



Illustration 6.42. Self-portrait of the artist with extrapolated heart, Station XII, *Chemin de Croix*, Stations of the Cross, woodblock print, Jean Charlot, 1918-1920. Reprint edition 1978. Photo Jana Jandrokovic. Collection Martin Charlot.



Illustration 6.43. Sacred Heart in an *Image d'Epinal*. Courtesy of Jean Charlot Collection, University of Hawai'i-Manoa, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Photo Tricia Allen.



Illustration 6.44. *Sacred Heart*, Jean Charlot, 1969, ceramic statue. St. William's Church, Hanalei, Kaua'i, Hawai'i. Photo Caroline Klarr, March 2001.



Illustration 6.45. Loincloth, Black Christ figure, detail of central panel, *Black Christ and Worshipers*, Jean Charlot, fresco, 1962, St. Francis Xavier's Catholic Church, Naiserelagi, Fiji. Photo Jesse Ulrick, September 2002. Collection of Caroline Klarr.



Illustration 6.46. *Ali'i Nui*, Jean Charlot, 1971, ceramic sculpture (nine and one-half feet tall), Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Photo Caroline Klarr, April 2001.



Illustration 6.47. Sugar cane breaking groundline, detail of Indo-Fijian (right) panel, *Black Christ and Worshipers*, Jean Charlot, fresco, 1962, St. Francis Xavier's Catholic Church, Naiserelagi, Fiji. Photo Jesse Ulrick, September 2002. Collection of Caroline Klarr.



Illustration 6.48. Breadfruit leaves anthropomorphized in the shape of Noh masks, detail of Indo-Fijian (right) panel, *Black Christ and Worshippers*, Jean Charlot, fresco, 1962, St. Francis Xavier's Catholic Church, Naiserelagi, Fiji. Photo Jesse Ulrick, September 2002. Collection of Caroline Klarr.



Illustration 6.49. José Guadalupe Posada, *Verdadero Retrato del Señor del Hospital* (The Portrait of the Lord of the Hospital). Courtesy of Jean Charlot Collection, University of Hawai'i-Manoa, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Published in *José Guadalupe Posada: My Mexico*, edited by Tom Klobe (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Art Gallery, 2001), 64-65.





Illustration 6.50. Black Christ of Mérida, Mexico. Photo reproduction courtesy of John P. Charlot.



Illustration 6.51. Sacred Grotto with spring dedicated to the Virgin Mary, located at base of Navunibitu Hill, Naiserelagi, Fiji. Photo Caroline Klarr, October 1999.



Illustration 6.52. Statue of the Virgin Mary on altar in grotto at base of Navunibitu Hill, Naiserelagi, Fiji. Photo Caroline Klarr, October 1999.



Illustration 6.53. Father Eremodo Muavesi, Naiserelagi, Fiji. Photo Caroline Klarr, July 2001.



Illustration 6.54. Father Eremodo Muavesi, offering Mass, Jean and Zohmah Charlot Memorial Service, 22 June 2001, St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, Naiserelagi, Fiji. Photo Caroline Klarr.



Illustration 6.55. Father Eremodo Muaversi's clerical robe with *tanoa* (*yaqona* serving bowl) and cross. Photo Caroline Klarr, July 2001, Naiserelagi, Fiji.



Illustration 6.56. Signpost off King's Road marking road up to "Black Christ," St. Francis Xavier's Catholic Mission, Naiserelagi, Fiji. Photo Caroline Klarr, October 1999.



Illustration 6.57. Etuate Naucukidi Katalau, carpenter (*matai*) from Rakiraki village, at work on building restoration, St. Francis Xavier's Catholic Church, Naiserelagi, Fiji. Photo Caroline Klarr, June 2001.





Illustration 6.58. Sakiusa Vedewaqa with wife, Emele Sevu, in Rakiraki Village, Fiji. Photo Caroline Klarr, June 2001.



Illustration 6.59. Sakaraia Tabala at home with grandchildren, Pita and Toni, Rakiraki village, Fiji. Photo Caroline Klarr, June 2001.



Illustration 6. 60. Sundar Lal with wife, Maya, at Rakiraki Hotel, Rakiraki, Fiji. Photo Caroline Klarr, June 2001.



Illustration 6.61. *Black Christ and Worshipers with masi* (Fijian bark cloth), St. Francis Xavier's Catholic Church, Naiserelagi, Fiji. Courtesy of Jean Charlot Collection, University of Hawai'i-Manoa, Honolulu, Hawai'i.

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Jean Charlot was a prolific artist. During his lifetime he created over seventy public artworks, including murals and monumental sculptures, over twelve hundred oil paintings, seven hundred and seventy-two original prints, and fifty illustrated books, in addition to his many final drawings, cartoons, watercolors, carvings, metal castings, and ceramics.<sup>565</sup> Charlot stated that he was "primarily a muralist." During his lifetime, he painted fresco murals at forty-five different sites in Mexico, in the United States, and in the Pacific Islands of Hawai'i and Fiji.<sup>566</sup> In Fiji, Charlot realized his desire to create an artistic and religious pilgrimage center through his frescoes, painted in September 1962–January 1963, at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Mission Church, Naiserelagi, Ra District, Fiji Islands. In Fiji, the central triptych, *The Black Christ and Worshipers*, expressed general themes of humanity made meaningful by being visualized within a local Fijian framework. Additionally, the Fijian murals materialized a deeply personal side of the artist, for example, the dedication of the two side altar panels, *St. Joseph's Workshop* and *The Annunciation*, to his wife, Zohmah.

Charlot brought to the Fijian commission his multicultural background, dual French-American citizenship and life experiences, having lived and worked in France, Mexico, the United States and the Pacific Islands. Charlot's interest in and sensitivity toward indigenous cultures motivated him to adopt a serious, scholarly approach to learning local language and cultural history. Charlot then combined this knowledge with his artistic approach in order to create numerous visual and verbal artworks that featured local cultures as primary subject matter. In his Pacific murals, Charlot purposefully illustrated artworks that not only prioritized local cultures as subject matter, but also were directed to local audiences. By taking a tri-cultural perspective, a sophisticated system of aesthetic and symbolic signs emerges from a forty-year-old fresco, making it clear that in his Fijian frescoes Charlot was intent on articulating a social, religious, and political ideology firmly grounded in his own Catholic faith but illuminated by his own cultural history. Painted near the end of his life, the Fijian murals represent Charlot's mature response to art-making and his realization of a sacred

pilgrimage center devoted to the Fijians, local cultures, artistic and religious pilgrims, and ultimately, God.

Charlot's Fijian murals are unique artworks in the Pacific Islands and in the artist's portfolio. They are the only example of the fresco technique in the South Pacific Islands and represent the only example of monumental, public art painted by a French-American artist in the twentieth century. Charlot's Fijian frescoes mark the furthest Western extent of the twentieth century international mural movement, which traces its history to Mexico in the early 1920s. Charlot's Fijian paintings also mark the furthest Western extent of his own artwork in terms of geographic location and cultural subject matter, as the Fijian portfolio represents his only other treatment of non-Hawaiian Pacific culture. Charlot's Fijian murals, paintings, and prints form the only major portfolio or artistic treatments of Melanesians by a Western artist in the historic record.

The Fijian frescoes are outstanding technical and aesthetic achievements in Charlot's artistic career. The murals exemplify Charlot's solutions to the technical challenges of fresco in a remote and humid climate. The paintings represent his visual solutions to the problems inherent with the unification of two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms. In the Fijian murals, Charlot created artworks that not only fulfilled the expectations of his commission, but also were successful in their liturgical purpose; to inspire spiritual devotion to their multicultural audience.

The nature of public art requires a different approach to the artwork, as the artist must necessarily consider the individual viewer as well as "mass" audience. Charlot's public frescoes require, therefore, a consideration of both aesthetic and communication systems because his murals were painted for and directed to a both local and a global community. Charlot's Fijian murals encoded narratives drawn from local cultural history creatively represented in a local framework. The application of semiotics, the study of signs, seems particularly appropriate to the analysis of any of Charlot's public murals.

My examination of Charlot's Fijian frescoes as signs that are indexes, icons, and symbols allowed the consideration of the artworks in relationship to the artist's intentions and to audience responses over time. Index-signs demonstrate physical relationships to the signifier, the art object. The discussion of artistic "style" can be understood from

the analysis of index-signs as physical (material) and formal (technical) properties. This type of approach is based on deductive analysis of the physical evidence present in the actual artworks. The treatment of ethnohistoric texts and visual documents as index-signs facilitated an understanding of the creative process during the historic moment in time they were created, i.e., almost forty years ago. Insight into the synchronic context of the Fijian commission was gained by reviewing letters, diaries, and visual records. These materials provided a basis for understanding the parameters of the commission, the desires of the patron, and Charlot's responses to these guidelines. The analysis of icon- and symbol-signs demonstrated how Charlot articulated his narrative within the framework of local cultures, drawing from indigenous models, native ritual, and local, syncretistic Catholic religion as practiced at St. Francis Xavier's Catholic Mission at Naiserelagi.

Based on a visual analysis of the frescoes as signs, in conjunction with research in the ethnohistoric record and more recent interviews, I have demonstrated how Charlot's Fijian murals have succeeded within their historic and social contexts. Writing on murals in Towards a People's Art, Lucy R. Lippard commented on the requirements of a successful public work of art as follows,

If the skilled muralist continues to probe for the hidden histories, the politics, and underlying tensions of a place and its people, a more real history begins to emerge, based in lived experiences rather than imposed ideas, revealing the stress lines and, ideally, suggesting ways to approach them that will not only present problems but suggest solutions. This approach demands a critical look at place, process and product.<sup>567</sup>

Since the time of their creation, Charlot's Fijian paintings have inspired spiritual contemplation in the lives of the local congregation at Naiserelagi Catholic Mission. Signatures in the guest book document four decades of visitors and religious and artistic pilgrims from all over Fiji and around the world. It is easy to understand how Charlot's religious attitudes, expressed in the Fijian frescoes, may have embodied the concept of a "missionary effort," but the message of the Black Christ was not limited to this meaning or to strictly Catholic audiences. My research indicates that Indo-Fijians responded more to the aesthetic systems of the paintings, while indigenous Fijians

responded to both the aesthetic and symbolic systems. Many Fijians viewed Charlot's frescoes as a source of national and cultural pride on local and national levels. Charlot's murals are the main public artworks and one of the most important cultural sites that attract international visitors to the Ra District, and, therefore, through their participation in the tourist business, generate monies on both national and regional levels.

I believe the Fijian murals represent the culmination of Charlot's life experiences in the form liturgical artworks, perhaps his realization of lifelong goals established as a youthful member of *La Gilde Notre Dame*. Fiji's geographic location, as the "crossroads" of the Pacific, where Melanesia meets Polynesia, makes it a suitable location to establish a pilgrimage center, deep in the heart of the Pacific Islands. Charlot could not help but be reminded of his pilgrimages in Mexico to the Black Christs at Chalma and Mérida upon his arrival at St. Francis Xavier's Catholic Mission. The site in Fiji shared similar features associated with Mexican Black Christ sites, including the isolated location of Naiserelagi, the sacred nature of the surrounding region in Fijian cultural history, the old stone church building, and the nearby geological features including caves and springs. These parallels are likely part of the reason Charlot chose to paint a "Black" Christ.

Charlot's Fijian frescoes embodied ideas integral to the future of the Catholic Church. In his Fijian murals, Charlot's incorporated local models, indigenous objects, and native flora, capturing the religious climate of the early 1960s and the changes brought about by Vatican II, changes that sought to define the future direction of the Church in relation to indigenous cultures in mission areas. While not overtly political, these ideas led to liberation theological movements, especially, Black theology, and, as such, advocated socio-political independence. As a colonized nation, Fiji's future in the 1960s depended on indigenous representation and self-determination. Charlot's *Black Christ*, with its native savior as the head of the Church, symbolized Fijian leadership and, by extension, sovereignty.

Although Charlot's Fijian frescoes were a liturgical commission, the illustration of Fijian Black Christ triptych articulated post-colonial values. A public artwork, the murals transcended time, ethnic, and religious boundaries, extending even into the realms of



national society. As a citizen of the United States, Charlot had pledged his belief in "one people under God." In his Fijian triptych, he promoted the idea of the "peace of God" and a universal humanity by presenting the diversity of creation; he painted the major ethnic groups of Fiji, native Fijian and Indo-Fijian, coming together as equals, regardless of social status, cultural background, or ethnicity. In Fiji, as in Hawai'i, Charlot's murals implicitly empowered Pacific Islanders through his monumental public images. He depicted local peoples within their cultural contexts and represented them as equals, not only in the eyes of God, but also in the eyes of the colonialists who dominated them. In his Fijian frescoes, Charlot painted a Fijian Black Christ and a natural "Paradise" for an audience of viewers in a post-colonial Pacific.

## Endnotes

565 Zohmah Charlot, 1986.

566 Ibid.

567 Lucy R. Lippard, "Towards a People's Art," Foreword in The Contemporary Mural Movement, second edition, edited by Eva Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, and James Cockcroft (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), xiv.

## POSTSCRIPT

*Your love adorns us as a lei. O friend whose memory is ever cherished. It is your lei that bedecks us. Much gratitude! Your name will live forever. O Jean Charlot, for you, a name song, the Beloved champion of the people.*<sup>568</sup>

Jean Charlot died on March 20, 1979, while at his home in Kahala, O'ahu, Hawai'i. At the end of his life, Jean Charlot's body was wrapped in Hawaiian bark cloth and Fijian mats, while the grave was lined with breadfruit leaves, because of the artist's symbolic use of the motif in the Fijian frescoes to symbolize the Sacred Heart. When Charlot died, a Hawaiian elder, Irmgard Aluli, brought a large piece of white *kapa*, Hawaiian bark cloth, to wrap his body for burial.<sup>569</sup> This habit is in keeping with Hawaiian burial practices of wrapping white *kapa* around the bones of deceased ancestors, as they are believed to be sacred containers of the person's *mana* after death. When Zohmah's body was laid to rest in Honolulu, she, too, was wrapped in Fijian bark cloth and mats. Charlot, who conceived himself as sacred art maker, requested that he be buried in a black Benedictine monk's robe that he had received as part of an earlier commission for the Brother's Chapel, St. Benedictine Abbey, Atchison, Kansas.<sup>570</sup>

The future of the Fijian frescoes is currently in the hands of the local Fijians of Naiserelagi and the Catholic Church. Father Eremodo Muavesi, who strongly supported my research and the project to restore the frescoes, is now stationed in Jamaica. Since my project began, both Selestino Naucukidi Koloaia and Maria Gemma have passed away, as has Tuinavitilevu Ratu Bolobolo, chief of Rakiraki village. Currently, there is no one group committed to their continued preservation, thus the future of Charlot's Fijian frescoes remains unknown. I would say the best hope for the future preservation of the frescoes would be if the government of Fiji agreed to list the frescoes as an historic site under the Fijian National Trust, which with the cooperation of the Catholic Church and the Jean Charlot Foundation, would commit to their permanent care. I believe that the paintings would benefit by being listed as a cultural treasure by the Fijian government, as this would ensure that their condition would, in theory, be

assessed, at least on an annual basis, and the preservation of the paintings would be protected under law. An effort should be made to educate the national community as to the historic, artistic, and cultural value of the frescoes, for example, by their inclusion in public school curriculum, to secure their survival for future generations to admire and appreciate.

## Endnotes

<sup>568</sup> Lyrics from *Keoni Kalo: A mele inoa* (name song) for Jean Charlot. Music by Irmgard Aluli; lyrics by Frank Palani Kahala and Hailama Farden. Refer to Appendix V.

<sup>569</sup> John Pierre Charlot, "The Death and Burial of Jean Charlot, February 12, 1898–March 20, 1979," Honolulu Magazine, Volume XIV, Number 6, December 1979, 87.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid.