

**JEAN CHARLOT**

**LIFE AND WORK**

**VOLUME 1: FRANCE, 1898 TO 1921**

**John Charlot**

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1.

**FOREWORD**

Jean Charlot was born in Paris on February 8, 1898, and died in Honolulu, Hawai'i on March 20, 1979. Formed in France where he began his career, he later worked in Mexico, the continental United States, and the Pacific. In each place, he was inspired by the indigenous and local culture and contributed to it with works of visual art, literature, and scholarship.

Charlot's work is uniquely multicultural and interdisciplinary. He was a pioneer of a world in which the old distances and barriers between cultures have been opened for serious exploration; a world in which artists can be deeply inspired by different cultures in which they themselves have lived. He was a pioneer also in coordinating creativity with scholarship, bringing an artist's sensitivity to archaeology and history, and a scholar's research to his recreation of classical, indigenous cultures.

Charlot was also a complex and fascinating man. I knew him first as my father and took for granted his personality, study, and work. Living among other artists and professors, his life seemed normal rather than exceptional, and we children entered easily into our own interests and artistic production. My sister Ann wrote poetry, I was interested in literature and music, my brother Martin became a fine artist, and my brother Peter an artist and playwright. I quickly found I had no artistic talent and felt myself a word-person in a family focused on the visual arts. I was inevitably interested in art, visiting museums, reading books, and attending my father's lectures on art history; but I was always an outsider looking into the world of art. As a result, I had to make an intellectual effort to understand art and found that when I wrote about it in school, I was able to explain the subject to non-artists like myself. The key for me was understanding art as a human activity, as something that emerged from the person of an artist.

I first considered my father as an interesting subject in 1958, when I read his "Juan Cordero: a nineteenth-century Mexican muralist."<sup>1</sup> I was struck by the esthetic balance of the main text and the footnotes, which endowed the rigorously scholarly work with a beauty analogous to my father's visual art. I started reading my father's many writings and was both interested in his thinking and impressed by his style. I appreciated for the first time his work in literature, which provided for me a new entrée into his visual art.

In the meantime, I pursued my own career, earning my doctorate in religious studies in 1968 and teaching the subject at the university level. On a summer visit to my parents' home in Hawai'i in 1969, I had the impression that my father was getting old and was seized with the idea that I should return to study him. In 1970, I started working for my parents, being paid to put my father's papers in order. I listed my father's manuscripts and supervised their typing, especially the early ones in French. The

typing was corrected by my then wife, Dominique de Mahuet, who was French, and my father would occasionally go over them. I also started interviewing my father, especially on his French period, for which we had few documents. I made lists of his childhood artworks, which he occasionally identified and explained. I also edited his *Two Hawaiian Plays: Hawaiian English*, the first of several writings I would edit over the years.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I started writing articles on my father, which benefited from his comments and criticisms while he was alive. This exclusive work on my father ended after two years, when I left to work as a museum director in American Sāmoa, eventually leading to my later work in Polynesian literature and religion. Nonetheless, I continued to work part-time with and on my father.

Through my work, I became aware of the sheer quantity of material that he had collected over the years, both his own work and items related to other artists and writers. I felt that this collection should be kept together and made available to scholars. Peter Morse, who was writing his important catalogue raisonné of my father's prints, had arrived at the same conclusion. My father was always nervous about doing anything that seemed self-important, but in his diffident, indirect way, he agreed to the idea as did my mother. Several years before my father died, a will was drawn up that specified that a large collection should be created out of the family holdings and donated to an institution that would care for it and make it available to scholars and students. After my father's death in 1979, Peter Morse assumed the large task of cataloguing the family property and recommending materials for the collection. The University of Hawai'i, under University Librarian John Haak, accepted the Jean Charlot Collection (JCC), and Peter Morse, with his exceptional organizing ability, became the first curator. Since that first donation, a large quantity of further material has been given to the JCC by my mother, my sister Ann, and friends of the family.

The JCC is invaluable for the study of Charlot himself, but also contains a wealth of materials he himself collected over his long life: collections of Images d'Epinal, Honoré Daumier, José Guadalupe Posada, and Edward Weston, and works by such artists as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Visiting scholars have called the collection the best archive of early twentieth-century Mexican art outside of Mexico. Seventy-five percent of the books donated were not in the University holdings; 25 percent were not listed on the OCLC. Many of the ephemera—posters, broadsides, mimeographed materials, and exhibition notices and catalogs—seem to be the only surviving examples. Charlot's research notes are in many cases the only record of documents now lost from Mexican archives. My mother's letters and diaries, admirably detailed, are also proving to be valuable historical sources, for instance on Sergei Eisenstein's filmmaking in Mexico, on Siqueiros' stay in Tasco in the 1930s, and on Weston.

After my mother's death in 2000, my parents' home—designed by my father and built in 1958—was donated to the University of Hawai'i as the Jean and Zohmah Charlot House. Together, the collection and the home make my father one of the best documented artists in history. Such documentation tempts me as a historian. Charlot also draws me as my father, whom I loved and wanted to know. He in turn wanted me to have some of his own experiences, purposely introducing me to friends like Norman Pearson at Yale and the art dealer J. B. Neumann, whom he had known in New York City in the 1930s. In 1954, my father took me to an Italian restaurant he had frequented at that time; he told me

in anticipation that he especially liked the sawdust covering the floor. When asked about the missing sawdust, our waiter said, "That was before the war." Charlot's sister, my aunt Odette, also liked to take us to old family sites when my mother and we children visited Paris in 1955. Writing about my father is an example of the Charlots' *sens de famille* 'family feeling.'

I am not the first son to write about his father, but I am, I believe, the first to try to combine two genres: the academic study and the personal memoir. Each type has its advantages and disadvantages. Memoirs are often disappointing because they do not address the subject's work, an essential in the life of an artist. For instance, Jean Renoir was a great film director, but his memoir of his father, the Impressionist Pierre Renoir, says almost nothing about his father's work. This is doubly disappointing because of the affinity of the work of father and son in lighting and taste in women, for instance in Jean Renoir's *Picnic on the Grass*.

Academic studies, especially those on visual artists, often seem disembodied, losing the connection between the human being and his production. (This loss has even been exalted into a theoretical imperative.) At worst, the portrait of the artist as a person can be distorted, skewing the understanding of his works. A tragic example of this can be found in much academic writing on Edward Weston, in which that most amiable and beloved of men is depicted as mean, somber, disagreeable, and selfish, and his nudes interpreted as examples of dehumanization. All of Edward's friends testified to his loving nature, his sense of fun, his energy, and sprightliness. His work and photographic ideals flowed from his personality: his enormous love of and respect for all objects in the world. My mother wrote a memoir in which she portrayed Edward as she and her friends knew him, which astonished at least one Weston scholar (Zohmah Charlot 1984). More recently, Edward's wife and model Charis Wilson has written a memoir of Edward, the main point of which, she states, is to combat the distorted view of him current in scholarly circles (Wilson and Madar 1998). That such a distortion can be imposed on someone who died in 1958 is an indictment of contemporary research. People were and still are available who can provide an accurate picture of Edward as a person, if scholars bothered to consult them. A combination of academic method and personal knowledge can, therefore, prove useful. Personal knowledge can provide judgment as well as details.

Unfortunately, few people have both a personal relationship with their subject and the necessary scholarly training. I, therefore, saw my own situation as an opportunity I should not miss. The main lines of my approach were already clear. In my articles, I had been combining standard academic methods with personal memories and relying on the kind of judgment possible only when one has known a person over many years. In my opinion, the two approaches fit easily and productively, although some scholars and publishing committees reacted uneasily. I was aided by the fact that my scholarly work in other fields was not theoretical but interpretative; I use academic method as a refined tool for the general human endeavor of understanding people and their communications. In sum, both approaches can be used for a richer, more accurate portrait, and each provides a control for the other.

Curiously, my father faced the same problem with his own *The Mexican Mural Renaissance: 1920-1925* (1967; henceforth referred to as MMR). He had been a participant in that movement and then,

from 1945 to 1947, returned to Mexico to write about it. Although he was careful to base the book on written sources, he told me he knew it could not be “definitive” because he himself had been too much a part of the event. On the other hand, he felt that his participant’s knowledge would give his book a unique character. He brought his narrative to an end in 1925—which puzzled many scholars—because he had left Mexico City that year for Yucatán to work as an archeologist. For events from 1926 on, he could write only as a historian, and he wanted his book to be scholarship informed by personal experience or personal memories confirmed and extended by scholarship. He was always surprised that a “definitive” work on the Mexican Renaissance was not written in his lifetime; none has been written even today.

## **1.1. SOURCES**

For Charlot’s French period, the subject of this volume, secondary sources are only peripherally useful. Twentieth-century art historians have neglected the circles in which Charlot worked, even when they are relevant to the thin line of development that alone has been recognized as modern art. Fortunately, a new school of historians—like Kenneth E. Silver and Richard Cork—is widening the focus and enabling a juster evaluation of the work and influence of artists like Maurice Denis. Nonetheless, the biographer of Jean Charlot must rely almost exclusively on primary sources.

Like any bourgeois family, the Charlots accumulated a mass of family papers, such as the official *Livret de Famille* as well as family letters and photographs. These included a large number of artworks by Charlot from his earliest childhood until he left for Mexico in 1921. Many of these papers were taken by his mother, Anne Goupil Charlot, to Mexico in 1921 and preserved by her and later by Charlot himself. Odette Charlot kept the remainder in France, although she wrote once that her mother had taken them all with her. Odette also kept the letters Charlot wrote her and made an effort to find new materials, for instance, on their father Henri’s mother. Odette’s materials were inherited by her daughter Arlette Menêt, who willed them in turn to my son, David Charlot. He has generously donated the bulk of this material to the JCC. The care and effort of this collection and preservation of documents reveals the Charlots’ love of family and also a sense that the documents were historically important. Charlot stated that he had saved his poetry, not for its intrinsic value, but as a biographical source. He carefully preserved and arranged his work papers—for instance his research notes for his projected catalogue raisonné of José Guadalupe Posada and *The Mexican Mural Renaissance*—and his clippings, even subscribing to a clipping service during the 1930s. Astoundingly, he even managed to keep the wooden blocks of his 1920 woodcut series *Chemin de Croix* throughout all his moves to Mexico, the United States, and Hawai’i. In this spirit, he and his wife willed these materials to the Jean Charlot Collection.

Despite these efforts, the attrition of the store of documents has been lamentable. Three batches of documents were deliberately destroyed. Documents relating to Henri Charlot’s Russian family were buried with him on his instructions. Odette burned documents relating to the Jewish background of the family during the Nazi occupation of France; the reason she gave me was that the occupying forces wanted government employees to prove with baptismal certificates that they had no Jewish blood for four generations. Finally, before his marriage in 1939, out of a sense of propriety, Charlot himself burned most of his earlier correspondence because of its personal nature. He excepted family correspondence

and the letters of José Clemente Orozco, which he considered historically valuable and of which he admired the Mexican style. Charlot's fiancée, Zohmah Day, opposed his action and carefully preserved family documents from the date of their marriage. Her own voluminous and lively letters as well as her diaries constitute an important source from the time she met Charlot. In more recent times, a batch of documents was inadvertently destroyed in the early 1970s by the typist to whom they had been entrusted, and David Charlot's storage in France was looted by thieves, who took about half of his legacy from Arlette, mostly unidentified materials.

Among the lost materials are many artworks of Charlot's youth along with his diaries. In an undated letter from the 1930s to Odette in France, he writes:

Merci beaucoup pour les gravures et dessins—Si tu peux trouver dans mes papiers mes agendas...

Thank you very much for the prints and drawings—If you could find in my papers my diaries...

In another letter, he mentions a book of drawings of Mexican subjects by his grandfather, Louis Goupil. A formal portrait in oil of Anne Charlot was also stolen from David's storage. I will mention other lost materials in the course of this work. Such losses have left important blanks in the record. For instance, Charlot was a close friend of the Mexican artist Federico Cantú, but we know next to nothing about their relationship. Was their Catholicism a bond? The biographer can only hope that more materials will become available through the years.

A difficulty exists in using the currently available documents. Charlot often used a shorthand that I have been unable to decipher. This difficulty becomes more important after 1922, when Charlot begins his surviving diaries, all written in shorthand. He used these diaries for a precise dating of his artwork and for writings on various historical subjects. In the French period, shorthand is used in a small number of documents and in notes on artworks. The correct transcription of these shorthand texts will make available important new information.

Besides collecting materials, Odette made valuable notes, often on the documents themselves. Her daughter Arlette also made notes on her research into the family as well as of her speculations; that these often include misinformation reveals that Odette was not frank with her daughter on several aspects of their family history. Dorothy Zohmah Charlot also collected documents and made notes, which are not as accurate as her letters and diaries and must be checked against the relevant documents. A genealogical chart was made by a member of the Briançon family with the help of Odette.

## **1.2.**

## **INTERVIEWS**

I spoke often with Odette about our family and have conducted more formal interviews used in this work. The most important are the twenty-six tape-recorded interviews with my father conducted between September 14, 1970, and August 7, 1971, and the eight between September 26, 1975, and April 24, 1978. I also took notes of our conversations and of several unrecorded lectures. An evaluation of

Charlot as a source is, therefore, important. I discuss his writings as historical sources in the first chapter of the second volume of this biography.

Charlot's memory was generally excellent. He could remember passages in books and find them easily. He tried very hard to be accurate and not go beyond his actual memory even when I pushed him. For instance, in our interview of November 18, 1970, he stated:

Well, I don't remember quite the exact dates of things, but after the war, I stayed in Germany for nearly two years. I was still there early in 1920, I think, just before leaving for Mexico. But frankly, I didn't have, I didn't write a diary at the time, and I don't have the exact dates with me. It's all made up of short moments in time.

As a result, Charlot frustrated me when I wanted to place an event either in early or mid-1915. He even helped introduce a misdating in Peter Morse's excellent *Jean Charlot's Prints: A Catalogue Raisonné* (1976). Charlot regularly misdated to 1920 his first trip to Mexico—he left at the end of that year, but arrived in 1921—and confused his first and his second trips. He was unable to sort out this dating even for his *Mexican Mural Renaissance*. In certain cases, this led to anachronisms: for instance, he admitted on questioning that his adolescent views on sex may have differed from those he held at the time of the interview.

Charlot could forget. For instance, he remembered little about his role in Mexican poetry of the early 1920s, especially his collaboration with the Estridentistas, although documents suggest it was considerable. He did not remember providing instruction—technical, compositional, and historical—to his Mexican colleagues, although they themselves described it as important. He remembered best how happy he was doing his own artistic work at the time.

Charlot sometimes minimized events. For instance, he had told me how much he suffered from his childhood eye operation, but in our taped interview, he downplayed his pain. In contrast, he could see certain events dramatically. The “short moments in time” of his memory were often attached to a vivid detail, such as he used tellingly in his written descriptions of other people. For instance, he remembered himself as very young and short when he went to the Bibliothèque Nationale to study the collection of Aztec codices donated by his uncle Eugène Goupil, peering with difficulty over the top of the librarian's desk at the reading room. He was in fact sixteen and almost fully grown, but the way he remembered the event is accurate about his emotions. Charlot saw himself regularly as younger than he in fact was; sixteen was in fact too young for access; and the desk was elevated slightly to enable the librarian to oversee the room.

Some inaccuracies are found in Charlot's memories. In our interviews, he attributed the criticism made of his work, *bien chiffonné*, to two different French artists whom he met in New York City in the 1930s; in the second, inaccurate ascription, he was clearly reaching for a memory. In the 1960s, Ben Norris of the University of Hawai'i art department, discussing Charlot's work, said, “Not many people are willing to do realistic art.” Charlot remembered the statement as “want to do” such work.

In sum, Charlot's memory was generally accurate to the facts and almost always to his emotions, but needs to be checked whenever possible against the relevant documents. He himself recognized this, establishing and using a firm basis of documentary research for *The Mexican Mural Renaissance*, a period of which he had many memories. Charlot had a historian's sensibility about his own life and career and was the opposite of a confabulator. The few tall stories he told—noted in my work—were clearly marked as such.

When not relying primarily on memory but trying to reconstruct an event or date a work, Charlot could change his mind. For instance, on his drawing, *Two Houses and a Wooded Hill*, he first wrote "20" and then crossed it out. He then wrote "19" and "17?", finally crossing out the latter. Interestingly, *Two Houses* is on the verso of a more easily dated gouache—in all likelihood, 1921—but Charlot did not hesitate to suggest a different date for the second side of a single sheet.

Beyond any problems of memory, Charlot's statements need to be seen in the context of his personality. He did not want to criticize others or to aggrandize himself, tendencies he carried to the point of losing events from his memory.

Moreover, conscious of his own complexity, Charlot had a horror of being encapsulated. Speaking generally of artists, he stated: "There are men that are good because of an extreme complexity, and I don't think we have the right to separate the different elements that make their own complex person" (Lesley and Hollis 1961: 13). In our interviews, he would continually react against any labels I tried to apply to him. When I said he was leftwing in his politics, he reacted strongly against the idea, to the point that he later had to correct his statement. Besides his correct feeling that he did not fit conventional categories, Charlot needed, I believe, to preserve his sense of freedom and indefiniteness for his own creativity. Charlot was certainly a Christian and a Catholic, but he developed his own form of being so, what he called the religion of the parishioner. Consequently, when Charlot did categorize himself—say, as a Mexican artist in the early 1920s—the significance of the act is emphasized by its opposing his usual tendency. This is true also of his joining organizations, like the Gilde Notre-Dame in Paris and the less formal grouping of young Mexican artists in the early Mexican Mural Renaissance.

Similarly, if I suggested one interpretation of his work, he would quickly add others. For instance, I described his style in his 1974 fresco *The Relation of Man and Nature in Old Hawai'i* as based on Hawaiian petroglyphs. He denied this and attributed the style to problems of perspective. In fact, the style is a result of both factors along with Charlot's desire to create simplified figures that could be finished if he died before completing the mural. That he would deny an obvious basis of the style—one that is in fact referred to within the mural itself—is the result, I believe, of his not wanting to be too easily and rapidly defined. In addition, Charlot could have a certain point in his mind at the time of an interview and, therefore, dismiss others. In fact, he could return positively to points he had earlier dismissed. Statements in our interviews cannot, therefore, be treated as definitive. He could be ambivalent and changeable even in his writings about certain aspects of art, like the hierarchy of subjects. He could pass false judgments on his own work, like his disparagement of his French liturgical style, seen

in his woodcut series, *Chemin de Croix*. In the interviews, Charlot is participating in a conversation that he finds in many ways uncomfortable.

Charlot disliked talking about himself and would usually deflect inquiries with humorous banter. When he did collaborate with researchers like myself, Peter Morse, and Stefan and Mira Baciú, he did so in the service of history. Like Paul Cézanne and Gustave Flaubert, Charlot had the visceral personal reticence of a French bourgeois male. Shortly before he died, he dictated to my mother some instructions for me. The card on which she wrote them was damaged before it reached me for transcription:

Two things.  
one — if John ever intends to  
publish or rather translate the  
diaries ~~the part~~  
the example of Claudel —  
when of [p]ublication  
puts su “here family matters”  
Be discreet.

This discretion—which prompted occasional actions, like destroying his correspondence before his marriage—was in conflict with Charlot’s historian’s tendencies. Fortunately, the latter almost always prevailed. Peter Morse, amazed that Charlot had kept the only surviving examples of now valuable ephemera, admiringly called him a packrat.

Charlot would say of Cézanne that all his emotional life was in his work, that all his great personal adventures occurred in his studio.<sup>3</sup> Charlot’s own monumental production—both in images and words—must be the basis of any evaluation of him as a man as well as an artist. He, therefore, appreciated the work of scholars and was anxious that their work be accurate. His last instructions to me, dictated to my mother, concerned his fear that his checklist of paintings would be used as a replacement for a true catalogue raisonné:

Adamant about  
the Cat- of paintings  
is *not* made to be published  
w. sketches but a real  
Cat. raisonne should have  
photographs  
if he wants to [publi]sh  
drawings as drawings that is  
something else again  
The autograph Cat. is intended as a  
foundation of a standard Cat. w. photographs  
[Should be?] good drawings &

should be published  
as drawings

I am intensely gratified that my father told my mother at this time that he had no worries about his writings—published and unpublished—because he knew I would edit them.

Despite the vast amount of material available to study my father, I regret all that has been lost or could have been obtained. When I returned to Hawai'i in 1972, I agreed too easily with my father's desire to discontinue our interviews. He felt they had become too personal; I could have promised him to confine my questions more to his work. Through all his years of lecturing on the history of art, no one tape-recorded his courses. I remember them as fascinating and am grateful that two lecture series have been preserved: *Pictures and Picture Making*, 1938, and *Mary and Art*, 1958. A particularly important opportunity was missed shortly before my father died. In an interview with a reporter—that he had reluctantly agreed to give—he started to sum up the main points of his life and work as he saw them. The reporter jumped in with a comment, and Charlot retreated into silence. Charlot's list would have been a precious guide.

### 1.3. PROBLEMS AND PRESENTATION

A son's biography can be rejected as partial or accorded a spurious authority. To avoid both, I strive to provide my sources and clarify the nature of my statements. Concrete references will be given whenever possible and discussed and evaluated whenever necessary. I will indicate always whether a statement of mine is based on sources or is my own opinion, conclusion, or speculation. Quotations of my father have different levels of security. The most secure are from Charlot's own writings or tape-recordings, which can be referenced normally. Less secure are quotations recorded in my notes of conversations, although these were often made immediately afterwards; these are referred to as "Tabletalk" plus date. On very few occasions and never for crucial points, I have reconstructed one of Charlot's statements to the best of my memory. On occasions when I could later check my memories against some notes, I found them generally good, always for general meaning and usually for key words; such memories are, however, subject to variation.

I have learned to be cautious in writing about my father. Both he and my mother were critical of the articles I wrote while they were alive. Besides details to be corrected, they felt my academic search for sources minimized Charlot's originality; indeed the scholar finds apparent connections easier to reveal than the individual at work. Moreover, while working on this book, I have found materials that disproved some of my earlier ideas. For instance, the Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros painted a portrait of my mother in 1932. When I learned this, she told me that she had been surprised that Siqueiros had not given it to her. I understood her to mean that she had thought the portrait would be a gift. Some years later, when I read my parents' correspondence from the 1930s, I learned that my mother had arranged to pay for the painting in installments, but Siqueiros had taken it from her to sell to someone who could pay the whole sum immediately. She had been distressed by this, and my father had tried to recover the painting for her. When talking to me, my mother was being discreet, and I had misunderstood her.

Being reared by two discreet parents is a handicap for a biographer. In fact, my parents never gossiped, and I myself find gossip repellent.<sup>4</sup> Discretion was a principle of my father's historical writing as well. He once told me that he tried to make *The Mexican Mural Renaissance* as dull as he possibly could, although the period was full of colorful stories. When I asked why, he said, "I don't want to pull down my friends' pants" (reconstructed quotation). Inevitably, stories have reached me that demand judgment, and my decision on their use is based on whether I consider them essential for some larger historical or personal point. Fortunately for their biographer, my parents were people who tried to be good, and the warts with which I complete their portraits emphasize my parents' effort. In no case, however, has discretion led me to avoid a whole area of my parents' life or to omit details that are essential for understanding the whole. A biography is like a textual biblical commentary; every aspect must be discussed.

The greatest difficulty in writing about Jean Charlot is the magnitude of the subject. He lived eighty-one years, moved from France to Mexico to the continental United States and finally to Hawai'i and the Pacific. In every place, he interacted with the local culture and produced numerous visual and literary works of diverse types. He wrote in French, Spanish, English, Náhuatl, and Hawaiian, and contributed to the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphics. He wrote scholarly and popular works in history, art criticism, and archeology, as well as poetry and drama. Moreover, all these activities were interrelated in complicated ways, the scholarship informing the artwork and vice versa. No biographer of Charlot would be able to follow him with equal expertise into all these areas of his interdisciplinary and multicultural career. I have, therefore, accepted my role in many fields of his activity as a mere guide for future researchers. Finally, since most readers will be unfamiliar with several fields in which he was active, I have been obliged to provide details that will be over-familiar to some.

All Charlot's work was produced by one man. The scholar must separate these different creative activities in order to study them, but they must ultimately be understood in relationship to their creator. In my memory and my mother's, Charlot made it look easy. At the minimum, Charlot must be recognized as an unusually full personality, in whom apparently contradictory qualities were equally intense: intelligence and emotion, inspiration and application. Indeed, at the most discouraged points in his life—when he was asking himself whether his lack of recognition might indicate his lack of worth—he would compare the quantity and breadth of his production to others in the history of art and admit inescapably that he was a genius.

Charlot was so dedicated to and involved in his work that he cannot be understood without it. A linear narrative of the events of his life would thus be an inadequate biography. Although I have done my best to establish and present the events of his life and their sequence, I have felt the need to discuss his contemporary production in greater detail than usual in a biography. This is my way of addressing the problem articulated by Henry James in his preface to *The Tragic Muse*:

Any presentation of the artist *in triumph* must be flat in proportion as it really sticks to its subject—it can only smuggle in relief and variety. For, to put the matter in an image, all we then—in his triumph—see of the charm-compeller is the back he turns

to us as he bends over his work. “His” triumph, decently, is but the triumph of what he produces, and that is another affair. (James 1908: xxi)

Moreover, Charlot had dimensions and complications beyond his work. Many personal characteristics resulted from his unusual background and unconventional life. More important, Charlot was an exceptional human phenomenon: a genius of the rare, broad type of a Goethe or a Victor Hugo. Scholars have penetrated little into such creators, whose recesses seem protected by their very greatness. More than my father’s wishes warn me to apply gingerly my weak tools of analysis to his work and mind. For the biographer of such a subject just as for the scientist: “*Not* understanding is part of the beauty. Mystery is essential.”<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, Charlot faces me across the table of my life, challenging my understanding as his son and fellow human being, refusing to be marginalized by apotheosis or oversimplified into an icon. In the last months of his life, he complained that some people were treating him differently. When I asked him what he meant, he said that they were acting as if he had already passed into history. He hated that. He closed the subject with the words:

“I’m not a monument. I’m a man.

<sup>1</sup> *College Art Journal*, Volume 28, December 1946, pp. 248–265.

<sup>2</sup> Charlot *Two Hawaiian Plays: Hawaiian English* 1976.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Baudelaire 1961: 1022, “N’avez-vous pas remarqué souvent que rien ne ressemble plus au parfait bourgeois que l’artiste de génie concentré ?” ‘Haven’t you often noticed that nothing resembles more the perfect bourgeois than the artist of concentrated genius?’; 1130.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Stasack, February 24, 2006, e-mail to me: “Jean’s office was directly across from mine for a few years, but he was never into ‘chit chat or gossip.’”

<sup>5</sup> Dudley Herschbach, quoted by Lambert 1999: 52.