



1911

Oil on canvas

77 1/8 x 57 inches  
(195.9 x 144.8 cm)

**MARC CHAGALL**  
French (born Russia)

The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection,  
1950, 1950-134-36

### LET'S LOOK

Describe all the things that you see in this painting. How are the things like the real world? What's not like the real world?

What colors, shapes, and lines do you notice? How did the artist arrange and repeat these colors, shapes, and lines to make his composition?

What do you think is happening in this scene?

What kind of mood do you feel when you look at the painting? Why?

Do you think it's half past three in the morning or in the afternoon? Why?

## HALF-PAST THREE (THE POET)

Seated at a table, with a pen in one hand and a coffee cup in the other, a poet works in an open notebook balanced on his knee. A wine bottle, fork, knife, and two pieces of fruit tilt and twist on the table as if reacting to his creative energy. His companion, a small green cat whose coloring mirrors that of the poet's own green upside-down head, affectionately licks the poet's sleeve as he writes.

This mysterious painting, *Half-Past Three (The Poet)*, was one of many that Marc Chagall created shortly after he arrived in Paris as a young Russian artist in 1911. Paris was a thriving center of art and modern culture in the early decades of the twentieth century. Artists, writers, musicians, and dancers from all over the world flocked to the city, creating an exciting atmosphere of camaraderie and artistic exchange. Many, including Chagall, settled in a vibrant area of Paris known as Montparnasse, which was filled with cafés, galleries, and artists' studios. Chagall expressed his excitement at living and working in the center of the modern art movement through this colorful portrait of a poet.

Many of the artists Chagall encountered in Paris were experimenting with a new style of art called Cubism. Rather than representing three-dimensional space and objects as they appear to the eye, Cubism represented the world in a new way, depicting people and objects from multiple viewpoints and breaking them into geometric shapes, lines, and angles. Chagall eagerly adopted elements of Cubism into his own work.

*Half-Past Three (The Poet)* was based on a smaller, more realistic portrait Chagall had painted of his close friend and neighbor, a Russian poet named Mazin. As Chagall worked on this new painting, he chose not to represent his friend exactly but to fragment the body and background into geometric shapes and diagonal shafts

of color, creating a bright and fanciful Cubist painting of a poet at work in his studio. Chagall may have intended the poet's upside-down head to represent a Yiddish expression, *fardreiter kop*, which translates as "turned head" and refers to a state of giddiness and disorientation, feelings that a poet at work at half past three in the morning might be experiencing.

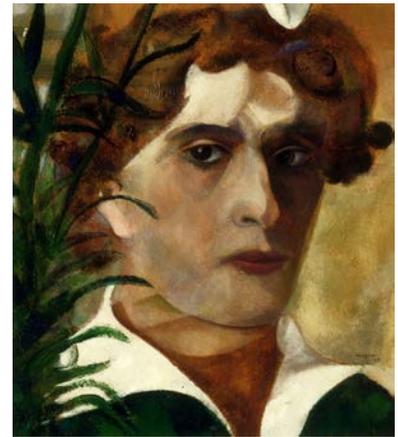
## ABOUT THIS ARTIST

*"Everything may change in our demoralized world except the heart, man's love and his striving to know the divine. Painting, like all poetry, has a part in the divine; people feel this today just as much as they used to. What poverty surrounded my youth, what trials my father had with us nine children. And yet he was always full of love and in his way a poet. Through him I first sensed the existence of poetry on this earth. After that I felt it in the nights, when I looked into the dark sky. Then I learnt that there was also another world. This brought tears to my eyes, so deeply did it move me." —Marc Chagall*

Originally named Moyshe Shagal, Marc Chagall was born on July 7, 1887, in Vitebsk, Russia (now Belarus). He was the oldest of nine children in a close-knit Hassidic Jewish family. After studying Hebrew and biblical history in a traditional Jewish primary school, he attended a local state school, where he studied geometry and Russian. At the age of nineteen, Chagall received a scholarship to attend a local art school. After a short time, he decided to go to the capital of Russia, Saint Petersburg, where he enrolled in the School of the Imperial Society for the Protection of Fine Arts in 1906. In 1909, he enrolled in the Zvantseva School of Drawing and Painting and began taking painting classes with a famous stage and costume designer named Léon Bakst.

*"At that time I had grasped that I had to go to Paris. The soil that had nourished the roots of my art was Vitebsk; but my art needed Paris as much as a tree needs water. I had no other reason for leaving my homeland, and I believe that in my paintings I have always remained true to it."*

—Marc Chagall



Self-Portrait with White Collar  
1914

Oil on cardboard  
11 1/2 x 10 1/8 inches (29.2 x 25.7cm)  
Framed: 14 1/8 x 13 x 1 7/8 inches  
(35.9 x 33 x 4.8 cm)

**MARC CHAGALL**  
French (born Russia)

The Louis E. Stern Collection,  
1963, 1963-181-9

With a grant from Maxim Vinaver, a lawyer and one of the first Jewish members of the Russian government, Chagall moved to Paris in 1911 and spent the next four years there. Taking up residence at La Ruche, an art-studio complex in the Montparnasse section of Paris, Chagall met and was influenced by many of the most important modern artists and writers of the time and was exposed to a variety of emerging new styles—including Cubism and Fauvism—being created by Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani, Robert Delaunay and his wife Sonia, and others. Chagall quickly fused these new styles with his imaginative visions of Russian folklore, religious stories, and personal memories to create his own unique style. It was at this time that he created the painting *Half-Past Three (The Poet)*.

Chagall traveled to Russia in 1914 just before World War I began. He married his longtime sweetheart Bella Rosenfeld in his hometown of Vitebsk in 1915, and in 1916 his daughter Ida was born. After several successful exhibitions, commissions, and teaching positions in Russia, Chagall returned to Paris in 1923. During the next decade, he exhibited his work in Europe and the United States.

World War II forced Chagall and his family to move to the United States. Bella died suddenly from a viral infection in 1944, before the war ended in 1945. In 1946 the Museum of Modern Art in New York had a retrospective of Chagall's work. He returned to live in France in 1948. Over the next few decades, he designed many works of art including prints, mosaics, and stained-glass windows.

In 1973, Chagall visited his homeland of Russia for the first time in fifty years and saw two of his sisters. In 1977, he was honored as the first living artist to exhibit at the Louvre, the most important museum in Paris. He died peacefully in 1985, at the age of 97, after a long and eventful life.

## LA RUCHE

Chagall arrived in Paris in 1911, and for the next four years he lived and worked at La Ruche ("the beehive"), so named because of its distinctive cylindrical shape and honeycomblike maze of artists' studios. Located on the southwestern fringes of Montparnasse, La Ruche was a three-story building with a staircase in the center and studios radiating out from its core. La Ruche opened in 1902 and, because the rent was minimal and artists' models were supplied free of charge, it quickly became a thriving artists' community. It had its own theater and exhibition schedule.

La Ruche nurtured some of the most celebrated artists and writers of the early twentieth century. By the time Chagall moved there, La Ruche had a large population of Eastern European artists who

had moved to Paris to discover the most recent trends in modern art. Many of these artists were also attracted to the religious tolerance of Paris, which provided a relatively safe working environment free from the pogroms (massacres) and persecution that Jewish families had endured for generations in their former homelands of Russia, Poland, and other Eastern European countries.

In his autobiography, Chagall created a vivid description of life at La Ruche:

*“In those studios lived the artistic Bohemia of every land. While in the Russian ateliers an offended model sobbed; from the Italians’ came the sound of songs and the twanging of a guitar, and from the Jews debates and arguments, I sat alone in my studio before my kerosene lamp. A studio jammed with pictures. . . . I used to stay up all night long.” —Marc Chagall*



La Ruche, 1968, by Walter Limot (Musée Carnavalet, Paris) © Walter Limot/Musée Carnavalet/Roger-Viollet