

Marc Chagall's *White Crucifixion* as a Reflection of the Jewish Experience

Jewish artist Marc Chagall's painting, *White Crucifixion* is a powerful reactionary work created following the horrors enacted against Jews across German controlled land on November 9th, 1938, now called The Night of Broken Glass, during which an estimated 250 synagogues were destroyed along with 7,000 Jewish businesses.¹ *White Crucifixion* compares the suffering of Jesus Christ with the suffering of the Jewish people, and in doing so reflects a powerful image of the Jewish experience. To fully understand this painting's relation to the Jewish experience, one considers its genre, time of creation, artist, form, and content.

Chagall is commonly classified as a surrealist artist, but *White Crucifixion* is described differently; this piece is often regarded as expressionist with a twist. *White Crucifixion* has been branded, "lyrical expressionism,"² or, "visual poetry."³ Such labels imply an added element of storytelling in this piece compared to Chagall's other works. It is not a snapshot or isolated event being depicted, but rather an entire history of displacement, loss, and destitution that has been a staple in the story of the Jewish people.⁴ In a highly literal sense *White Crucifixion* is surrealist because it presents two juxtaposing ideas, the crucifixion of Jesus, a Christian symbol, is placed among scenes of Jewish suffering and symbols. Chagall uses this surrealist technique to remind his audience that the two faiths are deeply intertwined. To address the idea that *White Crucifixion*, is a form of, "visual poetry," Jean-Michael Foray attests that *White Crucifixion* is a

¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Introduction to the Holocaust," Holocaust Encyclopedia.

² Jennifer Horvath, *Resistance, Resurrection, Liberation: Beyond the Existing Readings of Marc Chagall's Crucifixion Paintings*. Order No. 1602311, University of Cincinnati, 2015, ii.

³ Janis C. Stair, *The Visual Poetry of Marc Chagall's "White Crucifixion"*. Order No. 1592731, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2015, 12.

⁴ Horvath, *Resistance, Resurrection, Liberation*, 19.

series of isolated images that can then be viewed holistically to tell a story.⁵ Foray even goes so far as to say this painting is meant to be, “read,” not merely viewed.

1938 was plagued with oppressive laws and legislations against Jewish people under Nazi influence. Some examples include the first Jewish census, the marking of Jewish businesses, and, of course, the Night of Broken Glass,⁶ which is often cited as the primary driving force behind Chagall painting *White Crucifixion*.⁷ When examining this period, it is obvious what influenced Chagall when painting *White Crucifixion*.

The most critical thing to understand about Marc Chagall as it relates to this painting (and numerous others) is his Jewish heritage. Chagall was born on July 7, 1887 in the Russian settlement town of Lionza, which had a high concentration of Jewish people.⁸ He attended all Jewish schools (as was mandatory at the time) where he developed an affinity for art and eventually found his way to The Zvantseva School of Drawing and Painting in 1906. There, Chagall learned how to incorporate his Jewish identity into his art with the help of his mentor, and Jewish artist, Leon Bakst. Without Bakst it is possible Chagall would not have been empowered to include Jewish imagery in his art at a time when the Russian Government was severely aggressive towards Jews. Chagall then trained in Paris and practiced Cubism, which is apparent in much of his early work.⁹ Today, Chagall is viewed as a developer of cubist and surrealist art, as well as a brave story teller of the Jewish history in Russia.

⁵ Jean-Michel Foray, “Chagall and Modernism,” in Marc Chagall, exh. cat. (San Francisco:San Francisco Museum of Art, 2003), 18.

⁶ Justin Wolf, *Marc Chagall*, The Art Story: Modern Art Insight.

⁷ Stair, *The Visual Poetry of Marc Chagall's White Crucifixion*, 2.

⁸ Wolf, *Marc Chagall*.

⁹ Ibid.

While Chagall's work reflects the Jewish experience, so does he, himself. Chagall's works were singled out by the Nazi Party and ordered out of museums and galleries; some were destroyed. Chagall was recognized as, "at risk," from the Nazis, by the New York City Museum of Modern Art, and was granted a visa to the US in 1941.¹⁰ Similarly to the history of his people, Chagall was forced away from his home because of his beliefs. Chagall often voiced his desire for, "Jewish cultural treasures to speak for Jews in the same way other cultures used their art to speak for them in museums around the world."¹¹ It is clear when analyzing Chagall's personality, training, heritage, and experience during World War II that *White Crucifixion* was intended to be, and received by the public as, a reflection of the Jewish experience.¹²

As far as what is physically on the canvas, the first thing one notices when viewing *White Crucifixion* is its surprising lack of color. Most of Chagall's works are marked by vivid color, with little white space.¹³ This deviation perhaps reflects Chagall's sadness for his people. Additionally, by scarcely using color, Chagall increases the value and visibility of the color he does use (most notably, red, which draws attention to the oppressors depicted in the painting). The absence of plentiful, highly saturated colors is often used as evidence to claim that *White Crucifixion* is a turning point in Chagall's artistic career. When asked about his uncharacteristic use of color in *White Crucifixion*, Chagall discussed color in relation to shape in his answer, summarized best by Jennifer Horvath, Chagall said "the structure of the painting is what is critical, with a focus on placing objects and colors in a precise manner to balance the

¹⁰ Wolf, *Marc Chagall*.

¹¹ Stair, *The Visual Poetry of Marc Chagall's White Crucifixion*, 52.

¹² David Lyle Jeffrey, *Meditation and Atonement in the Art of Marc Chagall*, Baylor University, 2012, 219.

¹³ Horvath, *Resistance, Resurrection, Liberation*, 12.

composition aesthetically.”¹⁴ This explains Chagall’s choice of, what appears to be, a circle of tableaux surrounding Jesus on the cross. His scarce color and placement of isolated scenes (to be viewed as a whole) are about balance.

This painting places the suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross alongside the suffering of the Jewish people in contemporary Europe and historic Palestine. Chagall is using the image of Jesus as a force for morality.¹⁵ Perhaps the most powerful aspect of this image is the tallit (Jewish prayer shawl) worn by Jesus in place of the typically seen plain cloth. In making this change, Chagall is reminding his audience that Jesus was Jewish. He followed Jewish traditions, studied the Torah, and like the Jews, he was persecuted for his beliefs.

While Chagall did not blatantly place a swastika on his painting, he did include a man with a white armband and red face burning a synagogue and the Torah. This is clearly a visualization of the Nazi’s actions during The Night of Broken Glass. Similarly, while no specific icon is present, a group of armed men under solid red flags represent the Russians who allied with the Nazi party at this time.

The painting includes more obvious Jewish imagery as well such as a menorah and the star of David. For most of Chagall’s career, his work reflected his Jewish heritage, but was still intended to hold a mirror up to nature for viewers of any religion. *White Crucifixion* is by a Jew, about the Jews, and for anyone who will look. Chagall did what all artists do, he took his emotions, and turned them into art. The painting has an overwhelming sense of melancholy, and the source of such despair is directly shown, unlike most surreal art which is more symbolic. The content of *White Crucifixion* was not meant for art connoisseurs and scholars. Rather, it was painted for everyone who will look.

¹⁴ Horvath, *Resistance, Resurrection, Liberation*, 24.

¹⁵ Stair, *The Visual Poetry of Marc Chagall's White Crucifixion*, 13.