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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
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Address by
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Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the inauguration of the exhibition of Marc Chagall
during his official visit to Belarus

Minsk, 9 July 2002

Your Excellency, Mr Minister of Culture of the Republic of Belarus,
Ms Meret Meyer-Graber, grand-daughter of Marc Chagall,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is for me an honour and great pleasure to speak to you today at the opening ceremony of this marvellous exhibition of works by one of the 20th century's greatest artists, Marc Chagall, on the occasion of the 115th anniversary of his birth. That Chagall was a son of Belarus is understandably a source of much pride here.

This became very clear to me recently when the Government of Belarus organized the Belarus culture week in Paris in April, whose opening I attended with the Minister of Culture. There I saw a very moving musical entitled "Chagall, Chagall" which depicted his life in Belarus and France.

I must tell you that Chagall is one of my favourite artists. Naturally, I admire the beauty and high artistic values of his work but I am especially moved by the deep human qualities and feelings which Chagall communicates through his paintings. Particularly touching are those works showing his love and affection for his first wife Bella, whom he met and married here in Belarus. Chagall's art is very personal but, because it is so profoundly human, it becomes available to us all.

I also would like to highlight some other aspects of his work which have often been noted but which resonate particularly strongly today. I refer to his use of folkloric imagery, his recollection of local traditions and religious customs, and his great affection towards his Russian-Jewish hometown in Belarus. In current terminology, Chagall tapped into the intangible cultural heritage that surrounded him as he grew up and that fed his imagination as he became an artist.

As I recall, it was Chagall himself who stated that the soil that nourished the roots of his art was Vitebsk. From an early stage, Chagall expressed a distinctive vision and artistic style that were rich in imagery drawn from his childhood and life in his home town. As a result, we can see Vitebsk and Belarus in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the eyes, memory and imagination of Chagall. Indeed, he was an artist for whom memory and inspiration were one and the same.

To truly understand his art, we must also take into account his devout Jewish faith. It was a resilient faith that was truly formative of his outlook and values, that sustained him throughout his life, and that was reflected in many dimensions of his work. However, Chagall's deep religious convictions and his profound love for the town and country of his youth did not impede his engagement with the wider world. He was a much-traveled man, open to fresh experiences and able to form strong attachments to other cultures, especially that of France.

If the life and work of Chagall are now particularly resonant, this may be explained by his personal embodiment of the local and the global, the highly particular and the universal. In today's perspective, when questions of personal and group identity have become so consciously focused on cultural factors, Chagall's use and celebration of thematic images from his ethnic and religious background is strikingly free and without inhibition. At the same time, his work clearly has a universal appeal and has enriched international culture in general. Thus, in the dynamics of one artist's creativity, we can see a larger significance - the expression of cultural diversity and the promotion of universal values do not stand in necessary opposition to one another. On the contrary, each is capable of nourishing the other.

As an artist, Chagall absorbed influences from a range of twentieth century experiments such as Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism and Surrealism, but he remained unaligned with any particular artistic tendency or school. He was, in fact, a true original in terms of his creative vision, his expressive use of colour and his complex visual metaphors. As his work became popular and more accessible, his unique style became instantly recognizable. Not content with just one medium, Chagall mastered a variety of artistic forms and techniques: painting on canvas, murals, etchings of book illustrations, stained glass, theatre and costume design, ceramics and sculpture. One of the delights of living in Paris is to visit the Paris Opera and to see the ceiling that Chagall painted in 1964. It is quite wonderful, and is one of many illustrations of the remarkable breadth of his artistic abilities, which he demonstrated repeatedly during his long and productive lifetime.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

From its inception, UNESCO has recognized the immense contribution that art can make to the pursuit of shared ideals and values. Indeed, the Organization has always encouraged the arts and creativity in order to promote mutual respect, understanding and tolerance and to build a culture of peace. In

this United Nations Year for Cultural Heritage (2002), UNESCO is particularly keen to show how the arts and heritage can serve as a vital means for disseminating the message of peace and respect for cultural diversity. Cultural heritage is certainly one of the keys for appreciating the creative capacity of humankind. As that creative capacity expresses itself, as Chagall's life exemplifies, it draws upon and adds to the cultural diversity which is our shared inheritance.

I would like to offer my warmest compliments to the National Museum of Fine Arts and to all those who have made possible this special opportunity to appreciate the living spirit and legacy of Marc Chagall.

Thank you.