CHAGALL LISSITZKY MALEVICH

THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE IN VITEBSK, 1918–1922

EDITED BY ANGELA LAMPE

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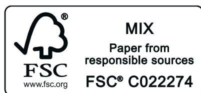

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Foreword

The year of the hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution was the occasion for reflection—through exhibitions, conferences, and publications—upon those events of 1917 that changed the face of the world long afterward. Building on its former links with Russia—forged in 1979 on the occasion of the exhibition *Paris–Moscow, 1900–1930*—the Centre Pompidou is now focusing on the period following the political upheaval when, against the backdrop of civil war, the Bolshevik leaders were working to profoundly transform Russian society. Their emancipatory plan involved educating the working classes, and artists were to play a major role. Painters, visual artists, writers, and film directors were enlisted to serve the Revolution. Marc Chagall was one of those very committed artists.

It was in that context that, in 1918, he conceived of a people's art school, open to all, in his hometown of Vitebsk. With a mixture of enthusiasm and feverishness, in that provincial town in what is now Belarus, Chagall managed to create a dynamic institution that was the envy of the major Russian cities. He invited renowned artists to come there and form a team of educators representing the full spectrum of what was referred to at the time as "leftist art." With the arrival of El Lissitzky and the Suprematist leader Kazimir Malevich, the People's Art School succumbed to proponents of "objectless art," leading to the departure of Chagall. There ensued a phase of intense agitation, in the guise of collective and utilitarian art. But that bubble of freedom was short-lived. With the end of the civil war and the establishment of a new economic policy about 1922, culture was placed under the yoke of the Bolshevik party.

Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918–1922—the first exhibition devoted to this little-known chapter in the history of the arts in Russia—offers a distillation of the postrevolutionary atmosphere that suffused the entire country. It covers a time in history when public officials placed artists at the core of their societal vision, and when artists in turn were fully committed to serving the collectivity, by helping to change people's lives, by working to transform the city, and by participating in free education accessible to all.

This ambitious project was led by Angela Lampe, curator at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, and editor of this book, which, in addition to essays, includes a detailed chronology and an anthology of texts penned by the main protagonists of this artistic and civic adventure. A symbol of the wonderful bond between the two institutions, the catalogue will be the subject of a presentation at the Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art (INHA).

Such an event would not have been possible without the support of many foreign partners. I would like to acknowledge the great generosity of the State Tretyakov Gallery (Moscow), The State Russian Museum (Saint Petersburg), the National Museum of Contemporary Art–Costakis Collection (Thessaloniki), the National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus (Minsk), and the Vitebsk Regional Museum of Local History. My gratitude also extends to the Van Abbemuseum of Eindhoven and its curator, Willem Jan Renders. Lastly, I am delighted about the presentation of this project at the Jewish Museum in New York at the end of the year.

Serge Lasvignes
Chairman, Director, and CEO, Centre Pompidou

Preface

It was with the stunning 1979 exhibition *Paris–Moscow 1900–1930* that visitors to the Centre Pompidou first became familiar with the history of the Soviet avant-garde. The now legendary exhibition revealed to a wide audience the richness of the aesthetic debates of this unparalleled period in modern history. Many exhibitions would follow, including the first retrospectives in France dedicated to Kazimir Malevich and Pavel Filonov, the exceptional exhibition of Marc Chagall's drawings during the artist's lifetime, and, of course, a series of events that would have a lasting effect on the history of the Centre Pompidou.

The history of these avant-garde artists is still too little known. In our country, many researchers, art historians, and curators have contributed to a better understanding of the artists and major actors of the period. Among them, Jean-Claude Marcadé and Camilla Gray, Emmanuel Martineau, Andrei Nakov, Béatrice Picon-Vallin, Jessica Boissel, Gérard Conio, Valérie Pozner, Catherine Depretto, Claire Le Foll, and obviously Christian Derouet, Jean-Hubert Martin, and Pontus Hultén have broken vital new ground. Numerous publications and translations have provided an attentive audience with long-unpublished texts. Finally, in 2018 and 2019 the Centre Pompidou will pursue its desire to make the creative complexity of the former Soviet Union and Central Europe better known. In the spring of 2019, an exhibition organized by Nicolas Liucci-Goutnikov, curator at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, for the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, will offer an unprecedented view of communist art in Soviet Russia between 1917 and 1953, the year of Stalin's death. Next fall of 2019, another exhibition, this one devoted to "Unism," a key Polish movement in theoretical opposition to the aesthetic debates of the 1920s in Russia, will reveal works and debates that are too little known.

All this demonstrates the importance of the project Angela Lampe is presenting here by conceiving the exhibition *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde at Vitebsk, 1918–1922* for the Centre Pompidou. Vitebsk, as we know, played a momentous role in the development of the artistic, educational, and social scene in the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution. It was a scene of creative clashes between figures as legendary as Marc Chagall—a native of that town in what is now Belarus, who was the driving force of the People's Art School in the fervor of the Revolution—and Kazimir Malevich and El Lissitzky, who had joined him there at his invitation. It was in Vitebsk that the conflict took shape between abstraction and figuration, and even more, the opposition between two ways of perceiving the world, of recounting it on the one hand and of envisioning it on the other. At its core, this conflict would witness the development of the work of Lissitzky as well as many others whom this exhibition will introduce, including Vera Ermolaeva, Nina Kogan, Yuri Pen, and David Yakerson, to name just a few.

The Vitebsk People's Art School is thus the foothold necessary for understanding where different creative visions came into opposition, one supported by the poetic spirit of its founder, Marc Chagall, who would soon find himself in conflict with the Suprematist theories of Kazimir Malevich and his students. What happened next is only partly known. El Lissitzky's work—so rich in previously unexplored aesthetic and theoretical perspectives—and its application to many artistic disciplines, ranging from architecture to photography and painting to graphics, resonates as a major contribution of the past century.

Angela Lampe, curator at the Musée National d'Art Moderne and organizer of many seminal exhibitions, including *Paul Klee: Irony at Work* and *Views from Above* at the Centre Pompidou Metz, has here presented a crucial investigation into this brief but extremely fertile period: four years in a provincial Russian city in which the intensity of exchanges and the positions taken by the various actors fundamentally changed ways of thinking and charted unprecedented paths. In Vitebsk, Chagall championed a beneficent and poetic mental universe, a way of imagining and conveying the world that made him one of his century's greatest poets of painting. In Vitebsk, Malevich's teaching

paved the way for "objectless art" as well as for the urbanistic future of Suprematism and a truly revolutionary pedagogy. In Vitebsk, Lissitzky conceptualized the *Proun* with the aim of liberating artistic practice from the confines of the painting. In Vitebsk, other ideas emerged and took root, nurturing a generation soon to come into its own and whose stated goal was to change the world.

The Vitebsk People's Art School was a utopian space, a geographic and cerebral territory where ideas and issues faced off. History tells us that the fight was tough, and that its founder preferred to leave the School and dream elsewhere. History also tells us that major cities have not always been the rallying points for debating the most radical of ideas. *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich* contributes to a redefinition of the geography of creativity and its various actors, and reminds us, if need be, that it is vital to rethink center and periphery. Vitebsk, in the heart of modern Europe, was like Weimar or Dessau, Łódź or Ascona, a place of ideas where modern art, soon harnessed to ideologies of all sorts, clarified its language and enlightened the mind.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Angela Lampe for her incisive research and her dedication to this project. We greatly appreciate all our colleagues from the many Russian and international institutions who offered their time and expertise, including those from the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, along with the authors and researchers who have contributed to the exhibition and to this publication. Finally, our heartfelt thanks go to the teams at the Centre Pompidou who worked to bring this important project to fruition.

Bernard Blistène
Director, Musée National d'Art Moderne–Centre de Création Industrielle

Members of the Creative Committee of the People's Art School, Vitebsk, winter 1919
Seated: Yuri Pen (third from left), Marc Chagall (center), Vera Ermolaeva (second from right), Kazimir Malevich (far right)
Gelatin silver print, 4 7⁄16 × 6 5⁄8 in. (11.2 × 16.9 cm)
Archives Marc et Ida Chagall, Paris

A Revolutionary Laboratory

Angela Lampe

"In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole."

Mikhail Bakhtin[1]

By 1937, when the historian and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin formulated the notion of the chronotope, his stay in Vitebsk between 1920 and 1924, when he taught and organized a group of philosophical researchers (the Bakhtin Circle), was already a distant memory. And yet, his encounter with Kazimir Malevich and the creative effervescence that marked this small provincial city at the time would leave a profound impression on him.[2] In this town, far from the metropolis, and now part of Belarus, the time of revolution itself seemed to materialize in space. The upheaval of Russian society had become palpable in the streets adorned with Suprematist decorations; time had become fused with place. For a short period following the Bolshevik seizure of power, Vitebsk was transformed into a revolutionary laboratory for the new world.

The shocks of the year 1917—the overthrow of the czarist regime in February, followed by Lenin's coup d'état in October—had raised high hopes, particularly among Jewish artists, who were henceforth to be considered full-fledged Russian citizens. Freed from institutional paternalism and the censors, the creative artists of Petrograd, including Marc Chagall, formed their own organizations as early as March, with the purpose of struggling for the autonomy of art and the ambition of running its institutions by the artists themselves,[3] all the while calling for the dissolution of the academies and the decentralization of artistic life. After their victory, the Bolsheviks adopted some of these demands as policy. Under the influence of Anatoly Lunacharsky, who directed the Narkompros (People's Commissariat of Enlightenment), artists of the left joined in the construction of the new Russian society, posing questions as to the purposes and utility of their art. The revolutionary forces considered public instruction an absolute priority, and so it fell to the painters to introduce the population to the history, the codes, and the practices of art.[4] Taking advantage of the relative freedom left open by a government focused on civil war, Lunacharsky and the Commissar of Arts would set up the first SVOMAS in Moscow in the fall of 1918—"free state art studios" operated autonomously by both the artist instructors and the students.

Having learned from these experiences, Chagall seized the opportunity to act on behalf of his native city of Vitebsk, known for its school of Jewish art founded by Yuri Pen. His idea of establishing a people's school of art, open to all, was well received from the outset. There were a number of reasons for this enthusiasm. Already admired for his success in Paris, Chagall was named the Commissioner of Arts for Vitebsk and in this capacity unleashed a wave of enthusiasm among those who joined with him, particularly the youth. This was particularly evident in his mobilization of all the painters in the city on the occasion of celebrations commemorating the Revolution. In addition, he sought out important artists whose stylistic approaches would nurture the eclectic teachings dispensed to the students. To that end, he solicited individuals as dissimilar in their teaching methods and aesthetic practices as the traditionalist Mstislav Dobuzhinsky and the Futurist Ivan Puni, both of whom arrived during the first heady days of the People's Art School, even before Chagall's friend El Lissitzky, as well as Kazimir Malevich, the leading exponent of abstraction, would take the road to Vitebsk. In addition, the geographic location of the city permitted its efficient provisioning in the face of threats of famine in the metropolises—a compelling reason for prominent artists to relocate. Finally, the distance from Moscow and the clustering of students in a single building facilitated exchanges and the development of collective projects—a condition similar to that of the Bauhaus, which had opened in Weimar that same year of 1919.

However, unlike Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus, Chagall did not set up his open studios by issuing a visionary manifesto calling for the fusion of art, craft, and architecture so ardently proclaimed by his German colleague, or by devising an educational program with compulsory courses. As he sought to offer the widest possible array of styles, he was undaunted by the prospect of running an establishment that brought together contrasting and even antagonistic personalities. "We can afford the luxury of 'playing with fire,' and within our walls, the leading artists and studios of all trends—from left to 'right' inclusively—are represented and function freely," Chagall assured the public at the end of the School's first semester.[5] It was up to the students, even the very young ones, to choose the classes that suited them. New tensions gripped the School with the arrival of Malevich in November 1919. It did not take long for the charismatic Suprematist to electrify the students as well as the instructors; Lissitzky, who had brought him from Moscow, was fascinated. The second phase in the life of the School

opened with the formation of the UNOVIS collective (the Affirmers of the New Art) in February 1920. It would solidify under the aegis of a particular utopian project: the creation of a Suprematist "objectless"[6] world. Lissitzky would recall: "It was our most creative time. The school was full of enthusiasm, the young students feverishly seized on each undertaking and took it further. It was the true start of the collectivist era. We made an active contribution to the color of this little town. Factories, trams and rostrums all rang out under our murals. The first exhibition of 1920 in Moscow showed that we had occupied first place in the art life of the Union."[7] Trained as an architect, Lissitzky would play a key role in the extension of Suprematism into three dimensions and in its functional adaptation, as illustrated in his series of *Prouns* (Projects for the Affirmation of the New).

The level of agitation produced by the members of UNOVIS was such that the School split into two camps during the spring of 1920: "the youth around Malevich," Chagall explained in a letter to a friend, "and the youth around me." To which he added this clarification: "Both of us are striving toward the leftist domain of art, nevertheless we see its means and goals differently."[8] As head of the School, he defended the idea of a plurality of artistic tendencies, which he himself had called for, even presenting the works of UNOVIS with a certain pride. For his part, Malevich was respectful of his colleague, to the point of requesting permission in writing to speak to Chagall's class about certain theoretical ideas on the subject of Cubism.[9] The two rival groups worked together on the May Day festivities—with Chagall-inspired figures dotting Suprematist decorations—as well as the anniversary celebration of the Committee to Combat Unemployment in December 1919.[10] But this coexistence would not last. Over the course of a few weeks, students deserted Chagall's studio to join the Suprematists. Exhausted and dispirited, he left Vitebsk in June to settle in Moscow. He would continue to harbor some bitterness toward Lissitzky (whom he considered a traitor) and Malevich (viewing him as a usurper) and did not refrain from saying so.[11] This would lead a number of subsequent commentators to assess the Vitebsk period through the fanciful prism of a personal conflict.

At the very moment of Chagall's departure, Malevich and his UNOVIS collective would win national recognition on the occasion of the First All-Russian Conference of Art Teachers and Students, held in Moscow in June 1920. The Vitebsk SVOMAS would become a benchmark of art education in Russia. At this point, a third chapter of the School, now under the aegis of Vera Ermolaeva, began: the dissemination of UNOVIS principles throughout the country. Satellite branches opened, notably in Smolensk, Orenburg, and Moscow, and collective exhibitions were mounted in the metropoles. After Lissitzky's departure in the winter of 1920, Malevich continued to organize studios at the School with the aid of his colleagues and his most faithful students, such as Nikolai Suetin and Ilya Chashnik, all the while continuing to publish his theoretical writings. Nonetheless, in 1921, the situation within the School began to deteriorate. The Bolsheviks sought to remediate the widespread exhaustion stemming from the civil war with a new economic policy. In addition, they were determined to reclaim control over cultural policy, which led to increasing state interference in artistic practices and pressures on artists to conform to socialist and proletarian values. After being exposed repeatedly to criticism and faced with massive cutbacks in the resources allocated to the School, Malevich left Vitebsk with a group of students during the summer of 1922, in order to carry on his work in Petrograd. The interlude of freedom that Vitebsk had enjoyed was coming to a close.

Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918–1922 is the first major exhibition of this little-known subject.[12] It is based on the in-depth research of Aleksandra Shatskikh[13] and seeks to retrace the major moments in a period when history was made in a provincial town. In addition to the various activities of the three protagonists, their colleagues and students, the exhibition covers the founding of the (short-lived) Museum of Contemporary Art in Vitebsk, and the assembling of a collection of works to be housed in that museum—a project Chagall instigated to give greater depth to the artistic education of students—along with the Suprematist experiments that began in Vitebsk. For a few years, Chagall, Lissitzky, and Malevich enabled a small town to capitalize on its geographic isolation, transforming it into a rare model of collectivity brought into being and sustained by the work of artists.

Translated from French by Christian Hubert

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics," in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*, ed. Brian Richardson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), p. 15.
2. On this topic, see Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art, 1917–1922* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 303–13.
3. See Hubertus Gassner, "The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization," in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932*, ed. Bettina-Martine Wolter and Bernhart Schwenk (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992), pp. 298–319.
4. See Evelyne Pieiller, "Alors l'art se souleva," *Le Monde Diplomatique* (October 2017), p. 12.
5. Marc Chagall, "O Vitebskom narodnom khudozhestvennom uchilishche" (On the Vitebsk People's Art School), *Shkola i Revoliutsiia* (School and Revolution), nos. 24–25 (August 16, 1919), pp. 7–8. For the text, see pp. 228–29 in this volume.
6. For a discussion of the use of the term *objectless* as opposed to *nonobjective*, see "Objectless in Vitebsk: Reflections on Kazimir Malevich, Architecture, and Representation: A Conversation with Elitza Dulguerova," *Scapegoat*, no. 3 (2012), p. 25 n 2: "Following scholars like Christina Lodder and Charlotte Douglas, I prefer 'objectless' to 'non-objective' (the term used in the English edition of Malevich's writings). The problem with 'nonobjective' lies in its philosophical undertones hinting at oppositions such as objective/subjective. This is not the framework Malevich is working with. Furthermore, the Russian terms for these philosophical categories are *ob"ektivnyi*, *sub"ektivnyi*, that is, Latin-based words, while Malevich uses *bespredmetnyi*, a neologism based on the Russian word for object, *predmet*. 'Objectless,' on the other hand, should not convey connotations of 'pointless' or 'purposeless.' As used in recent scholarship on Malevich, it is first and foremost a literal translation of *bespredmetnyi*, 'without an object,' without the qualities of a material object, mainly its materiality, its reference to the everyday, its weight."
7. El Lissitzky, autobiography (unpublished), Nikolai Khardzhiev Archives, Amsterdam or Moscow, cited in Aleksandra Shatskikh, "Malevich and El Lissitzky: Leaders of UNOVIS," in *In Malevich's Circle: Confederates, Students, Followers in Russia, 1920s–1950s*, ed. Irina Karasik (Saint Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2000), pp. 46–47.
8. Letter from Marc Chagall to Pavel Ettinger, dated August 2, 1920. For the text, see pp. 229–31 in this volume.
9. Letter from Kazimir Malevich to Marc Chagall, dated April 8, 1920; Paris, Archives Marc et Ida Chagall.
10. Sofia Dymshits-Tolstaia: "I found myself in Vitebsk after the great celebrations … lines of different colors and Chagall's flying men." Quoted in *Kazimir Malevich: Letters, Documents, Memoirs, Criticism*, ed. Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), vol. 2, p. 164 n. 16.
11. For an account of these disputes, see Marc Chagall, *My Life*, trans. Elisabeth Abbott (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo, 1994), pp. 142–45, and Jackie Wullschläger, *Chagall: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2008), chapter 12, "Commissar Chagall and Comrade Malevich: Vitebsk, 1917–1920."
12. Until now, only isolated aspects of this story have been addressed in the context of an exhibition; see *The Great Utopia*; *In Malevich's Circle*; and Angela Lampe, ed., *Chagall et l'avant-garde russe* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2011), in which one section is devoted to "Chagall and Vitebsk," pp. 99–103.
13. Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art*. The publication, which appeared in 2001 in Russia, was based on her doctoral thesis. I would also like to mention the invaluable research by Claire Le Foll, *L'école artistique de Vitebsk (1897–1923): Éveil et rayonnement autour de Pen, Chagall et Malévitch* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002).

POSTREVOLUTIONARY FERVOR IN VITEBSK

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And if it is true that only now … can we speak of Humanity with a capital H, even more so, can Art be written with a capital A only if it is revolutionary in its essence.

Marc Chagall, "Art on the Anniversary of October," November 7, 1918

The revolution that engulfed Russia in 1917 had a profound effect on Chagall. In March, the passage of a law repealing all ethnic and religious discrimination made him, a Jewish artist, a full-fledged Russian citizen for the first time. A series of monumental masterpieces then ensued, each expressing the euphoria of the moment. As the months passed, however, the painter felt compelled to crusade for his hometown, Vitebsk. The result was a blueprint for a revolutionary art school, open to all, with no age restrictions or entrance fees. The plan was approved by the new government, and Chagall was appointed his town's Commissar of Arts in September 1918. His first assignment was to enlist all the artists of Vitebsk to produce work for the celebration of the first anniversary of the Bolshevik victory. The streets of Vitebsk were transformed into a sea of colorful banners and signs. "Throughout the town, my multicolored animals swung back and forth, swollen with revolution," Chagall would later write. With the opening of the People's Art School and the arrival of the first teachers in Vitebsk, discussions about revolutionary art—abstract or figurative—intensified among leftist artists.

Marc Chagall
Onward, Onward, 1918
Study for the first anniversary of the October Revolution
Graphite and gouache on grid-lined paper, $9\frac{3}{16} \times 13\frac{1}{4}$ in. (23.4 × 33.7 cm)
Centre Pompidou, National Museum of Modern Art, Paris
1988 gift

Chagall in the Service of the Revolution

Angela Lampe

The union of the revolutionary and the artist is in the flaming enthusiasm of both.

Andrei Bely, 1917[1]

In the collective imagination, the name Marc Chagall is not immediately associated with the idea of political activism. Far from it, in fact. Seen from a distance, the painter of flying figures, admired for his poetic reveries, seems to have been little concerned with public affairs. And yet, during the years of the Revolution, the former resident of La Ruche (The Beehive), an artists' residence in Paris, was fervently committed to facilitating access to the world of art for all fellow citizens of his birthplace, Vitebsk.

The Bolshevik turnaround would mark him deeply. Living in Petrograd from the fall of 1915, he witnessed firsthand the events that turned Russia upside down over the course of 1917. Rather than stepping back from the agitation around him, he was instead caught up in the passion and the hopes raised by the popular uprising—the wave of exultation that swept Czar Nicolas II from power in March and put an end to a centuries-old monarchic regime. In his autobiography, Chagall described himself as "living in an almost semi-conscious state" at the time.[2] The Provisional Government passed a law ending all ethnic and religious discrimination, which for the first time granted Jews full-fledged citizenship. Chagall, a Jewish artist, was no longer considered a second-class subject. This fundamental social change, which galvanized the entire Russian Jewish community, explains in part his great mobilization on the side of the Revolution.

Chagall emerged from his solitude to become a member of the venerable Soiuz Molodezhi (Youth Union), which had been active since 1909, before being named a delegate to the Soiuz Rabotnikov Iskusstv (RABIS, Union of Workers in the Arts), a new grouping created in the wake of the February revolution. It included every tendency, from the relatively right-wing Mir Iskusstva (World of Art) to the Futurists on the left, with the goal of putting an end to the hegemony of the art academies. For the first time, Chagall experienced collective struggle. The restructuring of society accelerated after the Bolshevik victory in October. Shortly thereafter, the Narkompros (People's Commissariat of Enlightenment) was established, with authority over the school system, the universities, libraries, and museums. As the first director of the Narkompros, Marxist journalist and intellectual Anatoly Lunacharsky would play a defining role in the cultural policy of the country. Chagall had known the new commissar in Paris before the war and welcomed his appointment. But when Lunacharsky, precisely because of their common past, proposed that Chagall head up the new Visual Arts Section (IZO) of the Narkompros, Chagall demurred: "I still prefer my home town to being a minister." What's more, his wife Bella warned that if he followed this path, "it would all end badly."[3] Chagall opted to distance himself from the locus of power and set up his family in Vitebsk, which was safer and better provisioned than the capital. The directorship of the IZO was entrusted to another Jewish comrade from the Paris years, the painter David Shterenberg.

As the son of a worker who had become an avant-garde artist, Chagall understood that the proletarian state would offer new career opportunities. In addition, his close ties to the directorate of the Narkompros could be tapped when necessary. In Vitebsk, he initially dedicated himself to painting, working relentlessly in a state of creative intoxication that permeated his work. The result was a series of monumental masterpieces, each of them reading as a hymn to the happiness of the couple: *Double Portrait with Wine Glass* (cat. p. 25), *The Promenade* (fig. 2), in which Bella appears to be twirled about like a flag—a painting that would become the model for an agitprop banner in 1919 commemorating a military victory[4]—and *Over the Town* (cat. p. 23), which shows the two lovers flying up toward the clouds, free as air. In the revolutionary context, everything was charged with euphoria. Many years later, in his American exile, Chagall would

1. Andrei Bely, "Revolution and Culture" (1917), in *A Revolution of the Spirit: Crisis of Value in Russia, 1890–1918*, ed. Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1982), p. 282.
2. Marc Chagall, *My Life*, trans. Elisabeth Abbott (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo, 1994), p. 135.
3. Ibid., p. 137.
4. See Franz Meyer, *Marc Chagall*, trans. Philippe Jaccottet (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), p. 129.

describe this prolific period: "That revolution disturbed me with the prodigal spectacle of a dynamic force which pervades the individual from top to bottom, surpassing your imagination, projecting itself into your own, interior artistic world, which seemed to be already like a revolution."[5] In establishing a link between political revolution and his own artistic practice, Chagall was echoing the discourse of most members of the Russian avant-garde. From Vsevolod Meyerhold to Kazimir Malevich, creative artists considered their artistic innovations as equivalent to the Bolshevik upheavals, in their shared rejection of all previous tradition.[6]

In the context of a febrile society come to a rolling boil, Chagall began to regret the decision to confine himself to his private work. Throughout the country, artists were assuming responsibilities in the new government: Yakov Tugendkhol'd in Crimea, Aleksandra Ekster in Kiev, Kazimir Malevich and Vasily Kandinsky in Moscow.[7] The lack of an institution of arts education serving the youth of Vitebsk propelled Chagall to come to their aid, in particular those who, like himself, came from a Jewish background of modest means. At that point, he hit upon the idea of creating a school based on the "genuine artistic and Revolutionary trend in art, without any admixtures of academicism and routine," and which would enable the "provincial masses" to develop their own creativity. The school would be open to all, without age restrictions, and the tuition free for workers, peasants, and the impoverished.[8] This project, which also included the creation of an art museum, perfectly embodied Bolshevik values, and was approved by Lunacharsky in August 1918. One month later, he appointed Chagall the Commissar of Arts for the province of Vitebsk. The young Jew from the working class was now at the helm of cultural policy in his city, placed there by the central government.

He immediately embarked on the organization of festivities commemorating the first anniversary of the October Revolution, which was to be celebrated with great pomp across the entire country. Tugendkhol'd recalled that "it was in these street festivities that our Leftist art was most impressive. It did not just 'decorate' the streets but fulfilled a Revolutionary mission — it covered up the 'holy temples,' the palaces and monuments, destroying their habitual faces with new forms … it *exploded* and *undermined* the old feelings of slavery. It was that destructive work which was required by the psychology of the moment."[9] Driven by his egalitarian ambition, Chagall invited all the painters of Vitebsk — including the house painters — to create panels and banners based on preparatory drawings, some of which have survived, notably those by Chagall himself and the young David Yakerson. While the latter concentrated on motifs relating to the world of workers or the military (cat. pp. 33–35), Chagall remained faithful to his allegorical style: he painted "Chagallesques," to use Abram Efros's expression, and represented himself "riding a green horse, flying above Vitebsk and blowing a horn: 'CHAGALL — TO VITEBSK'"[10] (above). A period photograph (fig. 1) shows that one of his recurring motifs — an old Jew flying up into the sky above Vitebsk (cat. p. 71) — did in fact float above the parades. Other compositions, such as *Onward, Onward* (cat. p. 18) and *Peace to Huts — War on Palaces* (cat p. 28), confirmed that Chagall was well aware of the codes of agitprop. He would later write in his autobiography: "throughout the town, my multicolored animals swung back and forth, swollen with revolution. The workers

Marc Chagall
Rider Blowing a Horn, 1918
Watercolor, graphite, and gouache on paper, 9 1/16 × 11 13/16 in. (23 × 30 cm)
Private collection

Fig. 1
Festivities for the first anniversary of the Revolution, featuring a banner with the motif of the flying Jew, Vitebsk, 1918
Reproduced in Samuel Agursky, *Di Oktyobr-Revolutsye in Vaysrusland* (Minsk, 1927)

marched forward, singing the International. When I saw their smiles I was sure they understood me. Their Communist leaders appeared to be less satisfied. Why is the cow green and why is the horse flying in the sky? Why? What has that to do with Marx and Lenin?"[11]

These words highlight the central problem that confronted Chagall upon his arrival on the political scene: the incomprehension of many people when faced with his whimsical art. And more generally, despite the enchanting spectacle that had engulfed the streets of Vitebsk, particularly at night with its illuminated festoons,[12] the celebrations of the Bolshevik victory perturbed not only the communists, but the local townspeople as well. This was their first encounter with revolutionary, expressive avant-garde art, which in its distortion of the real world was the antithesis of the academic style they were accustomed to. "The inhabitants of Vitebsk looked with astonishment at the images of green horses and flying Jews. Peaceful provincials were surprised by the color of the horses, the subjects of the paintings, and the presence of drawings on their houses: there is no evidence that a man can fly."[13]

Given his official role, Chagall felt an obligation to defend the fundamentally radical nature of his propositions. He was convinced that revolutionary artists, still in the minority, would succeed in eradicating prejudices and eventually impose their new forms.[14] Hostile critics saw only a well-known artist arrogantly questioning popular taste.[15] The tone was set. From then on, the Commissar of Arts devoted all his energy to the development of his school, which he intended would welcome every style and offer high-level instruction. To that end, he began by recruiting two artists on polar ends of the ideological spectrum: Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, a stalwart of the traditionalist Mir Iskusstva, and Ivan Puni, a key figure in the abstract movements known as Futurism. Chagall believed that the coexistence of these different tendencies would be possible under the banner of revolutionary art. But his commitment to stylistic diversity sparked disagreements. Puni the agitator was among those who opposed

5. Marc Chagall, "Some Impressions Regarding French Painting," address at Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, Mass., August 1943 /March 1946, in *Marc Chagall on Art and Culture*, ed. Benjamin Harshav (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 74.
6. See Tzvetan Todorov, *Le triomphe de l'artiste: La révolution et les artistes, Russie, 1917–1941* (Paris: Flammarion, 2017), p. 18.
7. See Jackie Wullschläger, *Chagall: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2008), p. 228.
8. See "Report by the Artist Marc Chagall Concerning the Art College," August 1918, in *Marc Chagall and His Times: A Documentary Narrative*, ed. Benjamin Harshav (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 247.
9. Yakov Tugendkhol'd, *Iskusstvo Oktiabr'skoi epokhi* (Art of the October Revolution) (Leningrad: Academia, 1930), pp. 17–18, cited in Harshav, ed., *Marc Chagall and His Times*, p. 254.
10. Abram Efros, "Zakanchivaetsya bez nachala (Iskusstvo v revoliutsiia)" (Ends without Beginnings [Art in Revolution]), *Shipovnik* (Wild Rose), no. 1 (1922), p. 115, cited in Harshav, ed., *Marc Chagall and His Times*, p. 243.
11. Chagall, *My Life*, p. 140.
12. The buildings were adorned with 450 posters. Seven triumphal arches were erected, and banners and garlands brightened the streets. See Claire Le Foll, *L'école artistique de Vitebsk (1897–1923): Éveil et rayonnement autour de Pen, Chagall et Malévitch* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002), p. 122.
13. Cited in ibid., p. 122. See also "The Red Holiday in Vitebsk," November 11, 1918, in Harshav, ed., *Marc Chagall and His Times*, p. 255.
14. See Marc Chagall, "Iskusstvo v dni Oktiabr'skoi godovshchiny" (Art on the Anniversary of October), *Vitebskii Listok* (Vitebsk Newsletter), November 7, 1918. For the text, see p. 225 in this volume.
15. See G. Grilin, "Pravo na odinochestvo (K segodniashnemu dokladu Marka Shagala)" (The Right to Solitude [On Today's Lecture by Marc Chagall]), *Vitebskii Listok* (Vitebsk Newsletter), December 7, 1918.

Fig. 2
Marc Chagall
The Promenade, 1917–18
Oil on canvas, 68 × 66 ¼ in.
(175.2 × 168.4 cm)
The State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg

Marc Chagall
The Promenade, 1919–20
New study on a theme from 1917, design for a banner and an engraving of *My Life*
Graphite and ink on grid-lined paper,
4 15⁄16 × 4 13⁄16 in. (12.6 × 12.2 cm)
Centre Pompidou, National Museum of Modern Art, Paris
1988 gift

it, claiming the absolute centrality of Futurism to the definition of revolutionary art.[16] Chagall's perspective in these interpretive conflicts is particularly interesting because it embodies the misunderstandings upon which his school was built. Just as Kandinsky rejected the question of form in favor of the spiritual content of art, Marc Chagall did not take style, subject matter, or the viewer into account in his vision of a revolutionary art. Instead, he relied on the proletarian *consciousness* of the painter, regardless of his group allegiances. "We proletarian painters," he wrote, "respect above all the value of plastic language." He opposed "all art that contains 2 × 2 = 4," an art that is "not worthy of our times." He privileged "our inextinguishable inner voice," in other words, "the voice of the rebels of the world, constantly demolishing and building a new life and culture." It was critical, he argued, "to obtain the maximum of output and expression."[17]

The portrait of the proletarian painter that Chagall draws here tends toward a *pro domo* argument, taking the stance of an individualist unbound by any regulatory or collectivist system. But this is precisely tantamount to squaring the circle for the artist: How to transmit such a libertarian outlook to teenaged students attempting to find their bearings in the midst of tremendous social change? How to reconcile this position with the Bolshevik mission of educating the people? Under these circumstances, one might say that Chagall's project was destined to fail, and he would not be at a loss for adversaries who sorely tested his desire to embrace different styles in the same pedagogical program.

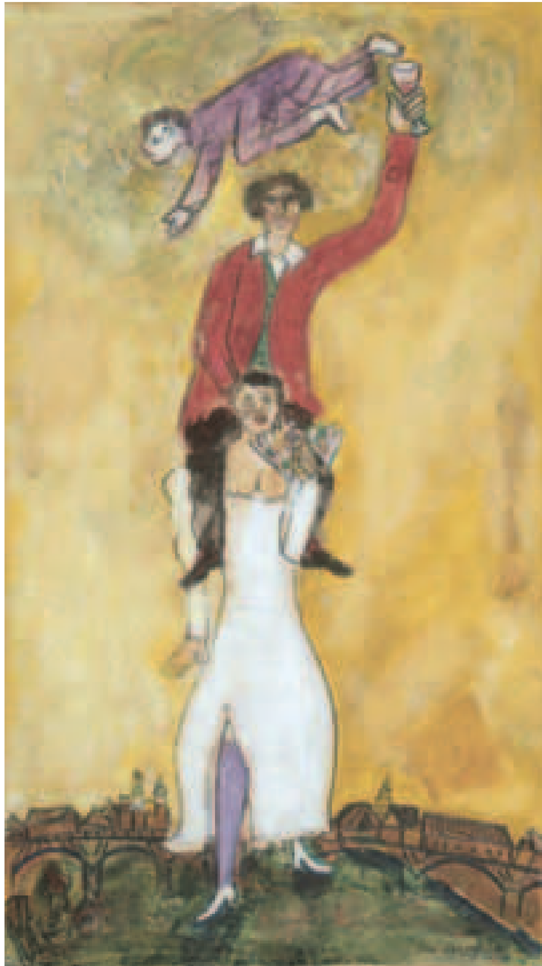
Two main factors contributed to his imminent disenchantment, the first being the personalities of the professors he employed: they were more determined, more convinced of their "calling." The second was that, while students were initially enthusiastic about working with a son of their region who had become famous, they were soon disoriented by a teaching method deemed too unusual.[18] The arrival of the charismatic Malevich in November 1919 offered them a more enriching, more stimulating

Marc Chagall
Over the Town, 1914–18
Oil on canvas, 54 ¾ × 77 ½ in. (139 × 197 cm)
State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

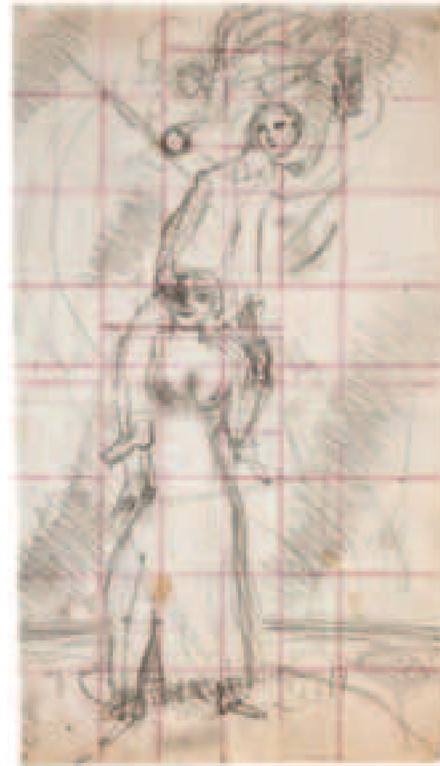
path: working within the new UNOVIS group, complemented by structured theoretical teaching. In the face of his progressively emptier classes, Chagall could not help but acknowledge the obliteration of his revolutionary dream. He had forgotten that he was not a servant, but a free spirit—in fact, too free.

Translated from French by Christian Hubert

16. See Alexander Lisov, "The Vitebsk Debate on Revolutionary Art, 1918–19," pp. 29–32 in this volume.
17. Marc Chagall, "Revoliutsiia v iskusstve" (The Revolution in Art), *Revoliutsionnoe Iskusstvo* (Revolutionary Art) (March–April 1919), pp. 2–3. For the text, see pp. 227–28 in this volume.
18. See Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art, 1917–1922* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 45–46.



Marc Chagall
Study for "Double Portrait with Wine Glass," 1917
Graphite and watercolor on reverse of Cyrillic print,
10 ¾ × 6 ⅛ in. (27.8 × 15.6 cm)
Centre Pompidou, National Museum of Modern Art, Paris
1988 gift



Marc Chagall
Double Portrait with Wine Glass, 1917
Graphite on grid-lined paper,
13 ⅞ × 7 15⁄16 in. (35.3 × 20.1 cm)
Centre Pompidou, National Museum of Modern Art, Paris
1988 gift

Marc Chagall
Double Portrait with Wine Glass, [1917–18]
Oil on canvas, 92 ½ × 53 15/16 in. (235 × 137 cm)
Centre Pompidou, National Museum of Modern Art, Paris
Gift of the artist, 1949

Marc Chagall
The Wedding, 1918
Oil on canvas, 40 ⅜ × 47 ½ in. (102.5 × 120.7 cm)
State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Marc Chagall
Bella with White Collar, 1917
Oil on linen, 58 5⁄8 × 28 3⁄8 in. (149 × 72 cm)
Centre Pompidou, National Museum of Modern Art, Paris
1988 gift

Marc Chagall
Peace to Huts—War on Palaces, 1918
Design for a decorative panel for the first anniversary of the October Revolution
Watercolor and pencil on paper,
13 3⁄16 × 9 1⁄8 in. (33.5 × 23.2 cm)
State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

The Vitebsk Debate on Revolutionary Art, 1918–19

Alexander Lisov

The revolutionary events in Russia triggered seismic changes in public life, spiritual culture, and art. At the very first stage of these developments, the cultural intelligentsia who allied themselves with the Bolsheviks began formulating the role of the artist in the new society and the meaning of such concepts as "revolutionary art" and "proletarian art." These attempts stirred controversy among representatives of the "art of the left"—avant-garde artists who had invested certain hopes in the Bolshevik government. A broad discussion about the content of the new revolutionary art was organized by the activists of the Proletkult (All-Russian Council of Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organizations). The conference, held in Moscow on September 15–20, 1918, coincided with the appointment of Marc Chagall as the Commissar of Arts in Vitebsk Province by the Narkompros (People's Commissariat of Enlightenment). Chagall's primary mission became the establishment of an art school and a museum in Vitebsk. Earlier in 1917, Chagall participated in creating the revolutionary organizations that brought together the Petrograd artistic elite, such as the Department of Fine Arts, the Provisional Committee of Commissars, and the Constituent Assembly of Art Professionals. The active participation in postrevolutionary organizational activities, first in the capital and then in Vitebsk, forced Chagall to clarify his position on revolutionary art, to explain how he perceived its meaning, and the goals of leftist art in practice. And, as the Commissar of Arts, he had to express his understanding of the new art in programmatic texts.

Chagall's articles on revolutionary art appeared in local Vitebsk publications. The most significant in the context were "Iskusstvo v dni Oktiabr'skoi godovshchiny" (Art on the Anniversary of October, 1918) and "Revoliutsiia v iskusstve" (The Revolution in Art, 1919). The first was published in the *Vitebskii Listok* (Vitebsk Newsletter), the second in the journal *Revoliutsionnoe Iskusstvo* (Revolutionary Art; cat. p. 30).[1] To these must be added the report titled "Menshinstvo v iskusstve" (The Minority in Art), which Chagall planned to present at a public debate scheduled for December 7, 1918. This report aroused keen interest. Invitees to the debate (which ultimately did not take place) included local party officials and ideologues, and representatives of the cultural intelligentsia such as Pavel Medvedev, Alfred Tsshokher, and Aleksandr Romm. The very title of Chagall's report was perceived as provocative and generated discussion in the newspapers.[2]

In Chagall's writings, the new art is conceived as a creation without teacher or academy, as emanating from the power of the left. However, he does not attempt to classify any particular leftist trends as "most revolutionary" or as best corresponding to the ideals of a proletarian social revolution. Rather, he adopts a conciliatory stance, based on the equality of all modern movements. But this line hardly captures his intimate understanding of the tasks devolved to the artist in a revolutionary context. Chagall believed that the revolution was above all a matter of personal outlook rather than a simple question of style or form. His skepticism about Bolshevik experimentation will become clear later, in his book *My Life*.

Chagall elaborates his concept of a "minority in art" in all of the above-cited texts. Three of its provisions are articulated in "Art on the Anniversary of October":

> The creators of Revolutionary Art always were and are now a minority. They were a minority from the moment the splendid Greek culture fell.
> The majority will join us when two revolutions, the political and the spiritual, systematically uproot the heritage of the past with all its prejudices.
> Stubborn and insistent, obedient to the inner voice of our artistic conscience, we offer and impose our ideas, our forms—the forms and ideas of the new Revolutionary Art; we have the courage to think that the future is with us.

Chagall's arguments generated hostile responses in the press. G. Grilin, for instance, called Chagall's position that of a loner rather than part of a minority.[3] Grilin's article appeared in *Vitebskii Listok*

1. For the texts, see pp. 225 and 227–28 in this volume.

2. See *Izvestiia Vitebskogo Gubernskogo i Gorodskogo Ispolkoma Sovetov Uchenicheskikh Deputatov* (News of the Vitebsk Provincial and City Executive Committee of the Councils of Student Deputies), December 5 and 10, 1918, and *Vitebskii Listok* (Vitebsk Newsletter), December 9, 1918.