

Chagall – Love and Exile by Jackie Wullschlager.
Allen Lane 2008.

I have been reviewing books for many years now and yet with Chagall I find myself able to say something I have not yet said about any of them: this book is a masterpiece!

Chagall is a marvellous combination of biography, politics, history and art, a rich tapestry shot through with the powerful and vibrant threads of Jewish culture and experience that also lay at the heart of Marc Chagall's life.

Jackie Wullschlager is the FT's Chief Art Critic, and her description of the symbolism, creation and execution of Chagall's extraordinary output is authoritative and, to a non-art expert (who nevertheless knows what they like!) incredibly clear and convincing. As a lifelong admirer of Chagall's art I now feel that I truly understand it for the first time, both in terms of its inspiration and especially the symbolism that makes it so endearingly quirky, and unique.

Chagall was born in the Pale of Settlement, in the town of Vitebsk, and although he was desperate to remove himself from it physically he was bound to it emotionally, and creatively, for his entire life; he always considered himself a Russian artist, even though his experiences of his homeland, both as a child and as an adult after the Revolution, were hardly happy. Wullschlager acknowledges Chagall's entrapment by his Russian origins by dividing the book into two parts labelled Russia and Exile; she also avers that by common consent Chagall did his best work in Russia, his masterpieces being the murals he created for the Jewish Theatre in Moscow in the 1920s. In his latter years Chagall reinvented his art and himself, particularly with the glorious stained glass windows that he created in a number of countries, and for which he is perhaps best known today.

The other key word in the title is 'love', and Chagall is also about the emotional relationships that defined the artist's life, the friends he made and lost along the way and above all his wives Bella and Vava, the English woman who bore his son, Virginia, and his daughter with Bella, Ida.

Wullschlager writes sensitively, honestly and authoritatively about these relationships, and details the ways in which the women in Chagall's life suffered for his art.

Chagall is sumptuously illustrated with colour and black and white reproductions of Chagall's work, and there are also many fascinating photos of the artist and his family and friends.

Chagall is as perfect a work of biography as you can read: informative, fascinating and inspiring about its principal subject, and immensely educative with regard to his art. One finishes this substantial book – and it is a massive tome, though highly readable – with an intense sense of satisfaction, and admiration for its author. I truly believe this is a masterpiece of the biographer's art.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh