

THE BACHMAN HALL FRESCOES

University of Hawaii



Two monumental frescoes by muralist Jean Charlot dominate the upper and lower lobbies of Bachman Hall on the University of Hawaii campus. The lower one, completed in 1949, was a gift to the University from the classes of 1949, 1950, 1951, and 1952; the upper one was made possible through an anonymous donor and was completed in 1953.

Professor Charlot used a true fresco technique in the execution of the two murals. This involves the application of color on wet plaster, a method used by Michaelangelo in his works on the walls and ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, which had greatly influenced the mind of the youthful Charlot. Charlot was the first modern artist in the Americas to work in this medium.

The artist himself, writing about the murals, explains them in the following way:

THE LOWER MURAL

"All works of art are based on both fact and mood. Even though the lower mural contains many details relating to life in old Hawaii, it should not be considered an archeological or historical reconstruction. It is rather an attempt to recapture the mood that led ancient Hawaiians to reach a true balance in their culture between man and his strong natural habitat in the Islands. Ancient Hawaiians lived in a stone age of their own. While present culture is mechanically powerful, this balance between man and nature has not been improved upon since that time.

"The left motif of the mural, that of a luau, treats of the physical theme, while that on the right, the hula, refers to the spiritual. The gesture of the dancers is that of the opening of a dance in honor of the dead. The arms and heads raised heavenward illustrate the preoccupation with the spirit. It also suggests that though the scene takes place in the past, Hawaiian culture was already the fruit of ancient tradition.

“The moment chosen is that when Captain Cook’s ship approached the Islands, but as yet had not been sighted. The spearmen in action are not engaged in war but only in one of the many war games. One should remember that though the Hawaiians knew and used the bow and arrow, they used it only for rat-hunts, since its long-range possibilities were considered unfair and tabooed for war.

“Taken in conjunction, the two lateral panels—man, woman and child—represent the family, then as now the basic element of society.

“A wilfull anachronism is the still-life of books and diplomas at the base of the left palm tree. It is, like the ship in the distance, a suggestion of things to come. Nowadays, with the expansion of book learning and the corresponding recession of the importance of natural things, the balance achieved between the two realms in old Hawaii is not valid any longer. This mural, then, has as its function the perpetuation through art of the values of a vanished culture, on the very campus that stands at the center of the new order of things.

“The mural is painted in true fresco, a mural technique which was known and used already in antiquity, and which preceded by many centuries the use of oil painting. Part of the propriety of a mural is its union with the architecture.

“In this case, the facts considered are that the right half of the wall can be seen at long range across the length of the court, while the left half is seen only at close range. This suggested two themes rather than a centralized one. Also considered was the fact that the staircase in front of the wall creates a strong diagonal movement which had to be counteracted by opposite diagonals in the composition.

“The low position of the mural allows a full range of perspective effects as one looks up to the

top figures and down on the lower ones. A specialized perspective effect was sought in the imudigger, who is placed lower than any of the other figures, in that the illusion of space and bulk remains true even at close range."

THE UPPER MURAL

"One of the suggestions made during the painting of the first mural was that an excellent theme for a new work would be campus life in Hawaii, with special emphasis on the various racial strains living and blending in harmony. This suggestion was carried out in the mural on the second floor of Bachman Hall.

"On one of the first days after my arrival in Hawaii, I assisted at commencement exercises. There were, of course, features similar to those one expects of such an occasion at mainland universities, but there were also many features that struck me as peculiarly Hawaiian—in fact, as a survival of the spirit of ancient Hawaii.

"I noted the academic procession along the jungle growth that forms a tropical background for the stage of Andrews Outdoor Theatre; the parents with leis ready to give to the graduated students; the mixture of hoods of academic character and of leis of a more carefree significance; above all, the many races working together toward one unified goal. All these impressed me deeply.

"Later commencements added other details and I started making sketches of small things, such as the strewn petals of discarded leis, together with exploded photographic bulbs, that litter the lawn the day after. As the small data accumulated, the larger lines formed themselves.

"As always with murals, the architectural setup is all-important and determines, in great part, the composition. A mural is not static, but is made to be seen along the normal lines of traffic within the building. As the first sight one has of the sec-

ond floor wall occurs as one ascends the stairs, this gave me the idea of painting the group of students who, after commencement, ascend the stairs of Andrews Outdoor Theatre. The processional of professors, somewhat lost in the jungle of palm trees and hala trees, forms the background. The crowd seated in the amphitheatre is suggested in its various costumes, and the parents waiting, leis in hand, each for his own student—son, daughter, or husband—form a frieze that is not intended as realistic, but is instead suggestive of an Egyptian frieze. Grandparents of Chinese or Japanese stock frankly dress in native dress, with both manners and types diluted in the next generation. A child out of school has hid behind one of the entrance gates to look at the spectacle, thinking of the days when he too will go to college. Two gardeners, that age makes immune to enthusiasm, look at the vivid scene with philosophical detachment.

“Typical of our campus, birds mingle freely with humans, and a flock of mynah birds, strewn along the lower edge of the mural, repeat the slightly stylized theme of the waiting parents on another scale, silhouetted in dark gray against the vivid green of the lawn.

“I feel that the two murals together constitute a whole more meaningful than either of them alone. The first mural has a certain epic intent, certainly unlike the Hawaii we know today, but I do believe related to the Hawaii to be found in ancient chants that tell of the heroes of old. The second mural, in contrast, is made with elements that are an everyday occurrence on our campus and portrays the very same people that work, or pass through, the building where it is painted. As the work proceeded, it was an encouragement to see the interest with which everybody, from janitor to president, followed its progress, giving advice that was all the more interesting to me as it was not given from

the overspecialized point of view of the professional artist. One must remember that a mural painting is painted for the people at large and not for a few collectors or critics. The fresco painter cannot afford the speculations and researches that some easel painters pursue in the isolation of their studio. To tell a story clearly, and to tell it in architectural terms that will blend with the existing architecture, is the purpose of the mural painter."

THE ARTIST

Jean Charlot was born in Paris in 1898, and in his youth he learned to sketch and paint in the studio of his artist-mother. After the first World War, he moved to Mexico, and there worked with such artists as Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco, and Guerrero on the murals of the Ministry of Education buildings in Mexico City. His murals now grace the walls of churches and public buildings around the world, but his talents do not stop here—he is painter, lithographer, illustrator, and author as well. One of his books, *Three Plays of Ancient Hawaii*, has been published by the University of Hawaii Press. Former director of the Colorado Springs School of Fine Arts, Dr. Charlot joined the faculty of the University of Hawaii in 1949 and now holds a senior professorship in art.