

# THE MAN BEHIND THE MURALS

Jean Charlot's vast Hawai'i tableaux were influenced by a childhood in France, adventures in Mexico and a worldview that celebrated the native and the sacred



STORY BY CONSTANCE HALE





**I**n 1909 the French explorer and archeologist Désiré Charnay climbed the steps of a building on rue de la Chaussée d'Antin in Paris, carrying an elaborate box. He was headed for a fifth-floor apartment, inside of which stood a boy of eleven celebrating his First Communion: Louis Henri Jean Charlot. "I was with a satin ribbon to my sleeve and very happy and beautiful and feeling very pious," Charlot later recalled.

Upon entering, the extravagantly mustachioed Charnay, a friend of the boy's grandfather, presented the box. "It was one of the nicest wrapped presents," Charlot remembered. "The more I opened it, the smaller it got. Inside was a little whistle made of clay." In the shape of a coyote, the whistle had two or three holes that produced different notes when the boy closed them with his fingers. When Madame Charlot inquired about its origins, the explorer reported that the whistle came from the slopes of the volcano Popocatepetl, southeast of Mexico City. "It is something very precious to me," Charnay continued, "for it came from the tomb of a little child about the age of your boy."

Such unusual artifacts were not so unusual in the cosmopolitan Charlot home, which was filled with art and curios. Jean's father, Henri, was the son of French and Russian parents and owned an import-export business based in Germany. Jean's mother, Anne, was an artist and a descendant of French Catholics who had spent the better part of the nineteenth century in Mexico; she carried both Aztec and Sephardic Jewish blood.

Anne's father and uncle, in fact, were one-quarter Aztec and they collected Mexican antiquities. The objects enraptured the young Jean Charlot, as did a sixteenth-

century portrait of Moctezuma in full regalia that hung in his great-uncle's country house. "That bony head with sparse mustache and beard looked very much like my own grandfather," Charlot later remembered, adding facetiously that he got a little mixed up between the two.

Memories of Moctezuma and the coyote whistle stayed with Charlot throughout his long life as an artist. He never lost his child's sense of play or his fascination with folk art. And he took the intellectual daring and the gallant charm of his grandfather's friend Charnay with him on his

own explorations, which led him far from that apartment in Paris to Mexico City, New York, Colorado, Fiji—and Hawai'i.

It was in Hawai'i, where he lived the last thirty years of his life, that Charlot left his biggest legacy. In the Islands he created almost six hundred easel paintings, several hundred prints and thirty-six works of public art in fresco, ceramic tile and sculpture. He published some 160 articles of art criticism in the daily papers in addition to a collection of essays, two plays in Hawaiian and three in English.

His *repoussée* panels detailing the life of Christ greet everyone entering the Punahou School chapel, and his monumental murals loom over students at Leeward Community College and the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Other panels watch over tourists at the Hawaii Convention Center, customers withdrawing funds inside the Waikīkī branch of First Hawaiian Bank and members of the United Public Workers union who visit their headquarters in Kalihi. There is a Charlot oil painting at the Honolulu Museum of Art and fifteen more in the Jean Charlot Collection in UH's Hamilton Library. And there are prints and lithographs at Cedar Street Galleries in Honolulu. "You can spot a Charlot from way across a room," says Michael Schnack, the gallery's owner. "He's in a class of his own."



Jean Charlot arrived in Hawai'i in 1949 and over the next three decades created a vast and still celebrated body of artwork; he is seen at right in the early 1950s, painting a mural for the Waikīkī branch of the Bishop Bank. Above, he plays a pahu drum; the Hawaiian instrument, which he loved, inspired numerous paintings and drawings. Opening spread, left: an ali'i (chief) seen in Charlot's *Relation of Man and Nature in Old Hawai'i*, the mural commission that brought him to Hawai'i. Opening spread, right: *Lavanderas (Women Washing)*, part of series of Charlot murals in Mexico City. "The women are still in their village working at their traditional tasks," notes Charlot's son, John.

All images courtesy Jean Charlot Collection, University of Hawai'i Library



**About a dozen years** after his First Communion, in late 1922, Jean Charlot knelt on a scaffold in a stairwell of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, preparing a wall for a fresco mural. Nearby, in the school's amphitheater and behind closed doors, was Diego Rivera's unfolding *Creation*, the first large mural project sponsored by Mexico's post-revolutionary government. Charlot himself was carefully laying out his own mural, *The Massacre in the Templo Mayor*, in which unarmed Indians in the midst of a ritual dance were being attacked by ruthless conquistadors. Charlot carefully studied the wall: a vertical rectangle above the landing, a trapezoidal one over the stairs. He thought back to paintings of epic battles he'd studied. In the clash between the two races, which had occurred in the great temple of Tenochtitlan in 1520, the peaceful Indian would occupy the lower panel; the European would thrust from above.

Charlot's path to this staircase had begun back in Paris, where he had started to draw around age two. The family indulged the prodigy's penchant for art. Charlot spent hours staring at paintings in the Louvre, studied informally at the École des Beaux-Arts and was a teenage member of a guild of Catholic artists. He also did typical boy things: fencing, kickboxing and, at a slight five-foot-four, winning the national scholastic boxing championship as a flyweight.

Then came World War I. Charlot's father lost his business and died. The family moved to a French village. Charlot was drafted. His math was good, and after minimal training he was put into a horse artillery unit. The war was a shattering experience for Charlot, who took refuge in reading Rimbaud during lonely vigils in the stable. He saw combat, went to officers school in Fontainebleau, then spent two years in the Rhineland during the postwar occupation, using the time as an opportunity to view paintings by sixteenth-century German masters.

It was in Germany that Charlot began a *Chemin de Croix* series, or *Stations of the Cross*; the series was printed in France after his discharge and exhibited at the Louvre in 1920. His gouache *L'Amitié*, showing the influence of Picasso and Analytical Cubism, was included in the 1921 Salon d'Automne. But an ambitious mural he planned for a parish church got scotched, leaving Charlot at loose ends. At the same time, diminished family fortunes left the Charlots unable to return to their bourgeois life in Paris. His sister married, taking half their money as her dowry, so Charlot and his mother moved to Mexico in 1921, settling with relatives.

It was an adventure from the first moment. Charlot painted in an open-air school in the suburb of Coyoacán and began meeting artists who had suffered scars in the Mexican Revolution much like those he had suffered in WWI. Other artists, like Diego Rivera, had just returned from Paris. Charlot fit right in.

A sculptor friend suggested Charlot go and see Rivera. "He is a little uneasy with his Spanish, coming back from Europe after such a long time," the sculptor told Charlot, who did go. "Both Rivera and I had the same jokes and loves and dislikes about art in Paris," Charlot recalled of the meeting. "He could pretend he was still



Long before he arrived in Hawai'i, Charlot moved to Mexico. Though he'd been born in France, the artist was part Aztec and in the Mexico of the 1920s, working alongside artists like Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, Charlot was endlessly inspired by the country's indigenous culture and history. His first mural in Mexico—and one of his masterpieces—was *The Massacre in the Templo Mayor*, seen above right. As Orozco recalled of Charlot, "He used to go along with us to the Museum of Archeology, where the great Aztec sculptures are on view. They impressed him profoundly and we would talk for hours of that tremendous art." After he finished his bigger mural panels, Charlot was also commissioned to paint seals, two of which are seen at right.

there. So we enjoyed talking together—in French, of course." Charlot began to pitch in on Rivera's mural *Creation*, and then he got a wall of his own. For three months he would help Rivera through the day and then climb the stairs to work on his wall. He painted far into the night, he wrote, "by the light of a raw electric bulb."

*The Massacre in the Templo Mayor* is Charlot's *Guernica*: At the top a jumble of horses and conquistadors create a compressed whorl of violence. At the bottom is the startled crowd of Aztec dancers. Lances pierce into the crowd, connecting the two. Charlot finished *Massacre* before Rivera completed *Creation*, making it the first work in what would become known as the Mexican Mural Renaissance—an effort by the new government and a cadre of artists to glorify the Mexican Revolution and the mestizo nation. Before it, artists in Mexico looked toward Europe—or to the Hispanic tradition in Mexico. After, the indigenous subjects that Charlot and others celebrated became staples of Mexican art. And fresco, which Charlot pioneered, soon became the technique of choice among the Mexican muralists.

By the time he finished *Massacre*, Charlot was part of the crowd that included not just Rivera, but other soon-to-be-marquee names like José Clemente Orozco, Frida Kahlo and the American photographer Edward Weston. He also met, briefly, an aspiring artist from Los Angeles named Zohmah Day. It was an intense, socializing cohort. Many gatherings were held in cafés and restaurants, but some took place in the small apartment Charlot and his mother called home. Weston described delectable suppers in which the atmosphere was entirely French, even if the food was Mexican. "The violet-laden table was presided over by his mother," wrote the photographer in 1931, describing Madame Charlot as "cultured, distinguished in bearing, with fine critical judgment."

Charlot brought a sharp and insightful eye to Mexico. On the one hand he was an outsider, able to see Mexican culture from







Many of Charlot's works dealt with the changes wrought by colonialism. In this scene from *Early Contacts of Hawai'i with the Outer World*, Hawaiians on one of their great canoes greet arriving foreigners. "He wanted to show the high culture of the Hawaiians who greeted the British," says son John. "They weren't savages but cultured and refined people. Thus the emphasis on clothes, jewelry, artwork and the whole ceremoniousness of the welcome." At left is a much more painful scene from *Cargadores (Burden Bearers)*, part of the Mexico City series of murals that also includes *Lavanderas*. "It is set in post-colonial Mexican society," explains John of the scene. "The men have lost their traditional roles and have been pulled out of their villages to work as peons on foreign projects. They are being used just for their backs and muscles."





a perspective different from that of his compadres. On the other he was seeking a visual vocabulary that emerged from within the indigenous culture and resonated in his bones.

“At six o’clock in the morning, I was in the streets,” Charlot wrote in a 1922 article, “Mexico of the Poor,” which he later translated into English. “At first glance the crowd is the color of dust. Flesh and cloth, both worn out with use, melt into this grey, which is the very livery of humbleness. Eye and mind soon learn to focus, and this race, its confidence won, attests to its beauty through fabrics, its straw, its flesh.”

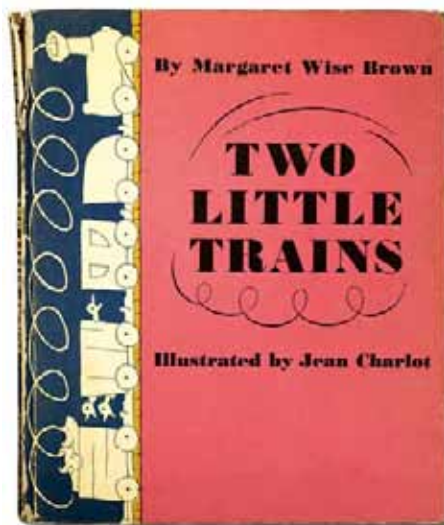
His palette tended to the “grey” mentioned above, and to earth tones that in his mind fused the color of Indian skin, worn clothing and extreme poverty. Not that his images were dour. He collected toys and whistles, and he painted women in *rebozos*, men in *serapes*, *tortilleras* grinding maize and with legs made angular by the weight of bulging loads. Forms emerged that would reappear for the rest of his life: arcs and circles and pyramids, giant heads and stubby, powerful fingers. Charlot soon found a muse, Julia Jiménez González — known as Luciana or Luz. She was a model of Rivera’s, an Aztec beauty and a master of Náhuatl, the Aztec language. She took Charlot to her village, introduced him to her family and made him godfather of her daughter.

**In 1926** Charlot left the muralists to join an archeological expedition to Chichén Itzá. He was hired as a staff artist to record newly excavated Mayan painted walls and reliefs before their colors became fugitive. He recorded hunters with jaguars, canoes on blue lakes and tall, svelte warriors with arching noses and turquoise-and-pink headdresses. After years of painting in the dark tones and squat shapes he felt were appropriate for Aztec Mexico, Chichén Itzá broadened Charlot’s palette and affected his line.

The signs of this change are obvious in many of the illustrations and lithographs

that mark the next phase of his career, in New York City. Charlot created cartoons and covers for *Time* and *Commonweal*. He illustrated a fine-art edition of *Carmen* and even children’s books, including *Two Little Trains* by Margaret Wise Brown. The story tells of a boy and girl going west through rain, snow, sand and tunnels. Most of the illustrations are line drawings, but some, including the endpapers, are done in hot pink, midnight blue, milk chocolate and violet. Maurice Sendak loved *Two Little Trains* and praised the 1949 edition as a “little miracle of bookmaking,” adding, “His choice of colors is a breathing into life of the very color of Miss Brown’s words.”

Some of Charlot’s most engaging art is entirely private. Shortly after he arrived in New York, he reconnected with Zohmah Day. Born Dorothy Day into a Mormon family in Utah, she studied secretarial skills in Los Angeles, changed her name to Zohmah, moved to Mexico and started to fashion a life as an artist or, as her son John puts it, “an artists’ magnet”; in addition to Charlot, she formed friendships with Rivera, Weston and the filmmaker Serge Eisenstein. Charlot and Zohmah carried on a bicoastal courtship for eight years, finally marrying in San Francisco in 1939. He narrated their life together in cartoons, line drawings and whimsical improvements on store-bought valentines. Soon there were children: Ann, born in 1940; John Pierre, born in 1941; Martin, born in 1944; and Peter, born in 1946.



During his twenty years in New York, Charlot continued to exhibit his painting and also to work on a monumental scale; he executed commissions for the Work Projects Administration and murals in Iowa, Georgia and North Carolina. He spent time as an artist-in-residence at Smith College and as a professor at the University of Colorado. In 1949 he accepted an invitation to come to Honolulu for the summer to create a mural in the foyer of Bachman Hall, the new administration building at UH Mānoa. He approached the culture of Hawai’i in much the same way that he had approached the culture of Mexico—full of curiosity and eager to learn—and his guides were some of the leading figures in the Islands. He started with Mary Kawena Pukui, a scholar at Bishop Museum, and Auntie Jennie Wilson, a former dancer for King Kalākaua.

Pukui, an impeccable source when it came to Hawaiian culture, coached him on everything from how ancient Hawaiians lived to the intricacies of the pahu drum. Wilson had a different role: Charlot hoped that she could help him come up with images of hula dancers. By then Wilson was in her late seventies and suffering severe arthritis. Charlot visited her in Wai’alae Nui, in what he described as an unpretentious home at the edge of a wilderness. She began with a prayer to Laka, the goddess of the dance. “The person who has not heard Aunt Jennie chanting,” Charlot later noted in an essay, “has missed a religious experience.” Then came the dance, a seated hula so spellbinding Charlot forgot to sketch. Wilson closed the dance with her arms frozen in an upward V. Charlot hazarded a question: Don’t dancers, as a rule, end the hula with arms stretched horizontally toward their audience? “Coming out of what had been close to a trance,” Charlot wrote, Auntie Jennie replied that she had dedicated this particular hula to the dead, and so the correct gesture was upward. In the end Charlot included a dozen or so dancers in the fresco; Auntie Jennie, he said, was the inspiration for each one.



In the 1930s Charlot settled in New York City and embarked on a career as a cartoonist, illustrator and lithographer. He illustrated the children’s tale *Two Little Trains* (above and above right); the book was a favorite of Maurice Sendak, who noted Charlot’s lack of “prissiness” and ability to be completely in tune with the story. Charlot also raised the art of lithography to a new level with the gorgeous and ornate illustrations he created for the fine-art book, *Carmen* (right). The commission changed Charlot’s life. “It enabled my father to marry my mother,” says John. “They had been more or less engaged for a long time, but he always felt he was too poor to start a family. But *Carmen* gave him a little money for the future.”





In that moment with Wilson, Charlot had seen the profound spirituality of Hawaiian culture. His son John, a professor of Polynesian religions, says that Charlot recognized the same dynamic that he'd seen in Mexico, where a deeply spiritual indigenous culture was marginalized—and unseen—by the dominant population.

That spirituality and its connection with nature became the subject of Charlot's mural. *Relation of Man and Nature in Old Hawaii* depicts a moment just before the arrival of Captain Cook, as a traditional feast unfolds. One figure digs the imu, the earth oven, while another pounds poi and two more carry in a pig. Drummers and dancers begin a hula in honor of the dead; warriors add to the composition with their long spears; all around the figures are plants: kalo, 'ulu, hala. In the distance is a flattened-out view of Kealakekua bay, and on the horizon, Cook's ship.

Charlot, always a devout Catholic, believed that in nature we are made minuscule by "colossal things"—Mont St. Victoire, Popocatepetl, Mauna Kea, the sea, the tallest tree. That experience, he felt, brings to us what he called "a sense of mystery," a reverence for something larger in life. "That sensation of man in relation to the gods—perhaps represented by nature because I have to give a body, of course, to the idea of God—is my angle; it's my bailiwick."

**Shortly after finishing** the mural, Charlot accepted a position as professor of art at the university. The family installed itself in faculty housing on the Mānoa campus. "Our house is crowded," Zohmah wrote to Weston, "not only with the children getting bigger and bigger but with three mynah birds and a rooster."

In 1958 the Charlots moved into a three-bedroom house in Kāhala sandwiched between a stream and a golf course. The architecture might've been called "mid-century modern" if it hadn't had so many traces of Mexico, Hawai'i and even rural France. Its living room featured low-slung

furniture and a mosaic of St. Francis, its beams were lined with petroglyph tiles and its garden, set around a courtyard, was graced with hala trees, their articulating leaves and aerial roots familiar from so many of Charlot's serigraphs. The dining room table jutted both into the dining room and onto the lānai, the easier to host family lū'au. According to the current doyenne of Helena's Hawaiian Foods, which catered those meals, the artist had a fondness for pua'a na'au, or pig's intestines.

As Charlot continued to work in Hawai'i, he continued to explore the liturgical, the indigenous Mexican and the Native Hawaiian. Curves of rebozos were echoed in lines of mu'umu'u. Bulging loads of cargadores were recalled in round calabashes. Metates for grinding corn were mirrored in double poi boards. The *Stations of the Cross* he started during World War I evolved into murals at Maryknoll School and the copper panels on the chapel doors at Punahou; some are easily recognizable, some are eerie—seas and skies swarming with fantastic forms.

In a series of interviews in 1971 and 1978, John Charlot prompted his father to reflect on how life in the Pacific had altered his work. The artist said that in his earlier years he had broken down forms for the two-dimensional plane of the mural:



circles, arcs, triangles and rectangles. In Hawai'i he sought to reflect the motion of the waves and the wind: the corkscrewing columns of coral under the sea, the wild tentacles of the octopus, the serpentine hair of underwater swimmers and the fringes of palm fronds.

This evolution can be seen in the six panels on the façade of the United Public Workers headquarters on North School Street. Some of the themes from Mexico are here: the celebration of workers and a portrait of a modern-day indigenous culture, complete with a case of Primo beer. Some of the forms from Mexico are here as well: the flat circles of umbrellas and cement mixers, the arc of a bedsheet. But the way laundry spirals out of a washing machine is new, as are the colors: deep-sea blue and plumeria pink and 'i'iwi red.

Even more obviously "Hawaiian" are Charlot's petroglyph paintings. "You go to the Louvre or to the Metropolitan Museum and you copy the Old Masters," Charlot answered when his son asked what petroglyphs meant to him. "By repeating the lines, the proportions and so on, you gather something that the guys had in mind." He continued: "If you copy the petroglyph with the same sense of respect that you copy a Poussin, you gather something of what the old artists of Hawai'i were about."

In another interview, Charlot connected the dots of his own artistic life. At the time he was working on his series on Hawaiian drummers, and he realized that the gestures he was painting were inspired by engravings from Cook's expeditions, by images of Aztec drummers he'd seen in the collection of his great-uncle and by his own experience of playing a pahu drum for the first time. He once mused about the possibility that two of his main themes—the Mexican Indian and the Hawaiian drummer—had gotten superimposed in his own imagination. "Those things happen, I think, all the time to an artist. It's not a question of geography. Things get bottled up and come out at a certain time, sometimes in another way." **HH**

Both scenes at left come from Charlot's Hawai'i murals. Above, a detail from *Early Contacts of Hawaii* with the *Outer World*, the mural Charlot painted for Bishop Bank, which shows missionaries demonstrating a spinning wheel. "Note my father's emphasis on the women of the mission, quite unusual at the time," says John. Below, a detail from *Relation of Man and Nature in Old Hawaii* showing men pounding poi. "Note how the bodies take on the shape of the tools they're using," says John. "My father's point was that we are formed by our culture." Above: Charlot made a valentine for his wife Zohmah every year from 1936 until his death in 1979; in many, Zohmah wore a crown and played the queen to Charlot's jester.