

Art teacher Louise Rago continues her interviews with famous living artists with a visit to a mural painter, Jean Charlot. Teachers will be interested in his reasons for wanting to continue as a teacher.

Louise Elliott Rago

A VISIT WITH JEAN CHARLOT

When Jean Charlot is not teaching he is usually working on a mural. Charlot is one of the most outstanding muralists in our country today. Currently he is on leave from the University of Hawaii where he has been a professor of art for the past eleven years. Mr. Charlot is living in New York City this year with his family and working on various commissions in and around the metropolitan area. He is enjoying being in the states this year, and in addition to working on murals he has been invited to lecture at various colleges and universities—including Syracuse University and St. Benet's in Chicago. Mr. Charlot is very soft-spoken and unassuming, but yet firm and deliberate in his views. Being a fresco painter it has been necessary for him to travel considerably throughout the United States, Mexico and Hawaii. But he takes it in stride and casually mentioned that his family for over a hundred years shuttled between France, Mexico and the United States, so this is nothing new for him. Mr. Charlot was born in Paris. His mother was a painter and for him painting was just the natural thing to do. Mr. Charlot admires women painters greatly providing they retain their femininity. Having taught at the Art Student's League in New York for several years in the thirties, in addition to having various other teaching posts, I felt Mr. Charlot's reaction to the controversial issue regarding the artist-teacher would be most helpful to us.

Louise Rago: Mr. Charlot, do you have any particular opinions, convictions or beliefs on this age-old problem of whether the artist is a teacher—or whether the teacher is an artist—or can he be both? I know I for one would be most eager to hear from a man with your many years of experience as both an artist and a teacher.

Jean Charlot: The artist never doubted he could teach. Perhaps the hierarchy in education doubted the artist. Of course, theories differ. However, I believe, it is the coming together of the student and teacher as persons. The all



Jean Charlot, famous mural painter and professor of art.

why people create



Jean Charlot at work on a mural. On leave from his post as professor of art at the University of Hawaii, he is working on commissions in New York City, and will teach in the 1960 summer session of the University of Minnesota.

important moment is when the teacher forgets he is a teacher and the student forgets he is a student.

Louise Rago: Of course, by now you know that this series is on the "Why." Many people have been interested in the creative process since the time of Aristotle, and naturally I am curious about the perennial question of why you believe you create.

Jean Charlot: (Mr. Charlot thought very carefully and then replied.) There is a Spanish and Mexican proverb that interprets my belief perfectly. "If you itch you have to scratch."

Louise Rago: As a teacher, I am sure, you are aware of the many problems connected with curriculum planning. If you were able to teach one course only—what course would you feel would be most beneficial to your students?

Jean Charlot: In addition to studio classes the teaching of the history of art is indispensable. It is much more than just learning dates. A great part of art can be taught visually. It is a life-long study, but, as a teacher, I believe, students can get from the history of art a sense of respect for what has been done, and it allows them to better understand what is being done today.

Mr. Charlot illustrated the artist as a craftsman as against the artist as a genius. He maintains that nothing will take the place of hard work and if one happens to be a genius all the better. Mr. Charlot feels more at ease with religious subject matter. For him art is always religious. "Art is to make the invisible visible. That is the whole point of art."

Louise Rago: Mr. Charlot—could you tell us what is the outstanding feature of your work?

Jean Charlot: I try to make anything as much of a mural as possible in an age when emphasis is on abstractions and experimentalism.

Louise Rago: What would you say are unique problems of a mural painter?

Jean Charlot: The mural painter cannot work alone as the easel painter. He must consider a wider audience. He also has to collaborate with architects. A knowledge of architecture is most important.

Mr. Charlot believes that experimenting in painting is inconclusive. It should be assimilation mothered by tradition. Students hang on the coat tails of what has happened before they go on their own. From Charlot's experience as a teacher he claims that young student-painters today react against abstraction because they are tired of it. The pioneers in abstractions are in their late forties and fifties, and are now ready for a change. There is more union between young painters and humanism, rather than young painters to just shape, color or form. There have always been moments in the history of art when abstraction was on top and other moments when representation was on top.

Louise Rago: Are there any abstract painters whom you particularly admire?

Jean Charlot: Definitely. I admire Franz Kline because there is a certain simplicity in his work and he is able to make a decision. It may come from my own feeling of architecture. I look for architecture in painting. The abstraction in marble in the Corning Glass Building on 56th Street and Lexington by Joseph Albers is an outstanding piece of work. Joseph Albers represents the Bauhaus School of Geometric Abstraction. Concept is all important.

Jean Charlot worked very closely with Diego Rivera for twelve years. He has twice been a recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship. Mr. Charlot claims that teaching is the nicest job an artist can have because you can help other people who will be artists. It keeps you in touch with the young. To be with the young and to see why they are going away in various directions, and to see what they consider valid or invalid is an education for the teacher. Mr. Charlot admits without reservation that he has been influenced by the great muralists such as Giotto to Michaelangelo. Past masters remain our contemporaries through their work.

Charlot has written or illustrated over sixty-five books and portfolios. His murals, which number well over thirty-five, include "Massacre in the Temple," Escuela Preparatoria, Mexico City, 1922-23. "Relation of Man and Nature in Old Hawaii," University of Hawaii, 1949. "Hopi Snake Dance," Arizona State University, 1951. "Fourteen Panels Symbolizing the Fine Arts," St. Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1956. "Trinity and Episode of Benedictine Life," St. Benedict's Abbey, Atchison, Kansas, 1959.

Louise Elliott Rago, author of series, teaches art in the Wheatley School, East Williston, Long Island, New York. The inspiration for this series of visits with contemporary artists came through a discussion at New York University, where Mrs. Rago has been working on an advanced degree.