

THE SECULAR ICON: MARC CHAGALL'S *WHITE CRUCIFIXION*¹

White Crucifixion by Marc Chagall is a painting which reflects the turmoil and suffering of European Jews on the eve of the Second World War. The imagery and historical context in which it was painted form a united composition in which Chagall displays pain and disheartening martyrdom through a contextualized image of the crucifixion. However, this particular crucifixion does not contain the salvific message of its prototypes and instead refutes the religious background of its subject. Rather, it impresses the viewer with the universalism and political nature of Christ which Chagall hoped to describe. This work follows the secularizing tradition of the Modern Jewish Revolution as well as the Jewish Art Movement. Traditional religious themes and subjects, both Christian and Jewish are redefined in order to carry the powerful message of Jewish suffering at the hands of political powers and anti-Semitic, "Christian" societies.

Key words: White Crucifixion, Marc Chagall, Jewish Art Movement, Modern Jewish Revolution, secularization, World War II

INTRODUCTION

Marc Chagall's controversial and widely debated painting *White Crucifixion*, (oil on canvas, 1938) is tied through its imagery and theme to universalism and secularism. By his use of bold, political and religious iconography, Chagall disintegrated the boundary between sacred and profane imagery and used the visual wealth of his Jewish background and the legacy of Western Art history to punctuate his primary political message. The suffering of European Jews was a particularly personal subject for Chagall and his desire to communicate their plight to a Western Christian audience inspired his distinctive use of religious imagery. This particular combination of images and themes was not revolutionary when it was conceived, but rather was an

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¹ This paper was initially researched and written for the purpose of independent study within the class *Religija i mirovne studije* for Prof. dr. Dino Abazović in September 2021 and was revised and edited later for publishing.

important part of a larger social and artistic movement which developed due to a specific form of secularism that grew within the Jewish communities in the Russian Empire. Chagall's composition also drew directly from the violent and volatile events occurring in Europe on the eve of the Second World War. In order to fully understand *White Crucifixion* and its influential position within secular art, it is necessary to understand the social, political, and historical events which precipitated Chagall's artistic career and the creation of this painting.

HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Chagall was deeply influenced by the artistic, political, and social atmosphere of his time. His distinctive style and conceptual art follow the secular movements and trends which defined his own life and those of his Jewish contemporaries. In the early 20th century, a movement toward secularism and identity politics influenced several generations of Eastern European Jewish artists (writers and painters) and loosely formed what is termed, "The Modern Jewish Revolution" (Harshav, 2003a: 302). This could best be described as an internal cultural shift which challenged the predominant beliefs, ideals, and behaviors regarding "uncivilized Jewishness" and redefined them according to Western "civilized" norms in order to attain a kind of dignity in the eyes of the Western world (Harshav, 1993: 5). This cultural revolution was underpinned by the 19th century development of a Jewish lingual and cultural identity within the Russian Empire, which gained traction as violent pogroms and persecutions cemented the social and political "otherness" of Jews (Harshav, 2021: 119). With the formation of a greater Jewish identity, came the secularization and "modernization" of this distinct ethnic group. The movement mainly consisted of the influence of western ideas and secular education on the Jewish population within the Russian Empire and resulted in the creation of two branches, one of which focused on the Europeanization, urbanization, and secularization of Jews, while the other focused on the creation of a secular Jewish culture based in Hebrew and Yiddish. These two expressions of the movement are known respectively as the extrinsic and intrinsic branches of the Modern Jewish Revolution (Harshav, 2003b/1918: 18). Part of the intrinsic aspect of this cultural revolution was expressed in a "Jewish Art" movement which viewed Jewish imagery and culture from a more nostalgic, atheistic, and secular point of view, disconnected from its original religious context. Artists and writers within this movement often appropriated traditional Jewish religious art as a representation of the Jewish people rather than as specific spiritual devices within their work (Harshav, 2003b/1918: 12). Artists like Ephraim Mose Lilien and Joseph Budko, who, like Chagall, moved to Western European cities to create a dialogue between their Jewish and often Zionistic identity and worldview, and the Expressionism taking hold in Western urban centers (Dmitrieva, M. & Holden, G., 2008: 145-146). This movement was also fed by the contemporary pluralism that Paul Mendez-Flohr discussed in his essay on culture and Judaism.

He argued that this modern blending of cultures was not only present in society, but in the mind of the individual, resulting in a kind of cognitive dissonance between Jewish identity and modern secularism. Jewishness, therefore, was defined by its relationship with Western culture and lost much of its religious connotation (Mendez-Flohr, 2009: 125). It is within the greater framework of this movement that we may begin to view the work of Marc Chagall, as his artistic work and career were direct products of this secularizing force.

Marc Chagall was born Móyshe Shagál in the town of Vitebsk on July 6th, 1887. His hometown was part of Jewish “Lithuania” and located in the Jewish Pale of settlement within the Russian empire. He grew up within a distinctive Jewish cultural tradition and (like his contemporaries) was deeply influenced by the secular movements of his time (Harshav, 2003b: 1-8). As a result, his paintings drew from the Jewish visual and folk culture of his life in Vitebsk, but notably, did not rely heavily on the theological details or doctrines of the local form of Hasidic Judaism. When Chagall moved to Paris in 1910, he was taken with the themes and imagery used in both classical Western art and the contemporary artistic movements (Harshav, 2003b/1918: 10). He appropriated the iconography and symbolism of Christian genre paintings and began to reuse their more universal messages in combination with typically Jewish imagery. In this way, he was able to layer the religious imagery of Christianity and Judaism in order to accentuate universal themes like love, beauty, suffering, and martyrdom (Jeffrey, 2012: 229). It also allowed him to communicate more clearly within the Western Christian cultural sphere. A Western, and therefore mostly Christian, audience would be more likely to understand Chagall’s secular themes if he were to use Christian rather than Jewish imagery. This artistic process is clearly represented in many of his paintings that use religious subjects and imagery in order to express secular and political concepts, especially those within the body of work that Chagall produced before and during World War II, like the *Yellow Crucifixion* (1943) and *The Martyr* (1940) (Jeffrey, 2012: 226).

THE CRUCIFIX AS ARTISTIC INSPIRATION

The theme of martyrdom is especially relevant in the study of Chagall’s *White Crucifixion*. Here again, Chagall was not alone in his use of crucifixion imagery to illustrate Jewish political views. In the inter-war period, many Jewish writers and artists turned to representations of Christ in order to illustrate the state of Jewish suffering in Europe at the hands of “Christian” individuals and governments. The situation was viewed as paradoxical by many Jewish intellectuals and artists, who saw the anti-Semitism and violence as being in direct conflict with Christian doctrine. The concept of Christ as a Jew who was persecuted and crucified was an appealing symbol for the expression of their frustration. Additionally, its relevance and contextual meaning within Western Christian society made it a perfect conduit for the political message of these Jewish artists. In his essay on the imagery of Marc Chagall, Aaron Rosen

described this common iconographic theme among Jewish artists such as Mark Antokolsky (the sculptor of the bronze statue *Ecce Homo* in 1873), who appropriated this image in order to better describe the contemporary violence against Jews to his Christian audience (Rosen, 2009: 26). This thematic movement was not only found in France, but wherever secular Jewish artists were working. As David Lyle Jeffrey writes in his analysis of Chagall's more religiously visual work:

With more immediate empirical evidence of un-Christ like "Christian" behavior close to hand, the dissonant viewpoint was shared to some considerable degree by the inter-war Polish poets known as the Yung-Yiddish movement, who also turned from traditional Jewish motifs (e.g., of the "golem") in the direction of a more radical contradiction: Christ on the cross (2012: 222).

Matthew Hoffman also discussed this artistic trend within the American Jewish community and how it was intended as a form of cultural reevaluation. Christ was no longer a Christian symbol of suffering, but an image which represented, "an inherently Jewish cultural symbol, and the Jews as the quintessential Christ-like victims of Christian violence and persecution" (Hoffman, 2007: 9). The use of a "Jewish Jesus" was a trend found in Poland, France, America, and wherever European Jews created cultural centers. This movement was particularly radical and was openly debated by Jewish intellectuals (Jeffrey, 2012: 222). Some critics viewed it as a heretical or disrespectful use of religious imagery, claiming that these artists were "misguided universalists." While others believed that Jewish artists should only use Jewish imagery in order to express their ideas (Jeffrey, 2012: 222). The prevalence of this image in art and literature, however, shows how useful it was to Jewish artists in describing the suffering of their contemporaries.

Chagall's own views on crucifixion imagery were clear, not only through his own use of the subject in several paintings such as *Golgotha* painted in 1912 (fig.1) or the *Yellow Crucifixion* painted in 1943 (fig.2), but in his interviews and lectures as well.



Figure 1. Chagall, Marc. "Golgotha." (also known as "Calvary") Oil on canvas, 174.6 x 192.4 cm, 1912. Museum of Modern Art. New York, NY.



Figure 2. Chagall, Marc. "Yellow Crucifixion." Oil on canvas, 140 x 101 cm, 1943. Musée National d'Art Moderne. Paris, France.

He believed that appropriating such iconography would, "call attention to the hypocrisy of the Christian persecution of Jews" (Rosen, 2009: 26). Chagall was closely influenced by his contemporaries within the Jewish artistic community and understood the potential value in using such a powerful Christian symbol within Jewish connotations. In one later Yiddish publication translated by Ziva Amishai-Maisels, he explained:

For me, Christ has always symbolized the true type of the Jewish martyr. That is how I understood him in 1908 when I used this figure for the first time [. . .] It was under the influence of the pogroms. Then I painted and drew him in pictures about ghettos, surrounded by Jewish troubles, by Jewish mothers, running terrified with little children in their arms (1991: 143)

The quintessential religious image of Christ crucified was reassigned by Chagall and his contemporaries as not only a Jewish figure, but a political icon. By painting Christ amidst contemporary events, Chagall forced his viewers to see the political reality which condoned the suffering he depicted. It also provided an empathetic foundation for the depiction of human injustice. Associating Christ with innocent Jewish victims in his paintings, tied the plight of European Jews to the symbolic tragedy of this traditional Christian figure. Again, in a lecture delivered in 1947, Chagall used this theme to describe the suffering of the Jewish people during World War II:

Unity is the salvation. I would select those with less talent who are for unity over the so-called great talents who oppose it or make it peripheral. In light of history, the new Jews look ever more like partisans, not wandering like peddlers with a sack on their back over the roofs of cities. On their banners, in spite of their military countenance, we see words of unity and love. Thus their fathers and brothers fought in the ghettos of Warsaw and other cities. And the "crucifixions" in the streets of Vitebsk and other cities take on the tragic look of the crucified Christ himself (Harshav, 2003b/1918: 111-112).

Martyrdom for Chagall was a theme which could best be described through the classical forms of Western art, aimed at the Christian society which was participating in the martyrdoms of his time. His paintings within this subject continuously developed the core theme of Jewish suffering and martyrdom. Works like *Golgotha* and *Le Martyr* painted in 1940 (fig.3) show clear references to Christian religious imagery and composition, but they retain an overt political message about contemporary Jewish suffering (Rosen, 2009: 26).



Figure 3. Chagall, Marc. "Le Martyr." Oil on canvas, 1940.

The religious nature of the referenced prototypes only acted as a base upon which Chagall could develop his secular subject matter. These paintings are part of a larger series which Chagall used to describe his views on the violence which results from ignorance and hatred. Both pieces reference the contemporary events and political issues which haunted Chagall. *White Crucifixion* belongs to this series of work and contains all of the nuances and devices which Chagall developed in his "martyrdom" paintings.

ANALYSIS OF *WHITE CRUCIFIXION*

The *White Crucifixion* painting (fig.4) is a work in oil on canvas that is dated to 1938, though the painting had been reworked by Chagall himself at a later date (Amishai-Maisels, 1991: 140). The canvas is organized in the form of an icon with a central scene, surrounded by smaller explanatory compositions. This is a subtle reference to Orthodox iconography with which he was familiar, having grown up and worked in Russia (Amishai-Maisels, 1991: 139). The central Christ figure is displayed as a corpse-like crucified Jew wearing a prayer shawl instead of a loincloth and a head scarf instead of a crown of thorns. The cross is inscribed above Christ's head in Aramaic, "Yesu HaNotzri Malcha D'Yehudai" as well as

with the INRI, clearly marking who it is that Chagall has depicted as a Jew. The central scene is illuminated by a shaft of light from the upper right-hand corner of the painting and a burning ladder is propped against the right side of the “cross.” The cross in this crucifixion is shown with a more conspicuous “T” shape than those of traditional Christian images, since Chagall omitted the height of the central pillar which usually projects over Christ. The circular light of the halo around Christ’s head is mirrored by the light emanating from the menorah at the base of the cross. Here, Chagall’s use of layered religious imagery is particularly prominent. The reference to the Christian Christ with a Christian halo, is juxtaposed by the specifically Jewish details and the menorah. This “divine” symbolism is further sabotaged by the pale, dead figure of Christ which speaks more to a depiction of human death rather than immortal divinity. The central figure acts as an introduction to the painting and sets the conflicting religious and secular tone through which the rest of the image is presented.



Figure 4. Chagall, Marc. “White Crucifixion.” Oil on canvas, 154.6 × 140 cm, 1938.
The Art Institute of Chicago. Chicago, IL.

Where, in an icon, would be depicted the apostles and Christ's mother, Chagall surrounds the central figure with scenes and vignettes of violence and despair. Above the cross float three Jewish patriarchs and a matriarch, possibly identifiable as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Rachel (Rosen, 2009: 28). They appear to be mourning the crucifixion as well as the immediate destruction and chaos. These figures carry Jewish connotations which further the mixed religious tone of the painting. By including them, Chagall creates a direct interaction between the Old and New Testament in a way which could be interpreted as a reversal of the traditional Christian narrative. Instead of viewing the Old Testament from the context of the New Testament, Chagall set the scene from the opposite direction. From a theological and psychological point of view, this arrangement is an innovative way of forcing the viewer to recontextualize what they are viewing from their (potentially) Christian perspective. This particular aspect of the painting also serves to reinforce Chagall's interpretation of the crucifixion. The Jewish figures are interacting with Christ *as a Jew*. They mourn for him and with him, cementing Chagall's Jewish identification of Christ.

To the left of the cross is depicted a burning village in turmoil while a group of soldiers with red flags run toward it. There is some debate as to whether the group (possibly Soviet soldiers) is coming to save or to harm the village, but as Aaron Rosen points out, likely Chagall knew from experience that the Soviets were not as protective of their Jewish population as they appeared (Rosen, 2009: 28). Within the village is shown a corpse lying in the snow in a graveyard. A sitting goat next to an abandoned chair is the only figure which apparently notices the corpse. This accentuates the inhumane nature of the suffering; not only is no one there to attend to the body, but the sight is unacknowledged by human eyes. A small group of three villagers gather together while their houses are literally turned upside down in the conflagration. Chagall focuses in this section on the poignant impotence of the villagers. They have no power to prevent their world and livelihood from being destroyed. War deprives them of both their houses and their lives, and this suffering is simultaneously inevitable and absolute.

Below them, a group of refugees from the village panic in a boat and appeal apparently hopelessly to Christ and God. This could be interpreted as a symbolic reference to the New Testament story in Matthew 8:23-27 in which Christ calms the sea for his disciples or alternately, to the Old Testament story of Jonah in which God creates a storm which threatens to drown a boat full of sailors unless Jonah sacrifices himself to the sea. In either case, the desperation and hopelessness of the refugees is mirrored in these biblical stories. However, Chagall purposefully leaves out any depiction of the possibility of salvation.

To the right of the cross is a burning synagogue with a soldier at the doors. In this section, the Nazi flag and arm band on the figure were painted over by Chagall, possibly to protect the painting at the beginning of World War II (Amishai-Maisels, 1991: 140). This would have been necessary since much of the art the Nazi party deemed “degenerative” or anti-establishment was confiscated and in some cases, destroyed (Barron, 1991: 19). In front of the synagogue, books, a chair, and religious objects are scattered, while through the doors opened by the soldier, we can see the Torah scroll within the temple.

Under the cross are several figures which appear to run away from Christ. One man with only one shoe, carries away a Torah scroll (apparently to save it) while another carries a sack over his back and runs over the enormous flames from a burning Torah scroll. A woman holds a baby, and another man holds his hand to his eye. Another male figure with a sign holds out his hands in a gesture of desperate appeal. The sign, though obscured by Chagall, originally read, “Ich bin Jude” (Amishai-Maisels, 1991: 140). It is clear from the imagery that these are depictions of contemporary events which occurred potentially before and during 1938. It is also important to remember that Kristallnacht occurred on November 9th of the same year. The violent anti-Jewish acts of the Nazi party, the labeling of Jews, pogroms, book burnings, and the destruction of Jewish villages and synagogues were the violent and demoralizing events which drove Chagall to depict this painting of complete Jewish suffering. The image uses detailed contemporary scenes in order to clearly show the “injustice of Jewish persecution” (Rosen, 2009: 30). The distinctly personal expressions of the fleeing figures in the foreground also add an empathetic dimension to the painting. These suffering Jews are human, like the crucified Jew in the center of the panel. As the viewer, we are meant to sympathize with their pain and understand their humanity.

White Crucifixion is not a salvific image, like most Christian crucifixion paintings. Rather, it bears a striking similarity to the outer panel of Matthias Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece* dated to 1506-1515 (fig.5) in which Christ is primarily a symbol of ultimate suffering and pain, even though it contains an over-all positive theological message (Kleiner, 2014: 281-282).

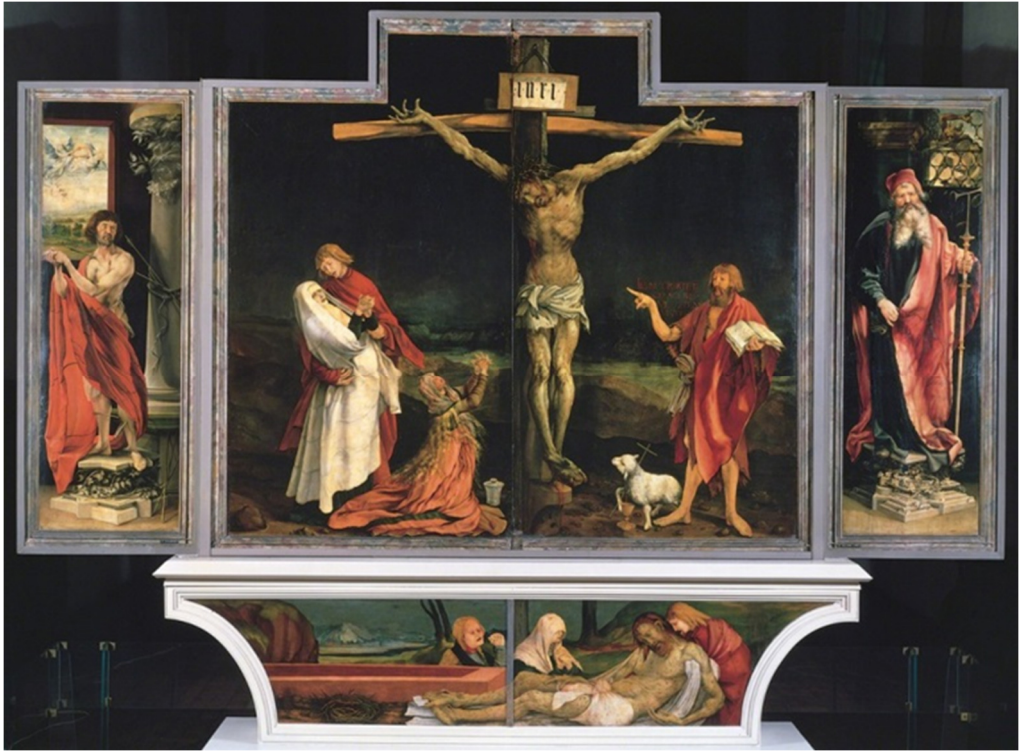


Figure 5. Grünewald, Matthias. "Isenheim Altarpiece." Oil on limewood, 683.3 × 1651 cm, 1506. Unterlinden Museum. Colmar, Alsace, France.

This definitive depiction of martyrdom plays into the broader artistic trend of reclaiming Christ for Jewish art. Just as Antokolsky depicted his Jewish Jesus, so Chagall has done the same, but added more overtly Jewish symbolism to clearly make his point. Benjamin Harshav, in his biography of Chagall remarks:

By portraying Jesus as a Jewish martyr, Chagall follows an established tradition of Jewish artists using the image of Jesus to indict their Christian persecutors, while at the same time hoping to arouse their empathy (2003b: 18).

A "Jewish Jesus" was a significant image used by the Jewish Art movement because it accurately portrayed the concept of martyrdom and suffering to a Christian culture. In other words, the language of the image would be understandable to a non-Jewish audience, even though the subject of the painting was an inherently Jewish one. Suffering and pain are exemplified in the crucifixion genre, so it was a natural step to reallocate this Christian image for Jewish subject matter in order to demonstrate the issues of violent anti-Semitism.

The action within the painting also serves to dislocate the crucifixion from its religious context. In particular, it is significant that the figures below the cross do not interact with it as those in typical Christian paintings. The terrified figures

are in direct opposition to the usual depictions of Mary and John. In *White Crucifixion*, the Jewish peasants appear to scatter away from Christ and from the destruction around him. As Allyn Weisstein describes in her work on Chagall's iconography:

The painting is a pattern full of spiritual incompleteness, with directions meeting in the central Christ. Earthly things are unbalanced values, deceits, paradoxes and devastations; Christ is not the understood Christ of classic crucifixions, carried down by those who love him, but a Christ abandoned by people at the height of some personal emergency whose relation in cause and effect to the symbolic tragedy they seem unable or unwilling to recognize (1954: 45).

There is a sense of despair associated with this disjointed display of humanity. Nobody appears to help anyone else. Every figure is absorbed by their own tragedy and cannot recognize the suffering around them. Isolation pervades the scene. Not only the isolation of the crucified Christ, but of each individual Jew who is suffering around him. Franz Meyer wrote in his analysis of Chagall's artistic career that,

For Chagall, too, Christ remains a Jew, as he explicitly stresses in the symbolism of the Crucifixions painted since 1938. Christ is not the Son of God: the Passion is not a chapter in religious history, but the incredibly lonely, unnatural, irrational act of one of the greatest of men (1963/1961: 16).

Chagall's understanding of Christ was not only from a political point of view, but also from a personal perspective which accentuated Christ's humanity. Christ, to Chagall, was not the crucified son of God, but a crucified innocent man. And as a man, Chagall felt connected to that symbol of suffering mortality. In a poem written by Chagall in Yiddish in 1938, he expressed his own connection with the abandonment of Christ:

I carry my cross every day,
I am led by the hand and driven on,
Night darkens around me.
Have you abandoned me, my God? Why? (Jeffrey, 2012: 223)

It is clear then that Chagall was making a parallel between the suffering of Christ and the suffering of the Jewish people. His personal connection to the figure of the crucified Christ adds a layer of pathos to his painting. For him, his Jewish Christ was not only a symbol, but a personal reflection of the suffering and desertion he felt. The burning ladder against the cross only strengthens this image of abandonment and forsakenness. It represents an opportunity for salvation that has not been fulfilled. Nobody is willing or able to take Christ from the cross and as it burns, the opportunity disappears. In a contemporary context, this symbolism would have instilled in its viewers the recognition that their lack of action or their inability to take action had cemented the fate of European Jews. We might conjecture that Chagall himself felt the same powerlessness in the face

of anti-Semitic violence. Like his painted subjects, he was unable to save anyone but himself. Such a message is far from the salvific nature of the original imagery, but it enhances the secular meaning which Chagall wanted to express.

The inversion of religious iconography is further accentuated by the layering of Christian and Jewish imagery. Chagall intentionally made references to both iconographic traditions in order to make the painting less “religious” and more “universal.” We cannot view it as a Christian devotional piece because it clearly shows a contemporary Jew. But it is in no way a Jewish religious image because it is a crucifixion. In this way, the political details within the painting are made more prominent and fill the vacuum created by these competing religious images. The suffering of the Jewish Christ is made more human, and the surrounding scenes gain prominence because they reflect Christ’s suffering in specifically Jewish contexts. The secular and political nature of the scene is what dominates this crucifixion. Jeffrey discusses this particular aspect of Chagall’s use of layered imagery in his own analysis:

In Chagall’s painting we can see a fusion of symbolic meaning that seeks to violate neither tradition, but rather, in the darkest of times, to achieve a simultaneous celebration and integrative re-interpretation of both Jewish and Christian sources of consolation. This is, of course, to highlight the spiritual affections of Chagall as a supreme idealism, not necessarily to suggest that he seeks to valorize religious behavior as he finds it in the world (2012: 213).

Chagall’s secularism allows for the recontextualizing of religious imagery in order to further express his urgent political message. Christ is universalized so that he can carry Chagall’s critique of the violent expressions of anti-Semitism. By merging several traditions of religious imagery that are seemingly incompatible, the real message is brought forward in a universal and pluralistic way. Chagall’s technique is in a way, “a calculus for integration” (Jeffrey, 2012: 227) which allows for the development of a richer, and more detailed conceptual composition. Much like the secularization of Jewish folk art and religious imagery within the Jewish Art movement, Chagall applied this philosophy to Christian art and used the result to express a specific message of secular Jewish martyrdom.

The universal nature of this painting is reiterated by the corpse-like figure of Christ. By accentuating Christ’s death, Chagall undermined the divinity of Christ often expressed in Christian imagery. This further separates the crucifixion from its religious origins and cements it in a new, political context. Franz Meyer describes how the humanity of Chagall’s portrayal redefines the salvific Christian image into one of secular tragedy and destruction:

Here instead, though all the suffering of the world is mirrored in the Crucifixion, suffering remains man’s lasting fate and is not abolished by Christ’s death. So Chagall’s Christ figure lacks the Christian concept of salvation. For all his holiness he is by no means divine. This Christ is a

man who suffers pain in a thousand forms and yet finally always in the same form, a man who is eternally burned by the fire of the world and yet, being an archetype, remains indestructible. It is not his divine but his human nature that Christ's suffering preserves (1963/1961: 416).

Meyer points out the key element which transforms Chagall's crucifixion from a religious work to a political work. By depicting Christ as human and a Jew, suffering amidst acts of Jewish persecution, Chagall explicitly showed the tragedy within which his own contemporaries were living. The use of Nazi symbols, the figure holding the sign, and the red flags are not simply detailed illustrations of actual events, but serve to highlight the political nature of the martyrdom of European Jews. Chagall wanted to accentuate the reality that the Jewish people and more accurately Jewish, individual *humans* were being persecuted systematically through violence stimulated by political movements and organizations.

CONCLUSION

White Crucifixion can only be understood as a product of the upheaval and politically fueled violence of the years before the Second World War. Without its historical context, the full message of the imagery cannot be expressed. Christ is secularized by Chagall for the purpose of clarifying the martyrdom of European Jews and condemning the violent acts of the Nazi Party and other anti-Semites. The painting is a composition tailored to the visual language of the Christian culture within which Chagall was working. The Nazi soldier depicted in front of the burning synagogue, the burned Torah scroll, the labeled Jew, the refugees, and the soldiers with flags entering the destroyed village are all images of contemporary events that disturbed Chagall. These scenes are Chagall's versions of the pogroms, Kristallnacht, and the public violence against Jews committed by members of the Nazi party. By painting real events, he made *White Crucifixion* a political piece and an empathetic appeal to its viewers. In this appeal lies the universalism of Chagall. In his autobiography *My life*, Chagall wrote:

Art seems to me to be above all a state of the soul. The souls of everyone, of all bipeds at all points of the earth, are holy (1965: 160).

This particular painting stems from that sentiment. Through his crucifix paintings and more specifically in *White Crucifixion*, he expressed his disappointment and frustration at the destruction of "holy" things and the suffering of innocent people. Chagall entreated his Christian audience to sympathize with the threatened humanity of their Jewish neighbors by equating them with the figure of the crucified Christ, with which they would already be familiar.

The clear influence of the Jewish Art movement and the Modern Jewish Revolution as well as the persecution and anti-Semitism rampant in Europe at the time, resulted in this distinctly universalist depiction of Christ as a symbol of

suffering. Chagall was a product of his time and the cultural-political environment that surrounded him. Like many of his contemporaries, he turned to secularism and Westernization in order to escape the perceived narrowness of his Eastern upbringing. His rejection of Judaism from a theological point did not prevent him from sympathizing with the Jewish people or indeed from using the imagery of his developmental years to express the abstract, human themes with which he worked. His easy use of appropriation further enriched his visual vocabulary when he was introduced to Western Christian art. And it is from this variety of influences: religious, social, and political that Chagall was able to craft his particular expression of suffering. In this way, *White Crucifixion* is a reflection of the artistic trends and controversial ideas which Chagall came in contact with through the Jewish diaspora. As Horst Keller writes in his work on Chagall's artistic career, this painting,

sprang from the horror of the persecution of the Jews and anti-Semitism in France. Christ, with the Jewish prayer shawl as a loincloth, is for him here a symbol of all martyred Jews (1980/1979: 129).

A "Jewish Jesus" to Chagall was not simply a reassessment of the traditional Christian symbol or a political messenger, but also a universal figure for both Christians and Jews of human pain and martyrdom.

This chaotic composition is a complex layering of themes which ultimately critique the politically fueled anti-Semitism of Europe in the 1930s. It functions as an appeal to European society to recognize the brutal martyrdom of its Jewish people and in a personal sense; it is Chagall's own process through which he tried to understand the violence and hatred which he witnessed. *White Crucifixion* is ultimately a secular commentary that appears through the eyes of Christianity and Judaism. These mixed theological iconographies are juxtaposed in order to carry the political and universal message of suffering. Chagall's martyred Christ and his martyred Jews become one unified depiction of the abandonment of humanity and the destruction of the Jewish people.

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СЕКУЛАРНА ИКОНА: БИЈЕЛО РАСПЕЋЕ МАРКА ШАГАЛА

Резиме

Шагалово *Бијело распеће* (1938) у овом раду анализирано је кроз социо-историјску, религијску те призму историје умјетности, истражујући улогу ширег политичког контекста и Шагалових личних погледа у настанку ове слике. *Бијело распеће* је слика која представља идеалан примјер умјетничких трендова присутних у европској јеврејској дијаспори у периоду између два свјетска рата. Такође, слика се у доброј мјери ослања на политичка искуства европских Јевреја овог периода. Комбиновањем вјерске иконографије и секуларних тема, двије међусобно супротстављене ствари, Шагал шаље политичку и универзалистичку поруку пријемчиву и за нејеврејску публику.

У овом раду прво се истражује историјска и биографска позадина која је инспирисала настанак ове слике. Конкретно, прати се утицај Модерне јеврејске револуције и Јеврејског умјетничког покрета раног 20. вијека на развој европске јеврејске културе, те како су Шагалово одрастање и умјетнички развој у оквиру овог периода утицали на његов стил и избор тематике. Затим се објашњава превалентност иконографије распећа у умјетности овог периода, као и то да је она чешће употребљавана да изрази политичке него вјерске теме. Шагал, наравно, није био први јеврејски умјетник који је користио овакав специфичан вид хришћанске иконографије; ипак, иконографија распећа тема је коју је често истраживао и развијао у свом поетском и сликарском стваралаштву, поготово у периоду између два рата.

Након анализе Шагаловог стваралачког контекста слиједи детаљна анализа слике *Бијело распеће*, са посебним фокусом на однос појединачних скупина фигура ка централној фигури Христа. Поред овога, разматрају се и многе теме и симболи употријебљени на слици, а са циљем бољег разумијевања поруке коју Шагал жели да пошаље. Коначно, у раду се истражују и политичке и теолошке импликације Шагалове умјетничке тематике и иконографије коју користи да је изрази. У Шагаловом случају, употреба вјерске иконографије са циљем изражавања изричито секуларне поруке рефлектује не само шири тренд секуларизације унутар јеврејских заједница овог периода, већ и покушај универзализације вјерске иконографије са циљем да се она употријеби као умјетнички језик путем ког би његова порука људске патње могла бити пренесена широј хришћанској заједници.

Кључне ријечи: *Бијело распеће*, Марк Шагал, Јеврејски умјетнички покрет, Модерна јеврејска револуција, секуларизација, Други свјетски рат