

Marc Chagall: Too Busy to Be 90

By HENRY KAMM

ST. PAUL DE VENCE, France

As the year that would bring his 90th birthday drew upon him, Marc Chagall was too busy painting and making stained-glass windows to stop to talk about old age. And when he signed mementoes for friends who came to wish him a happy New Year, he confidently dated them "1977," two days ahead of the calendar.

"We're almost there," the old man said, his still-elfin face showing amusement at his little joke at the expense of time. Rather than talk about his age, to which he referred only with rueful, self-mocking gestures and asides, Chagall preferred to dwell on youth.

"When I see the young, it gives me pleasure to work," he said. He mentioned "The Biblical Message," the great cycle of paintings for which France did him the signal honor of building a national museum in Nice, and said, "I did that for the young people."

"Not just for them," rejoined Vava, his wife, gently, "For us others, too."

"All right, for the old, too," he conceded, "but mainly for the young."

Unwarranted Criticism

The Chagalls feel that the criticism of today's young by older generations is much exaggerated and unfair. With her husband gesticulating in agreement, Vava Chagall said: "The young people today are not at all like we were. Today there is no great division between the old and the young. You can talk to the young like to adults. Children today go to help pick out their own clothes. Could you imagine that in our days? When I was young, I was dressed, and no questions asked."

"Recently my husband was on a television program with children. One asked him, 'Monsieur Chagall, why did you choose this business?' Could you imagine in our day asking a big person such a question?"

"I replied: 'It was fated,'" Chagall said, relishing the French play on word that makes the phrase mean "fatal" as well.

Recalling his own youth in Russia, where both the Chagalls were born, the artist cast a strong vote against schools. But he admitted some benefit from the Hebrew school that he visited, if not the Russian school in his native town of Vitebsk, which appears in so many of his paintings. "You only learn from your parents," he said. "I couldn't learn at school. I stuttered because I was bitten by a dog."

'Be a Photographer'

Nobody encouraged him to paint, he recalled. "My mother said to me, 'You have talent, maybe you should be a photographer.' She couldn't imagine a painter: A photographer, that meant for her a real job and a house with furniture."

Chagall studied painting with a teacher in Vitebsk, later in St. Petersburg. He said he could not enroll at the academy there, however, because

Artist Marc Chagall, who will be 90 on July 7, with his wife, Vava. France will take full notice of the birthday.



The New York Times/Micha Bar-Am

he did not have the special residence permit required for a Jew to live outside their Pale of Settlement.

"I was always against Realism," Chagall said, thinking of his studies. "When I saw a Jew walk on his feet, for me he walked on his head. I look at things, and then a dybbuk [a spirit of Jewish legend] gets inside me. I am a little *meshuga* [crazy]; that is my normal state."

Asked whether the people he knew still walked on their heads for him, he replied, giving way to a moment of melancholy: "Today, they don't walk at all. Today they are all up in heaven."

Intimations of Mortality

Recent weeks have been a time of intimations of mortality to Chagall, with the deaths of his younger contemporaries, André Malraux, Alexander Calder and Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago, with whom he had been in touch about a commission for stained-glass windows at the Art Institute of Chicago.

The death of Malraux, particularly, was a bad shock. They had known each other since 1922, and as Minister of Culture, Malraux sponsored many works that Chagall donated to France, his adopted country. They had just finished a book together, in which Chagall

did engravings for a hitherto unpublished Malraux story about the Spanish Civil War. Chagall is pleased that the writer saw the engravings shortly before his death and sent a letter of appreciation.

Although Chagall pretends to ignore the milestone 1977 represents in his life, his adopted country is taking full notice of his 90th birthday. As the year began, he was awarded the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor, and, more important, plans are well advanced for a major show, as yet unannounced, at the Orangerie at the Louvre. This is an extremely rare distinction for a living artist, and even Chagall does not hide his eager anticipation.

The painter said his opposition to Realism has softened with the years, as long as the work has "quality." He explained: "It was during the war, when I was in a ship to America after the occupation of France. I thought about quality when everything was being destroyed, when the world was being turned upside down."

Quality and Love

"Before, when I saw a picture whose subject was real, I said it was not for me. But when everything was being turned upside down, I thought of quality. Now I seek out quality like a bride seeks love. Quality and love are the same thing, and for love I am very strong."

At nearly 90 years of age—his birthday is July 7—Chagall still refuses to classify himself according to schools of painting. He goes beyond this refusal, rejecting even classification as a Jewish artist, although he is held by many to be the most moving witness to the poetry of his people, to the way of life of the Jews of Eastern Europe.

"One mustn't be a nationalist. It isn't nice. I don't need a passport, I don't need an identity card. If you have found a woman that you love, you marry her, that's all."

And before he rose—"I have to go earn my bread," he said apologetically—to return to his studio, at the other end of his house in the hills behind the Riviera, he drew the visitor aside and whispered: "I don't understand Chagall. All I know is that one understands only when one loves."

