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National Gallery of Art Unveils Chagall Mosaic *Orphée* (1969) in the Sculpture Garden on November 27, 2013



Chagall's exquisite stone and glass mosaic is installed in the northwest quadrant of the National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden.

Marc Chagall, Russian, 1887 - 1985

Orphée, 1969

stone and glass mosaic

overall size: 302.9 x 517.84 cm (119 1/4 x 203 7/8 in.)

National Gallery of Art, Washington

The John U. and Evelyn S. Nef Collection

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Washington, DC—The National Gallery of Art has unveiled a permanent and public home for one of Washington's hidden treasures—an exquisite glass and stone mosaic designed by Marc Chagall (1887–1985) and bequeathed to the Gallery by arts patron Evelyn Stefansson Nef (1913–2009). Newly installed in the Sculpture Garden, *Orphée* (1969) goes on public view November 27, 2013.

Adorning a garden wall at Evelyn and John Nef's private residence in Georgetown for nearly four decades, the mosaic was part of Evelyn's momentous 2009 bequest of some 100 works from the couple's 19th- and 20th-century collection of prints, drawings, and illustrated books.

"The Gallery is delighted to share Evelyn and John Nef's most prized possession—exactly as she desired," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "The mosaic is an exceptional gift from an honored friend whose story lives on."

The mosaic (approximately 10 by 17 feet) was a special gift from Chagall to the Nefs. After visiting the couple's home at 28th and N Street NW in 1968, the artist declared, "Nothing for the house. The house is perfect as it is. But I will do something for the garden: a mosaic." Chagall designed the work at his studio in France and hired Italian mosaicist Lino Melano to create it using Murano glass, Carrara marble, and natural colored stones from Italy. Three years later, Melano oversaw its installation into a 30-foot brick wall built for the purpose. The couple celebrated its completion on November 1, 1971, with the 84-year-old Chagall present. It was one of the first large-scale outdoor Chagall mosaics to be installed in this country, and was soon followed by

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another, the now-renowned *Four Seasons* mosaic in Chicago.

Comprising ten individually fashioned panels, each measuring approximately 5 by 3 1/2 feet and mounted on concrete, the mosaic presents colorful figures from Greek mythology—Orpheus with his lute, the Three Graces, and the winged horse Pegasus.

In the bottom left corner of the mosaic, a group of people wait to cross a large body of water. According to Chagall, this scene alludes to the immigrants and refugees who undertook ocean journeys to America. The scene is also a reference to his own past: smuggled out of Nazi-occupied France by the International Rescue Committee during World War II, the Jewish artist found safe haven in New York. At lower right, the artist included a pair of lovers beneath a tree. When Evelyn inquired if the couple was a depiction of her and John, Chagall said, “If you like.”

About the Restoration

In the spring of 2010, a team of conservators, curators, art handlers, designers, masons, and registrars spent five weeks extracting the mosaic from the garden wall. Conservators then meticulously removed tesserae along each seam and around the border before adhering them onto full-scale photographs so that the mosaic could be faithfully reconstructed. Calling on the expertise of an Italian mosaic specialist, conservators cleaned the glass and stone tesserae, as well as the mortar setting, re-adhered loose tesserae, and made replacements for missing ones over the course of three and a half years.

Conservators also studied the original structural reinforcement—an iron grid inside the concrete panels—and the iron clips that held them to the wall. Corroded by the elements, the iron needed to be replaced. The team designed a new stainless steel rebar armature and clip system to secure the panels. Gallery masons and designers then created a wall in the Sculpture Garden to present the newly conserved *Orphée*. “From start to finish,” said Shelley Sturman, head of object conservation, “the conservation and installation were part of an intricate, carefully choreographed ballet.”

Situated under trees in the northwest corner of the Sculpture Garden, the site emulates the Nef’s secluded Georgetown garden. There, passersby had to peek over the wall just to catch a glimpse of the mosaic from the sidewalk. Now Evelyn and John’s treasure is on view for all to see.

About the Nef Bequest

Evelyn Nef’s extraordinary bequest of 19th- and 20th-century prints, drawings, and illustrated books, featuring such artists as Raoul Dufy, Wassily Kandinsky, Alex Katz, Le Corbusier, Fernand Léger, Auguste Renoir, Georges Rouault, Edouard Vuillard, and James McNeill Whistler, is comprised of 31 drawings, 46 prints, 25 volumes, and the monumental Chagall mosaic. A number of important early prints by Pablo Picasso and over 30 works on paper by Chagall—many in books personally dedicated by the artist to Evelyn and John Nef—are also included in the bequest.

Dynamic, brilliant, and vivacious, Evelyn Nef was a psychotherapist, author, and benefactor to some of Washington’s leading cultural institutions. In addition to giving works of art to the Gallery, she donated annual funds that supported many programs and activities, and made possible the acquisition of a dozen important French pastels, watercolors, drawings, and prints.

About the Sculpture Garden

Designed by landscape architect Laurie D. Olin, the 6.1-acre National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden is an outdoor gallery for monumental sculpture. Amid curvilinear beds of American plants and arcing pathways, visitors encounter works of post–World War II sculpture by internationally famous artists. A circular reflecting pool and fountain form the center of the design, continuing the long axis defined by the spine of the West Building. The pool is transformed into an ice-skating rink in winter.

The National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden was given to the nation by The Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation.

The Sculpture Garden is located on the National Mall between 7th and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW, in the block adjacent to the West Building of the Gallery. There are six public entrances to the Sculpture Garden, from four corners and at two sides; and the area is accessible to visitors with disabilities. Admission is free. More information is available at www.nga.gov/exhibitions/sculptureinfo.htm.

General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW, and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/modern-art-during-renovation.html>.

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and on Twitter at www.twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

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