

CELESTE HEADLEE: Welcome back to *Sound Thoughts on Art*, an audio series from the National Gallery of Art. I'm Celeste Headlee. When we engage with art, it kick starts our five senses. We hear music or feel the beat of a drum in our chests. We see the vivid colors of a photo. We take in the three dimensions of a sculpture. We savor the taste of fine food. Sometimes, you can smell the carved wood or the smeared oil paint.

But when there's crossover, when a piece of art activates multiple senses and they begin to interact and intertwine, that's when things really get interesting. When we listen to melody, what images flash through our minds? When we study the brushwork in a painting, what do we hear? This podcast lives in that crossover, in the space at the center of our five senses' Venn diagram.

In each episode, you'll learn about a work at the National Gallery and you'll hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music. *Sound Thoughts on Art* delves into our personal relationship with art and the unique response we have to beautifully made things.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

The National Gallery is home to works of all shapes, mediums, and sizes, and not all of those works are surrounded by four walls and a roof. The National Gallery's Sculpture Garden has been a visitor favorite since its dedication and opening in 1999. Millions of visitors have walked through the greenery and larger-than-life outdoor art pieces. But if you know where to look, there are some hidden gems tucked away from the beaten path: peaceful little oases and immersive works of craftsmanship and vision that almost make you forget you're steps away from the National Mall.

One of those peaceful little nooks is near the Pavilion Café, right up against the fence separating the Sculpture Garden from 9th Street. There, down a few steps, is a bench and a gigantic mosaic by Marc Chagall. It almost looks like a watercolor painting come to textured, oversized life. In this spot surrounded by greenery, it's easy to get lost in the water-washed colors.

Folk musician Dom Flemons knows this spot and this mosaic well, and it holds a special place in his heart as he tells it.

DOM FLEMONS: If you think of, maybe think of the wall in your backyard. You have an entire wall that you're looking at. And you have these beautiful tiles and these beautiful colors that are telling the story of Orpheus, which is one of the prototype Greek tragedy tales. He goes down to Hades, the underworld, to save the love of his life and tries to do it with his music. And one of his powers is that he causes the sun to rise.

And he gets down to the underworld, he gets ready to bring her back, and the only stipulation he's given is that she cannot look back and he cannot look back to make sure that she is safe in one version of the tale. And at the last moment, he looks back and then she disappears. And so then he decides to jump off a cliff and it's a tragedy. He kills himself.

And then, of course, with Chagall, he expanded the story. And so on the left side, you see the water and you see a bunch of people under a pyramid. And he sort of references the exodus that's mentioned in the Old Testament in the Bible. And then on the right side, he has this beautiful, green pasture with some folks sitting on the bench.

And when you read about it, you find that he's telling a bit of the story of the Jewish people during the Second World War. And there are references to Pegasus the flying horse as well as Icarus in Greek mythology. And then it just has some vibrant colors. So it's very literal in one sense. But in this beautiful piece of art, there's an abstract quality that also allows for the imagination to just run wild.

CELESTE HEADLEE: When did you first see this piece?

DOM FLEMONS: The first time I got to see this piece in person--actually, when I got married to my wife Vania, we actually we went down to the courthouse. And one of the things that you can do before you sign your marriage license is that you need to leave the courthouse and then say your vows to each other and then come back into the courthouse. And so my wife decided to get a few pictures in front of the *LOVE* statue that's out over in the courtyard. And we happened to see this beautiful piece as we were walking around. And so I took note of it.

And yeah, it's just striking. I couldn't help but stare at a bunch. And it's also a very special moment that we shared together getting married. So that was--that felt like the right thing. And also when you see a picture of it online, it's not quite the same as experiencing it in person. And just to be able to see it in person and see the drawings etched into the stone, it's really just phenomenal.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Chagall's *Orphée* depicts in part the Greek myth of doomed lovers, Orpheus and Eurydice. The story has inspired many works of art, visual and musical throughout the ages, from this mosaic to the modern Broadway hit *Hadestown*. During the 77th season of concerts at the National Gallery of Art, one such piece of music was performed.

Throughout this episode in addition to Dom Flemons's work, you'll also hear a performance of "Melodie" composed by Christoph Willibald Gluck as part of a 1762 opera about Orpheus and Eurydice. This recording of an arrangement by Fritz Kreisler was made at the National Gallery on September 16, 2018, with the Living Art Collective. It features pianist Danielle DeSwert Hahn and the violinist Jacqueline Saed Wolborsky.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So tell me about the song that you chose to respond to this piece.

DOM FLEMONS: Well, I decided to choose a song that I'd recorded a while ago called "Blue Butterfly." It's from my album *Prospect Hill*. And this was originally an outtake from the original sessions.

And looking at the right side of the Chagall, it's just beautiful. That's one of the things that epic storytelling has always done for human beings from the beginning of civilization.

We've learned to tell stories and tales that can take us through the greatest heights and the lowest depths of our human existence. And a lot of the good tales, they tend to figure out a way to end out the story in a way that's very satisfactory. And the two lovers sitting on the park bench in the city is just such a beautiful image there.

And "Blue Butterfly" was sort of that. I'm playing guitar and then I have Guy Davis also playing a 12-string guitar next to me. And I really wanted to get that sort of beautiful folk flavor that Guy used to have on a lot of his early records on Smithsonian Folkways. And so I played him the chords and we started to pick it. And I think we might have done two or three takes on it, and then we moved on to something else.

But when I listened back to "Blue Butterfly," even the titling of it, it just reminded me of my wife Vania. And I wanted to name it after a dress that she had bought when we were out in Sedona, Arizona. And yeah, I called it "Blue Butterfly."

CELESTE HEADLEE: What did the dress look like? I mean, why did that dress stick in your head?

DOM FLEMONS: Well, it was interesting, because this dress was a mariposa butterfly dress. She'd actually bought two. One of them was a blue dress and one of them was a marigold dress like a monarch butterfly. And so she wore the blue dress when we went out to the Grammys. And actually we've got a portrait of the two of us standing there where she's wearing the blue butterfly dress. And she actually took a tintype with it as well.

And I just thought it was such a striking image that when I was thinking of titles--because instrumental numbers, those are just evocative. You have to come up with titles without having words to go with them. And I thought "Blue Butterfly" was a great way to title that one. And then it's the very last number of the entire song cycle. So it also was a great way to end the song cycle out with a blue butterfly, with a nice little period at the end of the sentence.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Chagall's *Orphée* is a work of contradictions. It's an enormous piece of art, 17 feet wide and 10 feet tall. But it's tucked away in such a quiet corner of the sculpture garden, you'd hardly know it was there unless you were looking. The colors are bold and shimmer in the sunshine. The story it depicts, of lovers and immigrants and nature, are as universal as stories can get.

But Chagall created it for two very specific people and one very specific garden. And in that garden it stayed for decades until a little over 10 years ago when the piece was bequeathed to the National Gallery of Art. And a team of artists, scientists, and engineers had to figure out how to get a 1,000-pound mosaic from one end of DC to the other. For more on *Orphée* and its journey to the National Gallery of Art, we spoke with Shelley Sturman, senior conservator and head of the National Gallery's object conservation department.

SHELLEY STURMAN: Conservators have highly trained backgrounds. We study chemistry, science, studio art, and art history and put it all together in this wonderful mix so that we understand how works of art are made, how they react with their environment, how they change, how they deteriorate. And we then can use that to examine them, study them. We do X-rays. We do x-ray fluorescence analysis. We do infrared spectral imaging. All kinds of techniques are applied to works of art so that we can treat them, conserve them, preserve them for generations to come.

And different works of art will require different expertises and different ways of handling them, ways of looking at them. A painting would be different from a work of art on paper, such as a print or a drawing. And then there are textiles, photographs, all the three-dimensional art, which is what I work with and I think is the most exciting, because it is such a huge amount of materials. We've got traditional stone, wood, ceramic, glass. And then we have all kinds of other materials, the esoteric ones, plastics and mud and dung and chocolate and ivory. And I can go on and on and on.

CELESTE HEADLEE: How did the piece come to be in the National Gallery's collection?

SHELLEY STURMAN: Wonderful question. The sculpture--I'll actually back up a little bit. A couple who live in Georgetown, who lived in Georgetown, John and Evelyn Nef, were very good friends with Marc Chagall and his wife Vava. They would vacation together. And at one point, the Chagalls came and stayed with the Nefs in their Georgetown home. They loved Georgetown. They felt it was like a little village.

After Chagall had gone through the house, he made a comment that he was going to make something for the Nefs, but then he amended that and said, no, the house is perfect. I'll make something for the garden, a mosaic. The Nefs thought that was lovely and didn't know anything else would come of that. And then they were visiting with the Chagalls, and he took them into their studio and he unveiled a painting of what would become this mosaic. They thought that was their gift, this painting that they would get. Or maybe he would turn that into a mosaic that was that size, I mean, I think it was 20 by 30 inches, that they would then hang in the garden.

In 1971, 10 crates with each of these panels arrived in the United States. The Nefs had to build a 30-foot wall in their garden in Georgetown and have mosaic panels installed. Chagall himself was not a mosaicist. He worked very closely with a highly trained mosaic artist, Lino Melano. And together, they would work out the piece, with Chagall taking his paintbrush and saying, no, I need more red here or more blue there.

Melano came over to the Nefs' garden and installed each panel. Because there were seams between each panel and around the border, Melano had to actually insert all of the tesserae, the little cut pieces, or cut new pieces so that it would become seamless and look like one huge mosaic in their garden. The Nefs also became friends of the National Gallery and felt that many of their most beloved works of art should be pieces that the nation could also admire and love.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So after first John Nef died and then when Evelyn Nef died, we were told that it was on us, on the National Gallery of Art, to somehow remove this mosaic from the wall, because it was now coming to the National Gallery. We had no idea how it was installed. We had to basically reverse everything that Lino Melano had done to install it.

We literally, we took--made one-to-one scale photographs of all the joins and all the borders. And then we had to chip out, chisel out all of the little pieces, the tesserae, from along every seam. And we would then glue them onto the one-to-one images so we knew exactly how to put it back together.

After we accomplished that part, the panels were removed one at a time, carefully lowered. We had to build a scaffolding. We took over the whole back garden of the Nefs' house for those five weeks. And so we would remove each panel from a scaffolding, very carefully lowering it on a sculpture lift, wrapping it. And then they were delivered to the National Gallery, and it took us another couple of years to remove the protective facing we had put on, to clean them, to make some repairs, treat areas where there were losses or damages.

Meanwhile, the National Gallery's masons and horticulture department built a new wall much smaller, not 30 feet high, a gray wall. We had to find the perfect place, a contemplative spot in our fairly new Sculpture Garden and then once again, reinstall the mosaic into the wall.

This time, though, we use stainless steel, a whole stainless steel mounting system. We could level and secure each piece much more easily than they had, and we didn't have to--we hope that, if anyone ever has to remove it again, they won't have the issues we had of not knowing how it was done or having to deal with rusted iron and fear that the actual concrete panels holding, supporting the mosaic would crack as a result.

CELESTE HEADLEE: You have seen a lot of these kind of efforts of moving large pieces, installing large pieces, cleaning and caring for and repairing large pieces. I wonder at that moment when it was finally done and installed and up on that wall in the Gallery and you stood in front of it, what did you feel at that moment?

SHELLEY STURMAN: What a beautiful question. I felt such exhilaration, such joy, such relief that we did it. And it was an entire cadre of people working together. The collaboration in these monumental kinds of installations is incredible at the Gallery. It was this moment of pure joy, because it looked so beautiful.

And then the sun came out and lit it up. And there are the suns in it. And the light on it, just it shines. It shimmers. And people would come and just really enjoy seeing it. So I was happy. I was very happy. It's that sigh of we did it. Oh, it worked. All that time, all that effort, it came through for us.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Here's "Blue Butterfly" by Dom Flemons, uninterrupted.

[MUSIC - DOM FLEMONS, "BLUE BUTTERFLY"]

How would you describe the mood of that song? What's the personality of it?

DOM FLEMONS: Tranquility and calmness and relaxation. Because after an epic story--and the track that precedes it features an electric guitar and a giant six-string banjo. And it's a very punchy instrumental. But "Blue Butterfly" is just sort of the end and it's where the credits roll. You just let it all sort of sink in.

And I think that that's something that, with a lot of epic poetry, you have to have that moment where you have to let it sink in. Because especially when you get into the longer form storytelling, you have to cover so much ground, so many emotions. And especially when it comes to ancient literature, before you had written literature, you had to create emotional images that could sustain themselves far past the first listening or the first hearing of the story. And so I always think about those sort of things. And I thought "Blue Butterfly" was a great way to be able to end out that story.

CELESTE HEADLEE: He tells the story of not just one tragedy, but he's got Icarus in there too. So the themes he's drawing on don't have always happy endings. And yet the piece itself looks cheerful. Why do you think that is?

DOM FLEMONS: Well, I think in some ways, that's life, especially when you've seen a lot of tragedy through unforeseen circumstances in many ways. And I think Chagall is a perfect example of that, of course, being someone who escaped from the horrors of the Holocaust. I mean, you can't even imagine the depth of emotion and tragedy and pain that must feel in one way. And he really sort of encapsulates that story in just a few images.

Again, when you start to see some of the other people outside of the main action with the Orpheus story, you begin to see that there's, again, there are greener pastures. And of course, people are going into the sea and there are sort of sea monsters, even, over here that are kind of pulling at the people. So I think there's just a lot that can be said. I think a lot of parables and a lot of elliptical storytelling, which is also connected to folk songs. Which is something I've always enjoyed about folk songs is that they can tell you a lot about a culture even if the details themselves are not a one-to-one ratio on every single piece of the story.

Even Icarus is such a small piece of this painting. But when you know that if Icarus tries to--he tries to fly. Icarus tries to fly toward the sun, and the sun melts the wax off of the wings that his father Daedalus gave him. That's a tragedy. He had the imagination to want to fly free, but at the same time, he had a mission to leave the prisons in which he was bound as well, that he and his father Daedalus were bound. And so I mean, this has so many different layers to it when it comes to the complexity of, I'm sure, Chagall's inner feelings as well as his communal feelings. Because by 1968, that's still very recent memory.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SHELLEY STURMAN: The Nefs' home was on the corner of 28th and N Street in Georgetown. And catty-corner from them was, I think still is, a synagogue. And on the High Holidays, the Nefs--Evelyn Nef was also Jewish--would leave the garden gate open so that people, as they

came out of the synagogue or took breaks from the synagogue, because on the High Holidays the services go all day long, on one of the High Holidays there's fasting. So people are maybe getting tired and want to go outside. And the congregants were permitted, invited to actually go into the Nefs' garden and enjoy, contemplate, sit in front of this beautiful mosaic that was adorning their wall made by another Jewish artist.

There's a beautiful quote by Chagall that he felt that this piece was not made just to illustrate or to represent one people, but that it should represent all humanity. And I think that that is exactly what the Nefs helped him carry out by opening their garden that way.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Do you think of its spot in the Gallery as continuing that tradition of sort of a place of peace and refuge?

SHELLEY STURMAN: I think it might. In terms of where it's located, it's kind of off the beaten track. If you don't know it's there, you could miss it, especially in the summer when the trees are all greened out and filled out. But similar to its placement in the Nefs' garden, if you know it's there, if you have this desire to find it, you will.

And the Gallery very wisely has placed some very large, flat topped boulders in front of it. So unlike a traditional gallery bench where visitors can sit down and just take in, breathe in, drink in the paintings or the sculptures within the four walls of the museum, this way they can sit down on another part of nature and just gaze at this piece, watch it in changing light, when it's cloudy, when the sun breaks through. Even in the rain it shimmers and the colors get deeper and more saturated.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Do you think that both music and visual art, even though music sometimes has lyrics, even though artwork can sometimes have words on it, do you think there's a certain level at which both art forms rise above what can be spoken?

DOM FLEMONS: Oh, absolutely. I think without a doubt. The Chagall, of course, goes far beyond anything that words can say. I mean, *Orphée* is the title, but you don't really have to even know anything about the title to be able to appreciate the triumph of this particular story that's being told. I mean, just from the very beginning, it's a joyful tale. I mean, there's sorrow along the way, but there's joy in this piece of art.

And that's one of the things that allows it to just sort of rise above everything else. And of course, the size of it helps as well, because then you get to see that they aren't just colors. It's beautiful tile work that shines and glistens in the sun as well. So there's also an aesthetic quality. It's the type of work that reminds you of home. And of course, it's a reminder that it did come from somebody's home. And it was a gift. So it has a special quality.

This is sort of an interesting just sort of side note. When I was a young boy, my parents had an artist friend out in Phoenix, and his name was Wahab. And he did southwestern art. And maybe when I was about eight or nine years old, he painted a wall in our backyard. We had a big

concrete wall over in Phoenix, Arizona, and it was a white wall. And so he painted all of these different things on there. He painted a coyote and a star and a moon and a southwestern rattlesnake and stuff like that.

And that stayed up on the wall. It might still even be on that wall. But it was something that I just admired and enjoyed and just observed for many, many years from about eight or nine years old till I guess when I left for college around 18. But then it stayed in my family at least till I was 26, 27 years old. I ended up taking a couple of pictures of it at one point years ago.

But a piece of art like that is something that changes a person's life. Because we used to have many family gatherings there and we had many moments where we all got to stand next to the wall and enjoy each other. And that's something that a piece like that can bring to any sort of gathering. And it's something that can raise up the entire occasion in a way. And of course, with it being a Greco-Roman style painting in one type of way, it also reflects the function that a lot of these types of murals had even in ancient times. So it sort of connects you to a lot of those different things.

So I think that there are pieces of art that can always transcend just what words can say about it, of course. And then of course, just like songs: there are some songs that the meaning to the person can transcend what's being said or what the actual lyrics might be. There are moments where someone can find a connection to a song just from their own particular situations.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Thanks once again to Dom Flemons for joining us. You can learn more about him and his work at TheAmericanSongster.com. For more on Marc Chagall's *Orphée* and all the other works we feature on the show, visit the *Sound Thoughts on Art* webpage at nga.gov/podcast.

The National Gallery will have some exciting announcements about the long-awaited return of live concerts in coming weeks. So keep an eye out for updates online at nga.gov and watch this space.

Sound Thoughts on Art is a production of the National Gallery of Art's music department. The show was created by Danielle Hahn, the National Gallery of Art's head of music programs, and it was mixed and produced by Maura Currie. To support the show, share *Sound Thoughts on Art* and subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify, or wherever you listen. I'm Celeste Headlee. Until we meet again, be well.