

Sacred Texts, Holy Images: Rouault's *Miserere* and Chagall's *Bible* Series

From September 25 until November 28, 2010, Baylor University's Mayborn Museum will have the privilege of housing two of the greatest masterpieces of modern religious art: Georges Rouault's *Miserere* and Marc Chagall's *Bible* series. The opportunity to exhibit these two remarkable collections is made possible by the generosity of the Mark Foster Foundation, which has established Fine Arts in the Academy to "advance the serious study of art, history, and Western civilization on America's college campuses by putting students face-to-face with masterpieces of our own Western tradition." Initiated in 2009 as a response to the declining role of the fine arts in the liberal education of college students, Fine Arts in the Academy enables students to examine the cultural, moral, and spiritual foundations of Western civilization through direct participation in the art itself. Bruce Cole, president and CEO of the American Revolution Center at Valley Forge, art historian, and former director of NEH, has outlined the importance of such engagement with the arts: "In this age of uncertainty, we can draw from the humanities' deep well of wisdom. For perspective, guidance, and even consolation, we can look to the arts and letters.... We cannot neglect the great democratic imperative: to give each succeeding generation a brighter light, a broader perspective, and an enriched legacy with which to face the future."

What better masterpieces to feature than those of Rouault (1871-1958) and Chagall (1887-1985), the two preeminent twentieth-century artists working in the Christian and Jewish traditions, respectively? Operating both in and out of the mainstreams of modernist art, these artists manage to retrieve and re-articulate for our time perennial human questions and responses. Rather than produce art that glorifies sensual experience as an end in itself, like the Pre-Raphaelites of the nineteenth century, or that demolishes the image of man in cynical eruptions of the diabolical, like many post-World War I art movements, Rouault and Chagall sought to probe the inmost reality of man and the world, interpreting its hidden mystery with a view to the transcendent.

For Rouault, this involved exploring the darkest depths of the human soul in order to highlight the redemptive power of suffering. Chagall, by contrast, revealed what awe, exhilaration, and unspeakable happiness come with obedience to God's law—what Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel once described as "the ineffable delight of being a Jew." Raïssa Maritain, friend of Rouault and one of Chagall's biographers, has perfectly articulated this distinction between the two artists: "One could say of Rouault that he is the painter of original sin. But the universe created by Chagall... speaks of grace and joy, fraternity and love." Of course, Rouault expressed the hope for redemption in the midst of misery, while Chagall was amply aware of the tragic dimension of human existence.

The *Miserere* and the *Bible* are powerful testaments to Rouault and Chagall's respective visions. Commissioned by the same art dealer and publisher, Ambroise Vollard, both works offer a series of images in a black and white color scheme. This may surprise visitors to the exhibition, especially considering Rouault and Chagall's renown as two of the most talented colorists of the twentieth century. But, much as in the artistic use of black and white photography, there is a power, a simplicity, an expressiveness to these etchings with which color would only interfere. In Rouault's case, his use of rich blacks in many variations of tone and texture is a natural means of achieving the pitch of tragedy he intended. As for Chagall, Jacques Maritain has remarked that, "laying aside the active aggressiveness of color, [Chagall's *Bible*] all

the more successfully reveals the human and poetic quality, the depth of feeling, which renders it so dear to us.”

### Rouault and the *Miserere*

A devout Catholic born in a suburb of Paris, Rouault has been touted by many as the greatest religious painter of the twentieth century, indeed “one of the greatest painters of all time” (Raïssa Maritain). And according to Rouault himself, the *Miserere* is his crowning achievement: “Following the death of my father, I made a series entitled *Miserere* in which I believe to have put the best of myself.”

The *Miserere* was designed and executed between 1912-18 and 1922-27. While originally conceived of as a two-volume set totaling one hundred prints under the title *Miserere et Guerre* (“Have Mercy and War”), after many vicissitudes the final portfolio of fifty-eight plates was published in 1948 under the shortened title *Miserere*. In this work, Rouault presents a powerful lamentation of the human condition; he captures the wretchedness of humanity’s lost soul with empathy and compassion, while at the same time offering a hint of man’s “nostalgia for the infinite.” Soldiers stumble to their deaths; bourgeois villains appear as the very incarnation of pride and self-indulgence; prostitutes crumple under the weight of sin and despair; clowns reveal a saddened soul behind their grotesque masks; and the poor struggle through the hardships of daily life. In the words of Jacques Maritain, “this monstrous and miserable flesh, enslaved in these hidden harmonies and these precious transparencies of the most complex matter—this is the wound of Sin, it is the sadness of fallen Nature.” Scattered throughout these sorrowful scenes, however, are images of Christ, in whose suffering all of mankind is united, and by whose identification with human suffering redemption is made possible. As Rouault scholar Soo Yun Kang notes, “It is not the dream of a better tomorrow, but the actual presence of Christ in the Passion that brings the true hope of Heaven to the lives of the afflicted. For Rouault, the image of the suffering Christ is the answer to pain, sin, and death—a living hope in the midst of all misery.”

The images are simple, at times seemingly crudely executed, and yet they are hauntingly profound. Inspired both by medieval imagery (which had captivated Rouault ever since his early apprenticeship as a stained-glass artisan), and by the various emotions and vices displayed in the society in which he lived, Rouault imbued his plates with an icon-like quality. And as one would approach an icon—prayerfully and receptive to spiritual truths—so, too, are we meant to quietly meditate on Rouault’s soul-stirring images, contemplating how the age-old Christian themes displayed in the *Miserere* continue to bear relevance in our own time.

### Chagall and the *Bible*

Chagall was born in Vitebsk, a small town in Russia home to a vibrant Hasidic community—a branch of Judaism founded in the mid-eighteenth century that opposed elite intellectualism and encouraged intuitive communion with God and universal love. For Chagall, this heritage would remain with him throughout his life, emerging in his work in the form of ecstatic lovers, donkeys, roosters, floating Hasids, illogical architecture, Jewish rites, fire, song and dance, angels, and other celestial menagerie. It is precisely this kaleidoscope of memory, recreating a hidden world, that gives Chagall’s work such a wild, visionary, and poetic quality. The *Bible* series in particular captures the artist’s talent for fusing the sacred and imaginary, the grave and charming, joy and distress, enchantment and history. In his own words, “When I held a lithographic tone or a copper plate, it seemed to me that I was touching a talisman. It seemed

to me that I could put all my sorrows and my joys into them... everything that has crossed my life in the course of the years: births, deaths, marriages, flowers, animals, birds, poor working people, parents, lovers in the night, Biblical prophets, in the street, in the home, in the Temple and in the sky. And as I grew old, the tragedy of life within us and around us.”

Commissioned in 1930 by Vollard, the *Bible* is, as far as engraving on copper is concerned, Chagall’s greatest masterpiece. It was an enormous undertaking for the artist, spanning twenty-five years of his career. In this series, Chagall depicts two of the three sections of the Jewish Tanakh, the canon of the Hebrew Bible: first is the Torah, the five books of Moses, followed by the Nevi’im, the former prophets and the latter prophets. (Chagall did not neglect the Kethubim, the “writings,” and elsewhere created many works based upon books such as Ruth and the Song of Solomon). Punctuating these sections are various expressions of the covenants between God and His chosen people: Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and that associated with Jeremiah.

Chagall embraces these covenants, celebrating them in swirling supernatural splendor. He does not ignore the failings of man throughout history; indeed, at many points throughout the *Bible*, Chagall’s depiction of biblical antiquity becomes increasingly expressive of his own contemporary world doomed for the destruction of World War II. Yet despite the sense of foreboding, Chagall reminds us that even amidst times of uncertainty and fear, there is a hope that pierces through the gloom.

#### *Concluding Remarks*

Two artists, with two distinct but harmonious voices, are brought together in this inaugural exhibition. The Mayborn invites you to come and listen to their song. Rouault offers the first note—his images emit a mournful cry for mercy (*miser cordia*) in the midst of suffering, a yearning for divine consolation. Chagall, in turn, presents a God who redeems, who elevates human experience beyond the frailties of sin. His joyous refrain echoes throughout the room, inviting us all, his ancestors and audience alike, to join together in a beautiful cosmic dance.