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THE COLOUR OF MARC CHAGALL

AN EMOTIONAL REALITY

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## INTRODUCTION



Renowned for his strange and magical imagery, the strongest and most expressive element in Chagall's work is his use of colour. Chagall is celebrated as the poetic painter of the twentieth century. His strength of colour has a visual and emotional impact on the viewer. His colours are symbolic and they hold distinct emotional qualities. Chagall is well known for his folklore images and they create an extremely important element in his work, setting up an unusual and often bizarre atmosphere. However on viewing a painting by Chagall it is the colour that has an instant appeal, the eye absorbing the colour learns before reading the imagery, the content and the mood of the piece.

The source of Chagall's work is found in mythology, folklore, his homeland, Paris and the French countryside. The theme of his work is simply love. <sup>1</sup> 'Love has always existed, and colour also. This has been the message in my work since the beginning. It is within me. It is stronger than me.' It is possible to relate emotion and colour and may reveal certain characteristics of emotional sensations.

During the span of Chagall's artistic career and before his time many revolutionary concepts and theories of art were established. The theories and ideologies of painters such as Cezanne, Gauguin, Matisse and Delaunay changed how many contemporary artists saw the visual world. Their revolutionary concepts made a great impact on Chagall's work. These concepts and theories led to an overall concentration on the grammatical and formal language of art. Aspects of painting became individually important. In this way painting took on additional aesthetic concerns.

In relation to the aspect of colour I would like to discuss how Chagall's work can be placed within the theories of some of the most revolutionary artists of his time. This includes the influential theories and concepts of the French artists, Matisse and Delaunay. Of the Russian influences the work of Bakst and in particular the work of these artists has enabled a clearer insight into the structure of colour symbolism and the poetic nature and structural freedom of Chagall's work.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE INFLUENCE OF MATISSE

Matisse believed that colour was one of the most valuable elements in painting. He believed that every colour had a certain pitch which provided a vibrancy, depth and harmony in his painting. For him, it was a means of expression, a process in which he could reflect his emotions. Through the use of flat gouaches, cut outs in paper or the translucent quality of stained glass Matisse believed colour becomes metaphysical. He found that when a non vibrant colour is placed beside a colour that is intense, visible hues can arise between the two. A similar interaction could occur between a muted colour and a luminous light source. These principles used by Matisse on colour can be seen in Chagall's earlier works. The paintings from 1908, such as the Little Parlor, House In The Park, and The Dead Man, contain colours and structures that are distinctly French.

The colours present in these paintings by Chagall are in perfect harmonious tones, they also show a simplicity of outline. The arrangement of the surface is ornamental with flat expanses outlined clearly. They are unmistakably Fauvist <sup>2</sup> in character and indicate Chagall's awareness of Matisse's experiments.

Matisse's concerns were to achieve simplicity in his works, moving from observation of actual light and forms of colour, without the distraction of texture. Here again we see the influence Matisse had on Chagall. Little Parlor <sup>1</sup> is a perfect example of this simplicity, with the play of three colours applied in a flat and decorative style. The dark brown colour emphasises the solidity of the furniture and allows for a realistic element of weight in the painting. The translucency of the pink reinstates the heavy brown, the fact that this colour is opaque and not solid creates a feeling of insecurity. The third colour is the interaction of both these colours. A yellow ochre appears as a glaze over the painting and conveys luminosity.



A great source of colour theory for Matisse and other artists, was the work of Michel Eugene Chevreul. He believed that colour acted in much the same way as music. An individual note played repetitively is not as complete as a bar of music. Chevreul believed colours had to be combined to create a sense of unity to achieve a perfect composition. Harmonious effects could be created with colour even if the actual object's depiction changed. He talked about colour having different 'zones',<sup>2</sup> similar in hue but differing in degrees of darkness, when they were put side by side the eye perceived changes of colour intensity.

Another route into colour experimentation includes divisionist theories on reconstruction of white light. Divisionism is based on a mechanical approach which uses the painting to stimulate the eye in a purely physical sense rather than provoking the emotions of the viewer. Its function was to break up the shadows by the separation of colour, resulting in the break up of form and contour which led to a discordant surface. The perception of these colours in the retina of the eye creates various sensations in the viewer's mind. This style of painting, although disruptive, holds great vitality and resonance.

Matisse was aware of these investigations into colour but for him they were only vibrations. Painting in a more direct expression he used the method of planes. With the use of flat colours he took the emphasis off the optical vibrations and hence he found a more simple and direct means of expression. The result was a more serene and peaceful piece. His objective was to create a complete harmony. For example, Matisse's La Danse,<sup>2</sup> the use of colour has been considered carefully. The blue, green and red are bright but because they are complimentary colours they have a calming effect on one another. Blue, red and green are



colours which reflect reality, waking in the viewer a sense of the tranquillity that can be found in nature, colours which are seen in the landscape. This painting has the dreamlike qualities that are also found in the works of Tintoretto or Giorgione. These artists had searched for harmony through colour and the rural environment. For example, in Giorgione's The Tempest,<sup>3</sup> the figures are placed in an idyllic setting dominated by the play of green and blue colours.

The ideal and serene is also reflected in Chagall's painting Peasant Life <sup>4</sup>: The interaction of the colours is extremely lively. The blue, green, yellow and red take on a rhythmic formation, all the colours are reflected and contrasted creating a lyrical effect like music. The images also suggest the landscape but the colours portray the idea of idyllic nature in a more obvious manner.

There is a blue light that floods the entire painting it suggests a kind of tranquillity. There is a feeling of light and air suggested through the colours of yellow and white. As in Giorgione's The Tempest everything is treated in a soft manner, the edges of forms become a haze, some of the colours melt into one another.

To Matisse colours had their own truths. They are beautiful and have to be balanced in order to achieve a tonal quality that resembles music. the structure of the painting was essential. It would keep the colours fresh and pure because everything is sensitive towards colour. The relationships of colours were also of great importance, the differences of colour had to be emphasised. Matisse believed that it was not the quality of colour that is important but the choice of colour. In this way the colour becomes symbolic. It is a personal choice and painting is open to the emotion and moods of the artist. Matisse strongly believed that colour

is at its best when it is organised in parallel to the emotional depth of the artist.

Matisse understood that an object could be described in a linear manner. However, the emotional content of the painting could be given more depth by the addition of colour. This method of painting allowed for a redefinition of the object and colour. As a result it was necessary for Matisse to define his feelings before commencing the painting.

Colour expressed a light for Matisse, not an expression of physical perception but communicated the light of the imagination. By redefining what he had seen in front of him, he allowed the colour to communicate the essence of every object and parallel it with emotional intensity. Colour and drawing create a suggestion. It is a method of illusion that installs a sense of order in the viewer.

There is a rationality to Matisse's method and treatment of colour and form. It is orderly and formal and never enters the realm of chaos. The form is analysed and the colour applied in an intellectual manner. To Matisse the concept of creating a sense of stability in both painting and the viewer is extremely important. This concept of serenity and order is particularly strong in the earlier works by Chagall. Nearly all of his work up until 1910 features the characteristics of this orderly arrangement of colours, the composition also approached in a disciplined manner.

There is always a sense of unity in Chagall's painting, but in contrast to Matisse a desire for a more hallucinatory and fantasy element pervades in his paintings. A quirky element, which belongs to the temperament of the artist, is present in his work. Chagall's world could never be as orderly as Matisse's. His paintings did not reach a chaotic

level but the possibility was there. Things could be balanced and unbalanced. His attitude resulted in a great freedom of structure and colour.

## CHAPTER 2.

### CHAGALL'S SENSIBILITY TO CUBISM



From St Petersburg, Chagall travelled to Paris arriving in the late summer of 1910. With a small allowance given to him by the politician Max Moisevitch Vinaver and the help of friends, Chagall settled in an empty apartment in Impasse du Maine. Chagall was overwhelmed by Paris, a newly arrived fledgling painter in the art capital of the day, the liberal atmosphere and light of the city overtook him, 'Lumiere Liberte',<sup>3</sup> he called it.

In 1911 he established an important friendship with the cubist painter and poet, Robert Delaunay. Familiar with his Russian background, Delaunay's wife Sonia Terk <sup>4</sup> was originally from St Petersburg, she strengthened their friendship. Their acquaintance was a long one, marked by Delaunay's portrait of Bella Chagall,<sup>5</sup> Marc Chagall's wife, it was painted in 1923, evidence of their close contact with each other over the years. Not only did Chagall gain a friend but his association with this experienced colourist influenced Chagall greatly, it was an opening into the world of colour theory and the methods of the Cubist movement. Through Delaunay Chagall made the acquaintance of other Cubist painters and poets. These include Leger, Le Fauconnier and Blaise Cendrars. Chagall eagerly absorbed their modernist ideas and the concepts that circulated in all circles of the Parisian intellect. Between the metropolis of Paris and the painters and poets of its cafe society, Chagall became exposed to all the latest trends. As a result elements of Cubism emerge in his work, a radical re-organisation of space and form can be seen in his paintings from 1911 onwards. Some of these paintings with Cubist influences include Russian Village, Adam and Eve, Golgotha and From The Moon. The paintings incorporating many of the Cubist trademarks : geometric planes, fractured forms and in relation to Delaunay's work, a strong feeling of movement.



In order to discuss the effects that Cubism had on Chagall, it is worthwhile to look at the work of Delaunay, his contribution to the movement and the influence he had on Chagall's sensibility of Cubism. The Cubist elements found in Delaunay's work include the architectural arrangement of forms within a rectangular frame and the surface that holds an appearance of being flat. Of most importance to Delaunay was the Cubist concept of fragmentation of form.

Delaunay based his compositions on his observations of light, breaking up the form with fractured light. It was a disruptive use of light and added a new dimension to Cubism. Delaunay also used aggressive primary colours, they were more pronounced especially with the introduction of fractured light. Because of Delaunay's concerns with light and colour, the term Orphism was bestowed on him by Apollinaire. It refers to the use of high key colours that bring the lyricism of colour to a highly sensitive level.

Delaunay insisted in deconstructing objects for the purpose of a more harmonious painting. In Delaunay's case the object is used to make a painting with, not the painting as representation of the object. A good example of these Cubist techniques can be seen in Delaunay's Eiffel Tower <sup>5</sup> from 1911. The painting is broken up into planes, the bottom of the tower dissolving into the city below. The sky is fragmented into different view points, the tower and buildings are twisted, as a result every dimension of the structure is seen simultaneously. This was one of the ultimate concerns of the Cubists, to show all sides of an object at the same time. This concept denied the classical ideal of a fixed view point, it was an attack on the traditional methods of painting. Breaking the continuity of line and juxtaposing colour, Cubism allowed for a consistent play of light, space and colour. The painting Eiffel Tower,

resembles a piece of shattered glass, it possesses something of a modern sense, in that the tower is a symbol of modern architecture. The tower is a true object, it is an impersonal steel geometric scientific structure.

Many of Delaunay's concerns can be applied to the works of Chagall. The emphasis on strong colour can be partly credited to Delaunay. His influence along with the movement of Cubism can be seen in the formal and spatial methods that are evident in Chagall's work. The pictorial space is separated by divisions of the geometric methods of the Cubists, derived from the Cubists are the superimposed planes and transparent qualities that become distinct features in Chagall's painting from 1910 onwards. Although Chagall incorporated the Cubist style he went beyond the Cubist formal concerns, in that he interpreted the Cubist methods into his own personal style.

In Chagall's painting Adam and Eve,<sup>6</sup> he displays the same fractured technique but allied to a thematic painting. Like Delaunay the colour is arranged harmoniously and Cubist stylistic effects are used to make the painting more rhythmic looking. But this painting is not just concerned with formal aspects, it is the theme of the painting that is of most importance, the content is the narrative held together by the structures that belong to Cubist methods.

In this painting the hips of the yellow figure edge off to one side, this is reflected in the movements of the green figure. In the hard edged forms of the figure a circular motion is created by the rhythm of these forms. There is a great deal of movement in the colours, they are sharp and emphasise the angularity of the figures' bodies and the cut out landscape they stand in. They are bitter colours, Adam is painted in a sour yellow, Eve is painted in an acidic

green. The stability of these colours are created by the calming effect of the blue light that surrounds them. The tree describes variations of red, this holds the green and yellow together, emphasising their contrasts. The painting surface is made up of the Cubist trademarks of geometric clashing planes, fractured forms and geometric brush marks.

This painting is not just concerned with the arrangement of colour and shape, it is also an allegory. The two figures representing Adam and Eve are the first couple, they are the archetypical couple. This is where Chagall departs from Delaunay and Cubism, here Chagall uses the narrative, as he does in all his paintings. He interpreted the Cubist planes as psychic levels, not just structures for a formal and abstract painting.

Adam and Eve represent the birth of the human race. However Chagall has clearly used unnatural synthetic, almost sickly colours to depict them. For example, Eve is painted in an acidic green. The story as we know is that Eve picks the apple from the tree, taking a bite she introduces original sin. The figures themselves take on the form of the fatal apple : the tree as the core and the figures as the encircling apple. Their bodies are fragmented, their arms joined above in a twist, so too are their feet. Their stance, colours and distortment of their bodies suggest something unnatural. These unreal elements indicate that the scene is purely fictitious, but is symbolic as a theme for birth and death.

The tree resembles a foetus, its colours suggest flesh and the shape of the bark is curled, suggesting a form in anticipation of growth, it clearly resembles the womb. Looking at the painting even more closely it is possible to make out a linear arrow head mark, that comes from the womb of Eve and points at this growth shape in the tree. Chagall



suggests that with birth death is inevitable, this is reflected in the sickly colours of the figures and the ominous purple cloud that approaches the figures from behind. Other indications of death are seen on the ground in which these figures stand. It is not a landscape that a real figure could walk upon, the ground is more like pits of blackness that these unearthly looking figures will fall into.

In a static narrative Adam and Eve are juxtaposed with the tree, juxtaposed with birth and in their colours and the landscape come in contact with the inevitability of their death. Using the concept of a narrative Chagall moved beyond the Cubist subject matter of banal objects such as Picasso's violins and bottles and Cezannes apples. He brought a modernist sensibility to traditional folk tales, he conveys emotional states through the elements of colour, object and form with particular emphasis on the human condition.

I could work tranquilly next to the arrogant Cubists.<sup>6</sup> They didn't bother me. I looked at them from a certain distance and I thought let them have their fill of their square pears on their triangular table. My art is irrational, a flamboyant go between, a blue spirit springing out of my pictures and I thought down with realistic naturalism, impressionism, cubism, they make me feel sad and constrained.

This quote emphasizes how strongly Chagall felt about conveying the emotional elements in paintings rather than seeing painting as a method of pure construction, or as in Delaunay's eyes, deconstruction of objects. Delaunay based his compositions in a purely structural manner, they were observations of light and breaking the form, techniques that gave rise to a fractured appearance and the illusion of movement through colour. Chagall also displays these

methods in his paintings, but the technique is always allied to a thematic painting.

In Chagall, colours and shapes already are combined <sup>7</sup> to form pictures at a time when his friend Robert Delaunay was still pacing off the circle of colour, mentally, in order then to fashion it through painting in crystalline purity, far from any objective references and "Orphically" beautiful.

Chagall did incorporate Delaunay's methods and the Cubist style, but as Keller states, he really was beyond the Cubist formal concerns. He used Cubism for his own devices. Cubism could show all sides of an object at the same time, similarly Chagall used this concept in a narrative way. In his painting he shows all sides of a story at the same time.

Although the structural elements of Delaunay's and Chagall's work are similar, their interests are entirely different. The highlighted interest in Delaunay's paintings is the concept of fragmentation through light on form. He was not concerned with the exact representation of an object, his painting was created through the deconstructive Cubist methods of light. This results in a spatial drama, Chagall's drama concerns the human figure. Take, for example, both these artists use of the object of the window. In Delaunay's window paintings of Paris, the drama is purely formal and abstract, the objects are fragmented and deconstructed in order to make a harmonious surface. The space is evoked by planes and facets which are structured from the object. In Chagall's views of Paris very often the images of animals, flowers and lovers take over as elements that take part within a structure, sometimes the space is evoked by planes but more often than not it is conducted through colour. The planes and fractured elements are present but in extreme contrast to Delaunay Chagall's drama is purely emotional. Chagall's chief interest in the Cubist



painters was their use of colour. He applied their methods of structure for his own devices but very often his colour took over, along with his floating imagery. Colour was important to Chagall because it has a distinct emotional appeal.

Chagall's use of colour has not escaped criticism. In Douglas Cooper's book The Cubist Epoch,<sup>8</sup> Chagall comes under the title of Lesser Cubist Painters. He describes Chagall as nothing more than a pure fabricator, who flirted with the concept of Cubism. He did not regard Cubism as a casual matter, he employed the techniques in a serious manner so that he could develop his own personal style. If anything, Chagall advanced the formal techniques and colourist methods of the French artists, who sometimes became overly scientific in their approach losing the potential of a more poetic language in their work.

Cooper also states that Chagall was 'in short a real eclectic'. He most certainly admired his fellow painters and the development that they brought to the art world, but he did not take with him their philosophy. Perhaps the only thing in common that painting can hold is the universal language of colour. By this I mean that the world is not without emotion and these sensations are reflected by the artist, through the use of colour. To Matisse, Delaunay, Bakst and Kandinsky, colour described the emotional content of their work and for many other artists colour is the essence of painting. Colour is one of the strongest elements in Chagall's work, it never left him as the movements of Orphism, Cubism and Fauvism did.

### CHAPTER 3.

#### BAKST AND MUSIC

One of the earliest influences in Chagall's artistic career is the work of the Russian artist Leo Bakst.

His influence can be seen in Chagall's strong use of colour and the musical qualities in his work.

Bakst was more than likely responsible for Chagall's urge to move to Paris.

In 1910 Bakst settled in Paris. There he remained, working for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, as a stage designer. Previous to this, Bakst had been teaching since 1907, Chagall attended his classes, hearing the names of contemporary painters such as Gauguin, Henri, Matisse, Cezanne and Maurice Denis, these Bakst regarded as the most significant artists of the day. This man who admired the French artists created an aura around these painters inspiring his students to travel to Paris themselves.

Bakst believed that these contemporary painters advocated a similar art form to his own. His views on art led him to Fauvism and this was echoed in his painting, drawing, and method of teaching. What he hoped for in his students was 'the ability to arrange contrasting colours, to balance their reciprocal influences and to translate this into the simplest forms'. These methods echo many of Matisse's theories and methods in approaching painting. Bakst is obviously the origin of Chagall's interest in French methods of painting.

Other French influences were sparked off by a number of exhibitions. As early as 1907, the Fauves held their first exhibition in Moscow, their influence was felt strongly in the new Russian art. Such movements sparked off an art revolution, Chagall would have been well aware of the concepts of this revolutionary exploration thus introducing

Chagall and many other young artists to French symbolism and the exploration and experiments into colour, form and line.

#### BAKST ORIGINS

Leon Bakst was a member of one of the most influential artistic groups in Russia. They called themselves World of Art. Set up in 1898, they searched for lyricism in art, going against the conservative and dogmatic art of the official academia. They looked for a new and more impressive means of visual expression. Some of the members include Mstislav Dobuzhinsky and Nikolai Roerich. Extremely ambitious, they were interested in bringing their art out, on a world wide scale. The idea was that Russian culture should be seen all over Europe. What it achieved was a binding of nineteenth century realism and the world of Art-Nouveau.

This group associated itself with the artistic trends of the day, reflecting it in their music, literature, theatre, painting and art criticism. Important is its contribution to the triumph of Russian ballet, music and stage design. They held annual exhibitions and published many journals thus promoting Russian art and bringing it closer to a wider public audience. Bakst was an editor and illustrator to these journals, they were stylistic with a high professional level of design. Bakst's interest in theatre was heightened by the musical enthusiasts of the World of Art members and is reflected in the musical quality of his work.

A key exhibition to the Russian symbolist movement was the Heaven Blue Rose, formed during the years 1907 to 1908. Bakst contributed to this group, other participants included Sapunov, Kuznetsov and Petrov Vodkin. It established the importance of the new Russian symbolism. The motives of these artists were create paintings through music and pure



colour. The dynamic effect of these paintings, even the ideas had a direct influence on the young Chagall. In 1908 they exhibited their work in Moscow. Other characteristics of their paintings were strong primitive elements and the influence of icon painting, particular attention was given to the colour.

All the emphasis placed on colour and music by such groups as World of art and The Heaven Blue Rose had an enormous effect on Chagall, in nearly all of his work there is a feeling of musical celebration. Along with the influence of Bakst, Chagall could have hardly escaped from the world of music and colour. Bakst, even without the influence of these movements was a dynamic colourist. The lyrical freedom of this artist was best expressed through dance and music. Colour dominated Bakst's set designs. For Bakst, colour produced a definite emotional response. His sense of colour was intense, vivid blues, reds and greens presiding over his sets. Many of his sources of interest revolved around the sensual poetry of oriental art.

Bakst's colours were very often sharply accentuated, particularly in costume design. A true master colourist, in that with such a huge abundance of movement and colour, he still maintained a harmony throughout. He was continually aware of tone, colour scheme, everything adhering to the rhythm of the music. The production of Schehirazade <sup>7</sup> is an excellent example of this emotional impact of colour. Bakst brought colour to music and in turn the feelings in the music were echoed in his colour. The result is a painterly interpretation of music, with this also, an innovation in theatre design.



Bakst would make careful studies of the movements of each dancer, in relation to his analysis he would create a colour suitable for the costume. Everything would correlate with the stage set, the music, dance and colour. The influence of Bakst in Chagall's painting is clearly evident. In nearly all of Chagall's work, there is a musical quality. The musical interest was also reflected in the motifs of the painting. A recurring image is the violin in the form of a man, the emphasis of music is also created through the movement of objects and placement of colour.

The production of Schehirazade can be easily compared to the colourful work of Marc Chagall's Daphnis and Chloe.<sup>8</sup> The colouring is remarkably similar. There is a feeling of magic in both of their paintings, also similar is the decorative use of flowers.

'without flowers and music half of happiness is lost.'<sup>10</sup> This statement by Bakst complies with any of Chagall's paintings, the element of nature is always present and for Bakst nature is closely associated with music. They both shared a lyricism of colour, a sumptuous richness and a very definite musical quality, to the point that the colours are almost singing.

Chagall's career as a stage designer began in 1921 with three miniature plays by Sholem Aleichem. These plays include The Agents, The Lie and The Mazel Tov. He also designed many costumes and scenery for plays by Gogol and Synge's The Playboy of the Western World. He created scenery and costumes for the ballet Aleko and the most famous production of Daphnis and Chloe at the Paris Opera in 1958.

Like Bakst, Chagall specified the fabrics for the costumes, was present at every dress rehearsal so that every detail could be seen to. He hand painted many of the costumes and in the balleted Daphnis and Chloe, he even went so far as to paint the stage curtain. A daring innovator, in that he loved to defy the law of gravity, his images sometimes upside down and often he would paint the actors' or dancers' faces and hands in green and blue.

Chagall was independent from other set designers in his originality, interpretation of the story and possessed a rich imagination. Audiences were dazzled by the sight of his set designs, the colouring and texture often characterised the lyrical elements of the Orient. For Bakst and Chagall the Oriental world allowed them an opportunity to introduce a romantic colour vision, that was lavish, luxurious and over the top. The colour scheme was often intense, it introduced mysterious and magical elements into their work but above all both artists used colour to make an emotional impact on their audience, be it on stage or in painting the ? of human emotion was the most important element. Colour allows the possibility of setting a mood in the audience, it produces an emotional response.

## CHAPTER 4.

### KANDINSKY AND COLOUR SYMBOLISM

Of the Russian painters, perhaps the most important and influential is the work of Wassily Kandinsky. In numerous ways Kandinsky is the key figure into the understanding of the role of colour in Chagall's work. Many of his theories combine the concepts of artists like Matisse, Delaunay, Chevreul, Goethe and many other influential painters that affected Chagall's work. All the concerns of colour subtlety, light, simplicity, harmony and colour contrasts are combined in the work of Kandinsky. Most important is the emphasis he places on the symbolism of colour.

Kandinsky believed that colour acted physically on the viewer initially and gradually evokes a psychic or psychological experience. The question arose in his work, whether colour had a direct effect on the psyche or did it bring about psychological associations? These associations correlating with history. Kandinsky believed that the effect of colour was more direct than associational. Colour could bring on sensations of sound, smell, taste and touch. This phenomenon is called synaesthesia, many experiments were carried out by psychologists and the evidence remains inconclusive. Kandinsky's understanding of this was that this occurrence could not be explained through association alone. Colours he suggested reverberated sensations, stimulating them.

In Kandinsky's Concerning the Spiritual in Art,<sup>11</sup> he found that there were two basic ranges in colour. The warm and the cool colours, light and dark. Yellow, he described as the warm colour moving down the scale to blue, as the cool colour. Warm colours come to the fore of the viewer, the cooler colours recede. This is a well known theory and was well established by the time of Kandinsky, but Kandinsky noted the unusual and similar centres of movement in colours.



The colour yellow, he noted, moved outwards, the blue was introverted. From this judgement it was possible to state that the colour yellow might appear offensive, while the blue lets the eye absorb. In this way yellow takes on a feeling of infinity, it goes towards the light, even the darkest of yellows moves in the direction of white. The similarity between white and yellow is parallel to that of black and blue. A dark blue can be seen as a black, because of its natural density.

Kandinsky believed that yellow was the most sensitive of the primary colours. It is extremely vulnerable when placed beside other colours or when it is blended. A tinge of blue turns yellow into a lime green, an unreal colour, with an almost sickly appearance. A pure green for Kandinsky is the most calm, yellow is sour and blue is spiritual. Blue belongs to the sky and yellow to the earth, on the other hand a blue that nearly reaches a black can be a sign of suffering.

Red resembled a colour of infinite warmth, he described this colour as a character that could also vary itself, going from warm to cool. Red can hold a reckless beauty and can be a very pleasing colour but it can also become very cold, depending on the tone or shade chosen. Its intensity is within, therefore it does not reach out as much as yellow. Red has many varieties, a loved colour in traditional design and primitive works, its popularity Kandinsky suggests has to do with its harmonious appeal with the green of nature. But none of these colours can stand on their own, Kandinsky felt that only when a colour comes into play with others can it free itself from being purely material.

Orange can reach the viewer on an instant as it is a mix of yellow and red. The red element in orange is a colour of confidence, through when it is placed by violet the colours

become unstable. Kandinsky described the colour brown as a colour that possesses inner strength. It is completely stationary, placed beside the right colours or merged into others, it can hold great beauty.

Black and white were also considered colours for Kandinsky. White is an exceptional colour, in that it is non material and non physical. In its purity it is truly one of the more spiritual. It is similar to yellow in that it describes infinity. The difference to yellow, is the cool silence of white, it is almost immortal. Kandinsky describes it as a colour of hope, a destiny that has not yet been revealed.

Black on the other side of the scale is final. Like violet, it is exempt of energy, motionless like death. All colours next to black come to the fore, alongside white they fade, leaving only an echo of colours left behind. For example, if yellow is placed beside black, it would stand out strong, but beside white it looks anaemic.

The concept of one colour acting against another is very similar to that of Chevreul's theory on the interaction of colours. The difference being that Kandinsky talks about colour in relation to human emotions and not their physical behaviour. Similar to Chevreul he believed strongly in a colour harmony.

The harmony that occurs between two colours can be complex. For instance colours that are considered jarring, when they are juxtaposed they can cancel each other out or create an extra tension. For example red and blue, they put huge contrasts on one another, taken by themselves the impact would not be the same. Kandinsky suggests that the tension created by these colours has something to do with the spiritual elements that they contain, causing them to have a strong effect on the viewer.

Two colours placed side by side influence each other, the result is a stronger contrast. This happens with near complementaries, like red and blue. The true complementaries being yellow and blue, red and blue-green or yellow and blue-violet, they have a very definite effect on one another and cause a visual drama, physically and mentally.

An interesting use of these complementaries can be seen in Kandinsky's Composition 4 from 1911. In this painting he deals with blue and yellow in an unusual way. For Kandinsky, by their nature, these colours are spiritual and earthly, they automatically set up a conflict. Yellow is the earthly colour, blue belongs to the divine. This is of course Kandinsky's personal colour symbolism but also complies to that of colour psychology. The yellow and blue set up a battle between the material forces of the yellow and the heavenly powers of the blue. However the character of the yellow in Composition 4 is anything but earthly, it is almost unreal and cold looking. It is the blue in this picture, that is warm. This emphasises the contradictory elements of colour and how their character can change in relation to surrounding colours.

Kandinsky's colour symbolism adds an interesting depth into other artists use of colour and a clearer insight into the work of Marc Chagall. The colour is the personality, it can form characteristics of beauty, ugliness, fear and serenity. These explanations of colour are extremely general but they focus on one of the most important elements in painting. The understanding of colour is not a straight forward one, as colour is as abstract as music. However Kandinsky, Matisse and Delaunay have shed some light on their physical and symbolic characters. As they were artists who shared their concerns and time with Chagall, some very close comparisons can be made.



Chagall is renowned as a master colourist but three basic colours recur in his work, these are blue, red and green. Perhaps this is a very obvious choice, as all other colours can be obtained from them through suitable colour combinations. They are the basic fundamental colours in Chagall's work, but even more fundamental is their emotional value.

The most vital of these colours is blue, it is the colour of the artist's soul, as he has so often described himself as a painter with a 'blue spirit'.<sup>12</sup> Blue holds celestial connotations for Chagall, it is regal and noble found in the semiprecious stone of lapis lazuli and the ancient works of the Byzantine period. It is melancholy in Picasso's paintings and is heavenly in the medieval blue of Giotto. Red is Chagall's colour of warmth, used by the famous Venetian colourist Titian it describes a sensual richness, the colour of blood, it is ceremonial and is reflected in the works of Cimabue it is joyous and passionate. Green is the earthly colour, lying between blue and yellow it is fresh and youthful. For Kandinsky it is calm and can neutralise the flighty appearance of yellow and other colours that possess an intensity or vibrance.

Colours describe the emotional depth of Chagall's paintings. They create an instant appeal, reaching out to our senses. Colours describe the human condition in Chagall's painting, it is the theme of the couple or human relationship that acts as a psychological construct, human emotions embody Chagall's spirituality and belief in colour. It is human emotions that are the main factors which govern Chagall's use of colour.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **YELLOW AND BLUE : A DISCUSSION OF THE MEANING OF PURE COLOUR IN CHAGALL'S WORK**

Chagall's awareness of colour sensation is evident in nearly all of his work. Parallel to Kandinsky, he used the character and nature of his colours to describe feeling. The emotional depth of Chagall's paintings is therefore the colour. The images are also significant but the colour in his paintings have a direct appeal. Colour reaches out to our senses long before the realisation of the pictorial images.

The character of Kandinsky's yellow and blue are similar to that of Chagall's. The theme of his paintings correspond to many of Kandinsky's works. Taking the view that yellow is an earthly colour and blue a spiritual one, Chagall also battles with the real and unreal. For example, Chagall's painting The Farm Yard, painted in 1954, the very familiar qualities of Kandinsky's yellow and blue philosophy are created.

The scale of the forms are also important in this painting, and here is a perfect example of the outward movement of yellow in the shape of a cow. The image of this animal is transformed into a warm light that stretches over the great expanse of blue. this scene is far from being a content picture of the idyllic harmony of nature, there is an element of uneasiness.

The yellow is used in an offensive manner, it takes over, the eye must keep coming back to it. The blue also takes on an eerie tone. Fading in and out, going from black to an unreal green. This play of colour sets up the magic in chagall's painting, even before the images are readable.

The colour of the yellow is earthly in this painting, but its form dissolves into a spiritual blue, leaving an unreal aura of green around the form of the cow. Everything is enfolded in a blue world that does not belong to reality, it is a vision from a dream not from observable reality. In nearly all of Chagall's paintings the battle between the earthly and heavenly is evident.

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The varied characteristics of red are used to their fullest in Chagall's painting, The Juggler, here he shows the perfect example of the warm and cool beauty of red. This painting is loaded with complex colour contrasts, harmonies and symbolic images.

The red arena in which this birdlike figure stands shows a remarkable handling of colour variation. Every hue of red is expressed and brought to its completeness. The internal warmth is depicted in the form of a fence, this introduces intimate qualities into the painting. The movement of red from the outskirts of the fence, goes from the beautiful into a frightening black. It is pleasing and disturbing all at once. The tone changes from a warm red, moving gradually outwards it becomes a violet red into purple.

The contrast of this painting is made even greater by the surrounding blue. Complementary to the red is the green of the bird's body. Every element has been taken into consideration. The form the red has taken on is a circle. The circle is most suitable to the character of reds colour, as Kandinsky suggests, that holds warmth within.

The glow of the red fence is reflected in the hands and the chin of the bird. Every colour here is in perfect harmony, a large number of tones are brought out and balanced by others. This painting's qualities could be easily compared to the sensations felt in music.

The musical quality of the painting is emphasised by the colour and also the images. For example, the ballet dancer in the top right hand corner, the fiddler, in his rich green jacket, all create the atmosphere of a musical circus. However the real rhythm of this painting is due to the choice of colours and where they are placed, also the forms in which they take.

This painting reflects a joyous celebration of the supernatural. The battle of the spiritual and earthly elements arise. Green, yellow and red are enveloped in a nocturnal blue, adding mysticism and celestial connections to the work.

A frequent feature in Chagall's work is the spiritual sense of blue that nearly always surrounds other colours. Many of his paintings are bathed in a blue light. In fact Chagall often described himself as a painter with 'a blue soul' this statement emphasises the symbolic nature of Chagall's colour.

## BLUE

'Blue evokes the sea and the sky; after all these are the most abstract things in the tangible and visible nature'.<sup>13</sup>

This quote by Yves Klein, can be paralleled with Chagall's desire to bring colour of the spiritual world to reality of nature, so that one could influence the other. Blue is a spiritual colour for Chagall, it describes an atmosphere of tranquillity and emphasises the dreamlike state which he so often loved to paint.

Again Chagall explores the different qualities and characters of blue in his painting Still Life with Flowers.<sup>12</sup> The blue in this painting takes on the feeling of immortality. Different tones of blue are described as shafts of light, as if introducing the possibilities of unknown dimensions. The heavenly blue that Kandinsky describes is more than obvious in Chagall's painting.

From the top right hand corner of the painting, a blue light streams down, bringing with it a white blue. In this painting the feeling of blue is not as nocturnal in character as The Juggler. The objects are not swamped in its colour, but become like forms that float or move steadily towards us through different blues.

Here blue becomes light, in the physical and imaginative sense. Much like the light that Delaunay achieved in his paintings of discs. There are prismatic fragments of colour, edges of blue cut into purples and greens, this begins in the lower left corner of the painting. As the eye travels, traces of shadows appear, shadows of dark blue that describe the leaves of the flowers.

The window opens at the top and a mysterious blue figure floats through, encircling the bride or angel that has come down from the heavens. The head of the blue figure is



painted with a turquoise face and dark blue hair. It is surrounded by an aura of blue light, hardly a figure from reality, more like a figure that takes on the form of something spiritual.

## WHITE

The idea of immortality and spirituality is also expressed through white. Again in Chagall's Still Life With Flowers, the image of the lilies and its surrounding flowers emphasises the spiritual content of the painting. White for Kandinsky was symbolic of purity, a truly spiritual colour, it is also infinite and immortal. The splashes of red roses and the shape of the white lilies are extremely provocative. The rich green surrounding them emphasises the beauty of their colours.

The question of white as a true colour has continually been argued, but here, in Chagall's painting, it acts as a remarkable colour. Kandinsky also believed that white and black had their place in the world of colour. He believed that these colours had an immense effect on our psyche. All the notions of death and birth are indeed associated with these colours and have an emotional effect on the viewer.

Perhaps one of the most interesting uses of black and white, can be seen in Chagall's Clowns At Night.<sup>13</sup> A painting that describes tragedy, it is mysterious and sad. A recurring theme is the battle between the earthly and the heavenly, also present in this painting. The white is moving back and forth in the black space. The clowns musical followers come through the blackness, as if coming towards their death. The colours of yellow, green and red reflect the earthly qualities, they are like reflections of the past. The white in the face of the clown echoes these colours, simultaneously, the black of his eyes brings them towards their final end.

Nothing shows a more positive magic than this work,<sup>14</sup> whose wonderful prismatic colours take up and transforms the unrest of modern times and yet retain the old innocence by portraying what in nature is the principle of joyous delight - flowers and expression of love

It is through Chagall's poetic perception of colour and imagery that he has earned himself the name as the poetic painter of the twentieth century. Even before his encounter with Matisse's work and Cubism in 1911-1912 when Chagall used the Cubist methods of planes to convey psychic levels of his mind and the harmony of colour found in Matisse as a poetic way of creating space.

The movements of Fauvism, Cubism and Orphism and the contribution of individual artists such as Matisse and Delaunay, emphasised the singular importance of elements in painting such as line, colour and planes of surface area. Matisse is one of the outstanding twentieth century painters who concerned himself with the painting as a harmonious flat surface tended towards decoration. Chagall was just as concerned with the surface as a harmonious whole but unlike Matisse, the figural elements in Chagall's work function as poetic imagery. His painting operates on the symbolic level as well as the formal. This is seen in the thematic paintings of Chagall's couple paintings, adding a structural image to his work and an emotional quality to his colour.

Chagall brought his individual world to painting, turning his life experience and dreams into pictures. Chagall belongs to the great painters of our time, he gave painting a poetic significance, he brought the pictorial metaphor to painting, initiating the movement of Surrealism. If we look at Chagall's window paintings, the views of Paris we sense something of the supernatural. The paintings almost made up entirely on the relation of coloured forms, they convey a spiritual dimension that can be paralleled with the work of Kandinsky. 'The splendour of colour <sup>15</sup> in a painting must powerfully attract the viewer'.

La Nuit,<sup>14</sup> painted in 1953, it is a Parisian interior scene. La Nuit demonstrates one of Chagall's pre-occupying themes :



a room with a balcony. This simple image symbolically reflects the painter's concern with the couple in their insulated love and their relationship to the outside world. This outside world is ambiguously viewed as either an extension of the couple's dreamlike, floating state or a threatening black vacuum. The lovers fly out of the window into the night, they rest on the cushion of a red bird, floating over the night sky of Paris, the interior of the room comes outside, they are interchangeable.

There is luminosity in the colour, the darkness of the background make the colours sharper, they glow deeply. The greens, blues and white. The colours appear to vibrate, they produce the illusion of a floating form, hovering images over the cityscape. The woman's transparent dress floats over the festive flowers, sparkling and white, it is luminous. All the features of the room, the city and the figures are outlined in white, acting like a spiritual aura around all the forms in the painting. The lovers almost dissolve into the black night, it is as if they are not aware of what is occurring to their physical state. There is an emotional depth in this painting, it is the unity of two people that transcend their physical selves into a spiritual world. Staring out at the viewer the eye of the red bird has a knowing stare. The bird is unreal, its body like a landscape in purple flames, suggesting internal warmth and desire. The couple leave the real world and enter another, this is suggested by the black vacuum and the half circle line of white. Like a break in the sky this half circle introduces a physical dimension. This painting is about emotional reality and the magic of unreality. In this way the couple act as a psychological construct embodying Chagall's spirituality and belief in colour.

The twentieth century movement of Existentialism revolves around the isolated individual. In Beckett's Eh'Joe,<sup>16</sup> this individual is stranded and unable to communicate. Chagall's concept of the couple is an essentially optimistic, idealistic vision of human communication. This romantic streak in Chagall may explain why his later work has been criticised by some as escapist and sentimental in contrast to alienated and pessimistic tragic works of Bacon and Freud. It is not that Chagall was unaware of human tragedy, he chose to paint in a more joyous and positive way. Chagall celebrates the human emotion of love in his paintings.

The world is good if you love it. I love love.<sup>17</sup> Love helps me to find colour. I can even say that it is love itself which finds colour and that I only report that discovery on canvas. It is stronger than me. That is how I see life. It is beautiful, terrible. Strange also, probably because I look on it with the eyes of love. Hitler, Auschwitz - that was terrible. It's the past, but humanity is still threatened today. They want to take love away. But love has always existed, and colour also. This has been the message in my work since the beginning. It is within me. It is stronger than me.

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'Zones' taken from Chevreul's book De la Loi du Contraste Simultane, The Law of Simultaneous Contrast.  
'Zones', describe individual bodies of colour. For example red or yellow, these colours reflect more than one colour but are composed of a number of coloured rays or 'zones'. Juxtaposition of a given number of coloured bodies, depending on the closeness or how far apart the colours are, influences the tonalties of colour.  
Michel Eugene Chevreul born in Angers France 1786. He paved the way for the teaching of the principles of colour harmony influencing the French schools of Impressionism and Neo Impressionism. It is through his investigations into colour that the concept of colour harmony, compliments, opposites and hue, derive directly from Chevreul's studies.

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