

## Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

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### Marc Chagall and the angels

Angels. Who or what are angels? Do angels really exist or are they simply folklore or figments of your imagination. When thinking about angels, *Peter Pan's* Tinker Bell, the much-loved pixie,<sup>1</sup> or "a kind of nature spirit that, under different names and guises, are found in every part of the world" and is also known as "a small humanoid being with wings",<sup>2</sup> and/or Cupid, who is technically "the Roman god of love",<sup>3</sup> may come to mind. Both characters have wings and help out people: Tinker Bell brings Wendy and her brothers, John Napoleon Darling and Michael Nicholas Darling, back home from Neverland; Cupid shoots his love arrow at people to make them fall in love, especially on Valentine's Day.

Since Biblical times, angels have played influential roles in art works. Artists like Giotto di Bondone (1266/7 – 1337), Jan van Eyck (ca. 130 – 1441), Fra Angelico (ca. 1395 – 1455), Rembrandt van Rijn (1606 – 1669), Giorgio de Chirico (1888 – 1978) all painted their versions of what an angel should look like, represent, and what images this heavenly body should project.

The angel in the Christian religion is similar to the angel in the Jewish religion in that both religions have Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael. But the two religions differ in that in Christianity, the angels tend to be more elaborate, be more taxonomic, have more lists of angel order, rank, and functions than in Judaism.<sup>4</sup> The Christian religion is "more fascinated and pre-occupied by [the angels] functions than in Judaism. While the "fallen angel tradition, of course, becomes a major feature in Christian mystic narratives", the Jewish religion does not accept the "apocalyptic source, like Enoch I, that claim some angels fell."<sup>5</sup> In the Jewish religion, the idea that there is "something other than angels themselves is of primary interest to the author [or the artist, for purpose of this article].<sup>6</sup> The angels end to assume a superior role in Christian art work while in the Jewish tradition there is a conflict between humanity and the angels, and "being human is really superior to being an angel."<sup>7</sup>

Born in 1887 with the Russian name of Mark Zakharovich Shagal, Marc Chagall grew up in Vitebsk, Belorussia, a tiny Jewish ghetto. His father worked packing herring and his mother managed a little shop to support their family of ten children. Although his parents did not make much money, Marc was lucky enough to have lessons in violin and singing. Chagall also began drawing and creating poetry at a young age.<sup>8</sup>

1 Lewis, James R. and Oliver, Evelyn Dorothy, *Angels A to Z*, Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1996, p. 331

2 Ibid, p. 155.

3 Ibid, p. 112.

4 Rabbi Geoffrey Dennis, "Jewish vs. Christian Angels", Tuesday, August 21, 2007.

<http://ejmmm20007.blogspot.com/2007/08/jewish-vs-Christian-angels.html> .

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Belief, "Marc Chagall: Painter of Angels"

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Chagall knew early on that he wanted to become an artist, something that his parents did not approve. He left his family at the age of just under twenty years for St. Petersburg, a city that didn't allow a Jewish person to live there unless he or she had a permit. But after some struggle and after attending two established art schools, Chagall attained his dream of becoming an artist.<sup>9</sup>

Chagall was a surrealist artist who painted cows, horses, fiddlers, violins or fiddles, lovers, traditional Jewish life and traditional Christian life in abstract ways, or ways that other artists didn't tend to do. He also liked to paint angels. This love for angels developed after he had a mystical experience one night while trying to sleep. He heard a noise and opened his eyes to see a blue angel floating above his bed in a glowing blue light. Eventually this apparition faded into the ceiling. But this infatuated him. And he began painting angels.<sup>10</sup>

Below are some paintings with angels and some paintings without angels that Chagall created. His conflict with his Jewish religion along with Christianity is often reflected.

"The Falling Angel" <https://samuelrobinspark.wordpress.com/2015/05/19/some-twentieth-century-jewish-artists-part-i/>



This oil on canvas is called "The Falling Angel" (1923 – 1947), and its dimensions are 74.4 inches x 58.3 inches. Here Chagall paints subjects either falling or trying to escape: the red angel is falling, perhaps from God's grace; the man in the blue hat and clothes is falling as he holds what looks like an umbrella handle; the Rabbi with the Torah seems to want to escape; the mother hugging a child seems like she wants to escape, too. There is an image of Jesus on the Cross, an image that becomes more complex

<http://www.beliefnet.com/inspiration/angels/2006/01/marc-chagall-painter-of-angels.aspx>

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

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when the viewer sees that Jesus is wearing a loincloth with tzitzit. There is a small blue violin painted there hanging in the air, bringing a little music into the devastating scene. A reference to the tree of life is evident in “The Falling Angel”, with its lively autumn hues; and the candlestick brightens up the painting he is working on.<sup>11</sup>

“White Crucifixion” <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/59426><sup>12</sup>

Chagall created a sequence of artworks with Jesus as a Jewish ideal-



ist/sufferer on the Cross, an important phase that started with his “White Crucifixion” (1938), 60 7/8 inch x 55 1/16 inch oil on canvas, currently on display at the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>13</sup> The “White Crucifixion” seems to reveal the pursuit and torment of the Jewish people who lived in Europe during the 1930s, as cited in “Entry” of *The Essential Guide*, 2013, p.277, which is republished online by The Art Institute of Chicago to discuss Chagall’s “White Crucifixion”.<sup>14</sup>

In 1911, Chagall moved to Paris and became part of a Russian Jewish movement called La Ruche, or The Hive. First designed by Gustave Eiffel to be a temporary wine rotunda at the Great Exposition of 1900, La Ruche was soon taken down and rebuilt as a low-expense residence for artists located in Paris’s Montparnasse’s district by sculptor Alfred Boucher (1850 – 1934) who wanted to assist starting artists with studios and an open exhibition area. The building had the appearance of a huge beehive and housed artists as well as people in vicarious life situations.<sup>15</sup>

11 <https://samuelrobinspark.wordpress.com/2015/05/19/some-twentieth-century-jewish-artists-part-i/>

12 The Art Institute of Chicago, “White Crucifixion”, 1938,  
<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/59426>

13 Ibid.

14 10 Entry, *The Essential Guide*, 2013, p.277

15 Wikipedia, “La Ruche”, [Revolvy.com/main/index.php?s=La%Ruche](http://www.revolvy.com/main/index.php?s=La%Ruche)

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Along with Chagall, such artists as Robert Delaunay (1885 - 1941), Max Jacob (1876 - 1944), Moise Kislting (1891 - 1953), Jacques Lipchitz (1891 - 1973), Fernand Leger (1881 -1955), Jean Metzinger (1883 - 1956), Gustave Miklos (1888 - 1967), Amedeo Modigliani (1884 -1920), and Diego Rivera (1886 - 1967) were affiliated with La Ruche.<sup>16</sup>

His "Green Violinist", (1923-1924), 78 inches x 42 3/4 inches, is one of several artworks that Chagall created during the La Ruche phase of his artistic life. Currently on view at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, "Green Violinist" is a combination of Cubism, Fauvism, and Surrealism, with some people speculating it also reflects some Expressionism. He mixed these genres with images from Russian folk art.<sup>17</sup>

"Green Violinist" <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/802>



The Guggenheim's Jennifer Blessing writes about Marc Chagall and his "Green Violinist":

*In Green Violinist Chagall evoked his homeland. The artist's nostalgia for his own work was another impetus in creating this painting, which is based on earlier versions of the same subject. His cultural and religious legacy is illuminated by the figure of the violinist dancing in a rustic village. The Chabad Hasidim of Chagall's childhood believed it possible to achieve communion with God through music and dance, and the fiddler was a vital presence in ceremonies and festivals.*<sup>18</sup>

16 Ibid.

17 <http://montrealgazette.com/storyline/mmfas-marc-chagall-exhibition-is-a-feast-of-colour-and-music>

18 13 Jennifer Blessing, "Marc Chagall", Guggenheim "Collection Online", 06.11.2017,

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Here Blessing acknowledges Chagall's sincere interest in the Jewish religion, culture and music – things that appear in his artworks time and time again.



The Fiddler (1912 - 13) <https://samuelrobinspark.wordpress.com/2015/05/19/some-twentieth-century-jewish-artists-part-i/>

“The Fiddler” (1912 – 1913) is another oil on canvas created by Chagall. This artwork has dimensions of 74 inches x 62 inches. In this work, once again, Chagall has things floating. There is the oversized floating fiddler with a green/blue animal-like face who wears a partially white and partially brown overcoat. He grasps onto a partly brown and partly yellow violin, or fiddle. The fiddler “is also a symbolic figure, standing for the mystery and power of art in all its manifestations,” commented Samuel Robin Spark.<sup>19</sup>

Like “The Falling Angel”, “The Fiddler” is a surrealistic artwork. This time, the painting has a lot of white color. There is also an angel in this piece. Chagall makes the angel tinier though, and he floats upwards toward the left of the fiddler’s head. This angel is naked, brownish skintoned without visible wings and sporting a golden-brown halo.

The fiddler and the angel fly above a neighborhood with a Christian

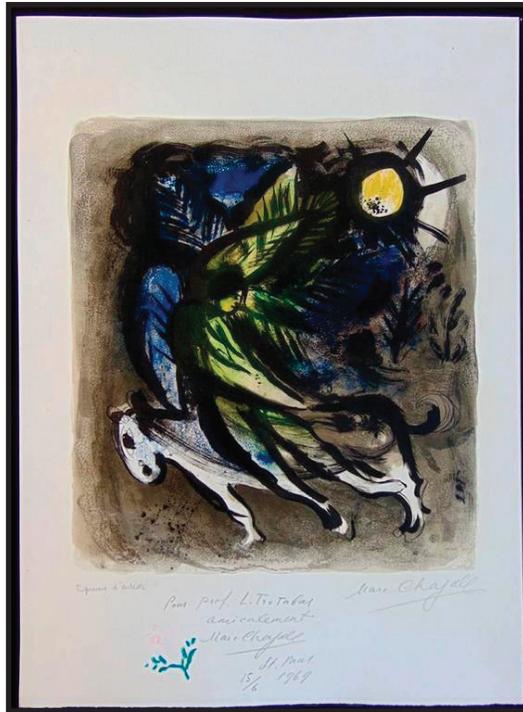
<https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/802>

<sup>19</sup> <https://samuelrobinspark.wordpress.com/2015/05/19/some-twentieth-century-jewish-artists-part-i/>

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influence, as indicated by the image of the Church with its Cross, located off to the fiddler's left.

Religious symbolism abounds in many of Chagall's works. It almost seems like Chagall is trying to make sense of Biblical Judeo-Christianity. Maybe he is even making an honest attempt to pull the two religions together in an abstract way. Jesus wearing Hebrew garments while being crucified maybe Chagall's way of showing strength, not simply depicting the persecution of the Jewish people throughout history.



"The Angel L'ange" [https://www.1stdibs.com/art/prints-works-on-paper/marc-chagall-angel-lange/id-a\\_1643043/?utm\\_content=test&gclid=CKWa\\_fznzNMCFVIWDQod\\_IoL5A&gclsrc=aw.ds#0](https://www.1stdibs.com/art/prints-works-on-paper/marc-chagall-angel-lange/id-a_1643043/?utm_content=test&gclid=CKWa_fznzNMCFVIWDQod_IoL5A&gclsrc=aw.ds#0)

"The Angel L'ange" is the last Chagall artwork published in this article. This lithograph (1960) is 20.9 inches x 12.8 inches. The scene is dark, ominous, and bizarre with an angel outlined in black. This angel sports blue and greenish hued wings and rests on the back of a white horse. The yellow sun is outlined with thick, black paint. Chagall does not leave the viewer with a comfortable feeling. Perhaps the white horse is a symbol of hope – the knight on a white horse – like a sign of rebirth.

Chagall once asked, "Will God or someone give me the power to breath my sigh into my canvases, the sigh of prayer and sadness, the prayer of salvation, of rebirth?"<sup>20</sup> This quote seems to help explain "The Angel L'ange", "The Fiddler", and "The Falling Angel". Perhaps what Chagall paints are unreal apocalyptic situations that once happen then, soon after, a rebirth will occur.

20 Marc Chagall Quotes, 04.30.2017

[http://www.azquotes.com/author/2674-Marc\\_Chagall](http://www.azquotes.com/author/2674-Marc_Chagall)

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Chagall's life was not simply focused on his art. In 1909, when he was 26 years old and an art school student in St. Petersburg, Chagall met Bella, the daughter of a well-to-do jeweler. She was 19 years old and the true love of his life. He married her in 1919 and they had one daughter named Ida. Unfortunately, Bella passed away from a viral infection in 1944. Before and after Bella's death, Chagall made artwork with Bella as the main subject. In 1917, Chagall finished "Bella with White Collar", a renowned artwork. For twenty years after Bella's death, he even took a notebook of Bella's and made drawings about her on the 85 pages of her writings in the notebook. Chagall remarried in 1952 to Valentina Brodsky.<sup>21</sup>

Chagall was a prolific artist whose artworks reflected turmoil, though often playful turmoil. Whether he painted good angels, transcending angels, fiddlers, violins, Jesus on the Cross, people wearing Jewish garments, images of Bella, his wife, and etc., Chagall always remained true to his art. His Surrealistic, Cubistic, Fauvistic and sometimes Impressionistic style still has a strong visual and emotional impact on his viewers.

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21 Roya Nikkiah, "Unseen works by Marc Chagall reveal artist's enduring love affair". The Telegraph. May 15, 2011.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/8514208/Unseen-works-by-Marc-Chagall-reveal-artists-enduring-love-affair.html>

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