

America Windows

1977

Marc Chagall

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO
Department of Museum Education
Division of Teacher Programs
Crown Family Educator Resource Center

ART
INSTITVTE
CHICAGO

Marc Chagall
French, born Vitebsk, Russia (Present Day Belarus), 1887–1985

America Windows

1977

Stained glass

96 x 385 in. (244 x 978 cm) (overall)

A gift of Marc Chagall, the City of Chicago, and the Auxiliary Board of the Art Institute of Chicago, commemorating the American Bicentennial in memory of Mayor Richard J. Daley, 1977.938

Presented as a gift to the Art Institute of Chicago in 1977, the *America Windows* remain an integral symbol of the city's longstanding relationship with the arts. At eight feet high and thirty feet across, these stained glass windows are a vast arrangement of colors of the highest intensity—bright reds, oranges, yellows, and greens—placed against brilliant shades of blue. Representations of people, animals, and items such as writing implements, musical instruments, and artists' tools float above a skyline of buildings and trees. Artist Marc Chagall began working on his design for the windows in 1976, America's bicentennial year, and constructed the windows as a tribute to the freedom of artistic expression enjoyed by the people of the United States. When designing the windows, he stated, "When one works, one must have a vision." For Chagall, that vision was a vibrant celebration of humankind's creative energy.

The *America Windows* consist of three main sections, each divided into two panels; together, the six panels feature imagery that honors the arts and America's independent spirit. While there are many details throughout the windows, particular items in each panel reveal distinct themes. Reading from left to right, the first panel represents music, including images of musicians with violins and horns. A faint detail in the upper left corner suggests part of a musical score with staff and notes. The second panel alludes to painting with depictions of paintbrushes, a canvas, an artist's **palette**, and, in the lower right corner, bottles and a bowl of food, items that could be part of a **still life**. In the third panel, books, a desk, an inkwell, and an extended hand holding a pen evoke the world of literature and expression through the written word. The fourth panel shows a bird flying over a skyline containing the Statue of Liberty, reminding viewers of America's founding principles of freedom and democracy. (The Statue of Liberty, a gift from the French, celebrated America's centennial in 1876; the *America Windows* were Chagall's gift for the bicentennial.) The final two panels bring the viewer back to the arts. In the fifth panel, depicting the theater, a curtain surrounds the top of a stage set, framing performers, one of whom is holding a mask, and a candelabrum. The sixth, and last panel represents dance, with a group of performers, some holding tambourines, hovering near a dynamic swirling form of colors and shapes that surround a solitary figure. All six panels of the *America Windows*, connected by a shared skyline, create a singular scene of creative and personal freedom. Despite the identification of these larger themes of creative and personal freedom, scholars are reluctant to ascribe specific meaning to many of the details in the windows, as they may have simply been personally appealing to Chagall and not particularly symbolic of anything related to the themes of the six panels.

All of the rich details and images found in the *America Windows* are portrayed in Marc Chagall's unique and highly recognizable style. While he acknowledged the influence of the many places, ideas, and people that he encountered over his long life, often sharing and borrowing methods from **Cubism, Surrealism,** and **Fauvism,** Chagall never officially aligned himself with any particular artistic movement. His extraordinary use of color, whimsical depiction of figures and animals, playful manipulation of space and scale, and personal lexicon of **motifs** were all his own. Among the dominant characteristics of his work, the vivid colors of Chagall's images are often regarded as his signature. Termed a true **colorist**, the **hues** that Chagall used impacted the impression of the scene, bringing a note of brightness to even his most somber subjects. He expressed himself and claimed to dream in color, identifying most with the color blue. "I am blue," he said, "like Rembrandt was brown." This dictum was never so true as in the *America Windows*.

Often the figures and objects in Marc Chagall's works seem to ignore laws of gravity and can be found floating over rooftops and into the sky as if in a dreamscape. These images traditionally include scenery, people, and animals recalled from nostalgic memories of **Vitebsk**, his Russian hometown. Some of the more commonly used motifs include birds, flowers, horses, pairs of lovers, and the sun. The influences behind these details came from a combination of elements: Chagall's profound imagination; his recollections of daily life for his and other families in the community of his youth; and the dramatic, dreamlike stories in Jewish and Russian folklore that Chagall heard so often growing up. These references and motifs, including the joys of music making and dancing within the Hassidic Jewish community of Vitebsk, are visible throughout Chagall's career and are again at work in the *America Windows*, where people and things appear as if constellations in a deep blue sky.

Like the figures and images that populate the *America Windows*, the theme of creative freedom was also linked to Chagall's personal experiences. As a young man growing up in Vitebsk, there was little access to education and emphasis was instead placed on finding a sustainable paying job. His father worked for a herring merchant, and his mother sold groceries from their home. While neither immediately understood their son's interest in creating art, they quietly grew to support him. It was, in fact, Chagall's mother that took him to Vitebsk's local art school as a teenager when he expressed an interest in art. A few years later, his father loaned him the money needed to enroll in art school in St. Petersburg, despite restrictions for Jewish travelers to the city. As his life and career progressed, Chagall was continually aware of and exposed to the discrimination against and limitations imposed upon Jews. In 1941, Chagall was one of over 2,000 intellectuals and artists invited to find refuge in the United States after Nazi Germany successfully invaded and occupied France. It was during this time that his perception of America as a place of liberty began to develop, a belief he chose to celebrate in the *America Windows*. Upon his return to France in 1948, he claimed about the United States: "Above all I am impressed by the greatness of this country and the feeling of freedom that it gives me."

Throughout his career, Chagall worked in a variety of media. He painted with oils, watercolors, and **gouaches** and, over time, his work expanded to include ceramics, mosaics, set design, and tapestries. At the age of sixty-nine, Chagall began working in stained glass, designing windows for a church in Plateau d'Assy, a region in the French Alps. In a subsequent commission, beginning in 1960, he undertook a two-year process of creating twelve windows, each symbolizing one of the tribes of Israel for the synagogue of Hebrew University's Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem. To complete the windows, Chagall employed French stained glass master Charles Marq. The two continued to work together for more than twenty years on windows for churches, cultural centers, and other public buildings around the world, including the United Nations building in New York, St. Stephen's Church in Germany, All Saints' Church in the United Kingdom, and the Musee National Message Biblique in France. Charles Marq believed that in creating stained glass, the artist is "raising color to its maximum intensity." Thus, it seems working with stained glass was very well suited for an extreme colorist like Marc Chagall.

At the same time that Chagall was exploring stained glass and large-scale public art, the city of Chicago experienced a great enthusiasm for and commitment to **municipal** artwork. Pablo Picasso's untitled sculpture—often referred to as *The Picasso*—was installed in Daley Plaza in 1967 and Alexander Calder's *Flamingo* was unveiled in Federal Plaza in 1974. It was also during this time that many other pieces were planned, including *Miró's Chicago*, designed by artist Joan Miró. When Chagall was approached to create something for the city of Chicago, he gladly accepted. This renaissance of monumental public art was appealing to him; his previous work with churches, cathedrals, theaters, plazas, and streets demonstrated a genuine interest in offering up his art to the greatest number of people. His initial contribution to Chicago was *Four Seasons*, a large-scale mosaic of 128 separate panels, unveiled in 1974 in Chase Tower Plaza (then known as First National Bank Plaza). While visiting the city for the unveiling, Chagall learned of the Art Institute of Chicago's auxiliary board's plan to dedicate a gallery in his name. Touched by this dedication, the eighty-seven year old artist offered to create something for the gallery; the resulting design was a set of stained glass windows—the *America Windows*.

Chagall believed that it was important for the *America Windows* to be a reflection of the city of Chicago. He sent Charles Marq to Chicago to study the city and the characteristics of the light, particularly the light at the Art Institute of Chicago. Marq noted Chicago's dramatic light changes, from bright sunlight reflecting off of Lake Michigan to dark shadows created by tall skyscrapers and gray skies. In the original plan, the windows faced a large open courtyard, taking advantage of the city's dynamic, natural light. The amount of light entering the *America Windows*

varied based on the time of day, changing weather, or moving shadows from nearby trees. The windows remained in this location until 2005, when the Art Institute of Chicago removed them as a precautionary measure while the museum underwent construction to build the Modern Wing. During this period, **conservators** took the opportunity to study the windows up close for the first time since their installation in 1977. Examinations showed a large amount of surface residue; following a laborious and deep cleaning, the windows were reinstalled in a new location in 2011. Their current setting, backed by artificial lighting, will protect the materials from exposure and prolong the life of the *America Windows* for future viewers.

Creating the *America Windows* was the result of constant communication between Marc Chagall and Charles Marq. Chagall created the original design for the windows in watercolor and gouache. Marq's role as an **artisan** glassmaker was then to examine this design and consider how to complete the project in glass. He decided how the glass could be safely cut and how large to make the individual pieces, which were connected together by **leading**. In order to replicate Chagall's brilliant use of color, Marq adapted a traditional technique of glassmaking to create a "sandwich" of layered glass called **flashed glass**. With flashed glass as well as acid washing, he was able to create gradation in tone and color. This allowed for several colors within each field or section of the windows. Upon completion of the panels, Marq brought them to Chagall in his studio in St. Paul de Vence, France. Chagall added his unique and final touches to the piece by painting directly on the glass and making scrapes and scratches on the paint with his fingernails or the end of his paintbrush, which can most clearly be seen in the lower right corner of the sixth panel.

The *America Windows* are a stunning display of the iconic style of one of the world's most prolific and expressive artists. They capture Marc Chagall's unique vision as he reflected, late in his career, on the resilience and freedom of the creative spirit. Thankfully, the results of these efforts are presented in perpetuity for viewers at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Glossary

artisan. A craftsman or skilled manual worker.

colorist. A person who uses color skillfully. An artist who emphasizes color relationships in a work of art.

conservator. A person who applies science to the technical study, preservation, and treatment of art objects.

Cubism. An early 20th-century art movement that used abstract, fragmented shapes to depict several views of the same subject simultaneously, emphasizing the basic geometry or structure of the subject.

Fauvism. An early 20th-century art movement that flourished in France from 1898 to 1908. The name Fauves, French for "wild beasts," was given to artists adhering to this style because it was felt that they used intense colors in a violent, uncontrolled way.

flashed glass. Originally produced for the art glass trade to provide a cheaper method of making colored glass panes, it involves the application of a thin layer of colored glass over glass of a contrasting color. When held up to the light the flashed glass is practically indistinguishable from solid color glass.

gouache ("gwash")**.** A heavy, opaque watercolor paint producing a more strongly colored picture than ordinary watercolor.

hue. The name of any color as found in its pure state in the spectrum or rainbow.

leading ("led-ing")**.** The process of interlocking and assembling pieces of glass together using lead came. The came—long strips of grooved lead—acts as a framework for enclosing a pane of glass. The pieces of came are then soldered together and often installed in an iron framework to create a window.

motifs ("mō-`tēfs")**.** Consistent or recurrent conceptual elements, themes, or ideas in a literary, artistic, or musical work.

municipal. Of or pertaining to a town or city or its local government.

palette. Board on which an artist mixes paints before applying them to a surface or object; usually designed with rounded edges and a hole through which one's thumb is placed in order to hold it while working.

public art. Artworks that are designed specifically for, or placed in areas accessible to, the general public.

still life. A depiction of a group of inanimate objects, such as flowers or fruit, usually arranged by an artist.

Surrealism. A movement introduced by a group of writers and artists in Paris in 1924. Surrealists embraced the act of spontaneous creation. To unleash their creativity, some used Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, probing the world of dreams, fantasies, and the subconscious in their art.

Vitebsk ("vē-`tepsk")**.** The Vitebsk region of Belarus borders Russia, Lithuania and Latvia. Vitebsk is the main city of the region.

Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

Stained Glass Storytelling

Illinois Learning Standards: 25A.B, 25B.D.2
Common Core State Standards: RL2, W3

The imagery in the *America Windows* reflects Marc Chagall's unique representational style and his appreciation for the arts. This activity allows students to immerse themselves in this imagery and use their imaginations to consider what it is like to be in Chagall's dreamlike world.

Make copies of the poster of *America Windows* at the back of this resource packet. Allow students to look closely at the copy and describe what that they see. Point out that although the windows are divided into six separate panels, they are connected through a shared skyline across the bottom. As a class, focus on one panel at a time, identifying the details present. What images are in each panel? What colors are used? What other observations do students have?

Ask students to identify one object, figure, or animal from the windows—this will be the subject of a story. Look closely at its details. Pay attention to surrounding shapes, colors, objects, and figures in the same panel. Have students write their story from the perspective of the subject, describing what it is like to be a part of the environment of the windows. What is the experience of interacting with the other figures, animals, and details in that panel? If the subject could talk, what would it sound like and what would it say? If it were able to, how would it move? By giving these characteristics to the subject, the students' stories can be performed as a monologue—a speech presented by a single character.

Translucent, Transparent, and Opaque

Illinois Learning Standards: 12C

Use the *America Windows* as the starting point for a science unit on the effects that light has when it meets translucent, transparent, and opaque objects. Stained glass is translucent, as it allows some light to come through, but it also absorbs and scatters light. At their current setting in the museum, the *America Windows* are backed with artificial lighting. However, the lighting does allow viewers to identify how different sections of the glass allow varying amounts of light to pass through.

Watch A *Palette of Glass*, a documentary of the creation of the *America Windows* (recommended viewing from 10:40–18:12). In the video, Charles Marq mixes various shades of color to complete the windows, prepares the glass, and washes designated areas in acid to allow different hues and shades of color to appear. How does the treatment of the glass and the resulting shades of color affect the ability for light to pass through the windows?

To create a deeper understanding about the properties of transparent, translucent, and opaque, students can create their own visual aides using art materials. Provide each student with three copies of the detailed image from the *America Windows* attached to this resource packet. On one copy, adhere a piece of clear cellophane paper over the image. This will be an example of transparent, as the cellophane is thin and allows light to easily pass through. Additionally, the object can be easily seen through the cellophane. On another copy, adhere a piece of colored tissue paper over the image. This will be an example of translucent, as some light can pass through the tissue; however, the object behind the tissue is not clearly visible. On the last copy, adhere a piece of colored construction paper over the image. This will be an example of opaque, because the construction paper is thick and does not allow any light to pass through, nor can the image be seen through the paper.

Instruct students to take a walk around their classroom, school, neighborhood, or home and identify objects that are translucent, transparent, and opaque.

Illustrating Ideas

Illinois Learning Standards: 25A.A.8
Common Core State Standards: RL6

The details in the *America Windows* reflect the value that Marc Chagall placed on the arts. To communicate this, he used motifs related to music, dance, literature, and visual art. Ask students to identify these motifs. How do they reflect the idea of the arts?

Ask students to draw on their own experiences and memories to identify some examples of things that are personally important, like the arts were to Chagall. What motifs would illustrate these ideas or beliefs? Select one idea and create a sketch of how it could be illustrated. Include a description of how the illustration represents the idea being shared.

After finishing their sketches, students can transfer their design and create their own Chagall-inspired stained-glass window. If you would like to use glass with your students, acrylic paints mixed with clear glue will adhere to the surface. If adding outlines to divide up the frame (as Chagall does in the *America Windows* with leading to create six panels), mix white glue with black paint.

If you do not want to use glass with your students they can illustrate their ideas using cut pieces of cellophane, tissue, and construction paper placed on a large piece of clear contact paper.

Symbols of American Freedom

Illinois Learning Standards: 25A.E.7, 25A.F.8

In gifting the *America Windows* to the Art Institute of Chicago, Marc Chagall was thinking about his experiences in the United States, the country's relationship with the arts, and the notion of freedom. In the fourth panel from the left, Chagall includes a very iconic American image: the Statue of Liberty. Conceived for the 1876 United States Centennial and finally dedicated in 1886, the Statue of Liberty—like the *America Windows*—was a gift to the United States. Given in friendship from France, it is a universal symbol of freedom and democracy. What other images have become symbolic with America or the notion of freedom?

Invite your students to design their own symbols of freedom, reminding them that a symbol is something that represents an idea, a process, or a physical entity. Ask them to explain how the idea of freedom has been visually communicated in their work.

Listen to those Windows!

Illinois Learning Standards: 25A.F.4
Common Core State Standards: SL2

Marc Chagall truly emphasized color in all his work, regardless of the medium he was using. He once said, "Color is everything; color is vibration like music; everything is vibration." If colors had a unique sound, what would they sound like? Ask students to create a musical response to the *America Windows*. Designate sounds for the colors used using musical instruments, sound effects, or even projecting their own voice. How does the soundtrack to the windows sound? What mood does it create? Are there other details, besides color, in the windows that would have sounds? What would they be and how would they contribute to the soundtrack?

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***All items with an asterisk are available in the Crown Educator Resource Center.**

Marc Chagall. *America Windows,* 1977.

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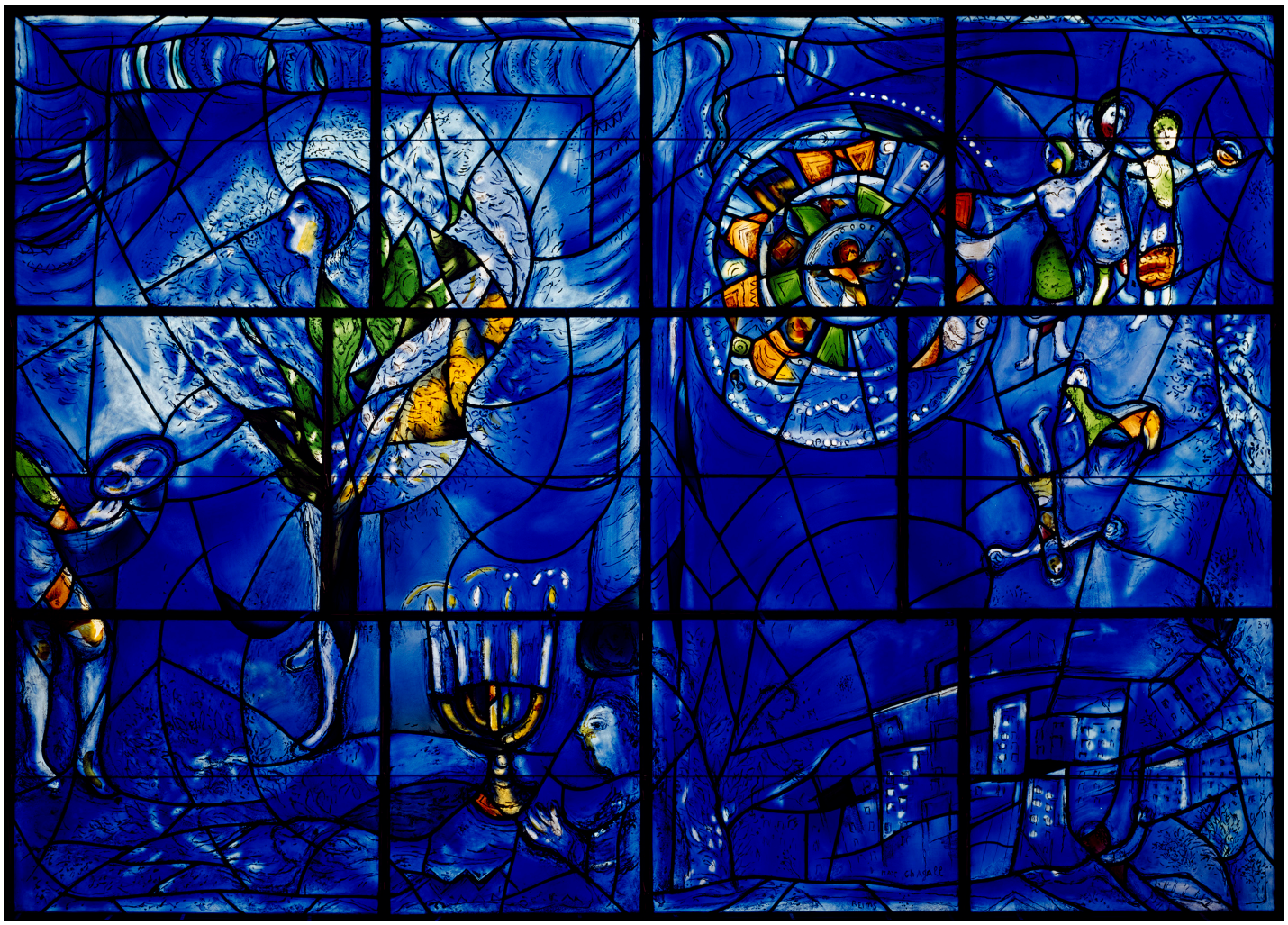
Marc Chagall. *America Windows*, 1977.



Marc Chagall. *America Windows*, 1977. Left Bay (Panel 1, Music; Panel 2, Art)



Marc Chagall. *America Windows*, 1977. Middle Bay (Panel 3, Literature; Panel 4, Freedom)



Marc Chagall. *America Windows*, 1977. Right Bay (Panel 5, Theatre; Panel 6, Dance)