

CHARLOT TALKS ABOUT HIMSELF AND HIS MURAL

"... a born mural painter is helpless without a wall..."

Jean Charlot

Jean Charlot was born in France in 1898, became a front-line officer in the field artillery of the Foreign Legion, fighting in World War I, and in his early twenties left for Mexico. His family had been rooted there for a hundred years or more.

In 1920 his work was shown at an exhibition of liturgical arts in the Louvre. A reviewer commented then: "This artist deserves to be known as a fresco painter..." The work he had submitted had been destined to grace a church, but upon completion of the drawings, the plans were cancelled. In his book "Mexican Mural Renaissance" Charlot says: "This first heart-break at the realization that a born mural painter is helpless without a wall was not to be the last. The experience was instrumental, however, in inducing me to leave postwar France for Mexico."

In Mexico he teamed with such muralists as Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros, to become the masters of the fresco technique in the rebirth of Mexican mural painting during the early twenties.

In 1949 Ben Norris, Chairman of the Arts Department at the University of Hawaii invited Charlot to Honolulu to teach and to paint a mural in the University's administration building. Of his decision to stay in Hawaii he says: "I guess I liked it here—I'm still here."

Relaxing on his lanai at the Charlot home in Kahala, he talked for a while about himself, his work and the mural at First National's Waikiki branch: *The old mural was done in 1951. After fifteen years did you find it difficult to recreate it?*

Not difficult. But it did give me a curious feeling of reliving a past adventure. The difficult part of the task was researching what the people in the mural actually looked like—and that was all done long before the first mural was painted. Some of the characters were extremely difficult to trace. For instance, the botanist De Chamisso, who is shown holding a fern in his hand. I eventually wrote to universities in Germany for photographs of him. When the pictures came they depicted him at 16 years of age and again at 54. Somewhere in the years between he came to Hawaii. I had to deduce from these how he must have looked. This time, I didn't have these

kinds of worries, although I did research on the new section.

How did you feel about cutting up the old mural?

There was no other way. It was 70 feet long and very much like marble. It would have surely broken if anyone had attempted to move it intact. There were many ideas of what to do—imbedding the segments in concrete was one—but the final solution was the proper one.

What preparations were made before it was cut?

Full color pictures were taken, and tracings made of the entire work. The bank wanted me to recreate the original as closely as possible; they did not ask for an entirely new fresco.

Is the new bank lobby as good a location for a mural as the old?

I think it's much better. The old branch lobby was smaller and narrower. People couldn't get far enough away from it to see it well. The new branch is more spacious. Following the serpentine curve, the eye can travel along its length; they can take in the whole work and this is as it should be.

Are there any changes in the large section?

A few. In the original, the strip along the bottom was about a foot high and on it was written a legend in the Hawaiian language. In the new mural, this strip has been reduced to only an inch or two. And the legend was removed. It now has a feeling of lightness. Because it actually is suspended from the ceiling, and not a part of the wall, it gives the sensation of floating—like a curving tapestry. The bottom heaviness is gone, though people may not notice this right away.

Also, there is a small section at the extreme right of the large piece that is new.

What problems did you encounter in adding the new 28-foot section which hangs separately?

It shows a high chief returning from a visit to Captain Cook's ship. Again, I did considerable research on the subject matter. I began by drawing the main figure in the canoe from life,

using a model. Then came the stylization to make it conform with the rest of the fresco. Otherwise, it would look as if it was just "stuck on" at the last moment—and not be a part of the whole work. The canoe itself required more research for authenticity. I studied a model at the Bishop museum, and then the double canoe that's moored on the Ala Wai, to check the validity of the lashings, and so forth.

But the canoe presented a unique problem. Because the mural hangs ten feet above the viewer's eye, the perspective must be correct; as if you were looking upwards ten feet at the bottom of a canoe. Now I wasn't able to do that too easily—get that far below a canoe and begin drawing. So again I had to pretty much invent how this must look.

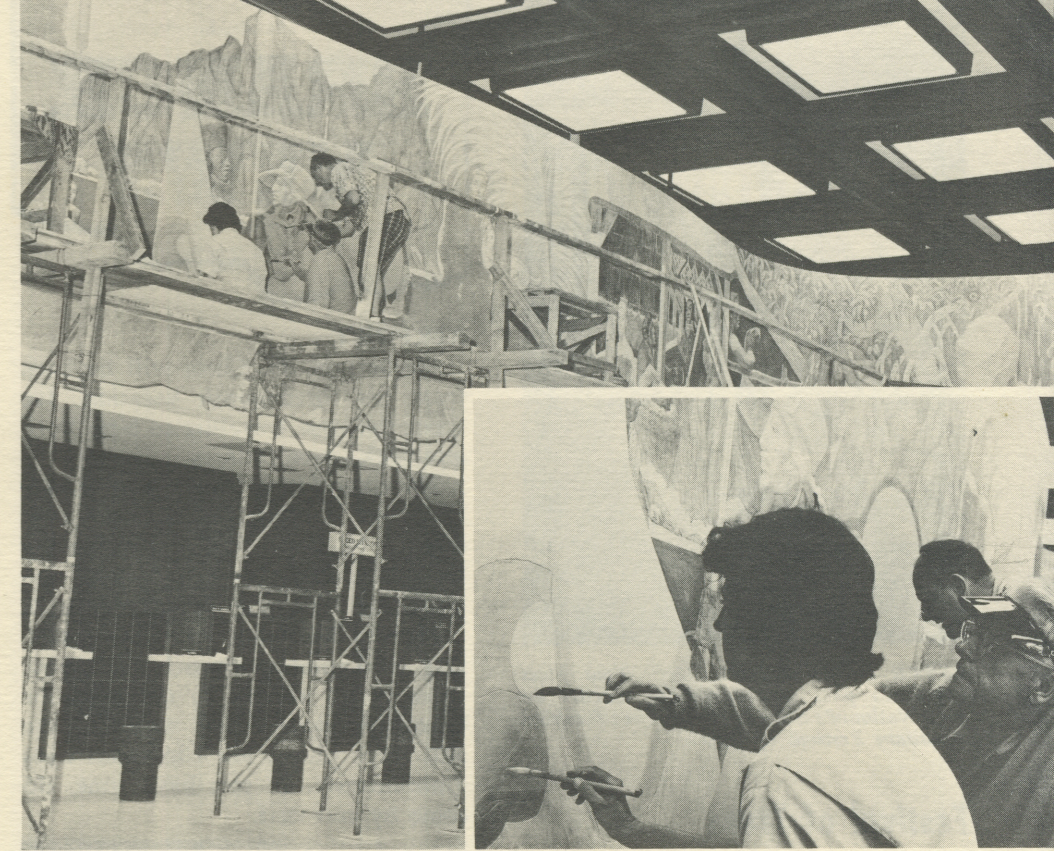
How do you feel about painting on such a massive surface, as compared with easel painting?

That's like asking the man who built my high pitched roof if he likes working up that high... Now myself, I'd probably fall off. But that's *his* profession. Mine is fresco murals—and the bigger the wall the better. If I had my choice the bank mural would be even larger!

The whole concept of painting murals is so different from oil painting on canvas. The problem becomes one of painting in complete harmony with the architecture of the building itself. You don't "emote," as it were, like you hear so much about with an oil painter. One can't just climb up on the scaffolding and begin putting color on, as it pops to mind. It must be all carefully planned, drawn and redrawn. It's more of a craft.

What about the surface?

In the fresco technique the plaster must be still wet when applying the pigment. So it's important to plaster a section just large enough to complete in one day. I've always used materials found locally. The plaster used in the Waikiki mural is made up of volcanic rock (which has been crushed to almost an ash consistency), lime and a little cement. The reason we chose volcanic rock is that when broken it



THIS MAZE of scaffolding supported muralist Jean Charlot and his helpers through the weeks of painting at First National's Waikiki branch. Plastic was fastened below the painters to protect customers from falling droplets of pigment. At right, Charlot points out a detail to his assistant Evelyn Beveridge. Brother James Roberts is at work in background.

has a crystal shape, as opposed to regular sand, which has more of a rounded shape. Because of this, it has a better binding quality; it has more surfaces.

Tsukasa Tanimoto is the mason that did the work for me at Waikiki—in fact he has done all my plastering—clear back to 1949. He knows exactly what is needed and is highly skilled. Each morning he comes in and plasters a small section. After I've completed the day's work, he scrapes away the excess plaster—right up to the edge of a figure, for example—and lays new plaster right next to it, without a seam showing—a perfectly smooth surface. He's very good at it.

While working on the Mission Church mural in Fiji, I had to fish sand from the river bed to get the material I needed. In Hawaii, it's not so difficult.

When did you paint your first fresco mural?

In 1923 on the walls of the Preparatoria School building in Mexico. One of the large ones I did is in a church in Farmington, Michigan—it has 1600 square feet of surface. Another large one is in the Benedictine Abbey in Atchison, Kansas. The new

one at the bank, is not the largest I've ever done. But it is the largest in the State, I believe.

Can you tell us about your two assistants?

They're both accomplished artists in their own right. Brother James Roberts first assisted me with the Farmington fresco. He's of the Marianist order, specializing in liturgical art. By the way, he is currently working on a fresco of his own at the Holy Family Church near the airport.

Evelyn Beveridge is a painter and an enamelist and does bronze castings. Her specialty is metalwork. We're currently working together on the 32 episodes of the life of Christ to be installed in the Punahou chapel doors. I'm doing the drawings and Evelyn is working them out in 20" bronze panels—an important and exciting undertaking that may be finished some time next year.

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Retired this year from the University of Hawaii faculty, Charlot is no longer teaching. But his work continues, as "retirement" has never been part of an artist's life. And for a muralist, there are many walls still waiting to be decorated.

