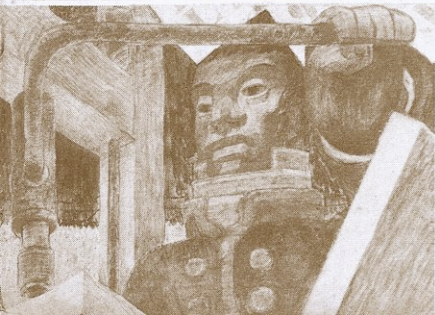


THE WAIKIKI BRANCH OF THE BISHOP NATIONAL BANK OF HAWAII

Jean Charlot's
FRESCO MURAL

EARLY CULTURAL EXCHANGES BETWEEN HAWAII AND THE OUTER WORLD



The True Fresco Technique

Beginning early in October, 1951, callers at the new Waikiki office of the Bishop National Bank were witnesses to a fascinating undertaking—the execution of a massive 73-foot fresco mural by the world-famous mural painter, Jean Charlot, and his corps of talented assistants.

Working on scaffolding high above the bank floor, the artists were busy combining paint and plaster in the classic technique of the “true fresco.” To the casual observer, however, there was little evidence of the enormous amount of creative planning and effort which had already gone into the work.

Conceived, from the first, as an integral part of the building’s architectural plan and décor, the mural began as a small-scale water color, a half-inch to the foot, which was prepared by Mr. Charlot.

Before work on the walls could actually get underway, it was necessary to prepare another drawing—this time in a scale of six inches to the foot, on large sheets of butcher paper. This was what might be called a transitional stage in developing the mural to full size.

With these preliminaries complete, pencil drawings were made, again on butcher paper, to the exact size of the mural. Over these pencil drawings the artists laid thin tracing paper to which they transferred the completed figures.

The true fresco technique is a good deal more than just painting on a wall. Colors in the painting blend closely with the mortar on which it is laid. Two

special coats of mortar were required to do the job properly, first a “rough” coat prepared according to a trusted formula of cement, lime, and sand, and second, the painting coat, or “intonaco,” of volcanic ash, lime, and cement.

Fresh layers of painting mortar were laid each morning as work on the mural progressed. Because pigments for this kind of work are not available commercially, Mr. Charlot bought dry colors and ground them to his own specifications.

While the painting mortar was still fresh, the tracing paper was laid in place on the wall. The artists, using a small nail, then incised the outline of the figures through the tracing paper and into the fresh mortar, after which the work of applying the color began.

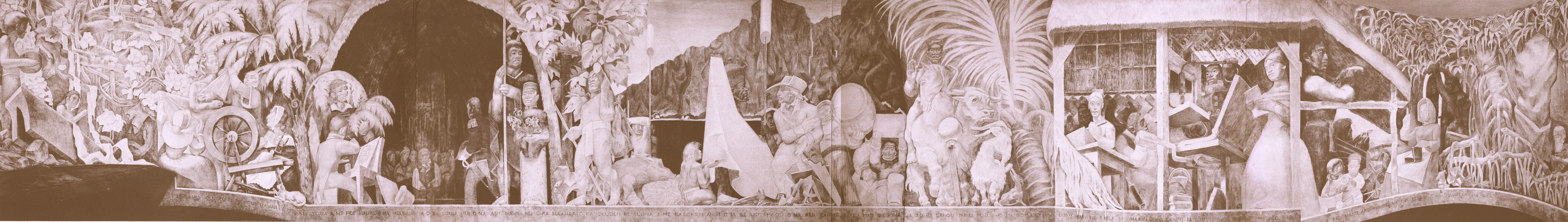
By a sort of capillary action, the colors seep deep into the texture of the mortar and blend with it. As this mortar dries, it undergoes a change in chemical composition. Lime is produced by burning limestone, a process in which much of its hydrogen is removed. When this lime mortar is soaked with water, it picks up hydrogen again and reverts to limestone as it dries. For this reason, the fresco mural is a highly permanent type of wall decoration. Because the colors impregnate the mortar itself, they retain their brilliance permanently.

Mr. Charlot has pointed out that the execution of this mural presented some unique problems, the foremost of these being the curved surface on which the painting was to be done. This required extra care in preparing the working sketches in order to avoid distortion of the figures.

The finished mural, one of the most striking and colorful works of its kind, is eloquent of the integrity with which Mr. Charlot and his associates developed the true fresco treatment and achieved with it a powerful and moving interpretation of Hawaii’s first cultural exchanges with the outer world.



Open here for mural key; see back cover for notes about the artist



Scene 1

Scene 2

Scene 3

Scene 4

Scene 5

Scene 6

KEY TO THE MURAL MOTIFS: 1, 2—The making of *kapa*, left above, contrasts with the introduction by missionaries of the spinning wheel and the sewing of the

first *mu'umu'u*. **3**—At the court of Kamehameha I, the sovereign, at center, receives Von Kotzebue (with sword), leader of an Imperial Russian expedition. Two famous

members of the expedition are shown at left: the artist, Choris, as he paints the only known portrait, from life, of the ruler; and next to him, Von Chamisso, author of

"The Man Who Lost His Shadow," and botanist of the expedition. The giant fern appearing at his side was discovered by him and still bears his name. At right, in

allusion to the once active sandalwood trade, the *alii*, Boki, is shown with a Chinese merchant who holds a twig of the fragrant wood. **4**—This central motif is based on early

forms of barter, and pictures the exchange of feather cloaks and helmets for metal tools and kegs of nails; Hawaiian pigs for longhorn cattle and goats brought from California

by the English. **5**—The inauguration of printing in the Islands. King Kamehameha II (in uniform) prints his name at the hand press, from type set by Elisha Loomis,

left. **6**—At right, with his *akua* stone, is the last *kabuna*, in contrast with an early missionary, left, shown as he teaches the alphabet to a group of native students.

The Inscription

The inscription running beneath the picture is a quotation from the historian, Kepelino (circa 1860). In free translation, it reads: "The Hawaiian race was a polite, loving and hospitable people. The great law of the *alii* (nobility) concerned humility, love and beautiful thoughts. These were the living expressions of the *alii* of old in these Islands. These things were learned from childhood. By obeying that law, they learned to rule. It was a thing of great beauty; the enlightenment of our Hawaii in these matters."

ABOUT THE ARTIST *Jean Charlot*

The creator of the Bishop National Bank fresco, Jean Charlot, is recognized as one of the world's great muralists. He, along with Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros, was one of the gifted artists whose experiments in Mexico with the techniques of fresco painting led the way to dynamic new progress in contemporary mural painting.

Born in Paris, February 8, 1898, Charlot attended Ecole des Beaux-Arts until interrupted by the first World War. After subsequent service as an artillery officer with the French Army, Charlot turned to woodcut and engraving, having been earlier interested in wood carving.

In December, 1920, Charlot left France and went to live with an uncle in Mexico, launching that phase of his career which was to mean so much to the development of the "Charlot Style." Charlot's arrival in Mexico coincided with an exciting opportunity to gather with others in executing frescoes for many public works then being planned by the government.

After lengthy experiment with the new medium, Charlot painted the first mural-size fresco, the *Fall of Tenochtitlan*, in 1922. There followed several others, principally in government buildings in Mexico City, among them work now considered the best of his Mexican frescoes.

Travels with a Carnegie archeological expedition in Yucatan followed the work with the Mexican Government, and in 1929, Charlot arrived in the United States to write two definitive books on the expedition's findings.

Between 1931 and 1941, Charlot gave intermittent lectures on fresco painting at a number of universities throughout

the country. He was artist-in-residence at the University of Georgia from 1941 until 1944, a period marked by a series of richly creative murals and paintings for government and university buildings. In 1946, he was awarded a two-year Guggenheim fellowship to write on Mexican art. He was Ryerson lecturer at Yale in 1948.

Although known principally for his work as a muralist, Charlot has been highly successful as an easel painter, print-maker, and as an illustrator of books. He is represented in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence; the British Museum, London; the Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and many other public and private collections.

Prior to his arrival in Hawaii in 1949, to serve on the art faculty of the University of Hawaii, Charlot was head of the Fine Arts School, Colorado Springs. Another Charlot mural, depicting Hawaiian life before the arrival of the white man, may be seen in the University's administration building here.

Artists who assisted Mr. Charlot in completing the mural include Juliette May Fraser, David Asherman, Nesta Obermer, George Wago, Anthony Walker, Mildred Schonne Paul, Georgie Daniels, John Kjargard, Jessie S. Fisher and Hartley Gurrey.

George H. Wimberley, of Wimberley and Cook, architects, planned and designed the interior of the bank. Ben Norris, chairman of the art department of the University of Hawaii, coordinated interior colors with the mural. Robert Griffing, director of the Honolulu Academy of Arts, served as consultant. Photographs by R. Wenkam.