The Cat Transformed into a Woman, c. 1928–31/1937, from La Fontaine's *Fables* (1926–31)

Etching and drypoint, hand-coloured in oil
29.5 × 24 cm
Tate Gallery, London

In 1926, Ambroise Vollard commissioned Chagall to illustrate La Fontaine's *Fables*. The choice of a foreigner for this seventeenth-century French classic, based on Aesop, outraged critics, yet Vollard argued that a Russian artist, who through his background and culture best understood the magic of the oriental sources for the fables, was an ideal match.

Fables takes a close, satirical look at human nature, using animals as main characters. Having an exterior reason for depicting animals, who had been central protagonists of his paintings anyway, suited Chagall perfectly. While Bella read the fables to him, he brought them to life with an imaginative array of anthropomorphic creatures.

By October 1927, he had created a hundred colour gouaches which he intended to convert into colour etchings. The process, however, proved to be too complicated and, between 1928 and 1931, Chagall carried out the etchings in black and white, subsequently hand-colouring a few.

The Cat Transformed into a Woman exemplifies the saying "old habits die hard" with the story of a man who so loved his cat that he turned it into a woman and married her. Yet, despite appearing to be the perfect wife, she had kept some of her feline traits and continued to hunt mice. The thrill of the chase, however, was diminished as the mice did not see her as a cat and were less inclined to run away. Chagall added colour to this etching in 1937. While probably achieving an effect close to the original colour gouache, he thereby covered up much of the varied texture that was a particular feature of his *Fables* etchings.

In 1930, Vollard showed the *Fables* gouaches in Paris and Berlin. Comparing his recent work to that of the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity), the modern realist movement then fashionable in Germany, Chagall realised how firmly integrated in the French art world he was by now. Although all the gouaches found buyers, Vollard subsequently did not manage to publish Chagall's *Fables* illustrations as a book. They were finally brought out by Tériade in 1952.

marc
Chagall

Abraham and the Three Angels, 1931

Oil and gouache
62.5 × 49 cm
Musée National Marc Chagall, Nice, donation 1966

In 1930, Chagall took up Ambroise Vollard's suggestion to illustrate the Bible. He tackled a typically Christian theme that had occupied many artists in the past, mindful that this project would enable him to explore his own Jewish roots, although he had stopped being observant as a teenager. In the tradition of his Hasidic upbringing, Chagall understood Bible stories as coexisting with the life of ordinary people. To find stimulation, compare an imagined world with reality and connect past and present, he travelled to Palestine in 1931. While the visit had little direct visual impact on the Bible illustrations, experiencing the ancient sites instilled an empathy for the country's inhabitants that he injected into his images.

In the Bible illustrations, Chagall brings together Christian and Jewish traditions in an unprecedented way. In consciously primitive images that range from the monumental to the intimate, he created an array of archetypal characters that express a range of human emotions. While some illustrations hark back to paintings by great masters such as Rembrandt and El Greco, *Abraham and the Three Angels* is based on an icon by the medieval Russian painter Andrei Rublev, housed in the Tretyakov Gallery. It shows the angels seated around a table on their visit to Abraham to announce that his wife Sarah would bear a son. Chagall subverts the familiar image by reversing the composition, turning the angels' backs to the viewer and removing their halos, thus infusing it with a casual domestic ambience.

Chagall first carried out his Bible illustrations as gouaches which he then turned into etchings. This meticulous process was interrupted in 1939 and only taken up again in 1952. By 1956, Chagall had completed the 105 etchings which then were issued by Tériade. His preoccupation with the Bible, which had inspired him since childhood, continued, resulting in a series of biblical paintings over the coming decade and giving birth to the idea for a museum devoted to the subject.

Chagall
1931

Solitude, 1933

Oil on canvas
102 × 169 cm
Tel Aviv Museum of Art

Solitude is one of Chagall's most memorable paintings, haunting in its melancholic simplicity and outspoken in its political message. Created as a response to the National Socialist seizure of power in Germany, which made Chagall more aware of his own Jewish roots than ever, its brooding seriousness and dark colours evoke the uncertain and dangerous future Jews were now facing.
Solitude refers back to Chagall's earlier depictions of old Jews and rabbis and follows on from his Bible illustrations for which he had found inspiration on his visit to Palestine in 1931. It presents a lone Jew, pensive and forlorn, sitting in a meadow under a threatening sky. His only possession, which he tenderly holds, is a Torah scroll. Beside him, under the protection of a hovering angel, rests a white heifer with a golden violin. Firm parts of Chagall's repertoire of motifs, both assume a clear symbolic meaning here: the violin is a typically Jewish instrument and the heifer, according to the Book of Hosea, one of the books of the Hebrew Bible, represents the children of Israel—the answer to the Wandering Jew's questioning of where he belongs.
Chagall identified with this uprootedness, as the buildings of Vitebsk in the background imply, and understood the suffering it brought. Unable to return to Russia, he longed to put down permanent roots in France. Yet he was refused French citizenship until 1937 on the grounds that, as Commissar of Arts for Vitebsk, he had held an official post in Communist Russia. Emigrating to Palestine, on the other hand, was never an option for Chagall, who was not a Zionist. Although feted by Meir Dizengoff, the mayor of Tel Aviv, he had felt alien and found his art unappreciated during his recent stay there. In 1953, however, Chagall presented *Solitude* to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art as a gift. Finally, an example of his art that incorporated memories of his origins in Vitebsk found a home in Israel.

Nude over Vitebsk, 1933

Oil on canvas
87 × 113 cm
Private collection

The rise of antisemitism in Nazi Germany prompted Chagall, who followed events from the relative safety of France, to paint the "twin masterpieces, one sacred, one profane," of *Solitude* and *Nude over Vitebsk*. Both explore issues of belonging and identity, distressingly brought to the fore all of a sudden. While the former tentatively holds out the promise of a spiritual community of the Jews, the latter falls back on Chagall's personal history in an exploration of a world endangered. As the titles imply, Chagall explicitly links *Nude over Vitebsk* to his iconic depiction of a figure floating over the city in *Over Vitebsk* from around 1914, of which, in the interim years, he had created several versions.

To great effect, Chagall infuses this enigmatic picture that, in its illogical combination of elements, comes close to Surrealism with its simple drama. For once he refrains from focusing on the humble outskirts of Vitebsk, with their low wooden houses, and instead presents a view of the grand stone buildings of the town's fashionable historic centre, dominated by the Baroque Uspensky Cathedral on top of the hill. In the pale sky above the deserted cityscape floats a monumental sleeping nude, depicted from the back, for which Chagall's now 17-year-old daughter Ida had posed, resting in the shade of a tree. A rare subject in his paintings, the naked female form is skilfully rendered, testifying to his intimate knowledge of the long tradition of depicting nudes in Western art.

Yet in this sombre, almost uniformly grey composition, in which only the enormous bouquet of blood-red flowers provides a hint of colour, the nude's sensuousness is dwarfed by its vulnerability. Although still unaware of the dangers in store, the pleasures and desires she represents are in jeopardy, and the sense of premonition, doom and grief appear already all-pervading.

White Crucifixion, 1938

Oil on canvas
155 × 139.7 cm
The Art Institute of Chicago

Beginning with *Golgotha* in 1912, Chagall repeatedly addressed the theme of Christ on the Cross during his life. In *White Crucifixion*, he employs it to record his response to the recent atrocities against Jews in Germany that culminated in the Reichspogromnacht (November pogrom). The powerful and complex painting presents an apocalyptic vision of their persecution and suffering in a series of horrific scenes of violence, flight and misery that are grouped around the central figure of the crucified Christ. The crying patriarchs hovering at the top of the cross helplessly look on as Jews, among them the eternal Wandering Jew carrying a sack on his back, flee at the bottom. One clasps a Torah roll to his chest, while another displays a label around his neck that denounces him as a Jew. It originally read "Ich bin Jude" (I am a Jew) before Chagall overpainted it. On the left, a horde brandishing weapons and red flags approaches a world turned upside down. Houses are burning, their inhabitants killed or turned into refugees attempting to escape by boat. On the right, a German soldier, whose armband had originally displayed a swastika, desecrates and sets a synagogue aflame.
In this eclectic composition, Chagall brings together figures from the Old Testament with contemporary people and infuses traditional Christian iconography with openly Jewish references and political messages. Through the prayer shawl draped around his loins and the inscriptions, proclaiming him to be "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews", the figure on the cross is clearly marked out as Jewish. He therefore, on the one hand, is no longer able to bring the Christian message of salvation and redemption. Following the Jewish tradition, he personifies martyrdom and suffering, here symbolising the Jewish victims of Nazism. On the other hand, by reminding Christians that Christ was a Jew, he is calling on them to stop persecuting his brothers.
Chagall would paint several further versions of the Crucifixion which, in the coming decade, turned into despairing comments on the unfathomable inhumanity of the Holocaust.

Time is a River without Banks, 1930–39

Oil on canvas
100 × 81.3 cm
Private collection

At first glance, *Time is a River without Banks* appears to be an archetypal Surrealist painting. Yet the dramatic juxtaposition of incongruous objects owes nothing to chance, but is infused with complex symbolic meaning, firmly rooted in Chagall's past and reacting to current world events.

In 1935, Chagall attended the opening of a museum of Jewish art in Vilna. The city, part of Poland since 1922, had been the hub of Yiddish life in the Pale of Settlement during his childhood. Now tensions were rising and Chagall, who witnessed an antisemitic incident, realised the threat to Jews. As a defector from Communism, he was prohibited from reaching Vitebsk, just across the Soviet border. In the poem "My Distant Home", written in Yiddish and published in 1937, Chagall gave expression to his feelings of nostalgia, longing and loss, also captured in *Time is a River without Banks*.

The painting, whose title is taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, depicts a monumental pendulum clock floating above the river Dvina, calmly flowing through Vitebsk in the fading twilight. It is attached to a large, winged fish that, with the help of a hand emanating from its mouth, plays the violin. While the fish refers to Chagall's father who had hauled barrels at a herring factory, the clock represents his father-in-law, the owner of three shops selling jewellery, watches and clocks. Together they watch over the lovers, Chagall and Bella, tenderly embracing on the riverbank.

During Chagall's childhood, the grandfather clock in his parents' house had set the pace of life. Over the decades, clocks would often feature in his work, particularly in times of trouble and unhappiness. *The Clock*, painted in Vitebsk in 1914, for example, immortalises his feelings of impotence and claustrophobia at being trapped in Russia at the outbreak of war. In *Time is a River without Banks*, the clock symbolises memory and the passage of time which, moving like a river, can never be stopped.

A Wheatfield on a Summer's Afternoon (set design for scene 3 of Aleko), 1942

Gouache, watercolour, wash, brush and pencil on paper
38.5 × 57 cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York

Chagall was passionate about the theatre all his life and made several designs for the stage throughout his career. In 1942, he had his first opportunity to work on a ballet when the Ballet Theatre of New York commissioned him with the set and costume designs for *Aleko*. Based on Pushkin's 1842 poem *The Gypsies* and Tchaikovsky's *Piano Trio*, the ballet tells the story of a youth who abandons his life in the city, joins a gypsy camp and falls in love with Zemphira. When he is betrayed, Aleko kills both Zemphira and her lover.

The commission came at a particularly difficult time for Chagall, who had remained an artistic outsider since he had fled France and found asylum in the United States in 1941. It helped boost his confidence by giving him a much-needed outlet for his creativity. Most of the work was carried out in Mexico City where Chagall, closely collaborating with the choreographer Léonide Massine, devised and painted a large backdrop for each of the four scenes. In a marked change from the sombre paintings of recent years, Chagall employs pure colour in bold compositions that, in their monumentality and sparseness, reflect the vast plains of the American South he encountered en route to Mexico, and could be read as paving the way to Abstract Expressionism.

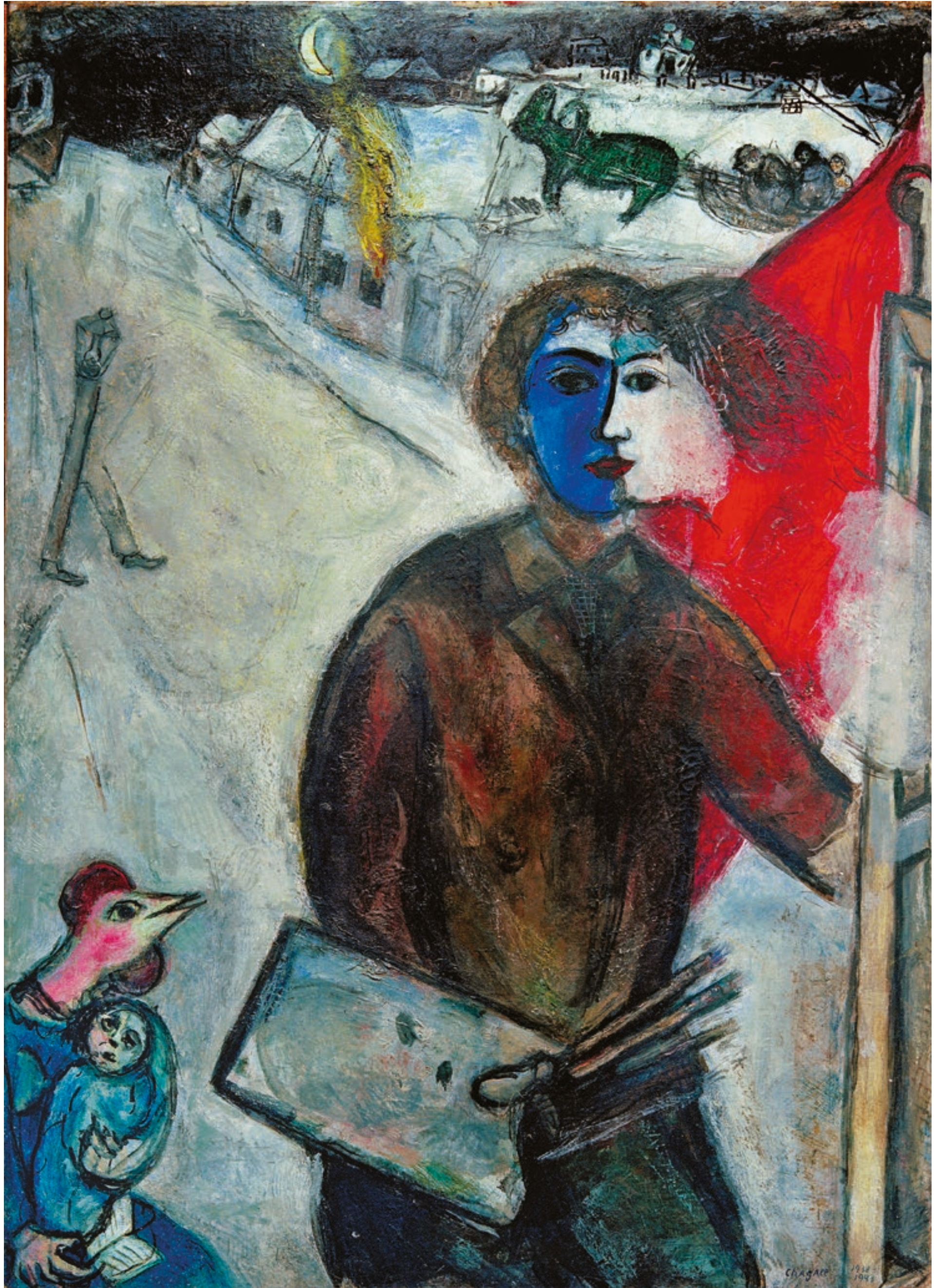
In *A Wheatfield on a Summer's Afternoon*, the backdrop for scene 3, Chagall created a yellow landscape that overwhelms with its simplicity, tension and intense colour, suggesting passion and heat. On the left, a sun glares over a field of corn, ready to be harvested, while on the right, Zemphira and her lover enjoy an assignation in a boat under a huge moon. The blood-red celestial bodies and the scythe, half-hidden amidst the crop, hint at the drama to ensue.

Aleko premiered to much acclaim in Mexico City in September 1942 and transferred to the Metropolitan Opera in New York a month later. Chagall's designs were widely seen as the true star of the show. One critic pointed out that his backdrops did not make good sets but were wonderful works of art of which the dancers obstructed the view.

Entre chien et loup (Between Darkness and Night), 1943

Oil on paper mounted on canvas
100 × 73 cm
Louvre Abu Dhabi

Although Chagall had only recently rediscovered colour through his work on the set design for *Aleko*, large parts of this painting are dark and gloomy. The sombre palette reflects his mood during exile in the United States, when worries about the fate of Europe, his career and Bella's declining health were preying on his mind. While Bella, about to complete her memoirs, was preoccupied with the past, Chagall attempted to find consolation in capturing his daydreams on canvas, combining memories of his hometown with allusions to France where he longed to be again.
A familiar street of Vitebsk, where snow-covered low wooden houses huddle in the wintry darkness, provides the background to this painting. Barely illuminated by the slim crescent of the moon, the scene includes several surreal elements, perhaps inspired by Chagall's recent re-encounter with some of Surrealism's main protagonists at the exhibition Artists in Exile: a heavily-laden sleigh flying across the roofs, an unlit lantern walking across the street and a bird-headed mother reading a book to her child. Chagall originally conceived this painting as a self-portrait, placing himself, brushes and palette in hand, in front of an easel and sporting a pair of wings. Yet he subsequently hid one wing under the snowy street and turned the other into a portrait of Bella. Cloaked in a red shawl, she emerges, ghostlike, from an open window, her deathly white profile merging with Chagall's blue face, thus creating an intimate double portrait whose three colours evoke the French flag.
The French title, which literally translates into "between a dog and a wolf" and refers to the time of dusk, captures the painting's undefined threat and sense of foreboding better than the English version. As Bella died unexpectedly in August 1944, this disembodied portrait was among the last Chagall created while she was alive. Over the coming decades he would poignantly pay homage to their event-filled life together, recreating Bella's likeness from memory.



The Flayed Ox, 1947

Oil on canvas
100 × 81 cm
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
Donated by Ida Chagall

This painting was created in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. It records Chagall's horror, as, from his exile in the United States, he followed the truth about the concentration camps and the fate of the European Jewry reported in newspapers and so unsettlingly shown in Pathé newsreels.
To capture his response to the atrocities, Chagall drew on the memories of his grandfather, the butcher. As a child, Chagall, fascinated by the cruel spectacle, had witnessed him slaughtering many cows. Taking his cue from carcasses of beef in paintings by Rembrandt and Chaim Soutine, Chagall depicts a monumental skinned animal. Cut open, its bloody flesh gleaming bright red, it swings from a pole, appearing to be lapping up its own blood from a tub. The savage scene is set amidst the wooden houses of a wintry, night-time Vitebsk. The butcher, knife in hand, hovers helplessly over the streets from which all human presence has been extinguished. He watches aghast as flames are threatening in the distance.
The flayed ox clearly represents the violated, tortured and annihilated Jewish people. In its resemblance to a crucified human body, however, it can also be read as a self-portrait, following on from Chagall's earlier identifications with Christ on the Cross that had become more pronounced in recent years. As Golgotha turns into Vitebsk, Chagall pours all his sadness about the losses of the past and his fears for the future into this powerful and violent painting.
Taken by the Germans in July 1941, Vitebsk had suffered a terrible fate in the war. The 16,000 Jews who had not managed to flee were put in a ghetto and soon faced liquidation. By the time the Soviet Army had liberated the city in June 1944 after fierce fighting, it was completely destroyed, its buildings burnt down and almost all inhabitants dead. Chagall would never return to Vitebsk, but in his art he created a lasting monument to his childhood home and the now lost world of Eastern European Jewry.

Champs de Mars, 1954/5

Oil on canvas
149.5 × 105 cm
Museum Folkwang, Essen

By the early 1950s, Chagall lived in a villa on the outskirts of Vence and relished his growing fame in France. He worked on a series of richly coloured, joyful paintings that celebrate his love of Paris, the city most formative for his art. In *Champs de Mars*, begun in the year of the tenth anniversary of Bella's death, he also commemorates the happiness he had found with his second wife Vava. From a rich, upper-middle-class, Russian-Jewish background, Vava provided a vital connection to his homeland. She also looked after and protected him from any distraction, so that he could work in peace.

In *Champs de Mars*, which takes its title from the park where the Eiffel Tower stands, Chagall brings together some of his favourite themes and motifs. A pair of lovers, Chagall and Vava, float over a town that is reminiscent of Vitebsk. The background is populated by famous Parisian sights, the basilica of Sacré-Coeur and the Eiffel Tower, silhouetted against the red sun. In homage to his first marriage, Chagall is holding out a bouquet of flowers to the small figure of Bella, cradling the infant Ida. An anthropomorphic bird sits at a table, decorated with a basket of fruit, demonstrating Chagall's mastery at filling empty space on the canvas. The dominant circles that surround the Eiffel Tower and, halo-like, protect the central couple, pay tribute to the great influence Orphism had on his art.

Champs de Mars, with its numerous personal references to the past and present, can be read as a succinct visual autobiography. Yet to appreciate the painting, it is not necessary to decipher the clues. Indeed, such an approach might not be in the artist's interest. When asked to explain the content of a similar painting, Chagall replied: "Say that I work with no express symbols but as it were subconsciously. When the picture is finished, everyone can interpret it as he wishes." This invitation to the viewer to let their imagination roam freely might explain the lasting popular appeal of paintings like *Champs de Mars*.