ART

The Work of Jean Charlot

IT was hard to decide whether the penny postcard announcing simply "a lecture on Religion and Art by Jean Charlot" was uninspired or highly distinctive, so we arrived at the lecture hall not knowing quite what to expect.

To add to our confusion, the audience, which soon began dribbling in by twos and threes, proved to be an unusual mixture of art lovers, ranging from the *savants* who were discussing subjects like Dali and the fourth dimension to the simple souls who felt that Chambers had accomplished the ultimate in religious art.

But there was one bond of unity—hardly anyone knew exactly what to expect. A few remembered seeing one of Jean Charlot's Nativity scenes on the cover of *Time* a few years back; some had read his books; all knew his fame as a mural painter and that he was director of the Colorado Springs Art Center. Someone passed around one of those artist-as-a-young-man pictures of him, in which he looked for all the world like the *Life* idea of a Parisian intellectual discussing Sartre over a glass of cognac.

The quiet, graying man who walked into the room a few minutes later and began his lecture by telling how he used to be a boxer, immediately put everyone at ease.

Charlot is a good teacher. He talked simply and understandably, with a soft accent that made one wish he would say words like "Veergin" more often. He told the audience that, to begin with, "*all* good art cannot be anything but religious art," that good art must have a religious mood if not a religious subject, and that "aesthetic quality can only be religious."

To prove the thesis he cited examples of artists who have attempted to paint non-religious art and were forced to admit defeat. One such artist was the Mexican muralist, Jose Clemente Orozco, for whom Charlot entertains a tremendous admiration.

He also pointed out the religious purpose of art and added that, "Some artists are so inarticulate that they cannot make a prayer with words but only with their hands."

Charlot has a great love for Our Lady and, through a series of slides depicting the life of Christ and His Mother, he showed how many of the best pictures throughout the ages have been religious not only in mood but also in subject.

His comments on and explanations of the slides often were more delightful than the pictures themselves. He would explain how da Vinci's "Annunciation" was "a prayer in paint" and how, in the Catholic devotion, "there is a little niche—not a big one—for sweetness and prettiness."

In rapid succession and contrast he would show paintings by Botticelli, Durer, Rembrandt, Daumier, Rouault, Gauguin, and even Raphael. The collection included an especially large number by Giotto and El Greco, and Charlot took special delight in showing El Greco's painting of "Christ chasing the businessmen from the temple."

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JEAN Charlot's own art work deserves to be held up to the best. It is simple, direct, strictly Charlot in style. There is no attempt to imitate any of the masters, no attempt at "period" painting.

This is because he believes, as he said when interviewed, that "we are born in a moment when the only thing we can paint is modern art." Anything that is not modern art, or was not modern at the time it was produced, is not art at all; it is a gross distortion of the very nature of art.

"The only art fit for the decoration of a Church in any age has been modern art," he says. A modern Church built in Gothic or decorated in post-Renaissance style is an anomaly. Even if it were not bad artistically, says Charlot, it could be criticised on the ground that it makes religion look like a hangover from the Middle Ages, something that doesn't quite belong to our own age.

He points out that this same tendency to make religion a medieval affair shows up in our newspapers, which so often use Gothic type for religious news, in the belief that it is somehow appropriate.

He adds that people do, of course, object to the use of modern art in their churches, saying that it isn't devotional, that it is irreverent, that Gothic is so much more fit for a Church. Then he will laugh and tell you that, back in the middle ages, people said the same things and that they thought Gothic too modern for use in Church.

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ALL of Charlot's work is deeply religious and most of his later paintings are of biblical subjects. He is at home in many mediums, but he is best known for his murals and frescoes.

These are highly colorful and original, with what one critic called "dynamic movement of figures crystallized into a decorative mural form." One is struck immediately by the vitality and directness of his murals. His figures are large, solid, with each one keeping its proper place in the whole. As befits a mural, his figures are stripped of detail, built up around basic geometrical forms—all of which gives them a strength without which they would be incongruous, linked as they are to the buildings which they decorate.

Charlot's Mexican murals are perhaps his best. In one done for a Journalism Building in Georgia, the eye first takes in the well-integrated whole and then travels back to dwell on individual figures, discovering with delight the wonderful arrangement and design of the horses, the cluster of Mexican women preparing tortillas, and the two children playing with a bug in the foreground. Charlot's Mexican children are especially delightful and some people think he does children better than anything else. This is perhaps because his sincerity and simplicity fit them best.

The Mexican "feeling" evident in Charlot's work is not something he simply acquired but traces back to his childhood. Now fifty-one, Louis Henri Jean Charlot was born in Paris in 1898 of a family predominantly Spanish, French, and Russian, although he adds that he also has some Indian blood.

The legend has it that young Jean, like all gifted children destined to be artists, began to draw at the age of three. And although he probably drew what most three-year-old children draw, there is nothing to keep one from believing otherwise.

Although born in France, Jean grew up amid his family's collection of art treasures from Mexico and the stories of that country, full of color and pageantry, early captured his imagination. "I had a stage country in my head," he says, "many feathers, blue, green, and tropical pantomime."

Young Charlot attended the Lycee Condorcet and, later, the Ecole des Beaux Arts. His education was cut short, however, when in 1917, at the age of nineteen, he was drafted into the French army.

After leaving the army at the close of 1920, Charlot went to Mexico to live with an uncle. In Mexico he found time to illustrate a number of books and magazines and to do a little writing.

In Mexico Charlot learned that "more than the museums and art galleries, the streets of Mexico are an index to its culture . . .

CHARLOT AND STUDENTS
"All good art cannot be anything but religious art."

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Mexico is aesthetic to the core. Mountains, huts, cooking utensils, fabrics of noble folds, clay toys attain classical beauty. Against such a healthy background many imported goods crumble, including a number of Paris-tailored paintings."

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IN 1929 Charlot came to the United States, where he later became an American citizen. Here he continued writing critical and historical articles for various art and educational magazines. He also lectured intermittently on fresco painting until 1941, when he became artist-in-residence at the University of Georgia through a grant of the Carnegie Corporation.

Charlot summarized the results of his experiences in Georgia in *The Charlot Murals in Georgia,* published in 1945. He has published a number of other books, among which are a *History of Mexican Mural Painting* and several collections of chromolithographs.

One of his most popular works, *Art from the Mayans to Disney* (Sheed and Ward), would seem to have a singularly unfortunate title since it is not nearly so ponderous and technical as it sounds. Rather it is highly readable and entertaining, even to one who is not a connoisseur of Mayan art.

The artist has also illustrated Belloc's *Characters of the Reformation* and many other books, including almost twenty children's books. Charlot married in 1939 and now has four children of his own on whom to test such books. Books like the *Good-Night Book, Tito's Hats* and *The Boy Who Could Do Anything* have been some of their favorites and have proved tremendously popular with children everywhere.

Charlot works at present as art teacher at Colorado College and director of the famous Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center.

Although he is known chiefly as a muralist, he has also had considerable success as an easel painter and has staged more than fifty one-man art shows.

Art galleries in Florence, London, Washington, Chicago, as well as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, display his work. He was also honored, in 1944, with the Guggenheim Fellowship for Latin-American Studies.

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WHETHER he is writing, speaking, or being interviewed, Charlot is friendly and informal. Both his talks and his writings are peppered with stories and off-hand remarks.

He will talk unabashedly about "art critics who never were too brilliant as a whole," and who, "before they throw bouquets, make sure they will fall on a grave." He will tell you, with a twinkle in his eye, "I was temperamental. I get less and less so." Or he will explain, "The artist has his limitations and must be allowed to turn his somersaults," just as a tightrope walker who cannot keep his balance.

Perhaps Jean Charlot's most outstanding quality is his humility. One comes away from a Charlot painting or talk or a Charlot book with the feeling that here is a man who understands the relationship of Creator to creature and creature to creature. And because he understands that relationship he is no mere aesthete, pursuing "art for art's sake."

He understands the nature and purpose of art. He knows that it must be religious because it is an expression of, and exists to fulfill, the spiritual needs of man and those needs are fundamentally religious. And he will tell you, as he does in *Art from the Mayans to Disney,* "there is no mystery about Art. It is one of the simplest things on earth. . . . You know if a piece of furniture is made of good or bad wood, according to the grain, color and destiny. . . . As for the looks, you relish the proportions if they are planned with orderly wisdom; you may prove or disprove its beauty by sitting on the chair or piling up your dishes in the cupboard, your linen in the chest.

"A bad piece of furniture is a useless one. The table wobbles, the back of the chair catches the cloth of your coat, sometimes by a nail, other times by elaborate carving. . . . the good work of art is (a) made with honorable material, (b) ordered to a useful end. Material should be good from the start, for the working of it into an 'art object' cannot modify its being . . . The sculptor who gives to clay the appearance of stone, the painter who with colored pigments pretends to open illusive windows . . . make a natural being vanish, clay or canvas, and give us a monstrosity in return . . .

"Some ends are so ingrained in an object as to leave no doubt: water has cleansing power, a knife cuts, etc., but for others the end is more devious. . . . Painting deals with plastic objects in the same way that a verb deals with words. Those objects are ideographs of thought. . . . It is paradoxical that the fashion of the day respects only the likeness of vulgar objects, still-lives or landscapes, while the great historical styles are despised as story-telling.

"The public learns to gabble technical terms, is prodded by the critics into invading the artists' studios. Theatres do not open to customers at rehearsals, and the wings are kept free for stagehands. We, painters, would also appreciate privacy when at work. When ready, our show is free for all to see. We are pleased if the pain we have taken pleases you. If you are irked, close your eyes, it vanishes."

—Lois Schumacher

The Reproaches of Good Friday

O My People, what have I done to thee? or in what have I grieved thee? Answer Me.

Because I Led Thee out of the land of Egypt, thou hast prepared a Cross for thy Saviour.

O HOLY GOD
O HOLY STRONG ONE
O HOLY IMMORTAL ONE,
HAVE MERCY UPON US.

What More Ought I to Do for thee that I have not done? I indeed planted thee My most beautiful vineyard: but thou art become exceedingly bitter to Me; for in My thirst thou hast given Me vinegar; and with a spear hast pierced the side of thy Saviour.

For Thy Sake I scourged Egypt with her first-born; and thou hast delivered Me to be scourged.

I Led Thee out of Egypt, drowning Pharao in the sea; and thou hast delivered Me to the Chief Priests.

Before Thee I opened the sea: and thou hast pierced My side with a spear.

I Went before thee in the pillar of a cloud: and thou hast led Me to the judgment-hall of Pilate.

I Fed thee with manna through the desert: and thou hast beaten Me with blows and stripes.

I Gave thee to drink the water of salvation from the rock: and thou hast given Me gall and vinegar.

I Smote for thy sake the kings of the Canaanites: and thou hast smitten My hand with a reed.

I Gave thee a royal sceptre: and thou hast given to My head a crown of thorns.

I Lifted thee up with great power: and thou hast hung Me upon the gibbet of the cross.

O My People, what have I done to thee? or in what have I grieved thee? Answer Me.