Oncle Sussy]*, 1914). Chagall's work took flight once more in his depictions of love and his relationship with Bella Rosenfeld, as evidenced by *The Birthday* (*L'anniversaire*, 1915) and *Blue Lovers* (*Les amoureux en bleu*, 1914).

\*Chagall quote from *My Life*, first English edition in 1960, Orion Press, New York

**Gallery 307: Tradition and Revolution**

“I painted everything I saw. I painted at my window. I never went out on the street with my box of paints.” \*

During World War I, many Jews were forced to leave their homes, situated on the front line of the conflict, and accused of being enemy collaborators by the czarist regime. It was during these years that Zionism began to garner supporters—most significantly with the Balfour Declaration—as well as detractors.

In the midst of this international confrontation, Marc Chagall revisited themes related to his own identity and the folklore and ethnographic heritage of his people. Some of his most important works from this period are the *Jews in green, red, and black and white*, mistakenly known as the “four great rabbis” and reunited exceptionally here, as three of them are at the Kunstmuseum Basel on long-term loan while *Jew in Red* (*Le Juif rouge*, 1915) belongs to the collections of the State Museum of St. Petersburg, Russia. These paintings are an example of what Chagall called “documents”, because he did not paint them from memory, as in Paris, but by observing the people and objects around him, from a newspaper vendor or beggar to a clock or a

mirror, to which he added highly significant elements such as tallits, phylacteries, and texts in Yiddish, Hebrew, or Cyrillic script. Displayed in this gallery are two identical works known as the Rabbi, painted over a decade apart due to the Great War.

While he was stuck in Russia, some of Chagall's acquaintances gave him up for dead, including his Berlin gallerist, who sold many of the works he had left at Der Sturm in 1914 to private collectors. Chagall mourned the loss of these works and decided to recreate some of them, producing several versions of his most important compositions. A case in point is *Jew in Black and White* (*Le Juif en noir et blanc*, 1914), of which there are three known versions today.

In the years since the Russian Revolution of 1905, Jewish upper-class citizens and intellectuals who occupied prominent positions in the cities were gradually granted some of the freedoms they had hitherto been denied. As a result, Chagall joined the Jewish Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts (JSEFA) and actively participated in its exhibitions. This society gave him several important commissions, such as painting murals at a secondary school—for which he made the preparatory drawings *The Pram* or *Little Carriage* (*“La voiture d'enfant”* ou *“La calèche”*, 1916–17) included in this exhibition—and illustrating books in Yiddish such as Peretz's *The Magician* (*Der Kuntzenmakher*, 1915), as well as an important set design commission from Alexander Granowsky for the Moscow State Jewish Theater, represented here by *Study for Music (Fourth Panel of the Moscow State Jewish Theater)* (*Étude pour La musique* [Quatrième panneau pour Le Théâtre d'art juif de Moscou], 1917). He also took part in major events like the Jack of Diamonds show and joined the artists' union.

Like other Jews, Chagall saw the revolution as the solution to social inequality and was actively involved in the early efforts to create a new Russia. In 1918 he was appointed Commissar of Arts for Vitebsk, a position that gave him authority over the museums, art schools, and all artistic events in the region. During those years, he lived with his wife Bella and their daughter Ida in his hometown and founded the People's Art School, inviting fellow artists like Lissitzky and Malevich to participate in his educational initiative. However, Problems due to artistic and conceptual differences soon arose, and Chagall withdrew from the project in early 1920 and left Vitebsk, bringing this decisive phase of his life to a close.

\*Chagall quote from *My Life*, first English edition in 1960, Orion Press, New York

## DIDAKTIKA

To help visitors get a better grasp of the exhibition's content and concepts, the educational space at the Museum explains how Paris, World War I, the Russian Revolution, and Jewish tradition influenced Chagall's creative oeuvre. It also reveals some of the artist's lesser-known facets, such as his collaborations with the performing arts, murals, stained-glass windows, and book illustrations.

In addition, sound and images are used to recreate Chagall's world in a video featuring the artist's own testimony, selected photographs about the Jewish community by artist Solomon Yudovin, and a musical piece by Aaron Copland titled *Vitebsk: Study on a Jewish Theme*.

The main educational activities offered in connection with the show are as follows:

**Shared Reflections\***

Unique tours led by Museum professionals

- Curatorial Vision (June 6) with Lucía Agirre, curator of the exhibition
- Key Concepts (June 20) with Luz Maguregui, Education Coordinator at the Museum

\*Sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre

**The Great War: Elegy for Piano (June 22)**

A piano concert featuring María Cueva-Méndez to commemorate the end of World War I, through which Chagall was deeply shattered, revealed in the powerful works realized at that time. The evening will include a screening of period footage and images.

**Cover image:**

Marc Chagall

*Birthday (L'anniversaire)*, 1915

Oil on cardboard

80.6 x 99.7 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (by exchange), 275.1949

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**For more information:**

Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

Marketing and Communications Department

Tel: +34 944 359 008

[media@guggenheim-bilbao.es](mailto:media@guggenheim-bilbao.es)

[www.guggenheim-bilbao.es](http://www.guggenheim-bilbao.es)

Complete information about the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is available at [www.guggenheim-bilbao.es](http://www.guggenheim-bilbao.es) (press room).

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Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

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tel. +34 944 35 90 08 and email: [media@guggenheim-bilbao.es](mailto:media@guggenheim-bilbao.es)

*The Yellow Room (La chambre jaune)*, 1911

Oil on canvas

84.2 x 112 cm

Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Ernst and Hildy Beyeler Collection

Photo: Robert Bayer

© Marc Chagall, Vegap, Bilbao 2018



*The Cattle Dealer (Le marchand de bestiaux)*, 1912

Oil on canvas

97.1 x 202.5 cm

Kunstmuseum Basel, purchase in 1950 with a contribution from Dr. h.c.

Richard Doetsch-Benzinger, Inv. 2213

© Marc Chagall, Vegap, Bilbao 2018



*Homage to Apollinaire (Hommage à Apollinaire)*, 1913

Oil, gold and silver powder on canvas

200 x 189.5 cm

Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

Photo: Peter Cox, Eindhoven, Países Bajos

© Marc Chagall, Vegap, Bilbao 2018





*The Flying Carriage (La calèche volante)*, 1913

Oil on canvas

106.7 x 120.1 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim

Founding Collection, 49.1212

© Marc Chagall, Vegap, Bilbao 2018

*Self-Portrait (Portrait de l'artiste)*, 1914

Oil on cardboard mounted on canvas

50.5 x 38 cm

Im Obersteg Collection, permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel,

2004, Inv. Im 1081

© Marc Chagall, Vegap, Bilbao 2018

*Departure for War (Le départ pour la guerre)*, 1914

India ink and pencil on paper on Japan paper

21.1 x 17.1 cm

Private Collection

Photo © Ewald Graber

© Marc Chagall, Vegap, Bilbao 2018

*The Newspaper Vendor (Le marchand de journaux)*, 1914

Oil on cardboard

98 x 78.5 cm

Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, Donation

Ida Chagall, 1984, AM1984-121

© Marc Chagall, Vegap, Bilbao 2018

*The clock (La Pendule)*, 1914

Gouache, oil, colored pencil on paper

49 x 37 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

© Marc Chagall, Vegap, Bilbao 2018



*Jew in Black and White (Le juif en noir et blanc)*, 1914

Oil on cardboard mounted on canvas

101 x 80 cm

Im Obersteg Collection, permanent loan to the Kunstmuseum Basel,

2004, Inv. Im 1084

© Marc Chagall, Vegap, Bilbao 2018



*Birthday (L'anniversaire)*, 1915

Oil on cardboard

80.6 x 99.7 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (by exchange), 275.1949

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*The magician (illustration for a short story by Ytzhak Leibusch Peretz, published in Yiddish in Vilnius by Kletzkin, 1917) [Der Kuntsenmakher, (Illustration pour le conte de Ytzhak Leibusch Peretz publié en yiddish à Vilnius, chez Kletzkin, en 1917)], 1915*

Indian ink and white gouache on paper

22 x 18 cm

Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, Dación, 1988, AM 1988-184

Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais /



*Strawberries or Bella and Ida at the Table (Les fraises ou Bella et Ida à table)*, 1916

Oil on cardboard on canvas

45.5 x 59.5 cm

Private Collection

Photo © Ewald Graber

© Marc Chagall, Vegap, Bilbao 2018



*Study for Music (Fourth panel for the State Jewish Chamber Theater, Moscow) [Étude pour La Musique (Quatrième panneau pour Le Théâtre d'art juif de Moscou)], 1917*

Pencil and gouache on sketchbook page on Japan paper

32 x 22 cm

Private Collection

Photo © Ewald Graber

© Marc Chagall, Vegap, Bilbao 2018



*Promenade (Promenade), 1917-18*

Oil on canvas

170 x 163.5 cm

State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg

© Marc Chagall, Vegap, Bilbao 2018



Marc Chagall, c. 1910/1911

© Archives Marc et Ida Chagall

