



# MUVE EDUCATION



## RABBI N. 2 OR RABBI OF VITEBSK

### AUDIO DESCRIPTION

Welcome! You are now standing in front of a tactile, talking panel reproducing *Rabbi No. 2 or Rabbi of Vitebsk*, an oil on canvas picture painted by Marc Chagall between 1914 and 1922.

The work was purchased in 1928 by Nino Barbantini, the first director of the Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna di Ca' Pesaro (Ca' Pesaro International Gallery of Modern Art) at the 16th Venice Biennale.

The religious theme is one that recurs throughout the Russian artist's entire production, starting with figures such as the Rabbi, exhibited here.

In 1914, Chagall returned to Russia from Paris for his sister's wedding; he only intended to stay in Vitebsk for a few months, but he soon became stuck there: the borders were closed at the outbreak of war and in the end he remained in the town until 1922.

In those years, he retied his connections with the Jewish world of his childhood, expressed through images of his hometown and family affections. This is the setting for the first version of the painting, *Jew in black and white or Rabbi of Vitebsk* of 1914, now in the Kunstmuseum Basel.

The artist himself related that one day, by chance, he met an elderly man in Vitebsk and invited him to put on the robes used by his father for the traditional weekday morning prayer.

The figure is depicted with great precision: from the *tallit* prayer shawl on his shoulders and the *tefillin*, small leather cases containing sheets of parchment with passages from the Torah tied on the left arm, close to the heart, and on the head, to the *kippah*, the typical male headdress in the form of a skullcap.

The man's mouth is pictured in the act of psalmodising, that is, singing the psalms or other hymns, while the melancholy that seems to transpire from his eyes represents the sorrows of the world.



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It is up to man to overcome these with the joy of the Law, through adherence to the divine will and to the human community. Only in this way is it possible to connect to spirituality, to humanity, and to face this life with serenity in the sweetness of the Lord's way. The figure of the Rabbi helps us to develop the spiritual part within us, our soul, our prayers, our mind.

The background of the painting is composed of black and white geometric shapes.

In 1922, the picture was sold to a Jewish collector, but before parting with it Chagall made two copies: one is now in the Art Institute of Chicago, the other is this one at Ca' Pesaro.

And now we can begin the tactile exploration; let your hands guide you. Using your fingertips, discover the beauty of touching the different materials and textures, shapes, contours and details of the character, including the fabrics he wears and much more.

If you bring both hands to the top centre part of the panel, with your fingers you will be able to appreciate the Rabbi's face with its hooked nose and regular eyes, along with some other features, such as the wrinkles that characterise the face and a thick, long beard that almost makes the lips disappear.

On his head you can touch the outline of the typical skullcap called the *kippah* and, above all, perceive the full shape of the small case that is part of a *tefillin*.

Now place your hands on either side of his face and you will begin to perceive the weave of the prayer shawl called *tallit*. Running your fingers downwards, you will come to the Rabbi's hands, which almost meet, and – finally – on his left forearm, and therefore on your right, you will recognise the full shape of a second box of the *tefillin*, fastened with a strap wrapped seven times around his arm.

The Rabbi's expression is intense and absorbed, and certainly captures our attention. This is evident from the careful distribution of the light, which creates an atmosphere of absolute and solemn spirituality.