

Painter Marc Chagall's interest in, and enthusiasm for, the Bible had an enormous impact on his granddaughter Bella Meyer and others in the close-knit Chagall family.

"He never went over any of the Bible stories with us, or read to us any part of the Torah," she said. "But we looked a lot at his work, and he talked to us about creating it. He explained why it was so important to him."

Chagall "really believed," she said, that the Bible -- and the work he did based on its pages -- could serve as a "meeting place" where young people could "find themselves and some peace."

Meyer, a New York-based art historian, author and floral designer, was in Milwaukee Thursday to speak at the opening of a rare showing of all 105 hand-colored etchings in Chagall's "Bible Series" at Marquette University's Haggerty Museum of Art.

The etchings were executed by Chagall in Paris between 1931 and 1956. They were donated to Marquette by the late Texas industrialist Patrick Haggerty and his wife, Beatrice, in 1980 in advance of the opening of the university-operated museum that bears both their names.

The Haggerty set is one of 100 hand-colored copies of the series. In addition, 275 black and white sets were produced. Marquette's set is No. 65 of the colored copies.

"The Bible had always been important to my grandfather, both in his work and in his life," said Meyer, who grew up in Switzerland and holds a doctorate in the history of medieval art from the Sorbonne in Paris.

"(This series is) artistically important because it represents the first time that he really became very free in the graphic art form. What he has represented is moments in the Bible which speak to him very clearly."

Seldom displayed in toto, the suite of Bible scenes represents Chagall's fanciful and charming, yet carefully documented, take on the Old Testament tales he had studied and loved since his childhood in Vitebsk.

Several color etchings from the folio were displayed last year at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art as part of a comprehensive Chagall retrospective, but a full set is rarely seen.

Production of the set covered much of Chagall's mature life. The images reflect the diminutive artist's determination to do justice to a project that was close to his heart and important to the embattled Jewish people.

As Kenneth Bendiner, professor of art history at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, notes in his informative catalog essay, Chagall's Bible illustrations "are reverent images, rigorously dependent upon the Old Testament and strongly part of Western tradition."

Chagall, Bendiner observes, stands with a handful of 20th-century artists -- Emil Nolde and Georges Rouault among them -- for whom religious artworks are emblematic of a profound personal faith. Chagall, Bendiner says, invites us to worship, not the genius of the artist, but the goodness of the deity. His imagery reflects passionate belief as well as creative daring.

Indeed, writes Bendiner, citing a previous statement by art historian Meyer Schapiro, "Chagall's standing as a great modern artist would be assured even if these were the only works he had ever produced."

Research in Palestine

Chagall's "Bible Series" was commissioned by Parisian art publisher Ambrose Vollard in 1931, but production was interrupted by World War II. Chagall, who had fled to the United States to escape Nazi persecution, returned to France after the surrender of Germany and completed and released the suite under different

auspices. (Vollard had died in 1939.)

Chagall had traveled to Palestine in 1930 to study the historic terrain and the shrines it contained, and had come back with notebooks bulging with visual ideas.

He also had, according to Bendiner, studied the Protestant Dutch painters and, following the example of Rembrandt, returned to the Bible for inspiration.

As a result, the finished series is a fascinating exercise in faith, fact and expressive surmise. Typically, given his tolerant nature, Chagall blunts the rough edges of bloodshed and horror that crop up from time to time in the Bible's pages. He dwells instead upon the human side of the scriptural narratives.

Unlike, say, the Englishman William Blake, who shows us biblical monsters as well as saints, Chagall maintains a consistent sense of charity and understanding.

His interpretations of the story of Lot's daughter, who emerges as the sexual aggressor in Chagall's telling of the tale, and David and Bathsheba are especially astute.

He shows us, as Bendiner notes in his essay, Bathsheba as she appears to David, thus covering several points of view in a single forceful composition.

It's no mean accomplishment, and the end product, from a technical standpoint, is among the finest fruits of Chagall's extremely productive middle period.

Pertinent images

It is also, considering Chagall's obvious devotion to his epic subject matter, surprisingly tough-minded. For a man who is often looked upon as childlike, at least in terms of the wonder and simplicity of his imagery, these complex and perceptive readings of the passions and problems of the people of the Bible are surprisingly pertinent to our time.

One young person who found both self-realization and inner peace in Chagall's Bible etchings was the future film star Kirk Douglas.

As a youngster growing up in Amsterdam, N.Y., Douglas had trouble connecting with his ancestors and his heritage, he said in a 1995 talk at the Los Angeles Synagogue for the Performing Arts. Douglas' talk was reprinted in Moment magazine.

He wanted to be an actor, and the community wanted him to be a rabbi.

Then, while lying on his bed, he looked up at a collection of Chagall's Bible illustrations on the wall -- and it hit him, hard, why he should be proud.

"Here were my ancestors! And what a famous group -- Moses, Abraham, Jacob and so many others! I began to read about them, and the more I read, the happier I felt. Why? They all came from dysfunctional families. They all had problems. . . . One sinner after another, and despite that, they all overcame the odds and accomplished great things."

Chagall's depiction of the problems of Cain and Abel and Joseph and his Brethren liberated Douglas -- and took a load of guilt off the shoulders of this self-professed "sinner." But there was more.

"I (soon) found out that Chagall, a Russian Jew, came from Vitebsk, a town not far from Mogilev, my parents' hometown, in White Russia. . . . Chagall became a famous artist in Paris, and my father became a ragman in Amsterdam, N.Y. Jews have diverse talents!"

Giving scale and flash to the Chagall exhibit is a 14-by-19-foot tapestry, "The Prophet Jeremiah," that was designed by Chagall as a gouache and executed, in the Coptic mode, by Parisian weaver Yvette Cauquil Prince.

It is on loan to the Haggerty from the Jewish Federation of Milwaukee.

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MARC CHAGALL

Born: 1887, Vitebsk Russia

Died: 1985, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France

Married: To Bella Rosenfeld, 1915 (d. 1944); to Vava Bodsky, 1952

Education: Studied privately with Pen, Saidenbourg, Bakst, also at Imperial Society for the Protection of the Arts, St. Petersburg, 1907-1909

Theatrical designs: Active throughout his career, mainly Russia and France

Stained-glass windows: Synagogue, Hadassah Medical Center, Jerusalem, 1962; United Nations, New York, in honor of Dag Hammarskjold, 1964; Art Institute of Chicago, 1979.

Retrospective exhibitions: Basel, Switzerland, 1933; Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1946; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2003

In Milwaukee: "Wild Poppies" (1968), at Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of **Mrs. Harry Lynde Bradley**

Sources: Marquette University, Milwaukee Art Museum

GRANDFATHER CHAGALL

When Bella Meyer talks about her grandfather, the widely beloved Russian-Jewish painter Marc Chagall, it is with a mixture of tenderness, respect and awe.

"He was a very small person," she recalled. "He was very delicate, with beautiful hands and mischievous eyes . . ."

Yet for all his fame, Chagall was insecure.

"He was funny," she said. "He had a great sense of humor, and he was always in doubt with himself. He was very uncertain of how his work would be perceived and, since he identified completely with his work, how he would be perceived. He was afraid people wouldn't understand or like him."

IF YOU GO

What: "The Bible Illustrations of Marc Chagall"

Where: Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University campus, N. 13th and W. Clybourn streets

When: Through March 21

Hours: 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday-Wednesday, Friday, Saturday; 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursday, noon-5 p.m. Sunday

Admission: Free. For information, call (414) 288-1669.

CITATION (TURABIAN STYLE)

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