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SYMPOSION

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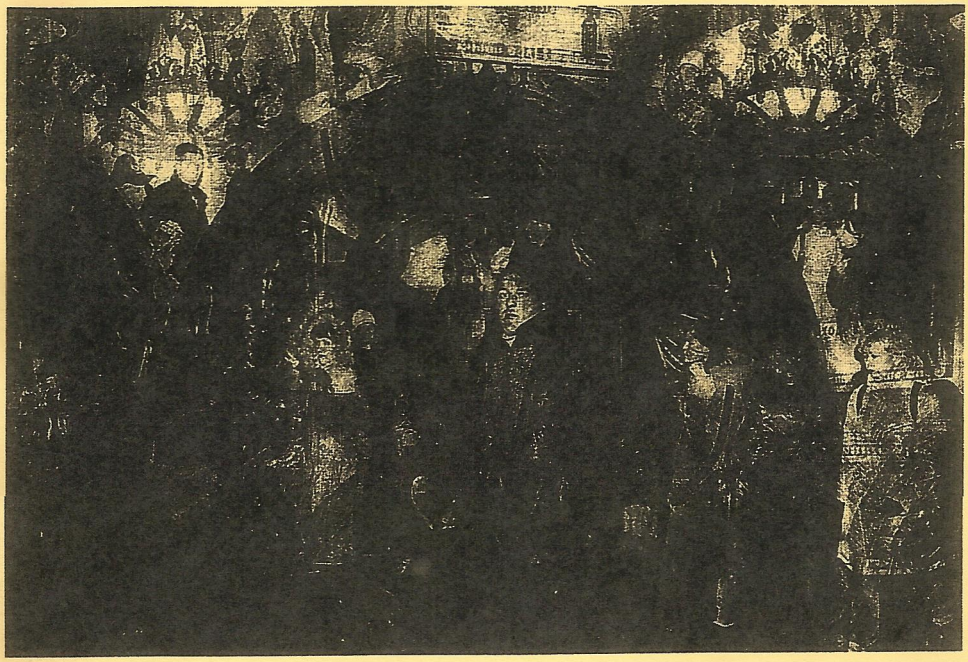

Valera & Natasha Cherkashin. *Moscow, Revolutionary Square*, detail, 2005.

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CRUCIFIXION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY ART: THE PAINTINGS OF MARC CHAGALL[*]

> "I try to fill my canvasses in some way with objects and figures treated as forms . . . sonorous forms like sounds . . . passionate forms designed to add a new dimension which neither the geometry of the Cubists nor the patches of the Impressionists can achieve.
>
> Marc Chagall

Introductory remarks

The central event in the history of the Christian religion, the Crucifixion does not appear in Christian art in the first four centuries of Christianity. One of the oldest surviving figures of Christ on the cross is the Crucifixion on an ivory plaque in London that was carved at the dawn of Imperial Christianity, between 420 and 430 in northern Italy. On this ivory relief Christ is still depicted as a muscular and beardless young man with his eyes wide open. He is hanging painlessly on the cross with only his hands nailed to it – symbolizing heavenly victory rather than human defeat, triumph instead of humiliation.

There have been three main phases in the depiction of crucifixion in the history of Christian art. The Byzantine style of the Crucifixion was established in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire, where artists have preserved the cultural heritage of antiquity and adapted it to the needs of their own tradition. On Byzantine crucifixions, Jesus Christ is portrayed with a beard and a halo over his head, which symbolize his maturity and heavenly dominion. Although nailed to the cross, his body looks airy and light, displaying no signs of pain and suffering. His open eyes reinforce the sense of divine glory and the eternal life that he brings to humanity.

Medieval Catholic crucifixions gradually shifted the focus from the divine to the human Christ, from his glory to his suffering, and from salvation to sin. The Byzantine *Christus Triumphans* gave way to a new depiction of *Christus Patiens,* "hanging dead on the cross, the head inclined

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* A version of this article was presented at the annual conference of the Mid-Atlantic American Academy of Religion in Baltimore, Maryland, March 2006.

and the eyes closed."[1] The newfound interest in the humanity of the Savior and in his vulnerability has also resulted in "a growing tendency to show the Crucifixion as an actual event rather than an amplified symbol,"[2] which later became one of the most characteristic features of Renaissance religious art. The novel element in the Renaissance Crucifixion was in fact the accuracy of historical details and pictorial representation, which was based on a newly discovered illusionist perspective.

In twentieth-century art the narrative of Crucifixion acquired a new and broader meaning, no longer confined to the Christian theology. In this fourth and contemporary phase, the art of the crucifixion has become dissociated from the Christian religion and has turned into a universal symbol of redemption through righteous suffering, a cultural prism through which artists view the society in which they live. These paintings are so varied in style and meaning that they escape the usual definitions, extend customary boundaries, defy historical frameworks and transcend religious traditions. The artists explore this religious theme from the standpoint of their own artistic individuality, philosophy, and worldview. They can be Christian, non-Christian or even atheists, such as Pablo Picasso or Francis Bacon, who are interested in portraying the Crucifixion not for its sacred origin nor its salvific value, but for its expression of the deeper existential dimensions of human spirituality. Surrealist crucifixions, and Marc Chagall's paintings, in particular, may serve as characteristic examples of this modern trend in the art of the crucifixion.

Surrealist crucifixions

One of the major twentieth-century art movements, Surrealism is also the most significant and influential artistic development in the period between the two World Wars. Its formal beginning dates back to 1924, when a group of former Dadaist artists established the Bureau of Surrealist Research in Paris and started the publication of the magazine *La Révolution Surréaliste* (Surrealist Revolution). The opening issue of their review contained the first surrealist Manifesto written by the founder of the movement, André Breton. In it Breton defined Surrealism as

> Pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing, or by other means, the real process of thought. Thought's dictation, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations. . . . Surrealism rests in the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of associa-

1. Stephanie Brown, *Religious Painting: Christ's Passion and Crucifixion* (New York: Mayflower Books, 1979), p. 7.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

> tion neglected heretofore; in the omnipotence of dream and in the disinterested play of thought. It tends definitely to do away with all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in the solution of the principal problems of life.[3]

The philosophical inspiration for Surrealism came from a Viennese psychologist and founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Medically trained, Breton was familiar with Freud's psychoanalytic theories and techniques, which gave him an opportunity to apply them to the artistic domain. Freud's psychoanalysis, which was designed to be a strictly scientific endeavor, was supposed to remain neutral to anything that transcends its boundaries. However, its much broader philosophical implications were of special concern to religion. A self-proclaimed "godless Jew," Freud wrote several books attacking religion as an "illusion" and a "collective neurosis." Surrealism inherited this anti-religious attitude and proclaimed the goal of creating art completely free from any preoccupation of faith, morality, or reason.

As one art critic pointed out, surrealists "flirted for a time with Oriental philosophy, religion and mysticism, and [even] believed that they had found spiritual guides in Buddha and in the Dalai Lama." Their interest in the human psyche and especially in the unconscious led them to exploit the metaphysical levels of existence in their art. One of the members of the group, Louis Aragon wrote back in 1924, for instance, that they "were interested in the beyond, the transmigration of souls, the supernatural and marvelous, and were greeted only by disbelief and laughter."[4] An equally strong resistance to organized religion and religious philosophy, however, accompanied the strong metaphysical appeal of Surrealism. The review *La Révolution Surréaliste* "was consciously anti-religious. [And i]n general, one could say that the Surrealists were decisively anti-clerical and non religious in their attitudes."[5] As a result, religion and religious themes didn't play a significant role in Surrealist art *per se.* The Crucifixion was no exception.

The earliest example of a Surrealist – or, more precisely, proto-Surrealist – Crucifixion was created by Max Ernst, an artist who "exemplifies those aspects of the countervailing movements of twentieth-century art in which the mysterious and irrational predominate: first in the

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3. André Breton, "What is Surrealism," in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, with contributions by Peter Selz and Joshua C. Taylor (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1968), p. 412.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

5. Marianne Oesterreicher-Mollwo, *Surrealism and Dadaism. Provocative Destruction, the Path Within and the Exacerbation of the Problem of a Reconciliation of Art and Life* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979), p. 15.

nihilism of Dada, then in the lyrical dream-imagery of Surrealism."[6] Ernst painted his *Crucifixion* in 1913 in Germany – in the wake of the First World War and long before the advent of Surrealism.

Hence:

> . . . [t]he subject and the writhing, tortured forms of the figures refer [rather] to the great tradition of German expressionism. Matthias Grünewald, one of this tradition's most important painters, may have provided Ernst with a direct model in his *Isenheim Altarpiece* crucifixion panel of c. 1510-15.[7]

The Spanish painter Salvador Dalí was another famous Surrealist who turned – and more than once – to the Crucifixion as a source of his artistic inspiration. From the beginning of his involvement with the movement, Dalí developed his own version of Surrealism that was quite different from Breton's orthodox approach. Breton insisted that artists must cultivate a passive state of mind and thus become free mediums, whose liberated unconscious minds would find new expressions in the light of artistic creation. Salvador Dalí, on the contrary, believed in the active human mind that transforms or, as he put it, invents material objectivity, according to its own creative impulse. Dalí called this method a 'paranoiac-critical activity' and defined it as a "spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based upon the interpretative – critical association of delirious phenomena."[8] As James Soby wrote in his book on Dalí, the Spanish painter

> . . . declared that his art sprang from a constant, hallucinatory energy. He proposed to paint like a madman rather than an occasional somnambulist. He added that the only difference between himself and a madman was that he was not mad.[9]

Salvador Dalí turned to religion and religious symbolism late in his artistic career, already after the Second World War. By that time he was formally excluded from membership in the movement, but as an art critic Robert Descharnes pointed out, this "'ex-Surrealist' . . . in fact remained more of surrealist than ever."[10] After the first explosion of the atomic

6. Diane Waldman, "Max Ernst," in *Max Ernst: A Retrospective* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1975), p. 15.

7. *Ibid*, p. 18.

8 James Thrall Soby, *Salvador Dalí* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), p. 11.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

10. Robert Descharnes, Gilles Néret, *Salvador Dalí, 1904-1989* (Köln-Los Angeles: Taschen, 2004), p. 158.

bomb, Dalí became fascinated by nuclear physics. In his view, science penetrated so deep into the mysteries of the universe that it approached the border that separates matter from spirit, and the material from the spiritual world. He goes as far as to conceive "protons and neutrons as 'angelic elements'."[11]

It is in this intellectual and spiritual context that "Salvador Dalí, inventor of the new paranoiac-critical mysticism and, as his Christian name suggests, the savior of modern painting"[12] creates many of his religious masterpieces. In the period between 1950 and 1955 he paints two crucifixions: his famous *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* (1951) is one of the most striking examples of Dalí's "nuclear realism". The composition of the painting is suggested by a drawing made by St. John of the Cross and kept at the monastery at Avila. On Dalí's canvas the crucified Christ is placed above the bay at Port Lligat where the painter and his wife Gala lived. The figures beside the boat are borrowed from other artworks, including "a drawing Velázquez did for his painting *The Surrender of Breda*."[13] Here is how Dalí himself describes the inspiration that led him to create this masterpiece:

> It began in 1950 with a cosmic dream I had, in which I saw the picture in colour. In my dream it represented the nucleus of the atom. The nucleus later acquired a metaphysical meaning: I see the unity of the universe in it – Christ! [After] I saw the figure of Christ drawn by St. John of the Cross, I devised a geometrical construct comprising a triangle and a circle, the aesthetic sum total of all my previous experience, and put my Christ inside the triangle.[14]

Crucifixion paintings of Marc Chagall

Another famous twentieth-century painter who was often associated with the Surrealist movement is Marc Chagall (1887-1985). Chagall was born into an impoverished Hassidic Jewish family in the small town of Lyozno in present-day Belarus. He studied painting in nearby Vitebsk, and then in St. Petersburg and Paris. In 1913 and 1914 he exhibited his early works at the Salon des Indépendents in Paris and at the Der Sturm Gallery in Berlin. While those early exhibitions took place well before the formal beginning of Surrealism in the 1920s, Chagall's style of magical

11. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
13 Descharnes and Néret, *Salvador Dalí*, p. 168.
14. Dalí/Parinaud, *Comment on devient Dali*. Quoted in Descharnes and Néret, *Salvador Dalí*, 168-69.

or fantastic realism was astonishingly close to surrealist aspirations. According to Breton:

> The aesthetic reversal of spatial planes and the refusal to accept the dependence of creation on gravity and the laws of nature, anticipated in Arthur Rimbaud's poetry, take their creative point of departure in Chagall both in the dream picture and in the intensive sensuousness of impression. A compelling magic emanates from his pictures, whose enchantingly prismatic colors dissolve and transmute the tortuous tensions in modern man.[15]

The French poet and art critic Guillaume Apollinaire called Chagall's works "peinture surnaturelle" or supra-natural painting. In the meantime, Chagall himself professed an artistic creed that was somewhat akin to surrealist beliefs about art. His interests lay in portraying the secrets of the inner life of human personality, of the human psyche, as surrealists would put it later. Chagall wrote: "I personally do not believe that scholarly endeavors serve the interests of art. Impressionism and Cubism are alien to me. Art seems to me to be primarily a condition of the soul."[16] Formally distant from both Cubism and Surrealism, Chagall was welcome to become part of the movement that between the two world wars exerted a major influence on the artistic and intellectual life of Paris where he lived, but he chose not to do so. As Chagall remarked on this occasion: "Everything in art ought to reply to every movement in our blood, to all our being, even our unconscious. [But as for the latter, f]or my part, I have slept very well without Freud!"[17]

Indeed, over his long and prolific career Chagall made hundreds of paintings, etchings, lithographs, and stained glass and established himself as one of the most original twentieth-century artists. In 1977 in honor of his artistic contributions he was awarded the Grand Cross of the Légion d'Honneur in France and made an honorary citizen of Jerusalem.

Chagall is also considered one of the greatest religious painters of his century. Religious and especially Biblical themes remained the important source of his art. As he himself wrote:

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15. André Breton, *Die Dichter verdanken ihm viel* (What Poetry Owes Him), quoted in *Marc Chagall. Origins and Paths*, ed. Roland Doschka, with contributions by Roland Doschka, Françoise Dumont and Meret Meyer (München-New York: Prestel Verlag, 1998), p. 17.

16. Chagall, *Origins and Paths*, p. 16.

17. Gill Polonsky, *Chagall* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), p. 19.

> Ever since my earliest youth, I have been fascinated by the Bible. I have always believed . . . that it is the greatest source of poetry of all time. . . . I have sought its reflection in life and art. The Bible is like an echo of nature, and this is the secret I have endeavoured to transmit.[18]

One of the major differences between Chagall and most of the Surrealists lay, therefore, in his deep and lifelong commitment to religion and religious subjects. Chagall's first paintings exploring Biblical themes date back to the beginning of his artistic career. In 1913 and 1914, for example, he exhibited among other works at the Salon des Indépendents his painting *Adam and Eve*. In 1930 an art dealer Ambroise Vollard commissioned Chagall to illustrate the Bible, and in 1931 he traveled to Palestine to make preparatory gouaches for his Bible etchings.

In the mid 1950s Chagall began working on a series of religious paintings called the "Biblical message." In the late 1950s and mid 1960s he developed a series culminating in the exhibition "Biblical Message" at the Louvre museum. By 1969 Marc Chagall and his wife donated seventeen paintings of the series to the French government and four years later, in 1973, the *National Museum Message Biblique Marc Chagall* in Nice opened its doors to the public.[19] In the 1960s and 1970s Chagall also designed numerous stained-glass windows, tapestries and mosaics devoted to religious subject matter.

Chagall's religious paintings are unique in how they combine Jewish and Christian imagery to show the continuity of both religious traditions, which convey essentially the same "Biblical message." On the painter's canvass one finds the traces of Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, the Biblical patriarchs, prophets and kings as well as the scenes from Christ's life and death. The paintings that depict Moses receiving the Tablets of the Law and Exodus are coupled with those which portray Christ's crucifixion and his descent from the cross. Chagall's own Hassidic religious upbringing did not stop him from incorporating these and other Christian pictorial elements into his paintings. Among them the Crucifixion becomes one of the key themes that reflect the inter-religious spirit of Chagall's art.

The Crucifixion appears in many of Chagall's paintings – as one of the motifs that adds symbolic complexity and depth to the main message, or as the central episode of the canvas. In his *Creation of Man*, for instance, made in 1958, the small crucifixion at the top of the panel reinforces the key image of an angel carrying the first human creature in his hands –

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18 Polonsky, *Chagall*, 23.

19. See: *National museum Message Biblique Marc Chagall*, an album (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2000).

suggesting the long and painful journey of humanity as well as the death and sacrifice that always accompany birth and desire. In his earlier *Resistance* and *Resurrection* (1948) the crucified Christ is placed at the center of the panels as a focal point around which other pictorial elements depicting various religious and cultural symbols are arranged.

Chagall's *White Crucifixion*, which was made in the wake of the Second World War in 1938, is perhaps the most widely known of his paintings on the subject. On this canvas, as one art critic pointed out, Chagall

> Turned the image [of the crucified Christ] into a searing and unredemptive symbol of Jewish martyrdom. [He] divested the crucified figure of its specific Christian associations and placed this Jewish Jesus at the still centre of a maelstrom of orchestrated violence, burning and Nazi desecration. . . . A swirling vortex of terror develops as houses, a synagogue and Torah scroll burn, a refugee-filled boat rows away, an armed mob comes over the hill, and one man flees with a salvaged Torah while another, on whose breast-cloth were once inscribed the words "I am a Jew," holds out his hands in supplication. Here also is the familiar figure of the beggar/Elijah, a bundle on his back. . . . This traditional harbinger of Messianic tidings comes, but in vain, to help his people in this time of trouble. . . . Above, too, float Old Testament elders – the lamenting and helpless witnesses to an unfolding catastrophe, which lies beyond human understanding.[20]

Here, as elsewhere in his paintings, Chagall masterfully combines the Jewish inspiration for his art with the cultural symbols of Western Christendom and then applies them to the events of contemporary history. Covered only by the Jewish prayer towel, Jesus Christ in the painting is turned by the power of the artist into a symbol of Jewish suffering and martyrdom. Chagall portrays Jesus as a Jew *par excellence* – being encircled by scenes of contemporary events full of violence, despair and death. "The sufferings of Jesus which continue in the sufferings of His people during the war years, in the suffering of all persecuted, wretched and impoverished of all times – that is what constitutes the genuine content of Chagall's paintings," writes Irina Iazykova in her article "*Ecce Homo*." She continues: "To Chagall, himself a Jew, Jesus is not the God of the Christians who persecuted the Jews in the course of all history, but a man who suffers alongside the persecuted whoever they are."[21]

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20. Polonsky, *Chagall*, p. 32.

21. Irina Iazykova, "Se Chelovek" [*Ecce Homo*], *Mir Biblii [The World of the Bible]*, 10 (2004): 52.

Conclusion

Modernity has opened a new chapter in the history of humankind. Some historians trace its origin to the Renaissance; others to the Enlightenment. In any case it was Europe, which served as the cradle of this new historical and cultural epoch. For several centuries European nations were spreading the project of modernity throughout the globe. And the twentieth century bore witness to the brilliant but nonetheless ambiguous and often tragic results of that enterprise. In his canvas *Crucifixion and Rose* completed in 1980, an Australian painter Arthur Boyd (b. 1920) recaptures in visual and symbolic terms the dramatic tension between modernity and traditional cultures. The rose in the artwork

> . . . can indicate purity, virginity or even celestial happiness. But in the Shoalhaven paintings Boyd had given it another meaning; it is the English rose, symbol of an English culture, which cannot take root in the ruggedness of the Australian climate. The inclusion of the rose is meant as a warning. As he said in 1982, "[it] represents the desperate attempts of the Europeans to impose their culture on an essentially primitive landscape. It floats because it cannot take root. If it does, it destroys, like lantana."[22]

Since Modernity is the product of Christian civilization, it is hardly surprising that the image of the Crucifixion – the central event in Christian history – remains so widespread in an apparently secular and often atheistic twentieth-century art. Some critics have suggested that

> . . . the two crucial components of the theme of the Crucifixion in twentieth-century painting [are]: a desire to de-emphasize the religious content, along with a desire on the part of the painter to identify with the body on the cross, even to the extent of self-portraiture."[23]

While this observation is certainly true, twentieth-century crucifixions exhibit a much greater variety.

On one hand there are atheistic crucifixions by such painters as Picasso, Guttuso, Bacon and Saura, each using the body on the cross for their distinct iconoclastic causes. On the other, we find more traditional crucifixions by Dalí, Sutherland and Rouault, for example, that differ in the way those painters apply modern techniques to this centuries-old subject. In the middle of the spectrum are situated modern crucifixions that

22. Rosemary Crumlin, *Images of Religion in Australian Art* (Kensington, Australia: Bay Books, 1988), p. 160.

23. *The Body on the Cross*, p. 96.

explore a large range of social and spiritual concerns. Paintings by Newman and Pussette-Dart, Nolde and Kokoschka are existential canvases that reflect – each in its own peculiar style – the anxieties of modern times. The artworks by Johnson and Boyd identify Christ's suffering with that of African-Americans and women – thus addressing the issue of discrimination with regard to minorities and other oppressed social groups. Chagall's crucifixions can be viewed as part of this group as well since they emphasize the Jewishness of Jesus and his martyrdom as symbolic sacrifice of the Jewish nation as a whole.

What is, then, the common denominator behind the incredible diversity of all these painters' depictions of Jesus on the Cross? In my opinion, it consists in the transformation, which the perception of Crucifixion has undergone in the twentieth century – from a religious event with crucial dogmatic and theological implications to a basic cultural archetype that symbolizes righteous suffering. As such, it has become the ideal vehicle for rendering the existential and social realities of the century's history. Each of these painters have brought a new dimension and modern perspective to the death of the Savior that took place two thousand years ago in a dark corner of the Roman Empire.

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