

In praise of Jean Charlot

First thing I do almost ritually every Sunday is read Sammy Amalu's column. I do not always agree with his point of view but I respect him and thoroughly enjoy his often brilliant writing. Yes, I am one of his devoted fans.

One point in his column of April 1 I take issue with — his choice of myself over and above Jean Charlot as a recipient of the Living Treasure Award. Frankly, it was the first time I'd ever heard of the designation being given here in Hawaii. Whatever the honor may be, I feel that of all artists of Hawaii Jean Charlot was head and shoulders above the rest of us as the number one choice.

Jean cannot be dismissed so simplistically as being a Mexican rather than an Hawaiian. True, his grandmother was a Mexican Indian but the rest of his antecedents were French. He was born and received his early education in France before moving to Mexico for a few years. He was there at a crucial time in the history of Western art and played an important role in contributing to the mural renaissance.

But Jean then moved north and worked in New York, Georgia and Colorado before coming to Hawaii. Once he had found our Islands, however, he felt as though he had "come home" for the first time. For 30 years, except for brief trips, he never left. He lived here far longer than in any other place in the world.

When Jean found us he became one with us — completely. The place of a person's birth is one of the few things over which an individual has no choice. I did not choose to be born here but I'm glad I was and have never wanted any other place as home.

For the artists of Hawaii, the coming of Charlot was probably the most important art event of this

century. He brought with him a universality and a professional integrity which has strongly influenced all of us who were fortunate enough to have known him well.

Throughout his life he transcended all regionalism and remained true to himself both as a great human being and a great artist. Perhaps the two are inseparable and great art is merely the direct outcome of the greatness within.

The world has come to accept Gauguin as the interpreter of Tahiti and yet his paintings of Brittany are basically the same style. In other words Gauguin remained true to himself wherever he painted — just as Charlot always remained Charlot.

Do we say that Gauguin's Tahitian figures all look like Bretons or vice versa? Then why must people keep saying that Charlot's Hawaiians all look like Mexicans? As a matter of fact, while we were working on the Benjamin Parker tile mural in Mexico, our two Samoan assistants (Matauma Alisa and Dixie Samasoni, who had come with us from Hawaii) were always taken to be Mexican Indians by the Mexicans themselves!

Charlot received many high wordly honors in his lifetime and so have I. But I don't think that either of us has ever taken them personally because to us such honors have been the offerings of the community to all true artists. We were merely the symbolic particular recipients of something far bigger than ourselves.

Jean Charlot has been a Living Treasure of Hawaii since the first day he came. From what he has left us he will continue to be a Living Treasure for all of Hawaii for many generations to come.

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