

A Farewell to Art: Chagall, Shakespeare and Prospero at Ben Uri from 1 November 2017 – 11 February 2018

PRESS RELEASE

A Farewell to Art: Chagall, Shakespeare and Prospero will be the first UK exhibition of a rare limited edition portfolio by Marc Chagall. Produced at the age of 88, it features 50 illustrations reflecting his interpretation of Shakespeare's magical play, *The Tempest*. This edition of the play was published by Éditions André Sauret under the supervision of Charles Sorlier in September 1975. The original lithographs by Marc Chagall were printed on the presses of Fernand Mourlot in Paris.

Ben Uri is honoured to exhibit these illustrations in London for the first time before commencing a national and international tour.

The exhibition draws on a number of themes including the relationship between Shakespeare's Renaissance aristocratic characters in *The Tempest* and Chagall's own imaginary mythological world. The curatorial argument of this new exhibition is that Chagall saw Shakespeare's *Tempest* as symbolic of the tempest that engulfed his own life and the traumatic experiences of European Jews in the first half of the twentieth century. Chagall knew the pain of being a refugee, having recognised his future lay outside Russia. He settled in Paris in 1907 and then, after being caught in his home town of Vitebsk during the first world war, eventually managed to return in 1923. He was then forced into exile from his home in Paris in 1941 due to Nazi occupation and escaped to New York. It would be perfectly understandable if he compared himself to the exiled Prospero.

Towards the end of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the lead character Prospero famously gives up his 'rough magic' and drowns his book. Many have read Prospero's abdication of magic as symbolic of Shakespeare's own farewell to writing, since *The Tempest* is recognised as the last complete play he wrote. Chagall's illustrations add many different dimensions and can be interpreted in many ways as his own 'farewell' to his frenetic artistic output on projects of this scale.

About Chagall

Marc Chagall was born on the 7th July 1887 in Vitebsk, a city in the north of present-day Belarus, then part of the Russian Empire. He studied art first in Vitebsk under Yehuda Pen and then in St Petersburg between 1907 and 1909. He first moved to Paris at the age of 23 in 1910, where he would spend much of his life. His fanciful works are immediately recognisable and he once called himself 'a dreamer that never woke up' and proclaimed: 'Even in my twenties I preferred dreaming about love and painting it in pictures.' He worked



Marc Chagall, illustration from *The Tempest*
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until his death in 1985 aged 97, producing an extraordinary and unique artistic legacy within 20th century art.

The Tempest

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* centres around: a major act of betrayal, ill treatment, the development of magic arts and a plot of revenge. It opens with a ship caught in a huge storm at sea, being watched on a distant island by a young girl. The girl, Miranda, is the daughter of Prospero who possesses magical powers and as the tempest unfolds so does the story of how they arrived on the island. Twelve years ago Prospero was The Duke of Milan. He was a studious man, but withdrew so much into books that his brother Antonio began to slowly steal his stately powers away from him. With the help of Alonso, King of Naples, now caught in the storm, Antonio usurped the duke, putting Miranda and Prospero to sea, leaving them to die. They eventually landed on the island, where Prospero has studied magic, helped by his mischievous spirit Ariel and an unhappy slave, Caliban. As a result of the tempest, Alonso and his son Ferdinand, among others, are shipwrecked on the island and the story unfolds.



Marc Chagall, illustration from *The Tempest*
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About the Curator

Hanna Scolnicov is Professor emerita of Theatre Studies and former Head of the School of Graduate Studies of the Faculty of Arts at Tel-Aviv University, and Life Member of Clare Hall, Cambridge. She has published books and essays, in English and Hebrew, on Adam de la Halle, Shakespeare, Jonson, Stoppard, Pinter and Chagall. Her writing focuses on the relationship between word and visual image.

The exhibition will run at Ben Uri Gallery and Museum, 108a Boundary Road, off Abbey Road, St John's Wood, London NW8 0RH from 1st November 2017 to the 11th February 2018. Open 7 days; Free entry. www.benuri.org

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