

The painting 'La Famille' by Marc Chagall is a monochromatic work in shades of blue. It depicts a family scene with a large, pale-skinned woman on the left, her eyes closed in a peaceful expression. She is holding a small, nude child in her arms. To the right, a man with dark hair and a yellow face looks down at the child. The background is filled with abstract, swirling blue forms and some darker, more defined shapes that suggest foliage or architectural elements. The overall mood is intimate and tender.

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Marc Chagall
La Famille

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MARC CHAGALL

(Lyozna 1887-1985 Saint-Paul-de-Vence)

LA FAMILLE, 1954

Gouache, watercolour, and brush and ink on paper laid down on canvas.
71.4 x 55.9 cm; 28 1/8 x 22 in.

Signed (lower left): *Marc Chagall*

Provenance

Galerie Maeght, Paris;
Galerie Beyeler, Basel;
Acquired from the above in 1973 by a private collector;
Anonymous sale, London, Sotheby's, 6 February 2013, lot 128;
Private collection, London.

Exhibitions

Stockholm, Moderna Museet, *Marc Chagall*, 1982, no. 93.
Humlebæk, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, *Marc Chagall*, 1983.

The authenticity of this work has been confirmed by the Comité Marc Chagall. The work is accompanied by a certificate signed by Jean-Louis Prat, dated Paris, 4 December 2012, no. 2012111R.

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Executed in 1954, *La Famille* belongs to the nocturnal gouaches Chagall produced once his settled life on the Côte d'Azur let him draw again on the repertory formed decades earlier in Vitebsk. Two years before, he had married Valentina Brodsky and settled with her at Les Collines, the villa above Vence he had bought in 1950. These were the years of his ceramic work at Vallauris alongside Picasso, and of two journeys to Greece for Tériade's *Daphnis et Chloé*, returning via Venice, Ravenna and Florence in 1954. From 1950 the Galerie Maeght in Paris had been his principal French gallery.

The sheet is built up in washes of ultramarine and Prussian blue worked over with gouache and brush and ink, reading as one continuous night broken only by passages of ivory: the moon at upper right, the faces of mother and father, and a dense bouquet built up in thick impasted white, opening like a second source of light. She inclines her head over the infant in her arms, her profile recalling Chagall's brides and his devotional Vitebsk madonnas; behind her, barely resolved from the surrounding blue, a small angel hovers as guardian, one hand raised. At lower right the head of a farmyard animal noses into the frame, drawn from the bestiary of his Belarusian childhood - a house and a standing figure are only lightly sketched in blue.

The date might suggest a portrait of Chagall's new happiness with Vava, yet the iconography belongs to the sequence of images he continued to paint of Bella Rosenfeld, his first wife, who died in 1944 and whom he never stopped representing under the guise of bride. Sidney Alexander judged the marriage one in which the couple remained "monogamous but not monotonous", noting that Chagall painted Bella into every subsequent bride and veil long after her death, even during his years with Virginia Haggard.¹ Bella herself recalled their courtship in similar terms, describing how the two of them rose together and flew out over Vitebsk's roofs toward a calling sky.² Read thus, mother and child become at once a memory of Bella and a Madonna and Child in the Hasidic idiom of Vitebsk.

The typical 'Chagall blue' - one of the most loved and easily recognisable artistic elements of his œuvre - carries much of this feeling. Picasso, working alongside Chagall at Vallauris, is said to have remarked that once Matisse died, Chagall would remain the only painter who still understood colour;³ it is this saturated hue that binds the picture's motifs into one register of feeling. The bouquet belongs to a thread running through Chagall's work since he and Bella first discovered the Mediterranean

¹ Sidney Alexander, *Marc Chagall, A Biography*, New York, 1978, p. 82

² Quoted in *Lumières allumées*, Paris, 1974, pp. 258-259

³ Quoted in Jackie Wullschlager, *Chagall: Love and Exile*, London, 2008, p. 456

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in the 1920s: flowers standing less for the South of France than for the joy of living and enduring love folded into that single name.

The painting is also notable for the density with which it brings together the characteristic motifs most immediately associated with Chagall's mature œuvre: the lovers, the bride-mother, the child, the angel, the animal, the bouquet, the nocturnal blue and the suspended moon. These are among the most identifiable and sought-after elements of his visual language, precisely because they endow the work with a concentrated statement of the imaginative world that made his art so enduringly lyrical and distinctive. The closeness of this pictorial world may be measured against Chagall's *Mother and Child* of 1948–53, now in the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (fig. 1), and *The Madonna of the Village* of 1938–42, in the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid (fig. 2), where maternity and the sacred are similarly folded into the artist's private language of memory and love.

The provenance underlines the picture's standing. Aimé Maeght began exhibiting Chagall in Paris in 1950 and later commissioned the mosaics for the Fondation Maeght; Ernst Beyeler, whose Basel gallery took its name in these same years, built the reputation, later crowned by his own foundation, of the era's most discerning European dealer in modern painting. That *La Famille* passed through both houses places it among the works these two connoisseurs judged most representative of Chagall's late production; it was later included in retrospectives at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm (1982), and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk (1983), before reappearing at Sotheby's, London, in 2013.

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Fig. 1. Marc Chagall, *Mother and Child*, 1948-1953, oil on canvas, 75.0 × 56.5 cm. Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.



Fig. 2. Marc Chagall, *The Madonna of the Village*, 1938-1942, oil on canvas.
102.5 x 98 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

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