

6. JEAN CHARLOT'S MEXICAN TRANSITION

Charlot arrived in Mexico with a long history of art activity behind him (Volume 1). His development of subjects and style in Mexico must be understood against that background. An indication of this is that on his first trip to Mexico, his main work was a set of Cubist analyses of illustrations by Boucher and Fragonard in his sketchbook *d'après les Métamorphoses d'Ovide, Amsterdam 1732*, dated it from January 1921 to May 1921 (Ovidius Naso 1732; Volume 1, Chapter 8, Section 8.2.1.1).

I was still very strongly in what I would call a Cubist mood in which there was a sort of alchemy of picture making that didn't need any excitement from the outside. And I think that little notebook, which is really the most that I have to bring as plastic fruits or plastic results of that first Mexican stay, is very definitely a digging into the rules, the abstract rules or the mechanical rules of picture making. Before getting into things that were either picturesque or social or human, I had to find a way of putting together the machinery that would make a picture. And that was my stage at the time. I think I would have done exactly the same thing if I had been in Paris that I did in Mexico, that is, just finding out first what the rules of game were for a man who was going to do pictures. (Interview May 14, 1971)

Charlot also made a few sketches of street scenes in Mexico City in his *Sketchpad 1919–1921* (Volume 1, Chapter 8, Section 8.2.1). On his return from France to settle, the amount of work on Mexico increased greatly, but he still continued various lines he had begun previously, most notably his plan for the large oil *La Théologie Régulatrice des Arts* (Volume 1, Chapter 8, Section 8.3.3.2). Also a series of European female nudes continues his French work and provides a base-line for his later nudes of the Aztec Luz Jiménez (Volume 1, Chapter 8, Section 8.3.3.1). These nudes were in all likelihood done at the Academy of San Carlos, because, as Leal reports, “nudes had been excluded as unnatural” from EPAL (MMR 165). Finally, Charlot's gouaches and prints based on El Greco—*St. John the Baptist, Cubist Style, after El Greco* (1921), *Saint John, after El Greco* (1922; M38), and *Saint Martin, after El Greco* (1922; M39)—continue his Analytic Cubist studies of the compositions of the Old Masters.¹

The evidence of *L'Amitié* of 1921 (Volume 1, Chapter 8, Section 8.3.1.2) and the Boucher analyses show that Charlot's composition had reached an extremely high level of complication: “it was one of my desires, certainly, to do that, to do complex things that would be as complex as those of the classical masters” (Interview November 18, 1970). His European basis was Analytical Cubism with its use of facets. However, through this analytic work, he was seeking ultimately a more realistic style. I would describe Charlot's project very schematically in the following way. Analytical Cubist works often looked unrealistic because the central figure was highly stylized, but the background was comparatively simple: the strangeness of the figure seemed stronger because somewhat isolated. Reemphasizing the background with an equal stylization could temper the effect. Charlot analyzed the Boucher illustrations by using facets, straightening the rounded Rococo areas to make them look Cubist. Moreover, he used them over the whole image, creating a unified effect. Curiously, the complication of Rococo composition

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lent itself well to such analysis—the surface of a Cubist landscape can resemble strangely a Rococo heaven-scape—and could thus provide an area of proximity between Analytic Cubism and a more realistic style, at least as Charlot produced it. As discussed below, Charlot will use facets as a main device in his 1922 oil *Trinidad*:

there was that series of big heads...are faceted and were my own version, in a way, of Analytical Cubism, without obvious distortions, because I had perhaps more interest in the subject matter. (Interview May 18, 1971)

Charlot's early work in Mexico can be conceived as a transition from this level of overt complication to a monumental simplicity in which the technical devices have been made covert:

with Boucher I learned some rather very complicated ways of composing, and through Boucher, that is, through rococo masters, I went rather deep into the precursors of the rococo, which are the baroque masters. Now that thing was good for me in a way, by contrast, because it emptied myself of those desires of using too much rococo-baroque elements in my things, and maybe that's where the so-called label of "primitive" came to me. But before I could truly be a "primitive," I had to go through those more elaborated styles and at least have a working understanding of them. (Interview October 18, 1970)

Charlot had already been engaged in a similar process in France: he created the complicated *L'Amitié* alongside the comparatively simple 1920 mural project *Processional* (Volume 1, Chapter 8, Section 8.3.1.4). The difference is certainly one of genre: personal easel painting as opposed to public, monumental mural painting. Charlot's French experience prefigured his Mexican one and must have helped prepare him for it. But faced with an actual wall, Charlot seems to have experienced the process anew. Compared with Charlot's *Processional* design, *Massacre* and *Cargadores* have a strong compositional complexity. *Lavanderas* has moved further towards the monumental simplicity that would characterize Charlot's later work. However, that simplicity was itself the result of complex devices; that is, the complexity had been interiorized to focus attention on the subject and point:

I always have a good time with those architectural things, but maybe that one is the most complex example—and quite successful in the sense that people are quite unaware of the different problems that are solved. That is, the result is natural looking, and the people don't have to ask further questions. (Interview September 17, 1970)

I include the Head of Christ you see here to show you that you have to simplify and go perhaps even more delicate for things that are far away and high up than if they were under your nose. Many people get the wrong idea and think that you have to be very violent so that things can be seen at a distance. Actually it's the other way around.²

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the interesting thing is that even though the solutions are very complex and rather esoteric, the desire of the painter is to make things easy to the onlooker. (Interview September 17, 1970)

And from the beginning I think I always have had problems of that type that I needed to do my art at its best, and I think that's one of the reasons why I am a mural painter: because I like to depend at the beginning—to start from a difficult problem that is stated by an architecture. (Interview November 18, 1970)

As discussed earlier, simplicity had a religious dimension for Charlot:

when at work an artist should be absolutely simple and totally naive. To him, the lily of the valley must appear truly clothed in more splendor than Solomon in all his glory. (December 14, 1966)

Charlot will explore this simplicity from complexity in a series of small oils, which make a monumental impression despite their size.

As seen in Volume 1, Charlot was preoccupied with the problem of simplicity in France, which he considered basic. Again schematically, any physical reality is infinite, but art is finite. Art is, therefore, created by simplification. The artist's way of simplifying is his style. Because it is personal, it expresses his views and emotions. The poles of complexity and simplicity, discussed above, are inherent in the process.

It's a sort of pulsating affair. That is, if you could make a... simply a diagram of things between style and nature, there would probably be one of those exact lines that would be fairly equal all through my life; it's quite true. And I think at the bottom of it, it comes from an uneasy feeling I have that nature in itself is a sort of a great instructress of art. That is that if you look again at nature, you will get strength in questions of style and of art. (Interview August 7, 1971)

A good artist can suggest the rich complexity from which he has simplified an image.

As seen in previous discussions, simplicity was a discussed goal of the muralists and often articulated by Charlot. Brenner wrote of Charlot:

Today, he is merged completely into the Mexican school. His work has changed. It has the architectural simplicity of line, the tangible sculpture of form, chiefly characteristic of the Mexican school. (September 1925)

However, Charlot was always wary of a simplistic understanding of simplicity. For instance, discussing his first woodcuts in Mexico, he stated:

those woodcuts done in Mexico are certainly more primitive than the woodcuts I had done in France... So those woodcuts may be really a first, I wouldn't say simplification, but a first attempt at being in harmony with the new sights and the new

ethnic ideals, call it what you want, and also a certain roughness that, of course, had come with the Revolution. (Interview May 14, 1971)

There were several specific reasons for simplicity, including the esthetic and technical ones mentioned above. Another important reason was the target audience that would have been alienated by the virtuoso bravura of some of Charlot's French work:

I knew very well the value of architectural lines, I knew very well the value of cubes, but I also knew that I could not flaunt art in the face of my Indian friends, because it would be wrong, it would be prideful, and it would end by alienating them. So I had to learn as I said. I had to be born anew. (March 8, 1972)

Charlot studied Mexican folk art to enter into the mind of his audience:

Very soon, I found I couldn't go on, I would say, as a Frenchman, as a Cubist, in front of the things that I was seeing, because they were different. They were different from Paris, and I had to learn again. I had to be, I would say *literally* born again. And so I started with small pictures—that is a very small picture—doing in a way which is closer to that of the penny-sheets or the Images d'Épinal; that is, popular, folk art, painting like a folk artist without wanting to, but simply because I was in a hurry to forget what I knew. And I knew a heck of a lot. I still do. (March 8, 1972)

Charlot felt he was rejecting his French style:

This is a portrait of her [Luz] in that particular style that I worked hard to do as if I had never known Paris. Of course, the people who would come and see my pictures would all tell me—some of them very famous critics, American critics—“Well, your things are very nice, but you should be more aware of what is being done in Paris.” (March 8, 1972)

Most viewers and critics, however, recognized his background:

Charlot...gives one the feeling of a Parisian who has adopted a more primitive style without losing any of his own sophistication. There is no doubt about the Mexican character of his work; its typical and often humorous picturing of Mexican life, and its hot, pungent color, like the flavor of Mexican food, are unmistakable. But the viewpoint is more ironical, and the workmanship more skillful. (Clippings 31: *The Arts*, May 1926)

A description of Virgil's style fits Charlot's: “the calculated simplesse of a complex craftsmanship” (J. W. Mackail, quoted in Williams 1973: 461).

Charlot's style resembled the way he viewed Mexican Indians: a quiet exterior covered a full human complexity. His new style interiorized its complexity under a seemingly simple surface. Also in works that extolled the simplicity and humility of its subjects, a flamboyant, self-centered style would have been inappropriate and even contradictory.

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Also inherent in the process of creation are the poles of subject and style, and artists vary in their emphasis on one or the other. For Charlot, honoring the subject—or “saving the subject” as formulated in France—is of prime importance. The problem can be illustrated by one of Charlot’s few works that he disliked: the 1925 woodcut *Vendedora de Plátanos* [*Banana vendor*] (M66). When I expressed admiration for its bold design, he said softly that he didn’t like it:

I thought a lot about why JC said he didn’t like the above work. I think it was because it sacrifices the subject matter too much to style. He achieves a fantastic *design*, but the subject itself (*herself*) loses some dignity (e.g., feet splayed). JC wanted a balance between the real subject and style.

JC agreed with me. He said this balance was a big thing in his art. He liked Posada because Posada was so interested in subject matter. (Tabletalk July 16, 1971)

Charlot had followed the process he had used in prints of 1923, working from street sketches done earlier: “Now this I did later than the small woodcut figures—after the inspiration was gone...I wasn’t very successful.”³ As seen above, Posada and folk artists portrayed peasants and workers with dignity: “Rags are strictly reserved for the villain—” (Charlot April 1949: 142). Charlot later reviewed an artist of Polynesian subjects: “Too often a tendency to satirize queers our relationship to the native models...Wit can be misplaced” (August 20, 1963). The relationship of subject and style was a topic of discussion among colleagues. Brenner sounds like Charlot in a 1927 diary entry:

Jean brought me two woodcuts which seem to me an advance on his part. I like very much his tendency, now definite, toward getting nearer to life, to the actual image, as opposed to the modern frequent and second-rate preoccupation of cutting capers with the form in order to show off. Also it is greater humility and respect for the material and subject, which means closer understanding of it. (Glusker 2010: 461)

Finally, to create the image, a number of techniques and devices are used. For Charlot, a bad artist attempts *trompe-l’œil*, to fool the eye by hiding the technical character of an image. Honesty precludes attempts to counterfeit reality, and style is used by the good artist to identify the image as an image. That is, the viewer should see in a picture simultaneously an object and the fact that the object is being represented by an artist. The viewer compares his own view of an object to the artist’s and thus becomes aware of the artist’s work, what the artist has done with the object. Along with the artist’s view of the object, the viewer also recognizes the artist’s feeling for it. The viewer is thus engaged in several ways—emotional, intellectual—just as when meeting a human being. He is also made aware of—and thus critically distanced from—his own view. This type of art viewing is a real experience, not an illusory one. The viewer is not fooled into thinking he is looking at the object itself. He is really looking at the representation of an object and dealing with it in a complex way.

The above schematic points, discussed in detail in Volume 1, identify some of Charlot’s concerns as he started work in Mexico. As can be seen from Volume 1 and above, Charlot brought with him a great deal of European technical and cultural knowledge, which was greatly appreciated by his Mexican colleagues. He was identified with geometric composition: “the arrangement is more formal, the rhythms

simpler and evident, and the more angular geometry implies the young man who taught mathematics to artillery officers in training” (*Idols* 309). Such composition was essential for mural painting and also connected the muralists’ work to the geometric emphasis of Aztec and Maya art and indeed much of the world art. In France, Charlot had long been enriching his Classical geometric composition with other traditions: Medieval art, Grünewald, and German art. He was now doing the same with non-Western but strongly geometric traditions, penetrating to their cross-cultural foundations. Fauchereau writes, “ce respect du passé ne l’empêchera pas d’être l’un des modernistes les plus résolu des années 1920 au Mexique” ‘this respect of the pass did not hinder him from being one of the most resolute modernists of the 1920s in Mexico’ (Fauchereau 2013: 94). Charlot himself did not see the art of the past as opposed to the art of his own day, but joined at their geometric base: Aztec artists were more Cubist than the Cubists.

Charlot also helped his EPAL colleagues move from Impressionism to Post-Impressionism by breaking the ban on the use of black. As Impressionists, they agreed with Manet that “El negro sólo existe en la paleta y en el cerebro de la Academia” ‘Black exists only in the palette and brain of the Academy’ (Vera de Córdova 1920b). Thus the challenge, Leal wrote, when Charlot “began an enormous picture with a religious theme, in which he boldly used the anathematized black.”⁴ Charlot wrote of the EPAL policy:

Ramos Martínez had made it a point to fight against the nineteenth-century masters who had been at the Academy and had made a very lavish use of black... Their pictures are beautifully modeled in a sort of Spanish-style way with lots of black, so that *his* revolution was to replace black by blue. And perhaps as I say, as a sort of a minute revolution, the woodcuts that we did at Coyoacán replaced blue, which by then was the admitted formula, by black.⁵

Well, the woodblock series was in the library of the San Carlos Academy in town, and that young group had all of them seen it, and that impressed them very much. And so one of the first things that we did when we were with Leal in Coyoacán at the studio was to get some pieces of wood and start cutting them. And Leal himself *has* explained that rather nicely in a thing which I think I have here that he wrote in which there was a sort of a scandal among the students, who were still really feeding on Impressionism because—well, it doesn’t say it in those terms, but obviously the woodcuts are more connected with what we could call Expressionism than Impressionism. That was an entirely new thing for the students of the open-air schools, who were working with the idea of blue shadows and golden sunlight and so on. So there was there a sort of a minute revolution which was actually a very good preface to what happened next. All those things happened immediately, the one after the other, and that was, of course, Rivera coming back as an ex-Cubist already but who liked to talk to people about Cubism. (Interview May 14, 1971)

On the other hand, the thing that made a very bad impression on everybody was my use of black, because they had worked so hard to eliminate black completely from

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their palette. And of course, as it was Cubist, I thought black was a pretty good color. So that was, I wouldn't say anything that a teacher would point to, but a certain scandal among those people who wanted to bring sunlight into their pictures. (Interview May 18, 1971)

Impressionism would have been an inappropriate style for murals and for the historical and social subjects the young artists would develop. The simultaneous woodcut series of Leal and Charlot (M27–37) demonstrated an appropriate alternative. Also, Charlot's colleagues knew already his black-and-white woodcut portfolio *Chemin de Croix*.

Charlot recorded a fragment of conversation he had with Leal at this time:

Leal dit : les anciens, point de départ clair, de là le noir où est noyé le tableau. Les impressionnistes, point de départ ombre, de là le blanc où est noyé le tableau. (Charlot 1922 Mexique)

'*Leal says*: the old masters, no light point of departure, from there the black in which the painting is soaked. The Impressionists, no dark point of departure, from there the white in which the painting is soaked.'

Charlot added in parentheses his own comment, which contrasts both styles to richer tonalities of nature: "(en effet la gamme de valeur palette moins étendue que la naturelle)" 'in effect, the tonal scale, palette, is less wide than the natural.'

Closely related to the above is Charlot's rejection of a sweetness characteristic of many EPAL works. For instance, even in Leal's *Campamiento*, Luz is dressed in her *fiesta* clothing and holding a pot in a typical EPAL pose (*Luz Jiménez símbolo* 2000: 26, 59). The men's clothes are ordinary, but they are perfectly clean, showing none of the rough use obvious everywhere in contemporary photographs. In Charlot's sketches, clothes, feet, and hands tell a story through their hard wear. Leal's fighters are visually benign. In Charlot's woodblock prints, gardeners and maids are threatening.

Charlot's large concerns developed early and were maintained throughout his life. The expression of those concerns was, however, continually developed, as is obvious in the transition from his French to his Mexican period. I will now discuss in general terms the principal developments of that transition and enter into more detail in subsequent chapters.

As I have already described, Charlot's experience was always the ultimate basis of his work. Charlot himself emphasized his increasing human contact and knowledge of Mexican Indians and their way of life. On his first visit, the Indians he had met were the servants in his relatives' house:

The contact or the direct contact with Indians came later on, and much of it really was funneled through the one person of Luciana, or Luz, which started, of course, just as a pictorial thing, because she was *one* of the Indian models at the Academy, but later on, going to her village, meeting her mother especially, and her family, it became something more important and more human. (Interview May 14, 1971)

That is, I had to reject certain images, and I had to accept other images. And I have been quite faithful all my life, actually, to the image of the Indian as a sort of a model for my pictures. After all, for fifty years or so, I have been really grinding the same ax, so to say, doing the same thing. There was a tremendous experience in the way the women wrapped their rebozos and so on. In my case, it was certainly not political. I'm sorry to say it wasn't even social. That is, I wasn't interested in social inequities or equalities or such things. I was just interested in form and color because my own expression is through form and color. (Interview May 14, 1971)

Charlot did not feel that his progress had been done in significant steps but in a gradually increasing familiarity:

I may have, in the early days, been somewhat at a sort of unease in discovering things. I think you can see that in some of my early Indian lithographs, perhaps, or even early Indian frescoes, and then later on I had been more at ease with those same things, simply by having lived with them longer. And of course, the ideal would be to feel so much at ease that I couldn't analyze anymore what is me and what is what you could call the Indian heritage. (Interview August 7, 1971)

I believe that all the subjects he developed in Mexico were based on experience:

The pictures in this show are mainly of folk festivals and biblical subjects, though it is hard to find a clean cleft between them. We sing our religion, the Indian dances his. The "Flight Into Egypt" series was suggested by my trek on mule back and over mountains, with all the inhabitants of an Indian village, to what was once the place of Tezozomoc, Lord of the Caverns, where now dwells the miraculous crucifix known as Our Lord of Chalma. (March 1945)

Even Charlot's reconstructions of Classic Maya temple builders are based on his observations of the workmen at Chich'en Itza.

I have discussed Charlot's use of conventional symbols in Chapter 4, Section 2.1.1. Traditional symbols are prominent in his French work, notably the Sacred Heart and the angel with the scroll in *L'Amitié*. In Mexico, he used the figure of St. Christopher as the traditional symbol of bringing Catholicism to the New World. Although he did not use some images, like the Indian or *mestiza* woman as the symbol of the independent nation, that image does form a context for Charlot's many depictions of Indian women: they are maintaining the distinctive cultures of Mexico. In his own caption, Charlot did relate his 1933 lithograph *Cargador* (M127) to Jesus' carrying his cross, and Paul Claudel called it: "Crucifié à la pierre" "Crucified to the stone." That is, Charlot's image can evoke another one without being identified with it.

Also, Charlot did innovate in his use of symbolic figures in the *Massacre*: they are active participants in the historic event rather than hovering above it. In contrast, Leal's facing mural was a pure

costumbres-historical painting, and Alva de la Canal's *Planting of the True Cross* (1922–1923) was a straight historical painting, both without symbolic figures.

The lack of any such symbolism in Charlot's next murals and other works reveals a change in his thinking: the significance of the subject would not be expressed by means of symbols or symbolic figures but through the depiction of the subject itself. I myself am reminded of Ezra Pound's statements on poetry:

Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.

Don't use such an expression as 'dim lands of *peace*.' It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol.

"*Symbols*.—I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man use 'symbols' he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that a sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk.⁶

In art, Charlot contrasted a genius, Caravaggio, to a good painter, Annibale Carracci: the former became fascinated with a pilgrim's feet in themselves, the latter merely used them to indicate that the figure was a pilgrim (Tabletalk early May 1978?). Similarly, Van Gogh could make his point by painting a peasant's shoes, whereas Munch needed to import drama. Charlot explained a passage in his 1960 *Village Fiesta*:

The most dramatic part is the little girl, just because she was tired, maybe, or was hit with the wooden sword, and is not really wounded, but is lying down there. There is a sort of, well, I won't use the word "grandeur" because that would be too pretentious, but when people say there is something in the picture that is more than the simple narrative, this is an example... There was, of course, true drama in what we could call the sunset of the original pre-Spanish races, and I would put a bit of that which I feel very strongly—of great tragedy—in that little girl in the lower left corner. (1960 *Village Fiesta*: 5)

Charlot was probably inspired by a Mexican Indian dance:

It has a particularly dramatic climax. The chief of the Arabs, after having fought alone against six Christians, reeling and bleeding, enters in agony. Here, thinking all facial expression too weak to reproduce this agony which is symbolic of his race, he veils his face with a cloth, and it is only the balance of his body, first wide, then gradually reduced and hesitant until the final fall, which tells of the racial tragedy. (September 1930: 39)

This change from symbols to meaningful objects has several bases. Charlot's WWI ephrastic poems reveal how he saw objects connected to meaning. In Mexico, the daily sights struck him

powerfully. Moreover, as a liturgical artist in France, Charlot had been working towards a modern religious style based more on Gospel events than general symbolism, notably in his *Chemin de Croix* (Volume 1, Chapter 8, Section 7.5.3). The theology of that project is that redemption was achieved through certain historical acts. Therefore, the crucifixion is not a symbol of salvation but itself the salvific act. Similarly, a sacrament does not represent an effect but causes it. Thus a subject like *Work and Rest* is not a symbol of its sense—the mother's work is the child's rest—but an instance of it. As Brenner put it, "Each figure is then a symbol for a thousand others" (*Idols* 310). Charlot sees the world itself as imbued with the meaning others confine to symbols or ideas. As he described his adolescent religious progress, he went through all St. Teresa of Avila's mystical castles only to find himself back in the first (Volume 1, Chapter 3, Section 3.7). The artist feels the resonance of the actual object and conveys it to the viewer. Weston expresses this view:

a valuable explanation to the public who are always finding symbolic meanings, literal association of forms, ideas, comparing a pepper to a madonna and child, or finding the face of Lincoln in a tree!...I never see these associated forms when I work, only parts of life as symbols of all life. (1966: 185; also 224 f.)

For Charlot, Mexican culture was particularly transparent to universal experiences and values. Mexican cultural expressions were clear, powerful, and touching. A *cargador* resonated with the idea of taking up one's own life cross. The *rebozo* in which the mother held the child transformed them both back into the united body they had been. The ostensible subject was Mexican, but the theme was human. Similarly, Charlot felt that Van Gogh's religious feeling was expressed more strongly and eloquently in his depictions of Walloon peasants than in his conventionally Christian subjects.

Another influence on Charlot's development was Mexican Indian hieroglyphic writing in which image was connected to meaning. As seen in Volume 1, Charlot had joined image and writing in his early childhood drawings and, as an adolescent, studied, copied, and analyzed hieroglyphs. In his later theoretical writings and practice, he emphasized legibility. In Mexico, he saw a connection between his work as an artist developing subjects and that of the ancient inventor of glyphs. He found confirmation of his *tortillera* subject in Chich'en Itza:

I was very impressed when I was in Yucatán doing the copies of the columns of the Temple of the Warriors—there were perhaps three hundred drawings of bas-reliefs there—to find that one of the signs—which, of course, wasn't Aztec, it was Mayan—but to illustrate the verb *action* or the verb *accomplishment*, there was a hand of a woman, just the wrist and the hand of the woman holding the roller, the stone roller, and rolling the dough on the *metate*. It's of course not exactly representational, it is just a hieroglyph, like an Egyptian hieroglyph, but it was such a summing up of so many things that I had stored in my mind and exteriorized in my pictures that it was interesting there to see that in the temple that may have dated of the thirteenth century. The Aztecs in Mexico in some temples and the Mayans in that particular Temple of the Warriors had come more or less to the same conclusions that I had

come to when they think of summing up in one gesture the verb *action* in terms essential to Indian life. (Interview October 1, 1970)

Charlot could use his developed subjects as hieroglyphs. In the left bottom section of his 1944 fresco *Cortez Lands in Mexico*, Charlot has placed a *Work and Rest* and a mother and daughter *Tortilleras*. Their presence is unrealistic, but they represent the domestic life of a culture that is on the verge of disruption. In the same fresco, Charlot invented a new subject, *Gift Bearers*: two women welcome Cortes with a bowl of food or drink and a flower garland. Charlot would use this subject in both versions of his *Early Contacts of Hawai'i with Outer World* (1951–1952 and 1966): Hawaiian women welcome a woman missionary with a *lei*. Charlot used a 1934 nude of Zohmah's back, CL 381 *Nude, back, arms raised* for Hawaiian god stones embodying the female energy of the earth.

Given this view of symbols, Charlot's choice and development of subjects was especially important, and he identified the main ones he developed through his life in his two books of lithographs *Picture Book* (1933) and *Picture Book II* (1973). None of the subjects used in those books date from his French period—even the Christian subjects in *Picture Book I*—but he did continue to produce, for instance, *Ways of the Cross*. Also, his use of skeletons, for instance, in his 1951 *Dance of Death*, was based on Medieval art rather than Mexican, as can be seen in his woodcut *Skeleton* of 1916 or 1917 (M2). However, Charlot produced little European-style religious or liturgical art in Mexico, perhaps his main subjects in France, but concentrated on society and history. This was due partly to the mental focus of the historical moment and to the social character of the commissions, but also, I believe, to Charlot's rethinking of his Christianity towards a "religion of the parishioner." This was supported by the intense cultural expressions of Mexican parish life with its feasts, processions, pilgrimages, and dances, which became primary subjects for Charlot in Mexico. But Charlot's "secular" subjects are imbued with his religious spirit, which did not change whatever the subject. Traditional Mexican Indian culture is itself "the good life." Charlot will return to his French-period subjects when he moves to the United States.

In Mexico, Charlot had to develop a new set of subjects. This required effort and gestation: he had to observe the object closely—as closely as a person whose portrait he was doing—understand it, assimilate it, and arrive at the right final stylized image. For instance, in Indonesia in 1969, he made a small oil sketch of a religious statue, CL 1146 *Bali Subject*. He regretted that it was stolen because he said it was the first step in his developing a new subject. Of his 1933 lithograph *The Rebozo*, he said:

This took a long time to evolve. The woman was originally giving centavos to a beggar. Then the beggar disappeared. As it is, it was first drawn for the book [*Picture Book*].⁷

As a result of this process, Charlot's images and subjects possess an expressive finality and were often seminal, like the Spaniards in armor of *Massacre*. Indeed, Charlot's many activities have proved seminal over the course of his life.

Charlot's development of subjects started in observation, but sometimes triggering mechanisms were involved, as Charlot described in an interview with me:

JPC:

It's very interesting looking at the 1920s sketchbook you've bound, *Sketches from Life*, the first time you see *malinches*—and most of the sketches are done very analytically, that is, very realistic, rather tall girls with costumes drawn in very carefully with color indications, but there are two little sketches which show *malinches* in exactly the attitude that you later drew them. There is a little pink *malinche* here on the third page in with her little hands above her head and her legs far apart, pretty much in the proportions that you did them later, little short body, whereas the other ones which are more realistic show rather longer girls. Now was this one done from life, do you remember, this little sketch, or was that already your mind making it into your style, or was that really a little girl who put her hands like that and sort of jumped?

JC:

Well, I think that all the sketches in the book were done from nature while really the dance was proceeding. Then the watercolor swatches were put on afterwards in the evening when I returned home, because they were really done from nature. But the little girl that you single out, I had not myself singled out as being the model for future paintings, and actually I was in the same place in that hacienda where we saw the dance with George Vaillant. He was an archeologist who had worked with me in Yucatán, and he was a rather tall and fat young man. And I was telling him that even though I had copied so many gestures and so on in the dance of the *malinches*, I didn't have a clear idea of how to make a picture out of it. And George, he was twenty-five, twenty-six, at the time, said, "Well, that's easy," and he started jumping around and pretending he was a little girl, and between his girth and his weight and his gestures, I had an illumination, really, and most of the *malinches* that happen in my pictures now are a double vision, if you want: what I'd seen in nature, in the dance, and what George had acted for me. Those things are curious, but they are quite true. (Interview September 28, 1970)

Sometimes the trigger could be unconscious. Charlot wrote to Paul Claudel on November 6, 1933, that he could not explain why he had designed his portrait of an archetypal Yankee woman, *Grace* (e.g., M152), the way he did:

Je savais que c'était bien ainsi mais sans pouvoir l'expliquer. Maintenant je sais, c'est le croissant de lune. (Reith-Bronner 2015 : 333)

'I knew it was like that but could not explain it. Now I know. It's the crescent of the moon.'

Charlot always felt that true creation came from below consciousness: "I don't think the artist realizes when he's doing the thing. Otherwise, it doesn't come out" (Interview April 2, 1978).

Some of Charlot's subjects had a long history in Mexican art, like the *Molinera* or *Tortillera*, the woman grinding corn at the *metate*.⁸ The subject had become tainted by picturesque tourist art, so it had to be revalorized with a strong esthetic. Also, Charlot added a new dimension by including the child on the rocking mother's back to form the new subject, Work and Rest. His depiction of mother and daughter making tortillas together added the sense of the transmission of culture at the hearth of the Indian family. The *voladores* had often been portrayed, but Charlot privileged a neglected moment: the dancer chanting at the top of the pole before diving off to whirl tethered by his feet to the ground.

Charlot used his intimate experience of the Aztec household in Milpa Alta to develop a set of previously untried subjects like the woman teaching a child how to walk and the Sunday Dress. One of the most intimate is *The Petate*, a newly-married couple touch heads and hold hands beside their marriage mat: "A petate is a traditional Mexican wedding gift."⁹ Charlot had entered tenderly and respectfully deep into "the warmth of the Aztec hearth," in the words of Luz Jiménez' grandchild, Jesús Villanueva. Without patronizing or assimilating, Charlot was appreciating and revealing the distinctive beauties of Indian village life. Family love and support were treasured by people who had suffered through war and revolution. Similarly, Indian dances had often been portrayed, but Charlot seems to have been the first to focus on the *Malinches*. Finally, Charlot also pioneered completely new subjects like his nudes of Luz, developing a canon of the Aztec body.

Charlot did try briefly some subjects that he did not develop. For instance, juice is sucked from the maguey plant into a gourd to ferment into *pulque*.¹⁰ The action is resonant, but Charlot used it rarely and in minor works, such as the tiny *Pulquero* of 1933 (M210). Similarly, as seen above, Charlot did some commissioned drawings of *charro* costumes and had a family connection to Mexican cattlemen through his grandfather Luis. Charlot even bought me a *charro* costume when we were living in Mexico in the mid-1940s. But he never developed *charros* into a subject.

Perhaps the most striking change from Charlot's French work to his Mexican is in the shortening of the human figure. In France, he was following the convention that spiritual people were long, thin, and white (Volume 1, Chapter 8). In poems probably of 1920 (1920–1924 Civil), he writes "ami blanc d'âme" 'friend white of soul' (*Distique*) and "le blanc val des vierges" 'the white valley of virgins' (*Quatrain*). The only contradictory influence was Stefan Lochner, whom Charlot studied during the Occupation, and whose influence emerged in Mexico:

The sense that you get from a Lochner is a sense of innocence... And I've always been very sensitive, I would say, to the idea of innocence. And I found it in the *Images d'Epinal* again, and I think it comes in my own work very often. I have a whole part of my work as subject matter goes which really I wouldn't say is patterned after Stefan Lochner, but allowed me to present the same feeling through the same proportions, that is, the series of the dancers, of the *Malinches*... the girls are very young girls, and they had what I would call the Lochner proportions. And that came in my representation, even in the sketches, of course, that I made from them, but later on I sort of enlarged the theme, and it became really a mixture of innocence and

heroic that I like very much, that means something for me, even though quite a number of people are sort of repelled. They don't quite understand what it's about. So this is what I owe to Lochner.¹¹

My pictures of Malinches bear his stamp. These tiny folk dancers, armed with mock swords and rattles, and dressed in their Sunday best, are of course Mexican. Yet it was Lochner who first taught me that there can be greatness in playfulness. (Charlot April 6, 1966)

A similar esthetic could be found in some Indian artists: "the insistence on a squarish outline with extremely short fingers is characteristic of the popular peasantlike tendencies of this particular artist" (Morris, Charlot, and Morris 1931: 324). Even more important, Charlot's own study of the Aztec body—especially his development of a short, stocky canon based on his nudes of Luz Jiménez—could be connected to his understanding of Lochner. In my view, his shortening of the human figure was first based on the observed physiognomy of the Aztec body and then was used by him—under the inspiration of Lochner—to express his view of Aztec character and their religious "good life." I will discuss Charlot's depiction of childlike innocence below.

In Mexico, the impact of the experience of Indian bodies and spirituality moved him to the short, bulky, and brown. The transition can be seen in his 1922 gouache and print *Saint John, after El Greco* (M38):

The most obvious difference is that Charlot has shortened El Greco's attenuated figure. The original body below the neck is about seven and a half times the length of the head; Charlot's version is five times. As Charlot has shortened the figure, he has also broadened it. The total length of the El Greco figure is about seven times the width at the shoulder; Charlot's is a little more than three times. Moreover, the hips and legs that constitute about five eighths of the length of El Greco's figure have been reduced to less than half of Charlot's. As a result, the mystically attenuated figure by El Greco has become stocky, and its slim muscles now bulge like a bodybuilder's. As the figure has been pushed down, it has spread out. Charlot is in the process of moving from his elongated style to his shortened and broadened one. (Volume 1, Chapter 8, Section 3.1.1)

Charlot used El Greco as a contrast to explain his own style:

Unlike Greco who elongates verticals, my fancy runs to a widening of horizontals. His people are made to look like flames, mine to resemble mud pies.

It is true that the plastic arts deal perforce with bodies, with what constitutes the visible world. It is also true that, unlike the ethics of cattle shows and leg contests, bodies are not in art the aim, but signposts that point to concepts. (March 1945)

The concept expressed by the stylistic change is the Indian body, art, and view of life:

It carves and paints a human body shaped by the acceptancy of daily tasks, life givers in their humbleness, cooking, washing, teaching a child to walk. Hemmed in between powerful natural forces and overpowering spiritual strains, man appears heroic enough as he stays upright, resists awhile the pull of gravity towards earth's center.

(March 1945)

Charlot was focusing not on costumes and accouterments but on "the supple and strong quality of the human beings that people unobtrusively this beautiful land" (January 1935). For such subjects, Charlot developed a style that did not obtrude.

Charlot's shortening of the human figure was accompanied by its widening, or more precisely, by a greater three-dimensional bulk, as seen in the figures of his early 1922 series of oils (CL 2–7), so different from those in his French work. Besides the native body itself and the ideas discussed above, Charlot's mural work in Mexico encouraged this element of his style. In Volume 1, Chapter 3, Section 3.1, I have discussed Charlot's ocular problem that disabled him from seeing in three dimensions. This may be a partial explanation for the absence of Italian perspective in his work. Instead, he used the bulk of figures to suggest depth in his images. This tendency can be detected in some of his French work but intensifies in Mexico. A possible explanation can be found in a 1922 note:

la perspective optique consiste à faire jaillir les obliques perspectives des positions des personnages, et non d'un point de fuite. (Giotto). (Charlot 1922 Mexique)
'optical perspective consists in making appear the oblique perspectives of the positions of the personages and not of a vanishing point. (Giotto).'

The vanishing point of Italian perspective is most effective in an easel painting when the viewer is directly in front of it. This is not the situation of a mural, which is seen from many and sometimes moving vantage points. The solution can be found in Giotto's murals, which are earlier than Italian perspective and use the figures themselves to express depth and space. Charlot always revered Giotto as a master.

Color was a major topic of Charlot's writings, discussed in detail, for instance, in his "Nous les Jeunes !" (1917–1918) and *Traité de Peinture* (1920–1922). Much later, Charlot stated: "the translation of value into color is the real problem that I've tried to tackle all my life" (Interview November 18, 1970). This is evident in his later color and black-and-white prints of the same subject.

Charlot recorded in his earliest article that the colors of Mexico were one of his greatest surprises: "Quelle mine inutile elles ont mes couleurs de la maison Lefranc et criarde, parmi ces belles couleurs naturelles qui sont celles de l'eau, de la terre, du bois et de la paille" 'What a useless and loud appearance my Lefranc colors have among these beautiful natural colors that are those of water, earth, wood and straw.'¹² Although Charlot is characteristically using himself as a foolish foil, his description recalls the rainbow colors he was using in France and the bright colors of the nineteenth-century Mexican figurines owned by his family. Charlot's street sketches, discussed below, are full of notations of the subtle colors he was discovering on the streets of Mexico City: e.g., "gris d'âne" 'donkey gray,' "gris et

rose cerné bleu” ‘gray and rose surrounded by blue,’ “le rebozo gris-bleu, les pieds de l’enfant cuivre” ‘the rebozo blue-gray, the feet of the child copper.’

Bright colors are used in Mexican folk arts but have become identified with works created for tourists and thus with a superficial view of Mexico. Moreover, fiesta clothes are more colorful than everyday wear, and Charlot was moving away from the former—favored by the EPAL models—to the latter. In Mexico, he describes at length the soft, subtle coloring of *rebozos* and *serapes*. Later, he will admire especially the “severe Indian taste” of Leon Venado’s *serapes*: “a splendid range of grays sharpened by a ground of velvet black shot with the lightnings of thin white streaks” (April 1949). By using these dark colors, Charlot was revealing a Mexico unlike the one known to tourists: “Mexico est une terre essentiellement plastique, tragique et surnaturelle” ‘Mexico is a land essentially plastic, tragic, and supernatural’ (Charlot August 30, 1925). Charlot painted a series of small oils in which he wanted black to be the lightest color. Zalce was one of the artists impressed:

He had very Mexican colors. The other art we could see was of the Academy, influenced by nineteenth century academic art. Only the subject was Mexican, but the way of painting and feeling was Spanish, European. Jean’s was the first thing I saw that was really Mexican. (July 27–28, 1971)

A support for Charlot’s change of palette was his experience painting fresco in which the wall absorbs earth colors better than chemical ones.

Even more important was the skin color of Mexican Indians. On his first arrival in Mexico, he noted: “L’Indien : terre cuite et masques japonais” ‘The Indian: terra-cotta and Japanese masks’ (1921 *Les Arrivées*). On his second trip, he wrote of the Indian priest saying Mass: “Ce prêtre mexicain à la nuque noisette issue d’hors la chasuble damassée d’or aux gerbes lourdes contre grenat” ‘This Mexican priest with his nut-brown neck emerging from the chasuble damasked in gold with heavy corn sheaves on garnet.’ Charlot reported this as a key experience in an autobiographical article:

My first Mexican priest, seen at landing, at Mass in the cathedral of Vera-Cruz, happened to be a genuine *Indio verde*, and all through the Consecration I watched lovingly the nape of dark green skin between the fringes of white hair and the gold galloon of the Sunday vestments. (1954 Jean Charlot)

Charlot was deeply moved by the religious feeling of the congregation, and this experience may have been the beginning of his identification of spirituality with dark skin colors rather than whiteness as he had in France.

Charlot took skin color as the key to his palette: “the best of Mexican painting... is concerned rather with man alone, its somber hues keyed to the Indian skin” (*MMR* 318). Charlot wrote Brenner from Chich’en Itza:

La llave de la harmonia es el color de la piel de la gente de aqui. (“No escribes nada, a mi”)

‘The key to the harmony is the color of the skin of the people from here.’

In Europe, it was white, so the depiction of Indians entailed a new color scheme. This was true also of his 1942 mural *Cotton Gin* with its African-American subjects.

I had learned to represent the human skin in a lower value or a darker value, if you want to put it, than the skin of the white race, and I had a very hard time, actually, to accustom me to what we call white people. I remember that one of my first few...I think it was a boxing match in New York. It was one of those huge amphitheatres; of course the lights and so on were all artificial, but suddenly I found that enormous sea of people—and you see nearly only the faces in those big crowds—that were piggy-pink. Everybody somehow was clean, I would say physically cleaner perhaps than a similar Mexican crowd at the time, but that very cleanliness gave to all those so-called white skins a pink that was rather repulsive, one just like the belly of a pig. And for my own painting purposes, I really had to hurdle over that distaste before I was able to paint white people. So I must say I do feel better, I have a better time, if you want, painting darker pigmented skins than that of white people. I left that to Renoir. Renoir was *par excellence* the painter of the pink race, we could say, and there is no doubt that I am not. So when I was in the South, I didn't choose, of course, especially Negroes, but they were part of the murals I painted at the time. They were part of that particular mural in that little town of McDonough, where I painted the cotton gin. And I felt at ease, I felt very interested by the dark skin of the Negro. I don't think I had any, oh, romantic idea or desire to uphold the dark races against the light races, but it was just for my craft. I had more experience and my eye was attuned to a darker skin than the pink skin of the so-called white man. (Interview October 1, 1970)

Charlot later stated: “The attraction of Hawai'i is its people. Their brown skin is wonderful for a painter” (Tabletalk Mid-February 1972).

Charlot continued to explore color until the end of his life. In a lecture, he explained how the red coloring of his *Forest Dancer* (CL 916; 1963) could be caused by either the firelight or the intensity of the dance. Charlot told his son Martin that he had come to a different view of Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*: it had changed people's ideas of what blue was supposed to mean (personal communication). Similarly, showing me his 1967 portrait *'Iolani Luahine* (CL1350), he expressed his amazement that the pinks in the *maile* leaves registered as silver in the viewer's eye.

From his adolescence, Charlot's artworks always looked different from those created around him. In Volume 1, Chapter 8, Section 7.5.3, I discussed how Charlot's *Chemin de Croix* was found stylistically surprising. A reviewer, Pierre du Colombier, even wrote “nous sommes certains que, là devant, le public rirait” ‘we are certain that, in front of that Way of the Cross, the public will laugh’ (January 10, 1921: 100 f.). Charlot's early works in Mexico met with the same reception among both artists and reviewers. Efraín Pérez Mendoza wrote in his “La Primera Exposición de los Grupos

‘acción de arte’,” *Revista de Revistas*, of November 19, 1922, that Charlot was the culmination of the self-proclaiming attitude of the young painters:

pinta con una ruda materia como de ‘carne seca’ que nos deja tan perplejos como un cartel de cine con una escena brutal. (1922: 36)

‘he paints with rude matter like some “dried meat” which leaves us as perplexed as with a movie poster with a brutal scene.’

Febronio Ortega wrote in “El Fracaso de la Exposición de Independientes,” *El Universal Ilustrado*, of the same date:

Jean Charlot, el joven pintor francés, expuso cuatro cuadros acertadísimos... Hay en ellos un ritmo de fuerza y una estilización admirable. A primera vista causan sorpresa, pero hay que acostumbrarse a ver y a encontrar la intención del autor.¹³

‘Jean Charlot, the young French painter, exhibited four most skillful paintings... There is in them a rhythm of power and an admirable stylization. At first view, they cause surprise, but one must accustom oneself to see and find the intention of the author.’

Ortega wrote of the *Massacre* on December 28, 1922: “en esa manera peculiar de él, que se nos aparece tan rara y a ratos extravagante” “Charlot has decorated one of the walls in the upper corridors in this peculiar style of his that seems so strange to us, and at times extravagant.”¹⁴ To the public of the time, most of the new work seemed strange, and the work of different artists could even be confused. *El Demócrata* published a photograph of *Cargadores* on March 2, 1924, which it mistook for Rivera’s, with the caption: “Cuadro de Diego Rivera, que representa...Lo que el Observador Quiera” ‘Panel by Diego Rivera, which represents... That which the observer wants’ (Clippings 14a). Rafael Vera de Córdova wrote of the 1922 woodcuts: “un poco difícil para el ojo crítico, definir claramente cuáles son las obras de Leal y cuáles las de Charlot” ‘it is a little difficult for the critical idea to define clearly which are the works of Leal and which of Charlot’ (1922). Charlot recalled a newspaper account:

I remember a reportage, for example, on the Café de Nadie in which it says that the walls show some Estridentist cartoons by Charlot. Well, the Estridentist cartoons are some, what I considered very good and very serious woodcuts of Mexican types. (Interview June 12, 1971)

The puzzlement extended to Charlot’s poet and artist colleagues:

[The Estridentista poets met at the Café de Nadie and] decorated the walls with my woodcuts because I was doing strange things in art, by their standards. (M33)

Well, I think they didn’t quite know what it was all about. As I said, there was a very nice effort on their part, even a heroic effort, to do something that was Impressionist, I would say, not even post-Impressionist, but Impressionist. And the jump into what I was doing, which was post-Cubist, was too difficult. It’s only, really, when Diego Rivera came back and gave some lectures—and he had photographs of Cubist things, his own among others, of course—that they could, if they want, relate my own things

to what Rivera had done and was showing them. But by then I think they had forgotten those early paintings of mine. (Interview May 18, 1971)

Charlot felt that a knowledge of Posada would have helped his friends with the understanding of his own work:

The one thing, of course, they could have tied my work with would have been the folk woodcuts and metal cuts of Posada, but at the time he was not thought of or considered as part of the art, of the picture of art, in Mexico.

...

Certainly the woodcuts were a nice preface to the acceptance of the folk art: Guadalupe Posada and so on. That—there would have been no bridge between Impressionism and Guadalupe Posada. There was a bridge between what I have called Expressionism, roughly speaking, and Guadalupe Posada. (Interview May 14, 1971)

Of the contemporary artists, Charlot and Mérida were, I believe, the most intensely focused on style. Charlot always recognized Mérida's pioneering contribution:

Of more import are a few forms where pre-Hispanic and post-cubist aesthetics fuse organically. First in date, even though they are not murals, are the pictures that Carlos Mérida painted about 1919. They put to new creative uses the heraldic colors and unbroken outline found in codices. (Writings Related to *MMR*; Passages Cut)

The difference between their stylistic searches was that Mérida's drew him away from muralism, whereas Charlot's was always directed towards it. He was searching for an effective mural style both for himself and for others. That direction informed his style in all genres with a mural bigness, a quality he recognized in Rivera's: "though it is a lithograph, it is a good example of the mural quality, of the monumental quality of Rivera, who is, of course, a mural painter" (June 9, 1965).

This search for an authentic Mexican style was based on a study of the many-layered history of the nation's art. Charlot was always happy to acknowledge his sources. Of his lithograph *Coiffure: Idols* (M234), he stated that "the great Tarascan terra-cotta" he once owned was not only the basis of the print but also "one of the things that really formed me." However, a comparison of the two artworks reveals how much Charlot digested it. Because of his background—"I had the Aztec in me besides having it around me" (Interview May 18, 1971)—and artistic and intellectual character, Charlot's relation to Mexican-Indian art was distinctive.

Charlot rejected simplistic ideas of influence. When I asked whether Aztec masks were the source of some of Charlot's and Siqueiros' work, Charlot answered: "I don't think, though, that going together, Siqueiros and myself, to the museum for the purpose of finding motifs is the right description of what we were doing" (Interview May 18, 1971). When I discussed with him Laurence Schmeckebier's theory that Charlot's style had been influenced first by Aztec and later by Maya art, Charlot stated:

There are so many things. Schmeckeber was blessed by a bookish knowledge of things. That is, he had a more simplified idea; he was going by books on the history of art of Mexico and so on, but when you are with the things themselves, it's pretty hard to say, for example, the underlying art, the prehistoric art of the Mexican plateau, which is all mixed up with Aztec. What we call now Olmec has completely that skull and nose that he saw mostly as Mayan. I am a little too close to things, so to speak, to have a very clear image of things, but I think that the most important thing was really that when I went to Mexico, I already was soaked, so to speak, into all the things I was going to meet there. There was—I always come back to Ozenfant and his pre-forms—there was a pre-meeting with Mexico long before, long before I met Mexico, so that makes things pretty difficult. They were already assimilated, so to speak, even at the very moment that I discovered them. (Interview May 18, 1971)

Not only were the Mexican art traditions themselves more complicated than their popular (or even academic) images, but Charlot had already studied them in France. In Mexico, he was able to study many more examples of Indian art but, perhaps even more important, was able to connect that art to a living people. Charlot was immersing himself not only in the ancient art but in the living culture. The experience involved the whole human being encountering other human beings:

I knew less about the Mayans than I did about the Aztecs, and certainly going to Yucatán and going into the diggings of the archeologists—maybe for the archeology, of course, but very much because all the workers were Mayan Indians in there—was a terrific experience...I had to dig into it very strongly by copying hundreds of *bas-reliefs*, getting at least the sound of the language, befriending, again, some of those people who came from the village of Pisté, which was rather a purely indigenous village. (Interview May 18, 1971)

Art-historical influences had to be evaluated in the total human context as just one among many experiences that the individual digested and composed into an image:

So there has been something added by Yucatán that wasn't in my work before. I think that's true, but the things eventually blended. It would be very difficult for me now to be sure of what is Mayan, what is Aztec. There is a synthesis, of course, after working with things for decades and makes difficult—in fact, you *shouldn't* try to separate any more the components because they have fused together. They have blended. (Interview May 18, 1971)

Charlot wrote two early summary descriptions of his change in Mexico: “Art Interpretations” (March 1926: 17) and “Une Renaissance Mexicaine” (Brenner-Charlot 1928). The latter starts by arguing that the movement is nationalist but emerges from its human element, which makes it significant for a world viewership.

Affirmer que la peinture mexicaine est nationaliste n'est pas nier la portée universelle de l'élément humain qui en est la source et que tous peuvent assimiler avec fruit. (Brenner-Charlot 1928)

'To affirm that Mexican painting is nationalist is in no way to deny the universal significance of its human element which is its source and which all can fruitfully assimilate.'

For example, Charlot is French and "au cœur de son travail mexicain bat l'émotion humaine" 'at the heart of his Mexican work beats human emotion.' Charlot was not painting Mexican subjects but human ones. Culture forms all human responses to life events: birth, love, and death. For Charlot, some cultures expressed the basic human experiences and values more transparently and thus moved the viewer or participant more deeply. As Carlos Mérida said of him:

él sentía estos motivos más en consonancia con su fino espíritu, su amor por la humanidad, su amor por la gente, su sentido positivo de vivir. En otros pintores del momento estos tipos que fueron pseudo-revolucionarios, llegaron a un clímax, que ya era una especie de intento directo de hacer un arte así sin que aquello tuviera un sentimiento hondo o perfecto como en el caso de la pintura de Juan Charlot, que era una cosa sensitiva, que era una cosa humana. (January 29, 1971)

'he felt these motifs more consonant with his fine spirit, his love for humanity, his love for the people, his positive sense of life. In other painters of the time, these subjects that were pseudo-revolutionary reached a climax, which was a type of direct intention to make such an art without its having a deep or perfect sentiment as was the case in Jean Charlot's painting, which was a sensitive thing, a human thing.'

The themes he found in Mexican culture were based on religious experiences and values that Charlot shared:

La plèbe douloureuse, la pauvreté glorifiée, le travail présenté comme une fonction noble, le surnaturel [*sic*] familier et le familier miraculeux... (Brenner-Charlot 1928)

'The sorrowful people, poverty glorified, work presented as a noble function, the supernatural as familiar and the familiar as miraculous...'

The revolution Charlot was promoting was the conversion of the viewers' hearts, the foundation on which any social revolution needed to be based. The themes of Mexican culture should inspire:

un esprit révolutionnaire intime qui, au rebours des thèses sociales, ne peut être ni reçu, ni transmis, mais doit germer spontanément. Nul fusil en bandoulière. (Brenner-Charlot 1928)

'an intimate revolutionary spirit that—the reverse of social theses—can be neither received nor transmitted but must germinate spontaneously. No gun in a bandolier.'

To reach these subjects, to express these themes, Charlot had to transform his style:

Passionné comme tous les convertis, il a cherché l'alphabet plastique de la plus plastique des terres. Il s'est dépouillé des doctrines professionnelles qui alourdissent son œuvre européen. (Brenner-Charlot 1928)

'Passionate like any convert, he has sought the plastic alphabet of the most plastic of lands. He has despoiled himself of the professional doctrines that weighed down his European work.'

Charlot expands on this point in his "Art Interpretations" (March 1926: 17):

When I realized this beauty and the very simple elements composing it, I had to change my palette for humbler colors, and my artistic theories for simple admiration; deepening my knowledge of this beautiful people and producer of beauty, I began to re-study my profession, not with the prejudices of an "artist" nor a "cultured man," only with good will and gratitude. Some of my friends have done likewise, and from such a collection of works, something can be grasped; I believe it is simplicity. We no longer deal with theories, our intention is not to make noise to attract the buyer. Our only secret in working is to see nature with emotion, because it is really admirable, and to attempt to bring our works some of its qualities for those people of good will who as yet live fictitious lives, because joy is not to be found in the possession of money, nor in luxury, nor in refined thoughts. We shall find it in the most common[,] most depreciated things which have no value in the market, to the end of adjusting ourselves, that we may live in harmony with our bodies, our companions, the animals and the objects which surround us. (March 1926: 17)

In this passage, Charlot characteristically joins art and morality. His mind is full of proud, complicated theories, but his observation presents him with a simple, humble beauty. To understand it, he must let himself experience his admiration and keep himself open with an attitude of "good will and gratitude." In doing so, his former practice of art will be transformed as he "see[s] nature with emotion" and learns to "live in harmony" with all of nature. That is, the experience of Mexican culture is connecting him with nature as well as human beings. One sees beauty in everything and thus lives in harmony with nature and community, and achieves contentment with oneself and one's life. The style appropriate to such a message must itself be humble and quiet, as Charlot preferred:

I do not speak of the outward marks of appreciation that can always be conjured up by published critical estimates and the attendant publicity drummed around big names but rather of the inner conformity felt before the art work when one is alone with it, and just looking. For the same reason, I would not choose either the biggest print or the loudest, impressive as is the Mexican version of both. (AA II: 156)

Charlot found a continuity throughout his artistic life. Shortly before dying, Charlot wrote in a shaky hand on a tiny slip of paper a "summing up"—as he said in conversation—of his artistic life:

Born and raised in Paris, having worked in Mexico both as an archeologist and a fresco muralist and now living in Hawaii, I have always looks [*sic*: looked] for the deep roots of the present day countries I lived in. I studied the native languages, *nahuatl* in Mexico, *hawaiian* in Hawaii, and [have] written and published in both languages.

Strongest influence in my paintings is the blood legacy of a great grandmother whose ~~in~~ aztec ascendancy gave me a taste for so called primitive art that blends uniquely with the studies of classical art I did both at the Beaux Arts School and at the Louvre as befits a Paris born artist.

This statement can be supplemented with the draft of a blurb written for Peter Morse's *Jean Charlot's Prints: A Catalogue Raisonné* (1976; slightly edited by John Charlot):

As a youth, he learned his craft in the *couloirs* of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts under the strictest of academic teachers. He lived a walking distance from the Louvre and struck there an acquaintance with the Old Masters. Among them, the Italian Paolo Uccello taught him how geometry is the very marrow of art, a lesson that was to serve him well throughout his mural career. Poussin and Cézanne both exemplified the French flair for clarity that, later on, as he came under the spell of non-classical cultures, helped him retain his balance. A Way of the Cross cut on *bois de fil* is a major work of his French period.

Just old enough to fight in the First World War, Charlot landed in 1920 [1921] in a Mexico still smouldering from the fires of the Revolution. Like France, Mexico had been home to his ancestors, a great-grandfather of his having landed there from Paris in 1820, marrying a woman of Aztec blood. Pre-Hispanic art taught Charlot things about which the Louvre had been mute. The revolutionary turn of chance had just offered the walls of Colonial palaces to a handful of young artists fiercely desirous to translate in line and color the contemporary social and racial upheaval.

Become one of them, Charlot painted in 1922 a first mural in true fresco, a technical apport that helped shape the ways of the Mexican Renaissance. As regards graphics, he rediscovered the personality of a great popular artist, José Guadalupe Posada, and introduced his friends to the woodcut technique that helped spread to streets and villages the message of the murals.

He also worked with American archeologists in the Mayan ruins of Chich'en Itza. To publish the official report on the diggings for the Carnegie Institution of Washington, he crossed the border. From Washington he went to New York, to teach at the Art Students League and do lithographic work with a master printer, George Miller. Shuttling between New York and Los Angeles to court his future wife, he met there another master printer, Lynton R. Kistler, thus beginning a fruitful collaboration in color lithography that continues to this day.

A Guggenheim Fellowship had him return to Mexico in 1945–1947, for a two years

stay that resulted in the publication of his book *The Mexican Mural Renaissance* and in a portfolio of color lithographs on stone, *Mexihkanantli*, variations on the theme of Indian motherhood.

Today Charlot, having lived for a quarter century in Hawai'i, is an emeritus professor of its University. Learning the Hawaiian language helped him understand the island culture, both past and present. Polynesian subjects are the themes for many of his later paintings and prints. Petroglyphs, prehistoric cave art, inspire a portfolio of etchings, *Moanalua*.

In Fiji, where he went to fresco the walls of a bush mission church, he met with yet another Pacific race, the black Melanesians. They became the subjects of a silkscreen series, and he prepares on the same theme, with Lynton Kistler, a portfolio of color lithographs.

In 1968, Mexico recognized officially Charlot's role as a link between races and nations by giving him at the National Museum of Modern Art a most comprehensive retrospective, the only American thus honored in the Cultural Events of the Games of the XIXth Olympiad.¹⁵

Charlot was recognized by his colleagues for the development of a personal style. Covarrubias wrote that Charlot knew modern techniques and was "eager for new plastic expression."¹⁶

La personalidad de Juan se hizo notar porque él, como europeo, tenía una cultura de la cual carecíamos todos nosotros. Él, desde luego, impuso un estilo que ha mantenido personal hasta este momento. (Mérida January 29, 1971)

'Jean's personality made itself noted because as a European, he had a culture that all we others lacked. He certainly imposed a style that he has maintained as personal up to this moment.'

Indeed, Charlot thoroughly digested his studies into his distinctive style. Orozco wrote: "Pre-Cortesian art influenced him to such an extent that his painting is still saturated with it" (Orozco 1962: 87). The word *saturated* indicates that Charlot had thoroughly absorbed the art he had studied; it was not a mere surface addition. Similarly, O'Higgins stated:

Undoubtedly Jean had a very deep feeling and understanding of the Prehispanic. And he was using that in everything he does, no, even in his mural work in Georgia. You see what I mean? Or in Hawai'i. But at the same time, he could be his strong, own personality. That is, he doesn't copy anybody. (March 21, 1974)

Xavier Moyssén has offered a general description of Charlot's developed style:

Jean Charlot como pintor y grabador alcanzó a crear un estilo distintivo en todo cuanto hizo, es posible afirmar que la originalidad le acompañó desde sus primeras obras.

[on *Mexihkanantli* (1947)]

Se trata de trabajos realizados con esa parquedad de formas que le distingue de manera tan notoria, el diseño lineal que hay en cada estampa está trazado con la maestría que se adquiere con el ejercicio constante del lápiz de dibujo. Las figuras son rotundas en su volumen, mas no están exentas de la gracia y la ternura que Charlot supo encontrar en las vidas sencillas de las madres indígenas y sus pequeños hijos. La composición de estas obras es cerrada, sólo existe lo esencial trazado con un dibujo unificador, apenas se insinúa la perspectiva, la profundidad, de allí esa sensación escultórica que impresiona en cada una de las estampas. (1990)

‘Jean Charlot as painter and printmaker succeeded in creating a distinctive style in all he did. It is possible to affirm that originality accompanied him from his first works.

[on *Mexihkanantli*]

‘These are works realized with that paucity of forms that distinguishes him in such a well-known manner: the linear drawing in each print is traced with a mastery that is acquired with constant exercise of the pencil. The figures are rotund in their volume, but are not without the grace and tenderness that Charlot knew how to find in the simple lives of the indigenous mothers and their little children. The composition of these works is closed, with only the essential traced with the unifying drawing.

Perspective and depth barely insinuate themselves; thence this sculptural sensation that impresses in each of the prints.’

¹ Volume 1, Chapter 8, Section 8.3.1.1. As late as 1925, Charlot could produce an oil in the Cubist vein: CL 82 *Still-life with dice*, discussed below.

² Charlot March 8, 1972. When grade-school students drew remarkably good copies of Charlot's figures in his 1974 fresco *The Relation of Man and Nature in Old Hawai'i*, Charlot said, “It's nice to know that a simplified image can stand longer than anything else” (Tabletalk March ? 17, 1977).

³ M66; 48–55. *Disassembled Sketchbooks [DS] 1922–1923*: 59, early drawing for M66, less stylized than the print.

⁴ MMR 166. Leal 1990: 173, “en el que tuvo el atrevimiento de emplear el anatematizado negro.” The painting was *La Théologie Régulatrice des Arts*. Compare González Mello 2002b: 65. Siqueiros 1996: 19.

⁵ Interview May 14, 1971. *San Carlos* 161 [Leal]. Siqueiros 1977: 96, dark colors and black were identified with Porfirianismo. Mello 2002b: 65, Orozco preferred black to Impressionism. This is, I feel, an influence of his cartooning.

⁶ Pound 1935: 3, 5, 9. I thank Professor Jonathan Morse of the University of Hawai'i for this reference.

Charlot's view is very close to that of Edward Weston 1966: 155 ("I want the *greater mystery of things revealed more clearly than the eyes see*," "making the commonplace unusual," "the real issue, significant presentation of the Thing Itself with photographic quality"), 185 f., 211:

My work has vitality because I have helped, done my part, in revealing to others the living world about them, showing to them what their own unseeing eyes had missed: I have thus cleared away the haze of a futile romanticism, allowing identification with all things by those who had been drifting apart.

219, 221:

what I record is not an *interpretation*—*my idea* of what nature *should be*—but a *revelation*, a piercing of the smoke screen artificially cast over life by neurosis, into an absolute, impersonal recognition.

222:

[The commercial photographer] sees a cabbage as an unrelated fact, devoid of interest except as a means to sauerkraut. I feel in the same cabbage, all the mystery of life force, I am amazed, emotionally stirred, and by my way of presentation my recognition of the reason for the cabbage form, its significance in relation to all forms, I am able to communicate my experience to others.

224: Weston denies sexual symbolism in his photographs of plants. Edward Biberman explained to Weston:

He said, in effect, that I had seen vegetables and other natural forms, *fundamental* forms, with such intensity, such direct honesty that a tremendous force like sex, which enters into, permeates all nature, could not but be revealed.

225, 228, 229:

Old ideals are crashing on all sides, and the precise uncompromising camera vision is, and will be more so, a world force in the revaluation of life.

230, 239, 240:

I have on occasion used the expression, "to make a pepper more than a pepper." I now realize it is a misleading phrase. I did not mean "different" from a pepper, but a

⁷ M141. The first version can be seen in the 1924 oil CL 52 *Rebozo, black and white. (Almsgiving)*.

⁸ Sahagún 1979: volume 3, page 40 recto. Génin 1908–1910: 114, 152.

⁹ M137. Compare Sahagún 1979: Volume 2, 247 recto.

¹⁰ Charnay 1885: 59, illustrated by Riou. Génin 1908–1910: 79, 81.

¹¹ Interview November 12, 1970. Volume 1, Chapter 7, Section 7.5.1. Similar angels can be found in the work of other German artists, e.g., Albrecht Dürer's *Life of the Virgin. Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. Lew Andrews suggests that Fra Angelico and Filippo Lippi might also have been useful for Charlot. A newspaper critic noted:

Charlot's Mexican children are especially delightful and some people think he does children better than anything else. This is perhaps because his sincerity and simplicity fit them best. (*Art: The Work of Jean Charlot* 1949)

Perhaps Brenner was thinking of such subjects when she wrote that Charlot in Hawai'i "works in the same rich vein of tenderness and gaiety that he introduced into the mood of the twenties" (1964: 132).

¹² Charlot October 1922. Compare Tamayo in Mijangos 2000: 135, 208.

¹³ Ortega November 1922: 30-1. In *MMR*, Charlot confuses the names of Febronio Ortega and the painter Sóstenes Ortega.

¹⁴ Ortega December 28, 1922. *MMR* 153. Writings Related to *MMR*; Passages Cut.

¹⁵ See also Charlot's flyleaf note for his *Three Plays of Ancient Hawaii* (1963): "One constant unifies Charlot's varied output, his interest in so-called primitive cultures, perhaps inherited from Aztec ancestors. Most of his paintings are on Mayan, Mexican, Hawaiian or Fijian themes. A movie was based on his study of Hawaiian petroglyphs."

¹⁶ Covarrubias 1940: 139. Compare Gruening 1928: 644. *Idols* 309 f.