

SOCIAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

Address by

JEAN CHARLOT

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**Dr. F. J. Halford,
Chairman.
Hon. J. Frank McLaughlin,
Secretary.**

THE CHAIRMAN: The principal essay this evening will be given by Mr. Jean Charlot. Mr. Charlot has been a professor of art in many of our leading universities and colleges. He has published six or seven books and many manuscripts and monograms^{plus} on mural painting. It is interesting to me to note that mural painting is a comparatively young art, being six or seven thousand years of age. The important thing, I think, of a mural painter is that he is a poet of all artists. It give me a great deal of pleasure to call on you, Jack, for your essay.

MR. CHARLOT: Thank you. Those of you who have gone to the university and gone into the administration building have been faced there, I won't say by an ordeal, but a surprise. You were looking perhaps for President Sinclair's office and instead of that you saw a lot of old Hawaiians beating drums and making hula gestures. I hope this didn't frighten you because after a while you must have seen it in the proper mood and they were just pictures. Nevertheless this is a mural and this is a fresco. I think this was the first fresco, true fresco, painted in the Islands as far as I can find out.

And now I have just finished--when I say I have

just finished I mean today, three hours ago--a large fresco of the same type for the Bishop Bank in Waikiki, (Lewers and Kalakaua, if you want to go see it,) and there I followed up the idea of the history of the Islands into relatively modern times, that is, a period that goes from around 1780 to 1820. There, too, some people, I am glad to report, have mistaken the fresco for reality.

My greatest pride, I would say, is that on that large frieze, 73 feet long and all done by hand, there are so many details and one of them is a little dog, and that little dog is minute compared to the whole, huge thing, but a little boy came in the back and looked at it and said "Wah, wah, wah", and I was very pleased. (Laughter) I was very pleased because, even though I am a modern artist, ~~ex~~ artist, a living artist, I think that that particular branch of painting which is called mural painting is specialized in the sense that it does not cater, I would say, to the person who knows art beforehand.

I just now experienced in the field of macadamian nuts the broaching of an entirely new field of knowledge. I had never thought of macadamian nuts before in that sense. And there was an uneasy feeling that perhaps this was not my future, that this was not my vocation. Some people who are

faced by art, I would say, in the raw--let's say modern art, at its most modern--have the uneasy feeling that they are perhaps looking through a keyhole, we could say, into the studio of the artist, that perhaps they shouldn't look, that that kind of art is not for them. This is not true at all.

We know that there are many preparatory stages to things and those things eventually become public property and public boons. Certainly many scientists who have been trying to split the atom were people considered not practical by their neighbors until they found that they were all too practical, I would say. But the mural painter has that particular vocation--and it is not an easy one--to make pictures for buildings in which people will go not for the main purpose of looking for art. The moment we pass the door of the Academy of Art, whatever happens to us we have called on to us. We cannot object because we know that we are going there to look at art. But the people who go to the Bishop Bank and who are interested in getting money or giving money, whatever they do--I have a rather high scaffold there and for the first time I could observe a bank in action under me. It gave me a certain sense of superiority. (Laughter) And I saw people exchanging papers of all color. I couldn't always understand

the goings on. I am not a banker, not a born banker at all.

So they were looking up and seeing me and my friends. They could see us taking some color from some palettes that we had, putting it on the wall, and taking it here and putting it there. And we were looking at each other, at each part of our little world, those on the scaffold and those underneath. And it reminds me of an anecdote which I think is nice. It happened to Diego Rivera. He is not a landscape painter. He is a mural painter. But once in a while he paints a landscape. And he was in Mexico and he was painting a landscape, and he was painting actually a field and the peasant who owned the field. I don't know what the crop was. I don't think that Rivera knew what the crop was. But it was a nice color. And the peasant came over and asked to look over his shoulder where Rivera had the palette and the canvas. And Rivera took the color and put it there, took the color from here and put it there. And he looked at the thing, and every time Rivera moved his hand the man would move his head, looking at the picture, looking at the palette. And Rivera, who has a liking for people, was very proud that the man really was interested in art. He looked very interested in it. And after a while Rivera, somewhat discouraged, asked, "Excuse me,

could I ask you if you like it?" The man said, "I like it fine, but could I ask a question, too? Do you take it from here to put it there, or do you take it from there and put it here?" (Laughter) So you see there is in painting certain manipulations which you could say are also mysterious, the same as in banking or in macadamian nuts (laughter) where we must, of course, bear with each other. We know that those manipulations are part of our craft, whatever our craft is. But the result, of course, is something different.

To put it simply, I would say that the mural painter is bound by his particular vocation to do pictures that tell a story. Now, I know that you people don't think that pictures that tell a story would be a great ^{sin} scene. I am sure that every time you look at the cover of the Saturday Evening Post you enjoy the story. I do. But it just happens that I have gone through a long, I would say 'loop', until I came back to the Saturday Evening Post. I was born an abstract artist. I was proud to be an abstract artist. And when I was young I was very happy when I showed my pictures to people. If they looked at them and said, "Oh, that's fine, that's beautiful. What is it?"--(Laughter)--It made me feel good. I felt I really was on the scaffold a little higher up. And

nowadays it is the other way around. Nowadays I am delighted when a little child looks at my dog and says "Woof, woof". Now, if he would have said "Meouw", I wouldn't have felt so good. (Laughter)

I could describe the picture to you but I will just give you a kind of an estimate. It is 73 feet long and 10 feet high, and it contains over 50 people life size, much cattle and many trees of all kinds, and, as I said, all that is done by hand. Now, the way I describe it, it seems that I am doing things that are competing, I would say, with Mr. Norman Rockwell, the excellent man who does the covers for the Saturday Evening Post.

There are many things that are behind the scene, so to speak, in mural painting which make it a fine art, which is a little different from the art of illustration. And I can try and tell you a little bit of those problems, though probably very few of you will become professional mural painters. I would not advise it even. One of them is that we have to cater, so to speak, to an architecture. It is a very different affair from the man who does an easel picture in what people sometimes call an ivory tower. The man who does his easel picture can do pretty much what he wants with his picture

and to his picture and answers only to his own conscience. But painters have a conscience. Believe it or not, they have a conscience. And the man who takes as his job to paint his mural within an existing architecture must somehow complete, we could say, ^Whis illusion ^Wwith that architecture, ^Wthat that architecture gives him in reality.

Now, here we come to problems which dovetail beautifully with those early problems of mind ^econcerned with abstract painting. I have always been astonished, surprised, that people who look at abstract pictures wonder why people make such things, because man, I would say, is a geometric animal. Excuse the animal, but it is the best way I can describe it. I am thinking now, for example, of the ^{bees}beast. ^{Bees}Beasts are happy if they are born in a hexagonal cell. But the geometry of man is cubic. If we are in a room we want that room to have its walls vertical. We want that room to have its floors horizontal. And we want walls and floors and ceilings to meet at right angles. Why do we want that? Because man is a cubistic animal, we could say. Now, at a fair, for example, there is something called a "Crazy House". You have to pay, I think, 25 cents to go in now. A little while ago it was only 10 cents. But anyhow, for 25 cents you go in there and you get into a

room where the angles are not right, the walls are not vertical, the floors are not horizontal, and you go crazy.

So we have within us certain laws, and those laws are purely geometric and purely abstract. And much more important ^{it is} to us than the skin-deep illusion of the creation, ~~I would say, is~~ the visual illusion. Sometimes I like to look at a man who has been perhaps drinking three martinis, let us say, and something happens to him. He goes this way and he sways that way and that way and that way. What is happening? He is so happy that he is losing that geometric instinct that makes us imitate, we could say, an architectural column and stay straight. And the plumb line that he has inside him rebels at what he is doing. That's all there is. You try it yourselves and find out. (Laughter) You will find out what happens.

Now, the proof of that desire of man to build in geometry is, of course, ~~this~~ architecture. In architecture we have the most rigid kind of geometric art, an art that has made all of the proportions and intervals that, correspond in the world of painting, correspond only to the most intense type of abstract art. So why not accept the one with the other? That I never could under. ^{stand} The poor mural painter

who goes on with that architectural logic is bound to find out that if he followed only his own instinct, his own passion, his own inspiration even, what he will do will not work with architecture. Architecture is geometric, and all mural pictures to be correctly laid out, so to speak, have to have a strong architectural skeleton of geometry in them.

The great periods of mural painting are quite ancient. We could say that we have to go over the ^{hub} best of the Renaissance, the early Renaissance, to men like Giotto, for example, born in the twelve hundreds, to see real mural art at its best. And we have a book of the time by a man called Cennino Cennini, a treatise on mural painting and on fresco painting, which is the very book that I have been studying myself to become a mural painter. We could say that since the 1330's when that book was written there has been no great ^{addition to the} knowledge ^{of} either of true fresco or true mural painting. And we have to ^{use for} learn ~~in~~ our text books ^{that of} from a man who wrote it in the mid-fourteenth century. Well, that book opens up with a paragraph which I think is wonderful, and it says, if you want to paint a fresco painting, gather to yourself a large ruler and a great compass, and this is the beginning.

Now, you see that mural painting is a very different

affair from the type of picture that depends, as I say, on inspiration. You think of painters usually as a romantic type, with long hair. I just had a haircut for the occasion. (Laughter) You think of painters as people with long hair and rather passionately illogical. That type of painter perhaps has been more prominent in modern times than the other one, but the other one paints in nearly a mathematical manner with geometry in which a ^{wall} man has to be measured at intervals as he gathers his knowledge through science. There is a science of painting connected with expression and proportion which is essential to the mural painter.

Now, in this case it was my job, and perhaps especially in the bank, to do something where those bones, that structure, that inner structure of the painting would not be seen, so that anybody going in and looking at my dog will say "Woof, woof". And that's all I want. I want you to look at Captain Cook and look at Kamehameha and you see them. They are right there. But behind this--and this is what makes the picture good--there is a relationship to that type of abstract and geometric art which we can call, rightly and proudly, for my generation, modern art.

So you see that the mural painter has a tension

created in him by the two poles, I would say, of result. One of them is to give you a story. And I sincerely think that mural painting should give the passer-by a story. And the other one is to establish a structure as vital and as logical as the architecture within which the picture will exist. And if the picture is well-done, it will be a living organism, something that will go on living long after the painter himself has stopped doing so.

Perhaps another angle on the picture and one that could be understood is the technique of the picture. I told you that this picture was painted in fresco or true fresco or buono fresco as we call it, which is the Italian word for it. It is a technique in painting, one of the two techniques of painting in antiquity, in Greece and in Rome. People painted their pictures in fresco or in encaustic which was a wax painting done with hot fire. It is good for murals, too.

Fresco painting, I would say, is a heroic kind of painting because you have to build up your wall day by day and on the fresh mixtures of lime and sand paint as long as the mortar is wet. When the mortar dries, your pigment will not adhere anymore to the mortar and it will be useless to go on painting.

Perhaps the last great exponent of fresco painting was Michelangelo, and Michelangelo broke a very long friendship with another painter, Sebastiano del Piombo, because when he was going to decorate the Sistine Chapel del Piombo was bold enough to suggest oil painting, and Michelangelo told him that oil painting is good ^{only} for women. I am afraid that Michelangelo meant this not as a compliment; but he said that fresco is really for men. Now, I am not flexing my muscles in front of you, but there is something in fresco painting that requires both a certain wisdom and a certain boldness that depends entirely on the man.

Some of the few things that we know of Michelangelo in his own lifetime were written by a man who was the Portuguese ambassador and who went to the court of Isabella and other Italian princesses, and he reported what Michelangelo said at tea, when he went to have tea, pink tea, with the princesses; and he came in in his dirty clothes, riding down from the scaffold of the Sistine Chapel, and he was rather sullen until the ambassador started talking about painting. Then Michelangelo told him a few things that were very important indeed, that were published in his lifetime. Some people doubt this thing as an invention of the ambassador. I think it is true

for one little detail. When the hour for the tea happened, Michelangelo was nowhere to be seen, and the princess sent her emissary everywhere to find the painter and eventually found him so engrossed in a conversation with his plasterer that he had forgotten the rendezvous with the princess.

Now, this is so typical of the attitude of the fresco painter that I am sure that the rest of the things that our Portuguese ambassador said were true.

For the fresco painter the most important man in the world, I would say, and the one he depends upon, is not the art patron, though art patrons are mighty useful, too. (Laughter) But it is the plasterer. I had a little experience in Mexico. I came there fresh from Paris, fresh from the school of Paris, and I was given a large wall. I was in my early twenties, and, as all young men, I felt I was going to do something magnificent, something incredible. I was going to be as good as Picasso. At the time that was as far as I could imagine. So I climbed on my scaffold. My plasterer had come in the morning. He was a nice Indian with his big straw hat, and he had taken off his hat very much in the Muskateer fashion that you see in Cyrano, and he said "Maestro", which was a nice way of addressing me. I felt I was a master. He said, "Maestro,

what do you wish?" "Well," I said, "you put plaster here and I will paint it". And I painted all through the evening and through the night, and around midnight the plaster was dry, but I felt I had done up there in that little corner something as good as Picasso. So I went to bed and the next day I rushed to my rendezvous with my plasterer at six o'clock in the morning. He had slept all night long. He was very fresh and rosy, and he looked at my picture and I looked at my picture. I wasn't quite sure it was as good as I had thought it was the night before. And he said, "Oh, Maestro, you had a headache; yes, I ^{no} know". And I looked at it and said, "Maybe". So he said, "Well, what do you wish today?" I said, "You put another piece here". Well, the next piece he put on wasn't put on as carefully as the piece he had put on the day before. He had decided perhaps I wasn't really a master, perhaps I was a fake. And I had a much harder time painting on that bad plaster than I had painting on the good plaster. So this time I was being busy being as good as Picasso but I was also busy in kind of pleasing my plasterer the next morning. And little by little that became my most intense desire. My most intense need was, in fact, to please my plasterer the morning after. And eventually we had nice morning conversations and he called me "Maestro"

again. So I felt good again. And my friends had the same experience, and this is the way probably, as ^{it} has been called, that the Mexican mural renaissance was born, thanks to our plasterers. (Laughter)

So you see that there is a craft to fresco painting, and that craft is all important, and the painter who ^{rules} elbows ^{with} against his plasterer on the same scaffold cannot feel the same as the painter who works alone in his studio, we could say, with curtains drawn so he doesn't hear the noise in the street.

Another experience of that type related, I would say, to fresco is a little different. I was painting a large mural as usual on my scaffold, and there was a wall on the side. It was a new building and that wall was not to be painted by me. It was to be painted by a house painter, a group of house painters. And they put their scaffold up. Well, I knew my scaffold was a fine art scaffold and their ^S was a house painter's scaffold. They look very much the same. And they came in. They were in overalls. I was in overalls. I was beginning to get worried because we looked so much alike, and when we started painting we looked quite alike. The only difference was that I had a little brush and they had the large brushes. It was one of those large square brushes that oozes

paint and the movement is quite like this, a large movement. And those men were painting wonderfully. They had painted as much as I had done in the last month in one morning. Of course, it was plain color, very well put on, though. But they were worried about me. They were talking together about me and looking at me. I was right at the angle, close to them. And at last one of them came to me and he offered me his brush and said, "Don't you think that perhaps with a large brush you can do it better than the way you are doing?"

And there also I learned something. I learned that the relationship between fine art and house painting is not as widely different as some people would like to make it. And there is a craft to both. I tried myself in the craft of the house painter. I was actually painting a closet, and I covered myself completely with paint as I was painting the ceiling. And I realized that those house painters had been greater artists because they didn't even put paint on their overalls. (Laughter)

Well, the fresco painter, then, is a craftsman. He is also, of course, something else. There is something in fresco painting of the type I hope that I am doing, and the type that was done in olden times, that escapes the connection

with craft, and that goes directly in what we call rather mysteriously the fine arts. Today while I was hearing the speeches that came before mine, I was drawn by what was ^{hanging} behind the speakers. I was drawn by this very beautiful piece. And before sitting down I had gone and looked at it from very near. I found that it is a fresco. I found that it is a fresco picture painted at least a thousand years ago or more. And there is an attraction in there which survives the painter, which survives the architecture, and that gives to a fragment like this one a great spiritual value. There is in there, we could say, an accumulation of energy or spiritual quality that has been put in there by the painter. And that has been put there perhaps by the painter while he was preoccupied with problems of craft while he was not thinking in terms of anything else but in terms of craft. And nevertheless that accumulation of the spiritual quality happened, and every time we look at that picture we get a certain jolt, we get certain energy from looking at it.

There is a story from antiquity relating to a great painter whose work, like the work of all the Greek painters, we have lost, but it is a rather interesting story. It is said that this painter was so famous and that the things that he did

were so beautiful that he stopped selling them. They were priceless and he would give them and would sign them, in Greek, of course, sign them not with his name but with this saying: "He whose work is divine". And everybody looking at that signature, "He whose work is divine", knew that that man had done that picture. Well, there was a joker or a practical mind, a man who, by changing a few letters in the inscription changed it to something else, something very different. That meant the man who shakes a hot stick. I told you that in encaustic that is done with fire. You have to use irons and you have to heat those irons. And the man who looked at the painter, at his craft, with those hot irons, all he could see and all he could write down to describe the process is, "He who shakes a hot stick". But the man who understood the spiritual quality of the art could properly see there something that was divine.

So we have always those two poles, always that tension in the fine arts and in the painter himself, that of the craftsman who is a manual worker and sometimes being slightly ridiculous by turning his back to the world and with his nose to the wall all his lifetime, and then the other side, the spiritual content of his art that has to do with something else. Now, who is the artist? And if he does things that can

keep their value--and I don't mean market value, though market value is something, too--but their spiritual value through the centuries, that man must have an importance of a kind. What kind of a member of the community is he? Some of you I know have an idea of the artist as being someone who is not interested in social matters. Those of you who resent a little bit the artist would say that he is anti-social. I think that none of those things is true or right. But perhaps within the lifetime of the artist, within his slice of time, so to speak, his attitude is that of a man who is not preoccupied directly with the problems of the society he lives in, because what he does he knows that ^{it} will be projected out of time into the future to become a living value in that future when he himself will not be there.

The artist has his own set of values, I would say, like any man who is deeply interested in what he does. And they are not the same. They are different from those of most other people. For example, we take a man who was obviously connected with society, such as a painter, a man like Velazquez, who was a court painter to the King of Spain; he was paid by the king to make a portrait of the king and the princess and the family in general. We would now have a court photographer,

but there were no photographers then and it had to be done by hand, and Velazquez had to do those hand-made, so to speak, photographs in oil painting. How he managed at the same time to be a great master is a difficult thing to understand because he was really on a leash, so to speak, to the king, but he managed. And when we look at his pictures we can perhaps realize how the artist, as I said, had his own set of values greatly different from that in this case, for example, of the courtiers or perhaps the king.

I remember a picture that Velazquez did of the little crown prince, who was, of course, a very pampered child. He was to die very young. And the picture I refer to is a portrait of the little crown prince when he was eighteen months old. That isn't very old to be marshal of the army. He was grand marshal of the Spanish army. And they had made a little armor for him that kind ^{of} came to his waist, and he had the grand ribbons around his waist showing he was marshal, and a baton, one of those sticks, in his hand to make him look important. And Velazquez painted the picture, which was slightly ridiculous, whatever papa or mama or the painter tried to do; he had another character who was a dwarf who was there as a kind of a clown to amuse the little prince. And besides the

dwarf, for no other reason, or no better reason, because Velazquez had started life as a still life painter and loved to paint still life, he put a dish with a few black olives in it, or maybe a few apples in it. And when you look at the picture you realize that the scale of interest of the painter looking at the world was thoroughly reverse of that of the king and the courtiers. When he painted the little man, he just was bored to death and the head of the little prince is a blur. Of course, he wouldn't stand still. But still, it is just a kind of a blur. And when he comes to the dwarf, he lavishes on that dwarf so much more knowledge and so much more painting passion than he had lavished on the baby prince. But where he really is at his greatest and really paints at his most beautiful is in the still life that is in the corner.

So Velazquez had a set of values, we could say, that saw the world upside down. First the apple, then the clown, and then the prince. Well, of course, if any of that came in the conversation of the man as he was talking with other people, they perfectly well knew that he was crazy, which simply meant that they knew that his ideas of values were entirely different from theirs. Nowadays, after a few centuries, we realize that Velazquez put in his pictures so

much more than what he was paid to do, so much more than the portrait of those poor people. We don't mind now if the nose of those people went up or down, or their eyes were blue or brown. But we realize that Velazquez put in his pictures some of the spirit of Spain at the moment when the Spanish nationality was in formation, and that single-handed, as a single man, he helped realize what we call now the Spanish spirit which has become the strength of the Spanish nation.

So you see, if we look at Velazquez in his lifetime, we realize that the man, we could say, is anti-social, that his ideas are different. If we look at him over the range of centuries, we realize that he did more to build up the society of Spain and the feeling of the nation in Spain than all the armies of the King of Spain put together. So we must go a little slowly when we criticize artists and remember that what they are doing is not too much for our time. It comes out of our time and will become functional perhaps a hundred years or two hundred years from now.

One of my experiences in New York was to know Joseph Duveen, the art dealer, who was quite a character himself, and a few of those people to whom he sold old masters for tremendous fortunes--a man like ^{Mellon} Mandel, a man like Jules

Bache. Those men are men who had been eminently successful in many things, we could say, that exist in time; that is, within their own lifetime they were absolutely at the apex of things. They had accumulated fortunes and power and everything that a man can acquire in this world, and at the end--and I am speaking directly from my knowledge--they were getting awfully worried about what was going to happen to them later on. A man can be a king in Wall Street while he lives but he does not remain a king afterwards. So it was really touching to see how those men suddenly realized that in the fine arts they had the way of living longer, we could say, than their human lives, and they started buying from Duveen those old masters and they paid, we could say, through the nose. That is a good American way of saying it. Duveen did not think anything of selling a small picture by Vermeer, the Dutch master, for a million dollars to Mr. Mellon. When Mr. Mellon said, perhaps it is a little expensive, Duveen had a ^{stock answer = "}store canvasser say it is not expensive, it is priceless, it is practically nothing, a million dollars ^{for} ~~is~~ something that is priceless. And I saw in the apartment of Mr. Mellon that little Vermeer, which is six inches by eight inches on a little easel on his piano, and it was one of the greatest experiences of my life to come face to

face with that million dollars transformed into a priceless thing.

2 If we look, of course, at Vermeer himself at the end of his life, after he was dead, just after his death, somebody came from the King of France to buy a Vermeer, and his widow didn't have any Vermeers because she had sold them all. She needed the money to eat. But she said, perhaps the baker who was giving us the bread has a Vermeer; I remember my husband gave him a picture in exchange for bread.

So you see, there are all sorts of discrepancies, so to speak, between the live artist and the dead artist. But it is a truth that there is more power in a little picture by Vermeer than in all the power that Mr. Mellon had actually accumulated through a lifetime.

Now, the artist himself does not know those things always, or does not want to remember those things always, we could say. But he pretty much feels that he has his place in society. As I say, if not in his generation, if he is not accepted by his generation, then with a coming generation. And I could perhaps finish with an anecdote which strangely enough does not relate to art, but to mysticism, that I always like to remember in relation to art. I told you that art packs

a spiritual intensity and as such it can be related, the painter can be related, so much more to the holy man, to the man who really ^{attempts} attends holiness, be it in India or in Europe or elsewhere, than to people in other activities. And the double facet of both professions I think is well represented in a little episode that happened in Rome at the end of the eighteenth century. There was there a man who later on was a canonized saint. He was a ^{Frenchman} freeman who had left the world, had left all the concepts, we could say, of the ordinary being in the world and passed his life in rags kneeling at the door of a church, and he was there with other beggars; the only difference being that he did not beg, ^{and} as some people would give him a penny here and there. And he managed to live on that penny. But when he was not kneeling at the door of the church, he went inside the church and there he went into something that we will call ecstasies. He was transported and he had, we could say, physical effects of these ecstasies such as groaning and swaying around. And little by little the people in the neighborhood around knew the man, expected him, knew he was a very holy man, accepted him for what he was and what he was proved to be later. But there was a woman who came to that particular church and she saw that man in the back of the church groaning

and she rushed to the man who had the broom and was sweeping the church and said, "Here is ^a the beggar and the bum is sick." And he said, "It isn't that the bum is sick, it is that the saint is in ecstasy."

And so you see, those are the two facets of certain professions. And among them is that of the painter. So when you look at a modern picture, even if you feel that there is something going on in there that to you perhaps looks unhealthy, just wait a moment before you say that the bum is sick because perhaps it is that the saint is in ecstasy. Thank you.

(Applause)
