

Charlot: Loved Man of Art

By Regis F. Hickey, O.S.B.

The 1995 summer will mark 36 years since artist Jean Charlot painted three frescoes in St. Benedict's Abbey Church. The principal painting, 21 feet high by 29 feet wide, entitled "Trinity and Episodes of Benedictine Life," is on the east wall of the upper church. "St. Joseph's Workshop" and "Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Four Apparitions" are smaller frescoes in the lower church.

Two Benedictine brothers of the abbey and a retired St. Benedict's College artist and chairman of the college art department still remember well Charlot's July and August labors in 1959 and how they relished his permitting them to help with the production of the three paintings.

Frescoes and other mural forms were only part of Charlot's creations through the decades. He was a lithographer of fine ability and produced much in that medium. He worked in oils too; he illustrated many books, did charming religious cartoons—many for Sheed & Ward, publishers. Charlot also did statuary and ceramics.

The artist died March 20, 1979 not quite 20 years after painting his Atchison frescoes. The 1978 edition of *Who's Who in America* identified Charlot as a muralist born Feb. 7, 1898 in Paris, France who made mural paintings for the Mexican government, 1922-26, etc. The biographical entry of 1978 states he had executed more than 60 murals since 1922.

Zomah Charlot, his widow, in 1986 published a catalog of his murals and monumental sculpture, his books, plays, portfolios and books he illustrated. Her first catalog entry was the fresco he painted in the Escuela Preparatoria in Mexico City, "Massacre in the Main Temple." It was followed by others in Mexico City public buildings.

Charlot studied as a youth in the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris. In the last months of World War I, on finishing French military school, he was commissioned a lieutenant in the army and assigned to an artillery unit. After the German surrender in 1918 he was in



Jean Charlot
(Photo c. 1959)

Germany in the military occupation, and art was still on his mind.

Returning to civilian life in France, the artist began to produce again. Here he made, in his words, his "first serious effort in fresco." Then in 1921 at age 23 he went to Mexico. At the Academy of San Carlos, Mexico City, he was briefly an assistant to Diego Rivera. Then rapidly, with Rivera, David Siqueros, Jose Orozco and others he joined in making the Mexican art world conscious of fresco.

Jean Charlot wrote much, and very well. In 1962 the University of Texas published his *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, an esthetics history of this art school founded in 1785. Yale University Press published in 1963 his *The Mexican Mural Renaissance, 1920-25*. Among other writings besides articles and papers he produced *Art from the Mayans to Disney*, 1939; *Art Making from Mexico to China*, 1972, and plays in the Hawaiian language, which Charlot learned, in the 1960s.

Frank J. Sheed of Sheed & Ward, an associate of the artist over many years, in a reminiscence paper written to honor the man, said of the quality of his writing: "I marveled that anyone could write a second language as he wrote English. But he told me that English was not his second but his third; his Spanish was better. Perhaps it was. I find it

hard to believe that even his French was better."

Charlot's fruitfulness in art was also channeled through his teaching. In the art department of the University of Hawaii, 1949-66, he was a professor, teaching painting and art history. In summer sessions and larger stints he taught at other colleges, universities and art schools, among them Art Students League of New York, University of Georgia, 1941-44, and Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 1947-49.

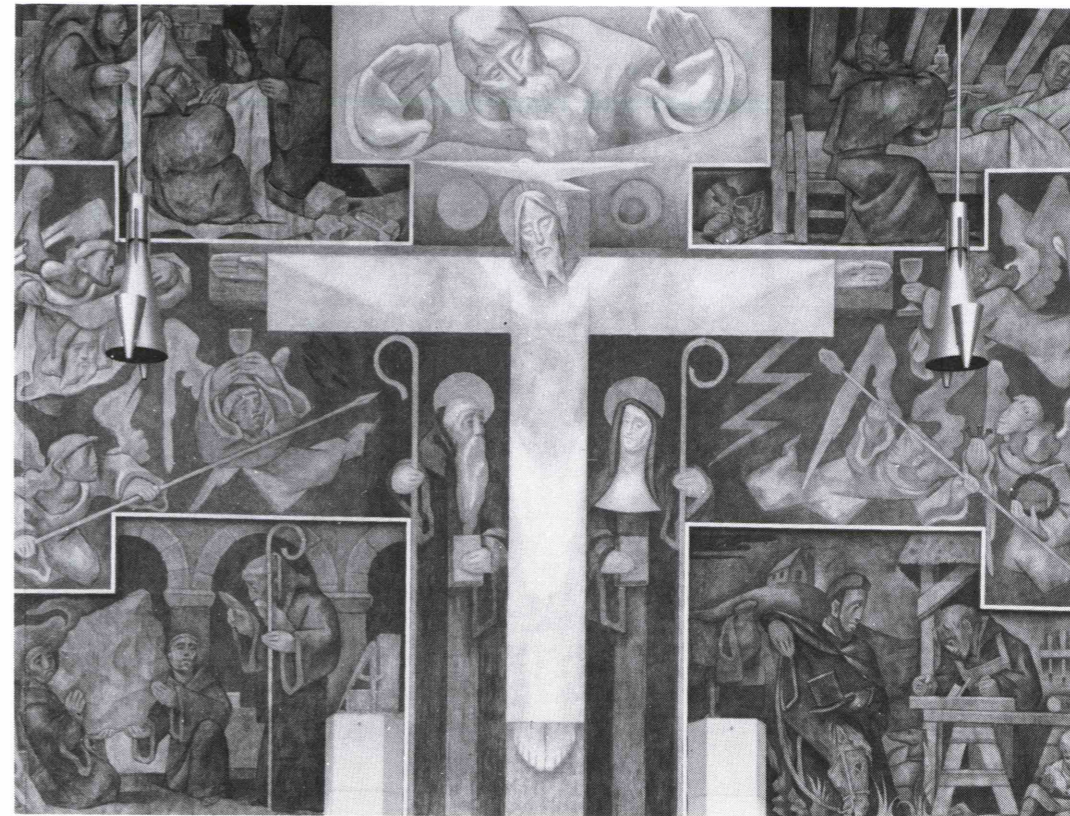
Rich in his art, he was richer in his personhood. Writing in the *Hawaii Catholic Herald*, Honolulu, March 30, 1979, the artist's friend, Msgr. Daniel J. Dever, said, "Jean Charlot, who lived among us so simply and humbly and died as he lived, was a genius of the faith. He possessed a remarkable sense of the presence of God and spent his life proclaiming that presence.

"Redirecting our attention to men and women and children at work, at play, at family, at prayer, Charlot invites us to glimpse our common humanity, bearing the marks still of the hand that gave it life."

When he died in Honolulu a daily newspaper ran a big picture of him, and very soon after his death both houses of the Hawaii legislature in concurrent resolutions rehearsed his achievements in art and communicated condolences to his family and friends. The Charlot family loved Hawaii, to which they came in 1949, and many people of the state warmly regarded the artist. While he was still alive the state of Hawaii awarded him the Order of Distinction for his cultural leadership.

Surely much of the richness of Jean Charlot as artist and scholar came from his cultural openness. This French-born man had a grandfather who went to Mexico and married a Mexican Indian. When Charlot finished with frescoes in Mexican public buildings, he made archaeological studies in Yucatan, 1928-29, drawing and painting what was unearthed of Indian culture. In his 30-year residence in Hawaii he embraced

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"Trinity and Episodes of Benedictine Life"

PHOTO: JOHN WIGGS (1994)

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the native people and their history. As years unfolded he went to the South Pacific, to China, the Philippines. He looked, appreciated, absorbed, and brought forth for others what he saw and felt.

Charlot was generous. Many of his paintings were gifts. A fresco he painted in a Catholic church in Fiji was a gift. Although his Abbey Church commission in 1959 was for only the large fresco in the upper church and the smaller one in the Guadalupe chapel below, the artist surprised the monks later in the summer by saying he would do another fresco free in appreciation for the helpfulness of the Benedictine brothers.

What he painted was the scene of St. Joseph in his Nazareth carpenter shop working on a piece of furniture. Joseph was being imitated by Jesus, hardly more than an infant, who hammer in hand was driving a nail into the same piece, but about four inches off the mark.

The artist was quite ready to allow some bystanders to have a hand in his murals. Brother Martin Burkhard, recalling Charlot's hospitality, said, "He allowed me, Dennis McCarthy [of St. Benedict's College art department],

Charlot's son John—almost anybody—to help." McCarthy, now retired several years, described that hospitality this way: "If you were around the painting site more than half an hour, he'd give you a brush and say, 'Now go and do this.'"

"This" was done under Charlot's eye. "Under his direction we applied pigment to the plaster," Brother Martin remembered. Then he would (finish up the brush work) on what we had done."

"What struck me most about him was his kindness," Brother Martin added. "He was extremely kind, patient, a calm person . . . a patient man with beginners. We made mistakes, but he put up with them."

Dennis McCarthy enjoys the memory of the abbey prior, Father Theodore Leuterman, one day walking up to the work site with a group of women whom he was showing through the church. Dennis was on the scaffold applying pigment. Charlot and he had been working together when Charlot had to stop to go to the Atchison depot to pick up his wife and children arriving on a train. Charlot welcomed Dennis to continue while he was gone.

"What are you doing there?" the prior asked Dennis, surprised.

CURRENT CHARLOT EXHIBIT
A traveling retrospective exhibit of artist Jean Charlot's work is currently (January-March, 1995) at Museo de Monterrey, Monterrey, Mexico. It was at Mexico City (San Ildefonso), April-June, 1994; Tlaxcala, June-October, 1994. It will be shown at the Academy of Arts in Honolulu in 1996. □

"I think Father Theodore had told those women he was going to show them an internationally known artist at work, and I think the ladies might have been disappointed," Dennis said.

Brother Walter Landwehr made his fresco contribution changing the level of the scaffold as the painting was being completed, from the top down. He has an unforgettable memory of Charlot. Once at the end of the day's painting and Charlot gone, he accidentally thrust part of the scaffold into freshly painted surface.

The damage was "the size of a golf ball, and white," in Brother Walter's words. "Next morning when Charlot came in, he saw it right away. He said, 'What happened?' I said, 'Mr. Charlot, I poked a hole in it with the scaffold.' He was silent, but then turned to his plasterer, and said, 'Patch it.' Brother Walter was grateful for Charlot's forbearance.

At some point Charlot became an oblate (non-vowed associate member) of St. Benedict's Abbey. When he died, appropriately on March 20, the eve of the Passing of St. Benedict, in keeping with his wish, the artist was laid out in a Benedictine habit.

John Charlot, his son, wrote feelingly of his father's death in an article in the periodical *Hawaii* in the December, 1979 issue, "The Death and Burial of Jean Charlot." It speaks depths of love and family togetherness.

For almost 36 years the Atchison monks have daily beheld the images Charlot put on the walls of their chapels. If Providence so ordains, monks in the womb of the future will also see them. Fresco is for centuries. □