

Apocalypse en Lilas, Capriccio, 1945/7

Gouache, pencil, Indian wash ink and Indian ink on Paper



Overview of painting

Chagall was personally affected by the Holocaust, having been arrested in the South of France by Nazi soldiers, before being released and fleeing to New York in 1941. Throughout the consequent persecution of the Jews, Chagall started depicting crucifixes in his works. The crucifix symbolised the fact that Christ was a Jew and that he had been persecuted and killed, as the Jews were being persecuted and killed during the Holocaust. However, in this work he has also included factual information about the Holocaust, as he learned more and more about what had been happening in Europe, as information was released towards the end of the war.

His anger at the treatment of Jews during the Holocaust is referenced in this painting. This is symbolised by Christ looking and shouting at the Nazi below, with his right eye open; the Nazi is recognized by the Swastika on his armband. To further show his hatred Chagall didn't depict the Swastika correctly, instead composing it from a C and a Z rather than two Zs. The tail attached to the figure of the Nazi is reminiscent of Satan and his hand is amputated, perhaps with the aim of disarming or taking the power away from the Nazi soldier.

There is reference to those that died during the Holocaust in the symbol of the clock behind Christ's arm; the clock is falling to the ground, and the hour and minute hand are outside of the clock. This signifies that time has run out for the European Jewish community. This can also be seen to relate to the title *Apocalypse*, which can often mean 'the end of the world'. Additionally, the woman and man clinging together are depicted in flame-like formation, and further flames are beneath them. These fires engulf a town and trap a figure of a mother and child. Throughout the bottom half

of the painting other figures are in pain and distress, over which the Nazi soldier looms like a terrifying beast.

Looking closely

Content and Ideas

“My paintings are arrangements of inner images that possess me.”

A floating couple are identified through the Star of David on the Torah. Chagall often depicted floating couples in his work, and normally this signified love and artistic freedom. Here, however they represent the anguish felt by the Jewish community regarding the Holocaust.

At the bottom of the painting there are several characters that are included in many other works by Chagall – the violinist and cow for example. These relate to his early life in the Shtetl in Vitebsk – his Uncle had been a cattle dealer and his grandfather would often play the violin. Chagall often depicted his memories of Vitebsk as he said: *“The soil which nourished the roots of my art was Vitebsk...”*

Christ is shown on the crucifix, with an eye open shouting at the character below. This character is symbolised through the inaccurate swastika on his armband, and Chagall’s hatred of him can be seen in his satanic-like tail and amputated hand.

The clock is turned upside down with the hour and minute hands not included, illustrating how Chagall believed that time had run out for the European Jewish community.

Form and composition

Chagall very rarely used traditional compositions such as horizon lines and perspective. He also often placed images floating in the sky.

As many of the figures are created from Chagall’s mind rather than depicting a real scene, by using non-traditional compositions Chagall gives a sense of a dreamlike world. In a way similar to that of how a mind works, thoughts and ideas are not boxed and ordered neatly, but instead drift continually. It seems that this is what Chagall was wishing to depict.

The image of the floating couple linked to the Nazi in an L-Shape formation at the bottom right of the painting balances the L-Shaped crucifix in the top left. This makes the composition one of balance.

Chagall uses techniques to lead the viewer's eye across a painting to the main imagery. The ladder leads the eye down into the canvas to the Nazi, whose tail then leads you up to the floating couple, whose outstretched arms lead you to the clock, which subsequently leads you across the crucifix to Christ's face, whose stare leads you back down to the Nazi again. It is as if there is a visual journey through the painting.

The use of dark black ink on the Nazi, the crucifix, Christ's face, and the floating couple also leads you around the canvas to each of the major symbols.

Materials and techniques

For this painting, Chagall used ink, gouache and pencil with the mediums overlapping and combined and not clearly defined. He may have chosen these materials and this technique to create a feeling of chaos and confusion, in the way that the Holocaust caused feelings of chaos and confusion. Another reason Chagall may have used water-based paints rather than his usual brightly coloured oils was to create a feeling of sobriety and sadness. It is a softer and more vulnerable texture.

Additionally, Chagall has left much white space of the paper showing – this creates a sense of impermanence, of things not being final or finished, and hence symbolises the insecurity and instability that he felt the European Jewish community were experiencing.

About the artist Marc Chagall

Marc Chagall was born in Vitebsk, Russia in 1887. After studying in St Petersburg he went to Paris in 1910 where he met and became friendly with the avant-garde circle which included Soutine, Léger and Modigliani.

In 1917 he returned to his native Vitebsk, where he was made director and Commissar of Fine Art. However, the element of fantasy in his work caused problems with the authorities who were happier with realism and a social message, so he went to Moscow where he spent some time designing for the newly-founded Jewish Theatre.

Returning to Paris in 1923, he met the great art-dealer Vollard for whom he illustrated Gogol's *Dead Souls* and the Fables of La Fontaine.

Between 1941 and 1947 he moved from occupied France to the USA, but then returned to France eventually making his home at St-Paul-de-Vence near Nice.

Chagall was a prolific painter and book illustrator, also designing for theatre and stained glass. His work was dominated by his memories of his Jewish life and bible stories and also of the folklore of his early years in Russia.

Chagall died in 1985 aged 98. At his finest, Chagall was one of the great masters of the group of expatriate, mainly Jewish painters known as the School of Paris.

Why is this picture important?

This painting was created at the end of the Second World War, and depicts the anguish Chagall felt at the increasing number of revelations about the persecution of Jews during the Holocaust. It is a very personal response to the atrocities.

Importantly, many symbols that Chagall used regularly in his works are used in this one but with different significance. The floating figures do not symbolise love as in many of his other works, but pain and horror.

Additionally, most of Chagall's other paintings of Christ have his eyes closed and a loincloth covering his genitals. Here Christ's eye is open to look at the Nazi, and the loincloth removed.

Terms Explained

Crucifix – A crucifix symbolises Christ's crucifixion that Christians believe saved mankind. Crucifixions were a common form of death penalty during this period.

Star of David - The six pointed star is the most common emblem of Judaism. It is called the Star of David because it is said that it was the emblem on the biblical King David's battle shield. It is also on the flag of Israel, in a royal blue colour, flanked by two blue stripes.

Swastika – This symbol has been used for over 3,000 years and before the Nazis used it had mainly positive connotations. It has been used by many cultures including China, Japan, India and Southern Europe. In the 1800s German nationalists adopted this symbol as it had such ancient origins, to illustrate the length and hence strength of Germanic/ Aryan history. Hitler continued this when he formed the Nazi party, adopting it as his main symbol.