

# The Madonna of the Village.

## World War II and the Rescue of Works by Chagall

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Fig. 1  
Varian Fry, Marc Chagall, Hiram Bingham IV  
and Bella Chagall. Gordes, 1941  
Ida Chagall Archives



Fig. 2  
Marc Chagall  
*The Madonna of the Village*, 1938-1942  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
[\[+ info\]](#)

Fig. 3  
X-ray of *The Madonna of the Village*,  
turned on its left side

Gordes, South of France, 1941 (fig. 1). Chagall's painting *The Madonna of the Village* is to be seen on an easel, located outdoors on a rocky patch of ground near a rural house. Grouped around it are Marc Chagall, the creator of the work; Bella, his wife; Hiram Bingham IV, the US Consul in Marseilles; and Varian Fry, envoy of the Emergency Rescue Committee in France.<sup>1</sup> Fry is the only person who looks at the painting rather than at the camera. He had arrived in Marseilles a few months earlier with a list of two hundred artists and intellectuals persecuted by the Nazis who were to be helped to escape from Europe. Among them was Chagall, who would be accompanied by *The Madonna of the Village* (fig. 2) on his eventful flight to New York, together with the other works that the artist fought to save from confiscation or destruction. If objects could speak, we might ask Chagall's painting about the places it visited, the people it saw and what it heard during the summer of 1941, when, along with a further five hundred works by the artist, it was detained in Spain for five weeks. The following article is an attempt to reconstruct that journey.

### Biography of the *Madonna of the Village*

Marc Chagall added his signature and two dates to the bottom left corner of the painting ("mArc ChAgAll 1938-942"), referring to its starting and completion dates. From x-rays of the painting (fig. 3) we know that the canvas had a previous existence, as the artist had tried out on it at least two other compositions, finally painting *The Madonna of the Village* on top. Between 1938 and 1941, the date of the photograph taken in Gordes, the canvas accompanied Chagall to the various places in which he lived during those years. In 1938 he was in Paris, while also spending various periods on a farm at Villentroy in Indre-et-Loire. In 1939 the artist began to be concerned about his possible arrest and decided to move to Saint Dyé-sur-Loire. As Meret Meyer noted,<sup>2</sup> Chagall collected his paintings from his Paris studio, removed the stretchers and took the works to Saint Dyé in a taxi with the help of his daughter Ida.

On 10 May 1940 the family moved to the south of France as a result of the advance of the German troops through the Low Countries and Belgium, which threatened the security of the north of the country. They settled in Gordes in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region where Chagall purchased the house (a former Catholic girls school) that appears in the photograph. Marc, Bella and Ida made a final trip to Saint Dyé to collect works by the artist and bring them by van to Gordes.

During the winter of 1940-1941 Chagall resumed work on *The Madonna of the Village*. This is evident from the photograph, which also allows us to know the state of progress of the composition at that time and the modifications that it underwent before acquiring its final appearance as we see it today. For example, the canvas was initially



Fig. 4  
 Marc Chagall  
*White Crucifixion*, 1938  
 The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago  
 Gift of Alfred S. Alschuler

around twenty centimetres taller but was cut down at the lower edge. By removing this strip Chagall removed the motif of the cockerel, symbol of sun and fire. From the 1930s this bird is linked in Chagall's work with pairs of lovers and can thus be associated with love. In addition, it could refer to the bird sacrificed on the Day of Atonement in Jewish tradition. The removal of this motif from the composition altered the relative importance of the three layers into which the composition is structured, reducing the earthly zone painted in grey-brown tones at the Virgin's feet and giving more importance to the blue area of the sky and the upper level in yellow that is filled with angels.

The photograph also acts as witness to the painting's "social life". Chagall showed it to Hiram Bingham and Varian Fry during their visit at a particularly tense moment, and the three are portrayed alongside it as if they were guests received by the painting. The ascribed meaning that Christopher Green<sup>3</sup> gives to the canvas takes account of the importance of its creation in the context of Europe at war: the image of the Virgin is notably similar to the votive images of Catholic tradition that were considered to offer protection against catastrophes. Chagall had already made use of Christian iconography on numerous occasions, for example in *White Crucifixion* (fig. 4), a slightly earlier work in which Christ represents the suffering of the Jewish people. This group of works can thus be seen as a response to his own situation as a refugee.



Fig. 5  
 Map of France, Spain and Portugal, showing  
 the route taken by the Chagall family before  
 arriving in New York

### Rescuing Chagall

In December 1940 the Emergency Rescue Committee located Chagall in Gordes. As a Jew and a "Degenerate" artist he was clearly a target for Nazi persecution. Varian Fry and Hiram Bingham conveyed to the artist the invitation extended by Alfred Barr, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, to exhibit his work in that museum, a fact that would facilitate his departure from France. In addition, mention should be made of the efforts of the Fund for Jewish Refugee Writers, which contacted Barr in the first place and collected the necessary funding for travel and visas.<sup>4</sup> On 7 May 1941 Marc and Bella Chagall left behind their daughter Ida and embarked on their journey, the final destination of which was New York. Both crossed the French-Spanish border by train via Canfranc,<sup>5</sup> then continued on, with a stop in Madrid, to Lisbon, where they arrived on 11 May. In Lisbon they waited until mid-June to embark for New York (fig. 5).

### Rescuing the works

In addition to the dangers to be expected when crossing frontiers in a continent at war, another issue was the transportation and protection of Chagall's large amount of valuable luggage. It consisted of around

six hundred kilos of paintings, some completed and others underway, as well as gouaches and drawings, which he had been able to gather together and pack up in Marseilles in April 1941 when the trip to New York seemed a likely prospect. "Through a complicated series of manoeuvres and operations carried out with great skill by Ida and her husband, Chagall had managed to have shipped into Spain, awaiting transport to Lisbon and America, trunks and packing-cases containing most of his output in recent years."<sup>6</sup> Almost all the biographies of the artist recount a piece of information which is still, however, slightly mysterious: apparently the paintings, which travelled separately, were detained in Spain for at least five weeks. Why was this the case? Who knew about them there and about Chagall's trip? Who was involved in releasing the paintings?

Benjamin Harshav was able to make a number of suggestions regarding this issue on the basis of the account offered by Michel Gordey, Ida Chagall's first husband. Gordey suggested that the luggage probably went to Madrid accompanied by François Piétri, the French Ambassador there and a friend of Chagall's.<sup>7</sup> It is not clear who was behind the unexpected embargo of the works in Madrid that prevented them from continuing on to Lisbon. Sydney Alexander has suggested that the German Embassy ordered them to be detained due to pressure from the Gestapo,<sup>8</sup> but his reasons for this suspicion are unknown. Like Jackie Wullschlager,<sup>9</sup> Alexander referred to the possible mediation of a curator at the Museo del Prado who succeeded in having the luggage released. Neither author provides a specific name, however.

Looking at the list of specialist-administrative staff at the Prado at that date, only two names are possible: Fernando Álvarez de Sotomayor, the Museum's Director, and Javier Sánchez Cantón, Deputy Director and Chief Curator of Paintings. We have no evidence of a direct connection between Chagall and either of these two men: in the summer of 1934 (by which date Sánchez Cantón was already working at the Prado) Chagall had visited the Museum but there is no record of any correspondence or contact between the two men. However, there is evidence of contact between Piétri and the two museum employees as they had coincided at official events. Another possible connection between Chagall and the museum's Director and Deputy Director was Wifredo Lam, who studied with Álvarez de Sotomayor. Chagall knew Lam in Paris and both fled Europe with the help of Varian Fry and Hiram Bingham.

Chagall and his wife Bella had a lengthy wait in Lisbon and one marked by uncertainty regarding the fate of the works of art. In a letter of 1 June sent to Solomon R. Guggenheim, Chagall wrote: "I am already in Lisbon and am waiting for my paintings which are still on the way."<sup>10</sup> On 10 June Chagall took his leave of Hiram Bingham in a letter, indicating that the issue of the luggage seemed to have been resolved: "This is to inform you that we are embarking today for Monsanto.



Fig. 6  
 News item published in the ABC of 28 June 1941

This is completely unexpected. The paintings have just arrived and we have just been offered a cabin.”<sup>11</sup>

It is difficult to know what really happened to the works as Customs forms of that period have not survived. Sidney Alexander recounted that when Chagall arrived in New York he found a note from the Spanish Customs stating that the luggage continued to be detained in Spain due to an administrative problem, namely that belongings had to be personally identified by their owners before sending, as a consequence of which the agent appointed by Marc and Bella could not carry out the task. Citing Sidney Alexander and Franz Meyer as a source, Ziva Amishai-Maisels considers that there were two delays, the first in Madrid on the orders of the German Embassy, and the second in Lisbon on the orders of the Spanish authorities.<sup>12</sup>

### Ida takes action

Varian Fry had been unable to obtain visas for Ida and her husband Michel who lived in Marseilles between March and May of that year. In June they moved to the house at Gordes that Marc and Bella had left in April. On 16 June the two were deprived of French nationality. The need to flee from Europe was urgent, as was that of recovering Ida’s father’s works (Chagall had made contact with his daughter on his arrival in New York, only to learn that the luggage had not been sent). Ida, followed a few days later by Michel, managed to cross the French border from Gordes. Michel was arrested but rapidly released, again through the intervention of the French Ambassador in Spain, François Piétri.

Once in Madrid, Ida and Michel battled with the administrative issues in question and turned to contacts for help. As a result they were able to rescue the luggage. Around this time Piétri had various meetings with Serrano Suñer, Franco’s Minister for Foreign Affairs. The two signed a reciprocal agreement between the French and Spanish governments relating to works of art, documents and Spanish objects of historical value (fig. 6).<sup>13</sup> No documentation survives regarding these meetings and we can only speculate whether the situation of Ida and Michel and that of Chagall’s works was discussed during these meetings of high-level Spanish, French and German officials.

In New York, Chagall impatiently waited for news from Madrid: “We have already received a heap of telegrams concerning our daughter. That disturbed our vacation and we all hurried to return to New York to try to obtain the visas that our daughter and son-in-law lack.”<sup>14</sup> On 29 July Chagall wrote to his friend Yosef Opatoshu: “We are worried about my daughter and her husband, we still don’t know where they are.”<sup>15</sup> Chagall did not receive definite information regarding Ida and Michel until September, writing again to Opatoshu: “The children, God knows, swim with the Spanish boat ‘Navemare’ via Cuba.”<sup>16</sup>





Fig. 7  
 Interior of the exhibition *Chagall* held at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1946. On the right wall is *White Crucifixion* and *The Madonna of the Village*

### The works cross the Atlantic

Before leaving Marseilles, Michel had booked two passages on a ship, partly paid for by his parents (Chagall's attempts to raise money in New York had been unsuccessful). This cargo ship with a capacity for twelve passengers took 1,200 Jews ready to flee from Europe at any price (some paid up to 1,000 dollars for the trip). The sanitary conditions were so poor that the American consul in Seville denied the ship permission to sail to the US. Finally the 'Navemar' received the necessary authorization in Cadiz and docked in Lisbon for passengers to renew their out-of-date visas. Sidney Alexander indicated that it was there that Chagall's precious luggage with his works was loaded, accompanied by Michel and Ida.<sup>17</sup>

Accounts by some of the passengers indicate that on the deck of the ship there was a huge box measuring around 183 x 183 x 91 centimetres, which a red-headed woman with blue eyes (Ida) constantly guarded.<sup>18</sup> Had they not travelled on deck under Ida's supervision all of Chagall's paintings would have been lost as the luggage in the hold rotted due to damp. It was declared insanitary by the Brooklyn Port Authorities and thrown overboard. On 13 September news of the ship's arrival was noted on page 19 of *The New York Times* with the headline: "Ship, Packed like a Cattle Boat with 769 Exiles, Here From Spain/Freighter Docks after one of the Strangest Voyages of War [...]" German submarines torpedoed and sunk the 'Navemar' during its return passage to Europe. After its eventful journey *The Madonna of the Village* was reunited with its creator who began work on it again, completing it in 1942, probably before receiving his first major commission in the US for the backdrops and costumes for the ballet *Aleko* directed by Léonide Massine.

In 1946 The Museum of Modern Art in New York in collaboration with The Art Institute of Chicago devoted a major retrospective to the work of Chagall, which was the first to be held in the US. It gave concrete form to the invitation that the artist had received six years earlier and which had enabled him to obtain a visa and flee from Europe. *The Madonna of the Village* was the mute witness to that long journey in which it and other works by the artist were obliged to experience the hazards of travel in a continent at war in order to finally be displayed with honour in the new world capital of art.<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

- 1 The Emergency Rescue Committee was established in the US in 1940 with the aim of helping refugees trapped in Europe. It was set up by political activists and committed intellectuals and enjoyed the support of Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of the US President of the day.
- 2 Meret Meyer wrote a biography of his grandfather Marc Chagall which was first published in Pierre Schneider's book, *Chagall à travers le siècle*, Paris, Flammarion, 1995.
- 3 Christopher Green, *The European Avant-Gardes. Art in France and Western Europe 1904 – ca. 1945: The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection*. London, Zwemmer, 1995.
- 4 Numerous surviving letters written by Dina Glanz (Fund for Jewish Refugee Writers) or Curt Valentin request financial assistance from Solomon R. Guggenheim, Hilla Rebay, Helena Rubenstein and Walter C. Arensberg, who acted as patrons and protectors of the artist.
- 5 In his account "El oro de Canfranc" Ramón J. Campo reconstructed the flight of Jews through Spain, specifically via the station of Canfranc through which Chagall probably passed.
- 6 Sidney Alexander, *Marc Chagall. A Biography*, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1978, p. 327.
- 7 Benjamin Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times. A Documentary Narrative*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 503.
- 8 Alexander, op. cit., p. 327.
- 9 Jackie Wullschlager, *Chagall. Love and Exile*. London, Penguin Books, 2008, p. 398.
- 10 Harshav, op. cit., p. 500.
- 11 Letter reproduced in "The Rescue of Marc Chagall", an educational documentary made by the Wyman Institute. <http://www.wymaninstitute.org/education/>
- 12 Ziva Amishai-Maisels: "Chagall's 'White Crucifixion'", in *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*. 1991, vol. 17, no. 2, p. 140.
- 13 In *ABC*, Madrid, 28 June 1941, p. 3. The article can be consulted on <http://hemeroteca.abc.es/>
- 14 Letter from Marc Chagall to Hilla Rebay, June-July 1941, Harshav, op. cit., p. 511.
- 15 Harshav, op. cit., p. 512.
- 16 Harshav, op. cit., p. 512.
- 17 Alexander, op. cit., p. 330.
- 18 See Harshav, op. cit., p. 504.
- 19 With thanks to Carla Bianchi, curatorial assistant in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, for helping us confirming *The Madonna of the Village*'s inclusion on the 1946 show celebrated in that museum.