OBSERVATION OF LE GRAND CIRQUE

by Kamilla Kapacinskas

So far my enjoyment of art history seemed to be strictly on an emotional level. The "analytical" side of viewing art seemed boring and difficult, due, (I assumed) to my untrained eye and my lack of familiarity with the jargon. Thus, it was with a lack of enthusiasm that I took myself to the art museum to find a painting to write about. The following is an account of my unexpected adventure into an emotional and psychological dimension of an art experience which I now suspect is one of many possibilities. Marc Chagall's painting, Le Grand Cirque, made this possible.

After half an hour or so of wandering through rooms of paintings I didn't really care to examine, I climbed a back stairway and drifted into a room whose wall straight ahead drew me forward, caused me to smile and catch my breath. I was standing about fifteen feet from a large magnetic painting I knew I wanted to look at for a long time.

Sitting down on a bench in front of the canvas my eyes were immediately busy and my fantasy ran wild. This painting was something I liked -- something to which I felt close. It was as if the painter had created images which connected with an experience of my own -- an experience on a deeper level than memories of times I had taken children to the circus.

The faces of the people, animals, and animal-people seem not to reflect a single mood but instead their expressions are enigmatic, inviting the viewer to find himself or herself in the various characters and their accompanying colors.

Most facial expressions seem to convey a certain calm or a kind of just-soness related to the activity of the characters. This is the way it is when I recall some dream images into which I immediately project my waking self in order to feel and experience that part of myself.

The painting is dreamlike in that the images and the colors evoke the feeling of intensity that I experience in a vivid, colorful dream where I am part of a scene that is full of activity, rich with graceful movement and the exciting tension of practiced performance. I am taken into this inner place where blue is so intense that only some mythical night sky could be its source and where yellow is a flash of wisdom or a million fireflies joined and glowing.

Yet this activity is not one of frenzy or nervousness but the activity of imagination, of daydreaming, unleashing fantasies. I do not go in my mind to a "real" circus but to a circus of the inner world of my imagination where music and color dance together, where tricks are attempted, balance is achieved, I juggle my own thoughts about all that goes on -- and it all goes on at once -- yet I feel peaceful and calm.

Chagall positions his figures in such ways that my eyes are convinced of their actual motion. An example is the running hoop-carrier, feet ungrounded, legs wide apart. The swaying man "moves" as well, balancing on his hands, tilted while "walking" forward. The musicians are
posed in the positions of active play and a woman balances on one leg holding the other straight up next to her head. Another person perches on a trapeze, skillfully balancing with "no hands."

The curves of the figures and chairs repeat great arches of color: the arching blue head high on the canvas conveys the feeling of floating or flying just as the red hands unattached to the flying body move through blue air. The large figure of the girl, cross legged while standing on the horse's back — arms in ballet position suggests she will pirouette momentarily. The woman seated at the piano, hand poised above the keys, fingers open, will strike a cord in the next instant. The juggler faces me with up arched arms which are just below the unattached head he has released into the air — it's tipped position suggests rotation.

As my eyes, thoughts, and feelings travel from parts of the painting to its wholeness, I am contained. I am inside a magic ring within myself. In this place I am concerned with balance, grace and intensity of color and movement. In this place I perform tricky maneuvers, juggle many thoughts and encounter the opposites in freakish ways. It is a place of illusion where illusion is a reality of its own. In this place color turns a spotlight on new delights or reflects a mood which carries brilliantly bizarre images.

The painter startles my sense of "normal" and shocks me with the central figure of the headless juggler — perhaps it is not with our heads that we are to understand this work, but with minds and fantasies spinning, turned around, unleashed. In the lower left I find a two headed figure, the male and female heads are surprising but they make sense in this world of dichotomies where opposites interact, contained simultaneously within the whole.

I am drawn again and again to the large figure who is woman from the waist up and man from the waist down. I actually know this feeling. The masculine side of my own personality seems often "upside down," that is, I often have difficulty "standing up" for myself, being assertive — it is sometimes as if my more outgoing side tries to balance my dominant femininity on one shaky hand ....

Behind this figure is the large man-goat bearing a bouquet of flowers. Here too is a way I have experienced the masculine in the "as if" world of my dreams. Like tall sweet animals, these bright and gentle images can turn into aggressive little beasts ready to pounce and devour all tenderness as in the small menacing figure above the goat-man.

*The circus is archetypal. There is something which goes on in that tent within that circle which speaks to all of us on many levels. It is a place for training the animals within, for tricks, for balancing comedy, grace, freakishness and beauty. It is a place where the music is played for each act; such music suits the action and matches the intensity of the moment. The circus can enable us to be open to the multiplicity and simultaneity of our psychic behavior. The ringmasters of our own souls conduct amazing activity calling for the applause and recognition of the waking "I." Metaphorically speaking, I found that Chagall's painting drew me into and allowed me to go with the emotional urge in all of us to run away and join the circus.*