

## Press Release

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### RARE CHAGALL LITHOGRAPHS MAKE U.S. DEBUT AT MOBIA

20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY MASTER DEPICTS THE CRUCIFIXION IN RESPONSE TO SUFFERING AND EXILE

NEW YORK, October 7, 2008 – *Chagall's Bible: Mystical Storytelling*, on view at the Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA) from October 7, 2008 to January 18, 2009, explores the achievements of Marc Chagall (1887-1985) across several mediums and examines his life-long fascination with the Bible. Over 100 etchings, lithographs and a celebrated oil painting are featured in the exhibition; included are 12 original 20-color lithographs, from the Chagall family estate, never before seen as a set in the United States. Among the highlights is Chagall's *Quai de Tournelle* (1962), which reinterprets the Crucifixion from the perspective of Russian Jewish exile. The luminous oil-on-canvas of a grief-stricken mother and infant will be exhibited in this country for the first time.

“Chagall witnessed the Russian Revolution, two world wars, the Holocaust and the re-establishment of the state of Israel,” notes Dr. Ena Heller, Executive Director of MOBIA. “This exhibition reveals the earliest roots of his visual vocabulary and probes the rich complexity and originality of his artistic response.”

#### Exhibition Overview

Exploring the artist's longstanding interest in illustration, *Chagall's Bible: Mystical Storytelling* will present 55 of his hand-colored etchings of the Hebrew Bible, commissioned by famed publisher-dealer Ambroise Vollard, as well as books illustrated by the young Chagall. On view is an array of Chagall's letterpress illustrations, including those published with *Troyer (Grief)* in 1922. The long Yiddish poem by David Hofshsteyn (1889-1952) confronted the 1919 pogroms in which those who had led the Russian Revolution turned against the Jewish community. In *Village Walking* (1922) Chagall depicts the denizens of an entire town, fleeing. Other illustrations from this period portray a cemetery filled with the graves of slaughtered children and a donkey-drawn wagon leaving a domicile. It was here, with these early works, that Chagall devised the symbols he would revisit again and again during his long career as one of the world's most popular artists.

Displaying all 12 of the original lithograph designs for the "Jerusalem Windows" (1962) – the windows in the synagogue of the Hadassah-Hebrew University Medical Center – the exhibition recreates one of Chagall's recognized masterpieces. The lithographs are autographed by Chagall and Charles Sorlier, the master printer Chagall worked with to execute the series. The radiant stained glass windows were dedicated to the 12 Tribes of Israel and incorporate Jewish symbols, floating figures and motifs of animals and flowers. Visitors will be able to follow Chagall's artistic process from conception to creation in a segment that traces the evolution of the *Levi Window* from inspired sketch to finished drawing. A wall-sized reproduction of the entire work offers an analysis of how Chagall's rhythmic color patterns relate directly to the Jewish tradition.

The exhibition goes on to explore an aspect of Chagall's work which continues to stir debate: his frequent use of Christian iconography. According to Paul Tabor, MOBIA's Director of Exhibitions, "The Crucifixion images can be seen as the culmination of the depictions of suffering and exile that you find in his earliest illustrated works. Those images, filled with Jewish and Christian symbols juxtaposed with allusions to horrific contemporary events, are perhaps the artist's deepest expressions of sympathy and empathy for the experience of loss and the attempt to find meaning in it from his deeply spiritual but essentially non-sectarian perspective."

Yet this remains open to interpretation. Chagall is a "deeply Jewish artist working with forbidden imagery in forbidden ways," writes Tom Freudenheim, retired museum director and former Deputy Director of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, in the illustrated essay accompanying the exhibition. In Freudenheim's view, Chagall is a transgressive artist. "There's an in-your-face quality," he remarks, "On the one hand, he's saying: I'm doing the Crucifixion because this is what artists do to take part in the history of Western art. On the other hand, he's saying: I'm going to do it *my* way. His work remains elusive and endlessly intriguing."

### Art in Exile

Marc Chagall holds a singular place in the canon of modern painters. Born in Vitebsk, Byelorussia in 1887, Chagall experienced many of the most momentous upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He grew up in a large but segregated ghetto, coming of age during the pogroms of 1903 and 1905 and later escaping from Vichy France. At this tumultuous and indeed terrifying time in history, dramatic changes took place within the plastic arts. Chagall and his contemporaries saw a succession of avant-garde movements including Cubism,

Constructivism, Dadaism, the Blaue Reiter, Fauvism and Expressionism. While well-aware of such developments, Chagall created his own idiosyncratic, dreamlike style that defies easy categorization. It is infused with references to mysticism, folklore and the vanished Russian *shtetl*, or what poet Osip Mendelshtam (1891-1938) termed “the lost world.”

Chagall famously said of himself that he was “...born somewhere between heaven and earth, with a world turned desert in which my soul drifted like a torch.” “The man in the air in my paintings is me...I’m not fixed any place. I have no place of my own.” Chagall’s heroes, prophets and Biblical scenes melded symbolic motifs and iconographies, drawing upon the traditions of Jewish Hasidism, eastern Orthodoxy and western Christianity. Ultimately, Chagall created a kaleidoscopic and nonsectarian sacred art.

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MOBIA is located at 1865 Broadway, at 61<sup>st</sup> Street. Recommended admission fee is \$7.00 for adults and \$4.00 for students and senior citizens (with ID). Free for members and children under 12. Museum Hours: Tue., Wed, Fri–Sun: 10:00 AM-6:00 PM; Thurs: 10:00 AM-8:00 PM; Mon: Closed. Please visit [www.mobia.org](http://www.mobia.org) for more information.