

SEARCH FOR EDEN - 1968
THE RETURN OF JEAN CHARLOT

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The Return of Jean Charlot

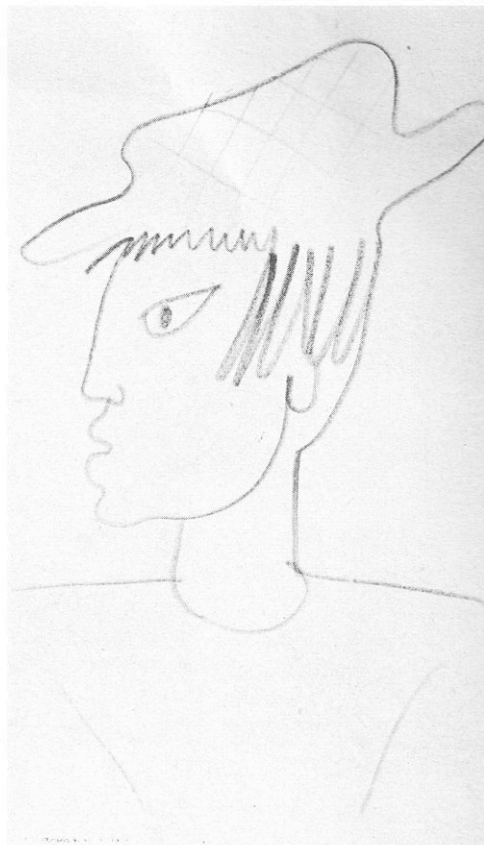
Back in the flaming Twenties, there arrived in Mexico a young artist recently discharged from military service as an artillery officer at the Argonne Front.

He was a young man of scholarly interests, associated in sympathies and temperament with Jacques Maritain's Catholic Left, so that he almost automatically found himself at home in the "back to the people" cry and commitment of the dedicated trailblazers cohering around the mighty energies of Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco, Atl . . .

Part Mexican via one of his grandmothers, but even more so in spirit because one of his grandfathers had been a discoverer and student in Maya Yucatan, Charlot had spent his childhood in the midst of pre-Columbian works of art. Their idiom was as native, therefore, to him as any. At the

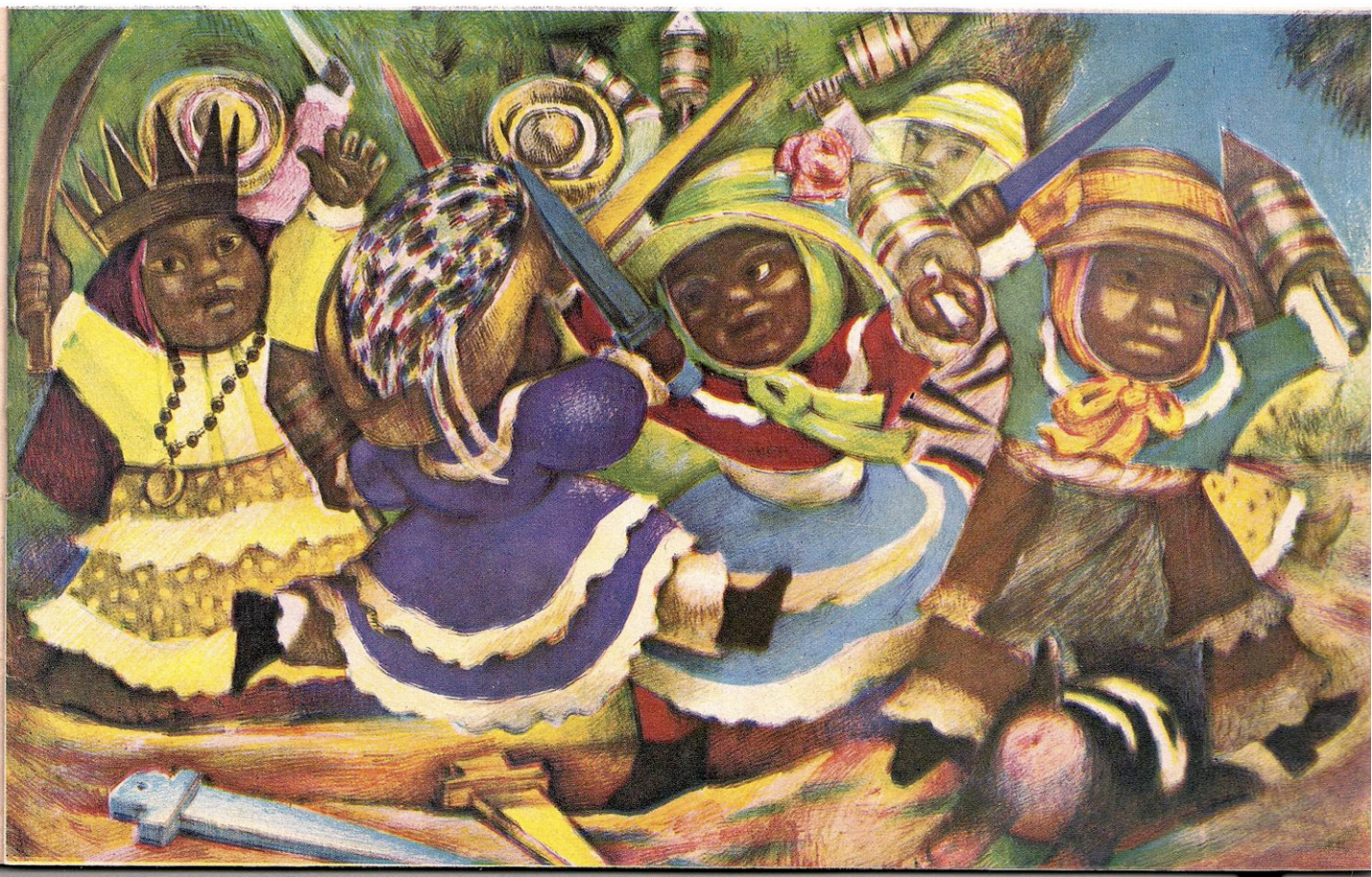
same time because of the "back to the people" feeling of the modern European Catholic Left, he had already, before arriving in Mexico, been working in fresco, in the direct contact mood of the early Renaissance, that was felt to be the point at which there was still the kind of inspired dialogue between artist and communicant, that the Church must recover.

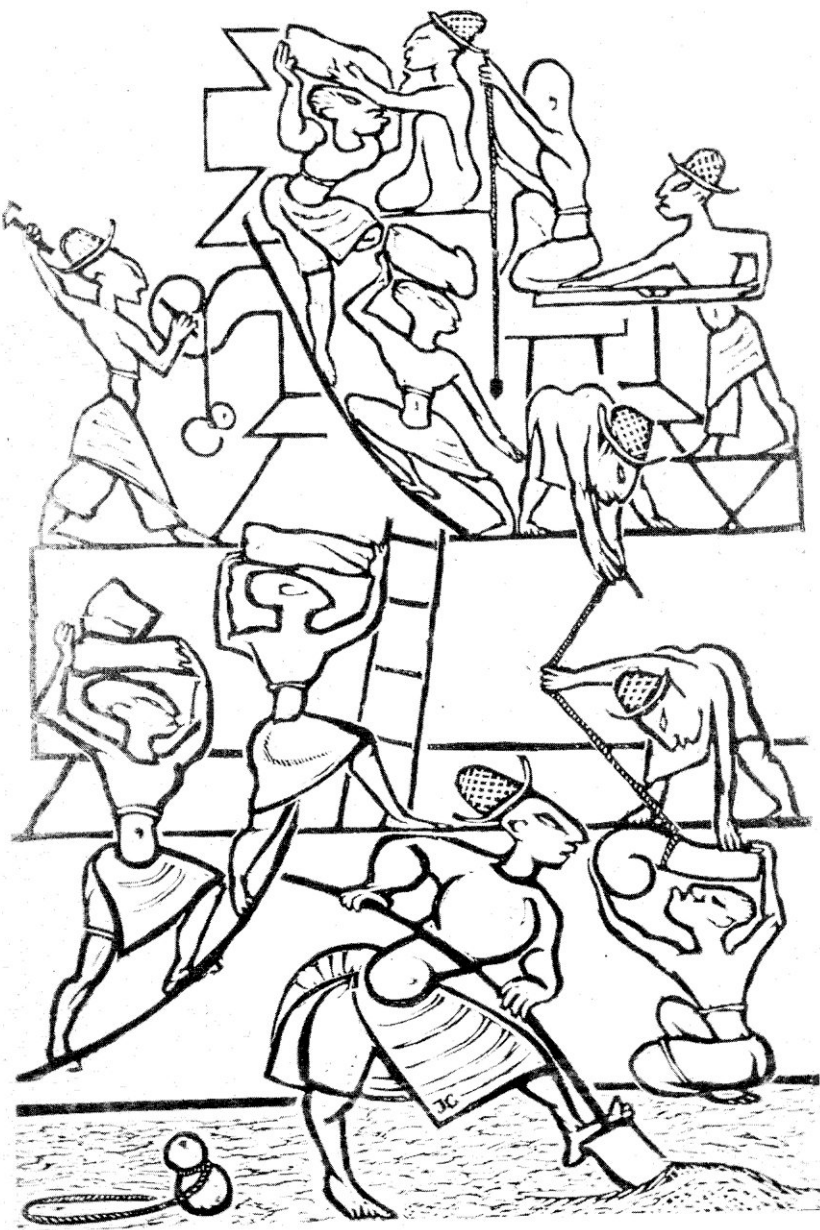
This being exactly what the artist of Mexico's new Revolutionary Left were searching for and trying to develop—but in the sharpest political, rather than religious terms, Charlot found himself happily at work in the Revolutionary Syndicate of Painters, Sculptors, and Intellectual Workers; and not particularly in disagreement either, with the basic political aims of this astonishing creative group.



CHALMA DANCERS: A COLOR LITHOGRAPH BY JEAN CHARLOT.

Maya. Pencil drawing



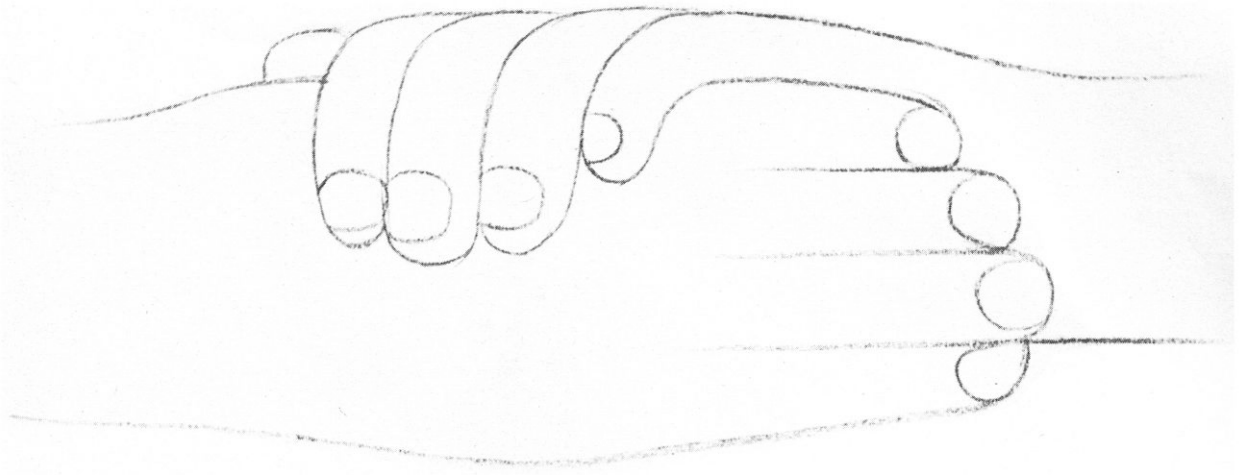


To search and re-create that which would be found to be in spirit "Mexico" was a self-imposed assignment that grew out of the fully instinctive feeling that, to become a self-respecting, forward moving people, it was essential to have a core, an identification; a "querencia" in fact. Throughout the ages everywhere, it is those people, and only those people, who have or have had this sort of heart and allegiance, who achieved greatness of whatever kind. And historically also, it has always been a people's poets—in whatever material—who have sung, painted, sculpted, built, or prayed in the form that gave their people its idiom and its Self, and hence its faith to do whatever was necessary for it to survive or grow and flourish.

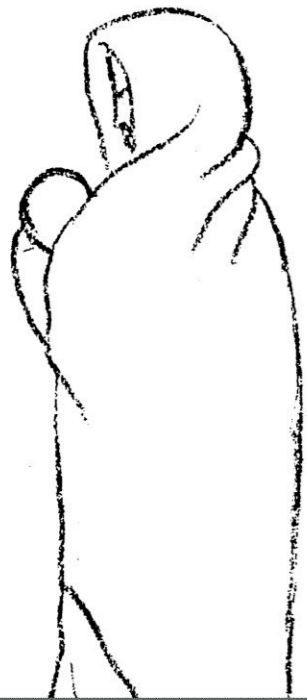
This problem faced Mexico's artists, poets, writers, builders, at the end of a murderous ten years of civil war and wave upon wave of revolution; but more precisely, at the end of over four centuries of systematic alienation, during which that which they had been was destroyed, buried, despised; and that which they had become could not possibly be the model that was forced upon them... Europe in whatever form. It was a problem in profound philosophical research, on the one hand; of love, plain and simple, on the other; and in the final analysis, of just opening the eyes.

In a way, it was like the crisis of adolescents everywhere that the adult world is separate from the world of children, a problem in self-discovery, self-assertion, integration. From which, security in self-confidence and self-expression grow. But for a whole people to "find itself" in exactly this sense, it needed, and was marvelously fortunate in having, artists of such intelligence and sensitivity as to do this job, and without any particular articulation of

Above, *Pyramid Workers*, Chichen-Itzá, Woodcut. Below: *Mother and Child*, Woodcut.



Mother and Child. Lithograph.



View From a Bridge. Oil Landscape.



Mother and Children, Line drawing, ink.



LUZ, Pencil Drawing.

the task in hand. On the contrary; it was something that could not have been done—cannot—as a conscious articulate assignment.

The understanding, dedication and passion that produced this modern miracle grew first out of the first small, then much larger, and quite heterogenous group of men and women (of many origins, and even varied nationalities) who called themselves the "Revolutionary Syndicate..." and

who in group form did many jobs of research: into the various forms and directions of the early Italian Renaissance; into Mexico's folk art, wherever found, but especially wherever found in still live function rather than as only merchandise; into folk art forms, such as saloon walls and church ex-votos; and of course and most minutely, into pre-Columbian art, from toys to the gigantic temple work done in and for the pre-Columbian cults.

Out of this collaboration, in constant interchange and mounting realizations and excitements, there emerged an art and an idiom brand new in the world of the Twenties: monumental, direct, unashamedly loving, rigorously clear, and unassuming as any true work of art usually is. Its political overtones were of course, Left, in Mexican terms. And as to who contributed what, and who invented what, and who originated anything... this is clearly impossible for any one to trace. Everybody taught everybody, and each took and gave.

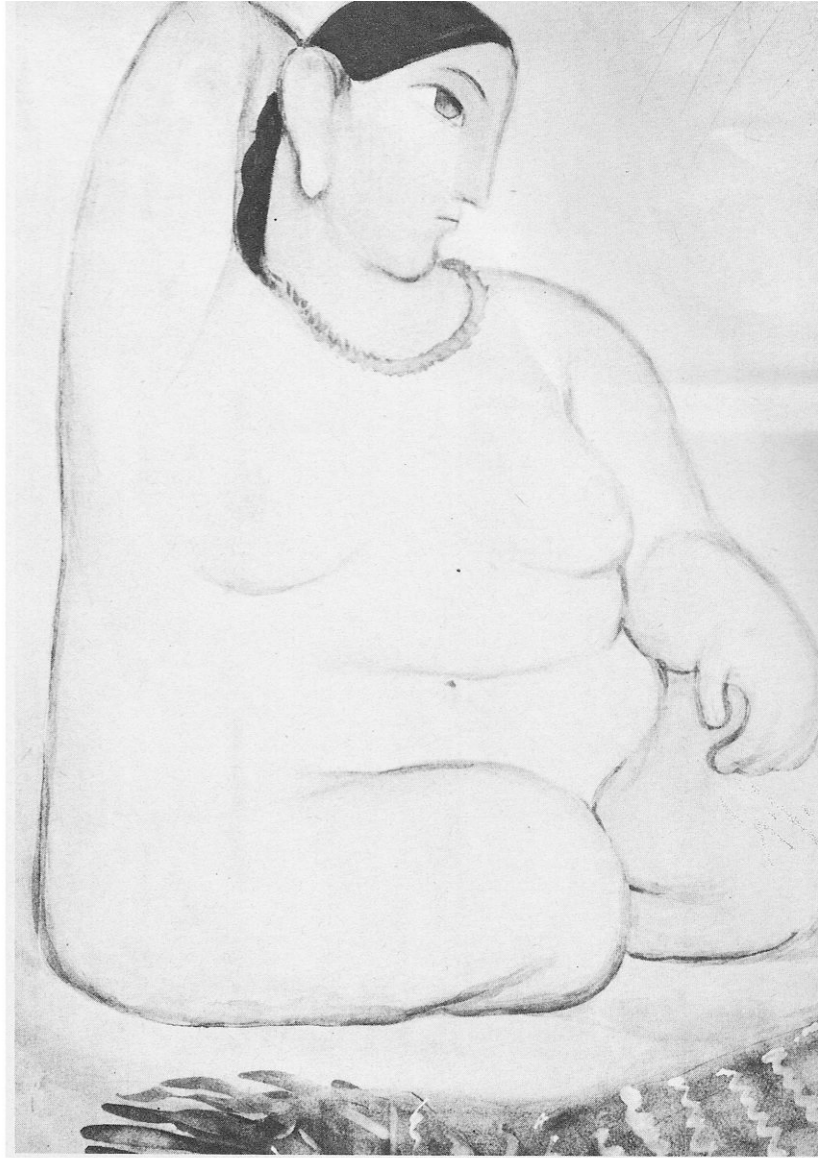
Individually of course, each artist developed a variant and a personal style or language within the common stream. But even now it is comically difficult if not impossible at times, to tell the difference between a Charlot and a Rivera, or in some of their early work, a Tamayo and a Siqueiros—odd as that may seem today. Interestingly too, all of the artists who participated in this piece of extraordinary making of history, became much greater in their work, than they had been before; and different.

As time passed and the then rowdy, boisterous, thoroughly unrespectable members of the Syndicate between the now hallowed Maestros, a tendency grew and sharpened to differentiate politically and nationally, so that absurd quarrels developed, fostered between the now dogmatic priests of the Communist left, and the unsubmissive Mexican revolutionaries following nobody's "line."

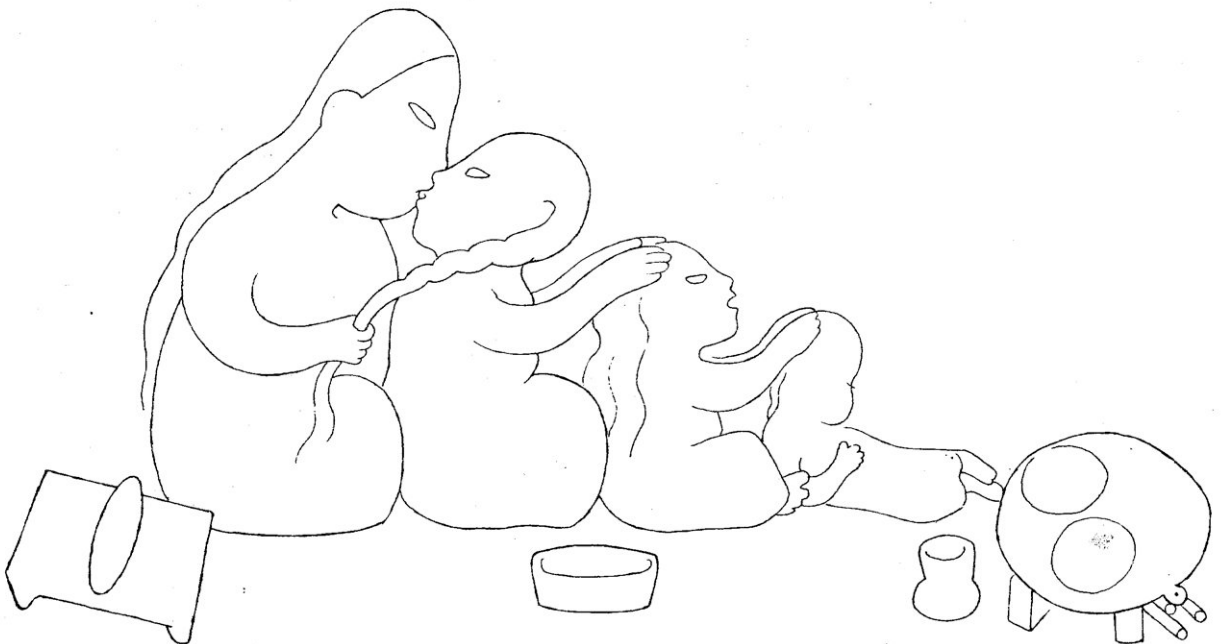
And also, fostered by marchands parlaying a good thing into a still better one by closing the borders, much demagogy also developed around who was and who was not, truly "Mexican," so that some of the contributors, and among them a few of the greatest, who happened to have been born elsewhere than in Mexico, were ipso facto demoted to second-class or limbo, in the local art market.

To some degree this happened to Charlot, who meanwhile had lost interest as the movement became more and more purely demagogic or commercial, and had moved away, settling down as Artist in Residence at the University of Hawaii, where he is now Professor Emeritus.

The major retrospective of his work being put on in Mexico's national Museum of Modern Art is therefore an event in many ways, but most handsomely, an invitation to return and be acknowledged as the great and gifted pioneer he indubitably was. The visible results of that generation's work are all about us, and are known and accepted throughout the world today, as among the great accomplishments of art in the twentieth century. Even more moving to all those who were of and in that "Syndicate. . .," however, are the results in human rescue and creation: a nation full of hope and belief in itself, having absorbed all those things then searched and found, having breathed the new spiritual air thus given it, and having thenceforth come alive.



Nude With Corals. Watercolor



Detail, study for mural, 1923. Sepia drawing.



LUZ AND CONCHITA. TEMPERA