

COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE: WHEN CHAGALL WENT TO FRANKFURT

Snejanka Bauer and Maria Kokkori

ABSTRACT

Marc Chagall painted *Commedia dell'Arte* for the Frankfurt Opera House in 1959. This painting is considered as one of the symbols of post-World War II Frankfurt. Together with 14 preliminary drawings, *Commedia* decorated the foyer of the new Opera. On display only for opera ticket holders, the painting endured for over 40 years without any conservation care. This paper describes how the painting's historical context and technical examination affected conservation decisions. This paper also aims to contribute to the demystification of different attitudes to exhibiting, conserving and decision-making processes, as well as to emphasize the importance of collaboration between curators, art managers and conservators.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Marc Chagall malte 1959 das Gemälde *Commedia dell'Arte* für die Frankfurter Oper. Dies Gemälde wird als eines der Sinnbilder für das Frankfurt der Nachkriegszeit angesehen. Zusammen mit vierzehn Vorzeichnungen schmückte *Commedia* das Foyer der neuen Oper. Das Gemälde, welches nur für Oper und Theater-besucher sichtbar ist, überdauerte 40 Jahre ohne weitere Konservierung. In dieser Arbeit wird beschrieben, inwieweit der historische Kontext des Gemäldes und seine technische Untersuchung die Entscheidungen zur Konservierung beeinflussten. Die Arbeit möchte dazu beitragen, verschiedene Ansätze bei der Ausstellung, Konservierung und der Entscheidungsfindung zu entmystifizieren und die Bedeutung der Zusammenarbeit zwischen Kuratoren, Kunstmanagern und Restauratoren zu betonen.

INTRODUCTION

Commedia dell'Arte by Marc Chagall represented a great opportunity for examination of the original technique and historical documentation, as well as for understanding the painting's conservation problems that developed mainly from exhibition in unsuitable environments.

The chosen approach towards conservation decisions was based on the interaction of related disciplines: conservation science, art history, art management and conservation. The technical examination of the materials and painting techniques used by the artist, integrated with research into primary and secondary sources, provided a new perspective on the relationship between the making as well as the meaning of the work, and impacted on conservation treatment.

The first part of this paper focuses on the painting's historical background, the second on the painter's materials and techniques, and the third examines the specific circumstances under which the painting was preserved and displayed. This paper explores how the historical contextualization affected conservation decisions and future display policies.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Frankfurt was the first city for which Chagall created a commissioned work on an opera building. In 1964, he painted the ceiling for the Opera in Paris, and in 1967, he designed two huge murals for the New York City Metropolitan Opera House.

Commedia dell'Arte is one of the few oil paintings by Chagall with a massive size, 2.55 × 4 m, Fig 1. Chagall painted it especially for the Frankfurt Opera House in 1959. Together with 14 preliminary drawings, *Commedia* has been decorating the foyer of the Opera for the last 42 years.

Commedia dell'Arte is closely connected to Frankfurt's history, and especially to the Frankfurt Opera. It is considered as one of the symbols of post-World War II Frankfurt. The Opera and



Fig. 1 Marc Chagall, *Commedia dell'Arte*, 1959. ©VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2006. Photo: Alexander Bouras.

the theatre were both housed in a building called the 'Schauspielhaus'. This magnificent Art Nouveau building dating from 1902 was badly damaged by 1945; this unfortunately had happened to the majority of the buildings in the city of Frankfurt at the end of World War II, many being totally destroyed by numerous bombings. During the 1950s, the historically important buildings were reconstructed. The Opera and Theatre House was opened for visitors in 1951 and reconstruction began during 1954.

The building, however, proved to be too small to host both the opera and the theatre. As a result, in 1958 the decision was taken to make a separate opera building. The old Art Nouveau shell was replaced by a glass façade. The architect of the new façade was Otto Apl. In 1958 Chagall was asked to create a painting for the opera foyer of this very new building.

On 16 January 1958, Chagall accepted the commission and started with the preparation of the awesome painting: he designed about 17 preliminary drawings. One of them was chosen as the final draft in September of the same year. Chagall chose the title of the painting himself: *Commedia dell'Arte*. One year later, on 16 December 1959, the painting was finished and signed by the artist.

Because of the size of the painting, it was rolled up and transferred from France to Frankfurt by train. Unfortunately, when the painting arrived in Frankfurt, the new Opera building was not yet ready and thus began the 'odyssey'.

For several weeks, the painting remained rolled and unattended in the storage rooms of a transport company until the Frankfurt Städelsches Kunstinstitut transferred it to its storage rooms and stretched it after almost eight months — a fact discovered during conservation treatment from an inscription on the inner side of the stretcher. In November 1960, the Frankfurt Städelsches Kunstinstitut organized the first exhibition show of the *Commedia* together with the 17 drafts. Three years later, in 1963, Frankfurt bought 14 of these drawings and from 14 December 1963 the whole *Commedia* group was on display in the foyer of the new Opera House. Opera visitors could admire the wonderful painting, which is actually the biggest painting by Chagall in Germany.

Unfortunately, in 1987, a fire occurred and a large part of the new opera building was burned down. It was a miracle that the *Commedia* group was not damaged. During the reconstruction of the building the *Commedia* group was evacuated. From 1988 until 1991, *Commedia* decorated the entrance hall of the Frankfurter Volksbank.

THE WORD AS STAGE: THE *COMMEDIA*

Commedia dell'Arte plays a catalytic role in the exceptionally fertile chapter of Chagall's theatre paintings. The circus was one of Chagall's favourite subjects during his early years in Paris and henceforth throughout his career [1]. His experience and memory of clowns, acrobats, and young ladies on horseback lay at the heart of his personal mythology. He joined a long and distinguished line of post-Impressionist and modern painters who featured the circus in their work, including Seurat, Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso, Rouault, van Dongen and Léger.

In *Commedia dell'Arte*, all of Chagall's favourite performers are here, together with an orchestra and audience. Chagall's circus pictures are usually filled with brilliant colour and exuberant activity, being especially joyous and life-affirming. He wrote in 1967:

For me, a circus is a magic show that appears and disappears like a world. A circus is disturbing. It is profound. ... These clowns, bareback riders and acrobats have themselves a home in my visions. Why? Why am I so touched by their make-up and their grimaces? With them, I can move toward new

horizons. Lured by their colours and make-up, I can dream of painting new psychic distortions. ... It is a magic word, circus, a timeless dancing game where tears and smiles, the play of arms and legs take the form of a great art. ... I would like to go up to that bareback rider who has just disappeared, smiling; her dress a bouquet of flowers. I would circle her with my flowered and unflowered years. On my knees, I would tell her wishes and dreams, not of this world. I would run after her to ask her how to live, how to escape from myself, from the world, whom to run to, where to go. ... I have always thought of clowns, acrobats and actors, as tragically, human beings who, for me, are like characters in certain religious paintings [2].

A close examination of this painting and a comparison with the closely-related preliminary works, allows us to understand better how the painting was conceived and executed.

Chagall used a medium-weight, plain weave, linen-type canvas. The thin, evenly-applied ground layer suggests that it is more likely that Chagall used a single-primed canvas that was commercially available. Scanning electron microscopy with energy-dispersive X-ray analysis (SEM-EDX) indicated the presence of lead and zinc in the ground along with calcium (carbonate), bound in oil. It is conceivable that Chagall desired a pure white ground for its optical effect, particularly as it was allowed to show in some areas of the composition.

Chagall worked on many preparatory drawings and sketches for *Commedia dell'Arte*; he designed about 17 preliminary works. These studies permitted Chagall to map out his final composition with very few changes. Examination of the painting with infrared reflectography has shown clear and continuous brushstrokes of black paint outlining the design. These lines vary in length and thickness. The painting shows the sense of immediacy and spontaneity commonly associated with Chagall's painting technique. These outlines are sparse linear frameworks with very little, if any, shading or development of form. Meyer wrote :

... After welcoming us, he would return to his work and sit down in front of his easel, imbued by the light coming through the large bay window. He would pick up a few long brushes with great deliberation, and proceed to place paint onto the canvas in a most delicate, precise and quick fashion, similar to a dance; he would call it *picoter*, to peck. It was amazing to watch him paint with such energy ... [3].

Colour is applied more or less thickly; and broad brushstrokes are clearly visible. Paint is used as a source of texture as well as colour. The variations in texture further activate the composition.

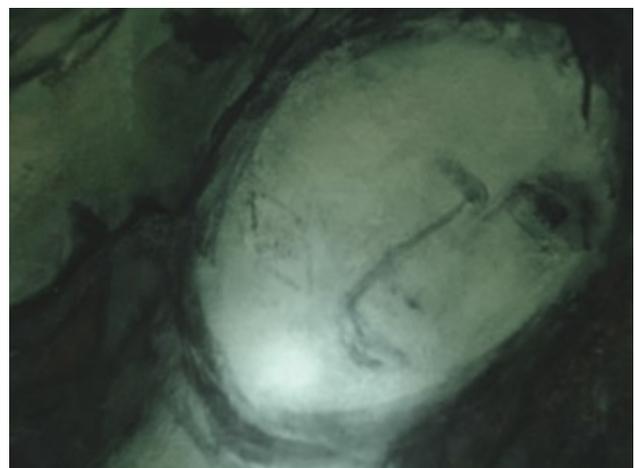


Fig. 2 Detail showing alterations to the face. ©VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2006. Photo: Alexander Bouras.



Fig. 3 Detail showing a figure holding an umbrella almost erased and covered with thin layers of paint. ©VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2006. Photo: Alexander Bouras.

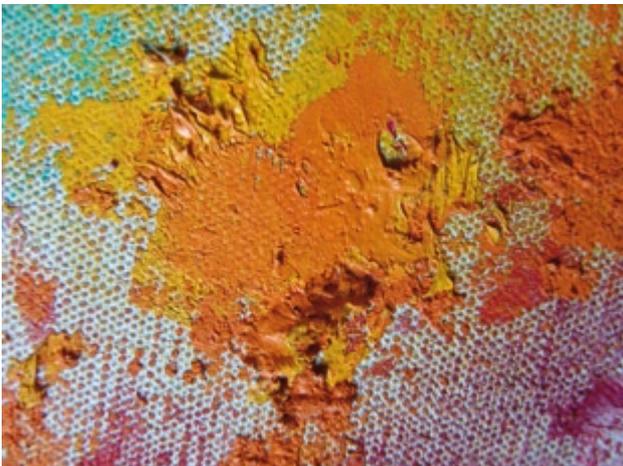


Fig. 4 Detail showing different types of brushstrokes. ©VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2006. Photo: Alexander Bouras.

Chagall experimented with mixed media. There are areas where he combines oil with wood dust, thus creating a grittier texture and vibrancy.

The paint layering is complex and reflects numerous changes and reworkings, as well as the diversity of Chagall's brushwork and paint formulation. These colour changes were made *alla prima*, not in such a way that a lower layer affects the appearance of an upper layer. The thickness and opacity of the final layers indicated a decisive change in the colour relationships. Another way Chagall created interesting colour effects and textures is by overlaying comparably thick and strongly coloured paint layers. He also used ink and mixtures of oil paint with varnish in order to create different matt and glossy areas. It is difficult to



Fig. 5 Detail showing the painting texture. ©VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2006. Photo: Alexander Bouras.

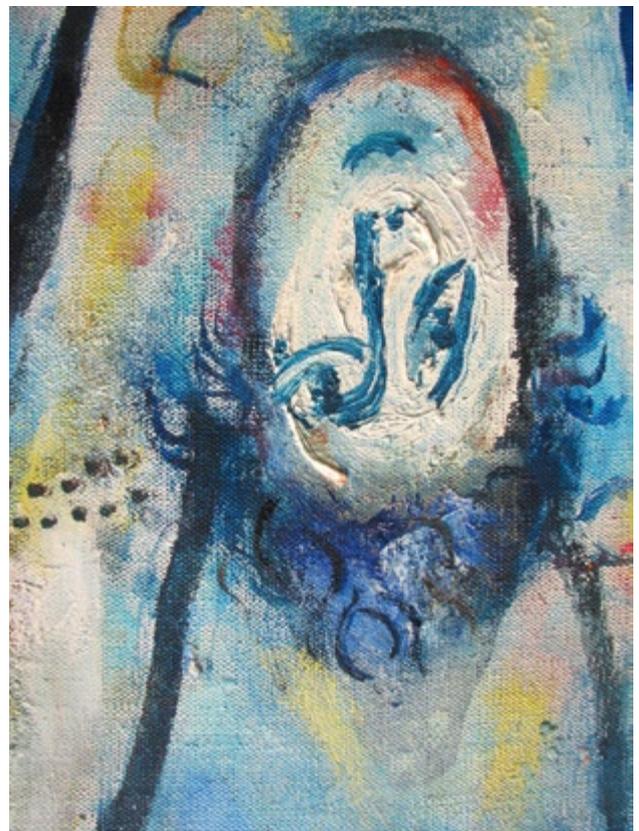


Fig. 6 Detail showing the texture of a face. ©VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2006. Photo: Alexander Bouras.

determine how many of these effects came into being as a side-effect of the continual painterly metamorphosis and how much of it was planned or 'intended'.

Many parts of the paintings were altered during the painting procedure. This became clear from infrared reflectography where it was found that certain face characteristics were repainted (Fig. 2), small figures were almost erased and covered with thin layers of paint (Fig. 3) and also some preliminary compositional elements were completely changed.

Chagall used his brushes to form strokes of many different sizes and shapes, oriented in various directions to delineate form and create movement. He seems to change his brushstrokes according to the amount of detail desired, or the prominence



Fig. 7 Neue Opera lobby with south-facing window glazing. *VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2006. Photo: Alexander Bouras.*

of the motif. The brushwork includes thick, wide, well-defined strokes; smooth passages with little hint of any brushstrokes; areas where the artist had manipulated the brush in order to create local areas of high impasto; and areas where a palette knife was used, Fig. 4.

The colours were worked out and refined as the painting progressed. Chagall's characteristic manipulation of the paint materials and his awareness of each pigment's nuance of colour suggest that he was also very involved with the raw materials and their physical properties.

There are areas where the paint has been heavily worked as it was built up in many layers, resulting in a somewhat dry and pasty texture. Soft, irregular blotches of paint were used, producing a mottled, indefinite effect, Figs 5 and Fig. 6.

Chagall's palette was composed largely of strong, spectrally-pure colours: cobalt blue, French ultramarine, vermilion, cadmium yellow, viridian, emerald green, lead white and zinc white. Mixtures of these pigments are also found to give other reds, oranges, greens, purples and occasionally, browns and blacks. In addition, other pigments were identified, such as red and yellow ochres, Naples yellow and Prussian blue. Analyses indicated that similar pigments were used for both the preliminary drawings and the *Commedia dell'Arte*.

Chagall managed to explore and obtain the most effective and vibrant colour contrasts. The result is a surface texture of great variety and complexity, providing tension in the composition



Fig. 8 Neue Opera: the entertainment area, showing the location of *Commedia dell'Arte*. *VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2006. Photo: Alexander Bouras.*

and emphasizing the differences in the physical traits of the theatrical figures.

THE OPERA HOUSE ENVIRONMENT

Commedia dell'Arte has always been regarded as a decorative object for an entertainment area — available only for Opera ticket holders — where smoking, drinking and eating is allowed.

Large areas of the new Opera building are predominantly illuminated by daylight — one of the most notable features of the building. Although daylight can be considered superior to any other kind of illumination, its control is difficult to reconcile with conservation demands.

The lobby with its south-facing window glazing has the highest level of illumination. Both *Commedia dell'Arte* and the 14 preliminary drawings were displayed just opposite these windows. It appears that the difficulties that might arise in coping with natural daylight were not anticipated at an early stage in the design of the building. On sunny days, the temperature in the exhibition area also rises dramatically, Fig. 7. Although conservation standards for works of art on display are published in a number of books [4, 5], the presence of a conservator to monitor day-to-day light and climate conditions is absolutely necessary.

As in any building which is not designed to house works of art, temperature and relative humidity (RH) are very unstable. The uncontrollable number of people entering the room during the opera intervals contributes to extra fluctuations in temperature and RH. The bar area just opposite *Commedia*, equipped with two steam coffee machines, is always overcrowded during opera intervals, Fig. 8. In addition, due to the function of this area, it also appears very difficult to control the amount of dirt and dust as well as noise and vibration.

Finally, hanging such a large and heavy painting inclined away from the wall posed many challenges and great potential for serious damage. The installation of *Commedia dell'Arte* at the new Opera House created a number of structural problems to the painting.

CONSERVATION TREATMENT

Very little documentation exists in the Historische Museum records on the condition of *Commedia dell'Arte* over the years since its arrival in Frankfurt in 1959. The records that exist relate to the exhibition history of the painting and the 14 preliminary drawings. *Commedia dell'Arte* was photographed and assessed, condition reports were compiled and treatment proposals formulated as a result of discussions between curator and conservators.

The stretcher is a seven-member wooden one, with a central horizontal bar and two vertical ones. The dimensions of the painting represent those of the stretcher added during framing in 1960 just prior to its exhibition. The tacking margins indicate that the painting was extended by approximately 2 cm on each side. Due to the display system in the Opera House, hanging caused the stretcher to warp slightly and the canvas to sag. The condition of the stretcher was found to be sound, and because of its historical significance, it was decided not to replace it.

The first step was to remove a layer of superficial airborne grime that had accumulated, since the work had never been surface cleaned. This treatment also allowed the surface to be examined closely in order to detect any minor damages that may have been overlooked. Dust, atmospheric pollutants and dirt were removed using saliva. Other cleaning solutions tested included deionized water and 2% tri-ammonium citrate in deionized water, but none of these cleaning agents removed dirt as much as the cleaning agent chosen. The procedure began by testing a small area of the painting judged to be least noticeable. At each step of

the treatment, the painting was carefully examined for changes in gloss, or colour pick-up on the swab. All dirt and residues have been removed from the surface, allowing Chagall's true palette and methods of paint handling to be appreciated. The surface has regained a freshness and vitality, as if a grey filter had been removed from the front of the painting.

The painting canvas had begun to show the familiar signs of deterioration. The tacking edges of *Commedia dell'Arte* were found to be more damaged than the bulk of the canvas, because of the effect of the rusted tacks and resinous wood. In order to reinforce the original edges strip-lining was carried out using polyester canvas and BEVA 371 adhesive.

Additional support was provided to the painting in the form of a loose lining — a polyester fabric stretched and secured to the original stretcher. The painting was then re-secured to the stretcher so that it rested against the polyester fabric. Loose-lining was chosen as one of the most effective preventive measures for the painting. An extra advantage was that the original stretcher could be retained and preserved by this system, and the total weight was only increased by a very small amount.

Any idea of varnishing the painting was rejected, as it is felt that the painting should remain unvarnished for a more appropriate appearance, allowing Chagall's considerable technical prowess and vision to be appreciated fully. Both curator and conservators agreed the painting had not been varnished originally, in keeping with Chagall's intention that the paint surface should retain its natural variation in matt and gloss.

Framing is a very important preventive measure. The application of backboards, the strengthening of frames to ensure rigidity, and the application of low reflecting glass whenever possible, provide effective mechanical protection and ensure a microclimate around each work. A Fome-Cor backboard was screwed to the reverse of the stretcher in order to slow moisture transport through the canvas, keep out dust and foreign objects, and protect against damage during handling. *Commedia dell'Arte* was installed after conservation treatment in a metal frame, in which almost the entire painted surface is visible. As Chagall painted the image right up to the very edge of the canvas in many places, displaying as much of the canvas as possible is important. This frame provides rigidity and the strength needed for the painting's large format, its heavy weight and fragile materials, so as to minimize deformation or vibration during exhibition or transportation.

DISCUSSION

Commedia dell'Arte had been displayed for over 40 years without any conservation care. Far from any scientific approach, it had been regarded as a decorative object: it was exposed to direct sunlight, cigarette smoke and steam from coffee machines.

Conserving *Commedia dell'Arte* required careful planning based on historical criteria and detailed knowledge of the work and its components as well as respect for the artist's intentions [6]. The technical examination of the materials and painting techniques used by Chagall, integrated with an analysis of his theoretical and practical aims as expressed in the artist's writings, and the comments and practices of his contemporaries, revealed and explored the interrelationship between materials, techniques and artistic expression. The following questions were the most interesting. Which painting materials and technique did the artist use? Did he create new forms by experimentation? Where did he find his stimulus for the choice of materials and techniques and in what way are these modified within the artistic process? What was his theoretical and practical aim?

We tried to focus on measures and treatments that could meet the meaning, function and requirements of the painting. Any

conservation project is a complex undertaking, full of risks and difficulties. A wide range of problems was posed by the variety of materials used in this work and also by the way the painting was exhibited.

Apart from issues related to conservation treatment procedures, there were also other structural considerations that were discussed. These concerned the durability of the work and its ultimate display. Is the Neue Opera providing a suitable environment for the painting? How could the environmental conditions be improved? Should the painting be transferred to another exhibition space? How is *Commedia dell'Arte* placed in the physical and social context of the Opera House? Whenever one turns to discussing the display of artefacts in an exhibition place there is the issue of epistemology, of how artefacts are perceived and presented by the curator, how they are preserved by the conservator and of how they are perceived and understood by the visitor. It becomes clear that this highly fluid and complex activity is not susceptible to straightforward definition: the painting has to be seen in its historical context; curators have a particular and personal representation of historical and aesthetic significance; conservators are responsible for the preservation of works and maintenance of the most important property of a painting, its lifespan. The painting does not continue to exist of its own accord: on the contrary, it is susceptible to multiple constructions of meaning dependent upon, among other factors, its visual and historical representation, albeit the whole environment in which it exists.

The importance of collaboration between curators, art historians, art managers and painting conservators was apparent in all discussions related to the past, present and future of *Commedia dell'Arte*, and this multi-disciplinary approach bridged the different mindsets involved in exhibiting, conserving and making decisions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to Meret Meyer, the Chagall Committee, Heinz Vogel, Adolf and Luisa Haeuser-Stiftung, Dr Richard Zacharuk, Alexandra Neubauer, Alexander Bouras, Manjit Debashis, Natasha Duff, Barbara Hassel, Julia Spies and Jana Zarlung for their invaluable participation to this project.

SUPPLIERS

Fome-Cor: Alcan International Network Deutschland GmbH, Fritz-Vomfelde-Str. 12, 40547 Düsseldorf, Germany.

Pigments: Kremer Pigmente GmbH & Co. KG Hauptstrasse 41–47, D-88317 Aichstetten, Germany.

Plectol B500: Polymer Latex GmbH, KG 45764 Marl, Germany.

BEVA 371: Conservator's Products Company, P.O. Box 601, Flanders, New Jersey 07836, USA.

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AUTHORS

Snejanka Bauer is a curator at the Ikonen Museum of Frankfurt am Main. She has studied art history in Sofia (Bulgaria) and Berlin. She received her doctorate in art history from the Humboldt University, Berlin. She has published widely, and her research interests include contemporary art, icon painting, art under National Socialism, and the Munich School. She has lectured as a visiting scholar at the University of Sofia and at the Louvre, Paris. Address: Ikonen Museum der Stadt Frankfurt-Stiftung Dr. Schmidt-Voigt, Brückenstraße 3-7, 60594 Frankfurt am Main, Germany. E-mail: snejanka.bauer@stadt-frankfurt.de

Maria Kokkori is completing her doctoral thesis entitled *Russian Avant-Garde: A historical contextualization of selected paintings by Kazimir Malevich, Ivan Kliun and Liubov Popova c.1905–1925* at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London. She received a BSc in chemistry from the University of Athens in 1994 and a MA in the conservation of easel paintings from Northumbria University in 1997. She was a Gerry Hedley Fellow at the Courtauld Institute of Art in 1998–2000. Address: Courtauld Institute of Art, Somerset House, Strand, WC2R 0RN, London, UK. Email: marie.kokkori@courtauld.ac.uk