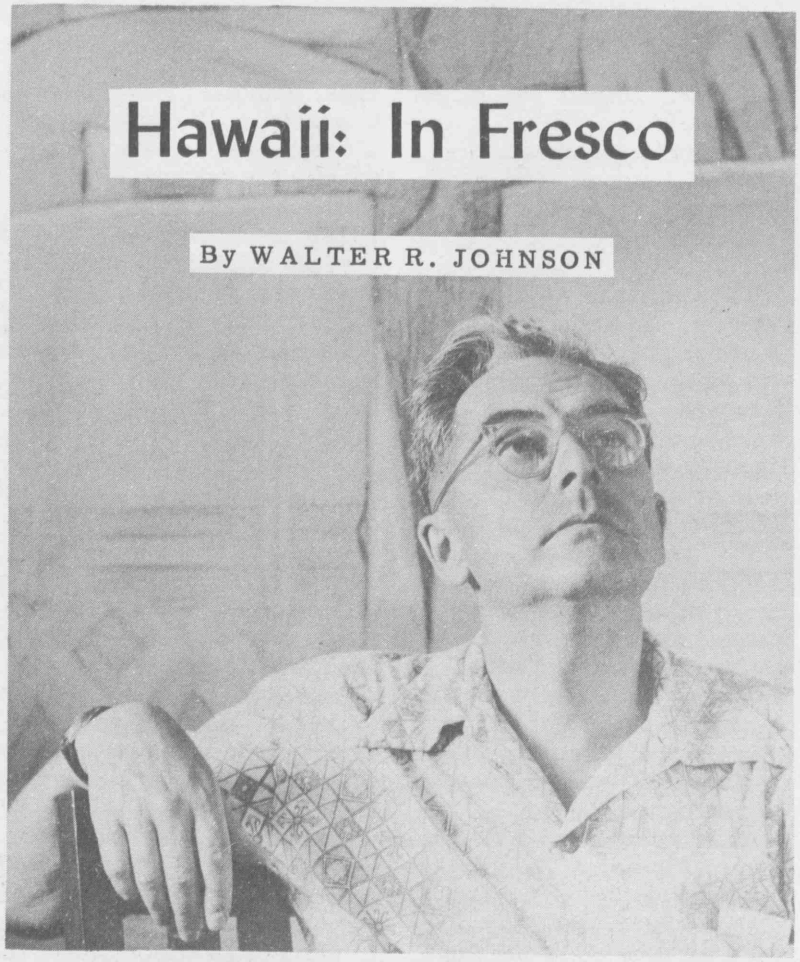
Hawaii: In Fresco

By WALTER R. JOHNSON



JEAN CHARLOT--photo by the author

ON A LARGE WALL directly facing the entrance of the new Administration Building at the University of Hawaii is a monumental salute to the Islands. It is a mural by Jean Charlot in true fresco technique, a work of art as permanent as the building itself. In its area of 256 square feet, it recaptures in delicate colors the mood of the Sandwich Islands immediately prior to the coming of the white man.

Charlot, internationally recognized as one of America's foremost artists, conducted several months of intensive research into the history of the Islands and their people before the idea of the mural emerged and the preliminary sketches were evolved. It may be of value to the observer, in appraising the aesthetics of the mural, to keep in mind the artist's own interpretation, as follows:

"All works of art are based on both fact and mood. Even though this 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, yet this balance between man and nature has not been improved upon since that time.

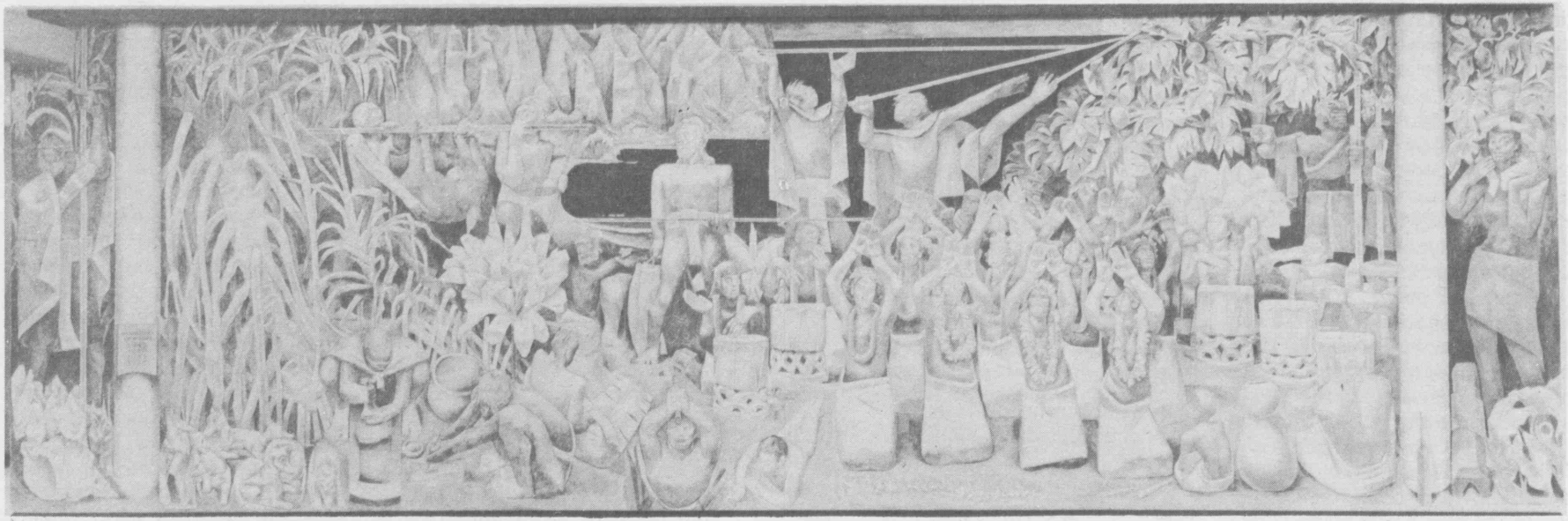
"The left motif of the mural, that of a luau, treats of the physical theme, while that on the right, the hula, refers to the spiritual. The gesture of the dancers is that of the opening of a dance in honor of the dead. The arms and heads raised heavenward illustrate the preoccupation with the spirit. 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.

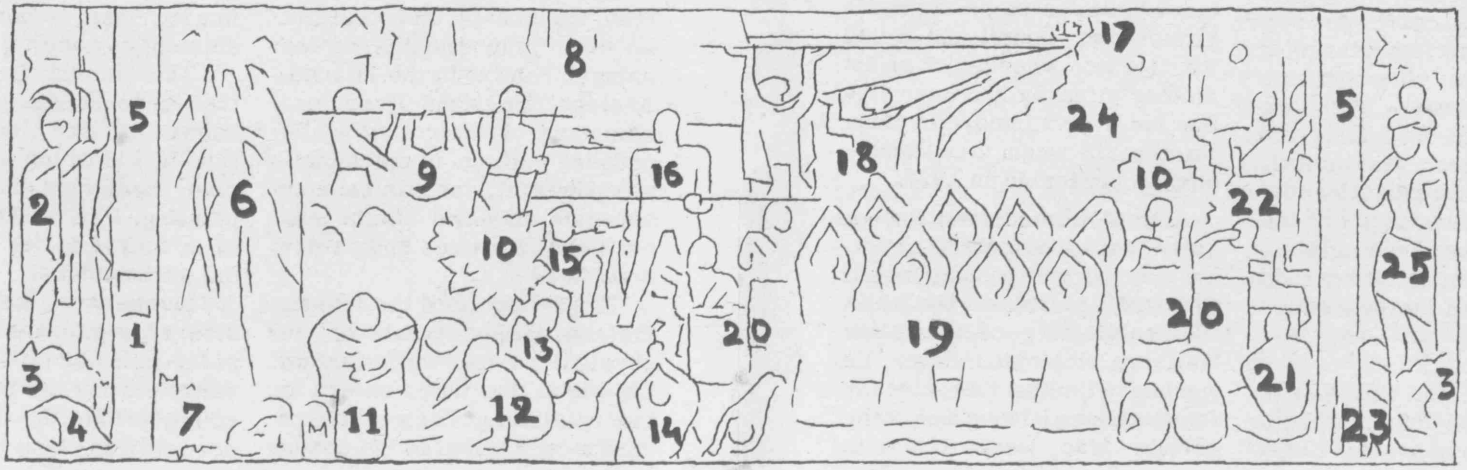
"Taken in conjunction, the two lateral panels--man, woman and child--represent the family, then as now the basic element of society.

"This mural is painted in true fresco, a mural technique 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



1-Dedication. 2-Warrior. 3-Taro plant. 4-Conch, war trumpet. 5-Palm tree. 6-Hala tree. 7-"Poi" dogs. 8-Pali. 9-Pig carriers. 10-Ti plant. 11-Poi pounder. 12-Fire maker. 13-Boy with banana leaf. 14-Imu digger. 15-Water carrier. 16-Spear fisherman. 17-Cook's ship. 18-Spearmen. 19-Kneeling hula. 20-Drummers. 21-Gourd musicians. 22-Stick musicians. 23-Kapa board and beater. 24-Breadfruit tree. 25-Lei child.



Nick Massey photo

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 imu-digger, who is placed lower than any of the other figures, in that the illusion of space and bulk remains true even at close range.

"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."

SOMETHING OF THE background of Jean Charlot should increase the observer's appreciation of this significant work of art.

Charlot was born in Paris on February 8, 1898, and in his early years learned to sketch and paint in his artist-mother's studio. At 18, while he was a student at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, France became embroiled in the first World War. He immediately enlisted in the French Army and soon rose to officer rank, ultimately commanding a company of the French Colonial Artillery.

After the armistice he served on occupation duty along the German Rhine. A short time after returning to his mother's home in Paris, he felt that conditions in his native city left something to be desired. So, following an old childhood urge, he, with his mother, retraced the footsteps of great-grandfather Goupil and sailed for Mexico, where part of his mother's family had been living for over a hundred years. He was 22 when they disembarked in Mexico in 1921.

Almost immediately recognized as a competent artist, he was commissioned to aid in painting murals on the walls of the Ministry of Education Building in Mexico City. He worked with the then already famous Diego Rivera and other artists who were later to achieve fame: Siqueiros, Orozco and Guerrero.

Rivera had started his murals in encaustic, a method of applying color by the use of heated wax, a technique which had found great favor among the ancients of Greece. But Charlot, although he had never tried it before on a large scale, decided that he would use the technique of true fresco (buon fresco.) This involved 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.

Thus Jean Charlot became the first modern artist in the Americas to paint in this medium.

Rivera immediately saw that Charlot's fresco was better than encaustic for the job in hand, so he abandoned his method and enthusiastically began work in fresco.

Mexican historians, in writing of this important decision later, were loath to give credit to an unknown non-Mexican. So no reference to Charlot's origination of the idea was mentioned, and credit went to Diego Rivera, who was, of course, already a famous son of Mexico. Little by little, however, contemporary historians are giving the credit to--as he is known in Mexico --Juan Charlot.

Charlot and his associates proceeded to revive the art of true fresco on a heroic scale for the first time in centuries. Together, they brought to the world a renaissance of Mexican art through their paintings on the walls of the Mexico City government buildings.

With the exception of one large panel in the Ministry of Education Building which Rivera ordered destroyed to make room for his own work, all of the frescoes done by Charlot during that period still remain.

The walls were completed in 1924 and the revitalized technique was subsequently siphoned into the United States, where the attention of the art world was focussed on the controversy between the owners New York's Radio City and Diego Rivera. The owners, who had commissioned a fresco, destroyed the partially completed work of the artist and refused to permit him to finish the job, ostensibly because of a clash of idealogies.

During his residence in Mexico, Jean Charlot became enamored of the vital folk art done by the unpretentious José Guadalupe Posada (1851-1913), whose relief cuts were used to illustrate the crude sheets on which the daily news was disseminated to the Mexican

people. Charlot was often chided for his research along these lines. But, being an outsider, he appreciated the value of this art form as a graphic representation of the struggle within Mexico to throw off the curse of ancient stagnation and assume her place in the new world.

Unmindful of the jeers, Charlot stoically continued collecting, writing, and pursuing this eclecticism. The success he had is evident today in the fanciful biographies of Rivera and of others who chided him at the time. They are reported to have stood enraptured, their noses pressed against the windows of Posada's print shop, hungry to catch a glimpse of the great artist within, and of his daily creations. Now, since through Charlot's efforts those art values have been certified, the falsehoods of the biographers go undenied.

Since those days, Charlot has found time to be art editor of the magazine Mexican Folkways (1926); to paint murals, both fresco and oil, in Georgia, New Jersey, New York and Colorado; to illustrate numerous books; to co-author, after an archeological expedition into Yucatan, The Temple of the Warriors (1931); to write Art From the Mayans to Disney (1939) and Charlot Murals in Georgia (1945); and to recently complete, on a Guggenheim Fellowship, a 500-page volume entitled History of Mexican Mural Painting, which will probably be published this year.

Outside of these accomplishments, he has also found time to teach and lecture extensively throughout the United States; to write numerous magazine articles as a critic, artist and researcher; to exhibit and win prizes in all media, including oil, watercoler, prints, fresco and other techniques; and to develop a new process of making multi-colored lithographic prints.

Immediately prior to his acceptance of the post of Professor of Art at the University of Hawaii, Charlot was head of the Colorado School of Fine Arts.

He now resides in the faculty housing area of the University with his wife Zomah and their four children.