



By **JEAN
CHARLOT**

ART

Now showing at the Academy . . .

At the Academy of Arts, opening Friday, there is a retrospective show by the Jean Charlot. The show covers a span of 50 years of art making.

I hesitated to write this review. Its title could be "Charlot on Charlot". It suggests a man engrossed in talking to himself, at times a useful pastime but one better indulged in as a game of solitaire.

True, Hamlet's soliloquy is a glorious exception to the rule, but I am no Hamlet.

To look at my own retrospective spread over half a century is like thumbing through the pages of a half-forgotten diary. I could hardly pretend to rate and grade my life work objectively.

A sombrero? A helmet?

A bug knows more about itself than the most learned of entomologists. The remark is not mine but Mark Twain's. It gives me strength to exchange the beret of the artist for whatever style of hat suggests the art critic.

I shall review here mostly my earliest years, those of my formation. It seems the wiser course to leave to others, should they feel so inclined, the task of appraising the results.

I am grateful that mother was a painter. She proved good at both trades. When an infant, I was permitted to enter her studio on all fours and to mess up all messable things within range.

She destroyed his first works

Thus did a motherly scrubbing with soap and water destroy my very first paintings—abstractions no doubt—daubed directly upon my own skin.

Later on, when I graduated to schoolboy, I passed most of my weekends in the Louvre. The old masters became my friends. Poussin, the great French classicist, taught me composition.

In those days, pictures were still hung as they had been since mid-nineteenth century. Titans, Raphaels and Vincis were piled gloriously high in the Salon Carré.

I would scurry through it all unfeeling and only stop as I reached the small room where the Italian primitives were stored. They hung there more as an object les-



"Bed-Time," a 1938 Charlot work

son to illustrate the beginnings of art than as works of art in themselves.

Paolo Uccello remains my favorite. Wrenched though it is away from its Medici walls, Uccello's great battle-piece is still preeminently a mural.

The lances glowing against a black ground, the warriors encased in armors made of raw geometric solids, influenced me mightily. Uccello inspired my first Mexican mural.

When a teenager, I was already and firmly a painter. I studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The first item in the present show is a drawing dated 1915. It represents the Hall of Casts where I worked.

Whiskers and wisdom

All our teachers were aged Academicians. Their long white beards impressed me as undoubted badges of wisdom. Any departure from factual objectivity meant a

scolding and a correction of my drawing by the hallowed hand of the master.

These men gave me forever a sense of reverence in the presence of the model, and a craftsman's understanding of the tools of the trade.

There were other things than casts in the hall of casts. Copied actual size, Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" loomed threateningly over my beginner's every effort. Indeed, the resulting familiarity with its giant scale germinated in me a vocation for mural painting.

Soldiering in the first World War and the subsequent occupation of the Rhineland proved more than a martial interlude. Thanks to the war, I met with the art of ancient German masters.

In Colmar I saw the works of Mathias Grunewald; in Cologne, those of Stephan Lochner.

Grunewald is violently dramatic and my work at its most passionate owes much to him.

Lochner, Grunewald's op-

posite, paints infant angels chubby and pink, and as frisky as puppies.

My pictures of Malinches bear his stamp. These tiny folk dancers, armed with mock swords and rattles, and dressed in their Sunday best, are of course Mexican. Yet it was Lochner who first taught me that there can be greatness in playfulness.

He knows his Mexico

As regards the often-quoted Mexican influence, my work as a Mayan archeologist is documented in the show.

Two life-size copies of polychrome bas-reliefs capture the thrill of Chichen-Itza and its ruined temples. Chichen-Itza allowed me to tie together in orderly fashion the contemporary murals of my wild, pistol-toting colleagues with Mexico's most ancient traditions.

It seems easier to speak of the past rather than of the present. Fiji is represented in the show by fragments connected with the "Black Christ" fresco painted in 1962 for the mission church of Naiserelagi.

A bud slow in bursting

Hawaii has been the slowest influence to blossom, perhaps because of its obvious beauty. Or perhaps because I approached it through its language and as a playwright.

Sixteen years separate my first Hawaiian mural, that of the University's Bachman Hall, and the Allison mural, dated 1966.

I feel that the Pacific islands are, as regards my work, more in the future than in the present.

As all fishermen are when fishing, I am superstitious and would rather, at this juncture, fish than talk.

The task of this retrospective is to sum up the past. In no way does it deny to my work a future.