
MASTERS IN
MODERN ART

James W. Lane



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JEAN CHARLOT

(1898-

CHARLOT



AT a time when most painters are concerned only with form and forget direction, or with direction and forget form, or with color and forget both form and direction, Jean Charlot can emphasize each in every canvas he paints. One of the most studious and versatile painters of today, powerful, and undeniably one of the most persuasive, at an age still under forty, he has mastered fresco, canalized the art of mural painting in Mexico—though he is no Mexican—and although the compositions of his works are as if they had been solved by the pure cold music of mathematics, he has produced pictures pulsating with warm, stirring human feeling. Charlot, if his approach to painting is intellectual on the professional side—like the approach of a twentieth century Delacroix—always limits his scientific pyrotechnics to re-enforcing what he has to say. There are times, when in Charlot's working out of an especial problem, such as how to underline the spatial qualities of a landscape, the spectator is so sincerely astonished at the technique that he must gasp a moment at it before reacting to the subject matter itself.

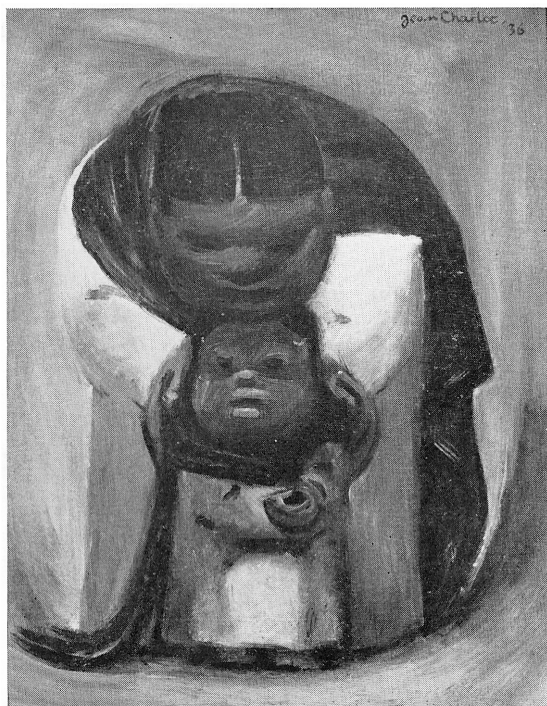
There are many painters today whose technical abilities are great. Some of those members of what Mr. Duncan Phillips has dubbed "The Immaculates" are technicians, their products being as airless as they are spotless. Men like this, Niles Spencer and Stefan Hirsch, for example, achieve

MASTERS IN MODERN ART

comparatively soul-less paintings. That is the difference between them and Jean Charlot. The work of Charlot has a soul. He is a man obviously to whom ideas, as well as the manner of expressing those ideas, mean much. Simple, unconfounded, is his wise vision of humanity. His pictures reflect it in all moods—at work, such as the building of pyramids; in the family, such as the spaciousness of mother love; at war and in agony; and at devotion.

For a man of thirty-eight Charlot has had a singularly well-rounded life, equipped with the distinction of a scholarly background. Born in Paris, of a Franco-Russian father and a half Spanish mother, he led there the life of the usual French student. He was twenty and a lieutenant in the artillery when the Great War ended. When as a member of the French Army of Occupation, he found himself in German territory he took advantage of this to go and study the paintings of Grünewald, of the fifteenth century Cologne School. Three years after the end of the War he was in Mexico, living with his uncle, for members of the family had been settled there for a century. He has not seen France since.

Charlot had always, from the age of three, drawn—and always, from a little later, written, so that, arrived in Mexico, he was not long in demonstrating his talents in both arts. From a long critical examination of Mexican picture manuscripts he revived the woodcut and he illustrated poems. He painted the first fresco, which is in the Preparatory School. As a writer he was able to look back to the day when in France he had done his bit composing classic quatrains and now wrote a Mexican letter on art for



CHARLOT
The First Steps

C H A R L O T

Parisian periodicals. In 1926 the magazine "Mexican Folkways" was founded with him as art editor.

After completing "The Fight at the Great Temple"—the result is Uccello modernized—for the Preparatory School in Mexico City, he began that instruction (with Rivera, Siqueiros, and de la Cueva) at the Secretariat which created almost over-night a great school of muralists, the Mexican. Charlot trained masons, as he continues to train students at the Florence Cane School in Radio City, for "the preparation of walls for true fresco". As Paul Claudel says of him, he is born for fresco painting. His forms are large and monolithic; they "carry" superbly, but they "carry", not alone because they are broad forms, but because they have been well-designed and placed on a properly prepared surface.

In 1926 the Carnegie Institute sent an archaeological staff to Chichen-Itza in Yucatan. Charlot, due to his great knowledge of ancient Mexican civilization and his powers of draughtsmanship, was on it. His job was to copy Mayan frescos and bas-reliefs, and to root up stelae. Possibly he had a particularly strong scent for the latter from having been given, on the occasion of his first communion in the Catholic Church, some American grave-pottery. At any rate, he soon found a very valuable Mayan gravestone. No tropical sun with its scorching heat was too severe to send him away from his labors of sketching.

These years in Mexico, from 1921 to 1928, were the formative years for Charlot's style. What he had found to his liking was the unheralded, unassuming, offstage, and un-Spanish life of the Mexican Indians wrapped up in their

MASTERS IN MODERN ART

sarapes and as dignified as Roman senators tucked into togas. He found also that there was the splendor of intellectual order in this civilization, especially in the Mayan version of it that he found at Chichen-Itza. That appealed to him, for Charlot, if his forms are characteristically Mexican, is very French in his love of order and clarity. He is French, too, in the manner of twelfth and thirteenth century France: his ideas come from Catholic cosmogony, which was then intellectualized to its highest degree by scholasticism. He is austere without puritanism; intellectual without joylessness.

As La Farge found the Tahitians Hellenistic, so Charlot found the Mexican Indians like ancient Athenians. He observed that the Indian foot is always very horizontal and clinging to the earth, like the feet of the virgins of the Parthenon, and he so paints it. There is music in the noiseless glide of the Indian through the early morning streets; there is grace in the folds and cant of his *sarape*, pulverous as it is in color.

In so far as Mexico is concerned, Charlot's paintings are not sociological nor socialistic. Diego Rivera has attempted to inject such notes into his own work, and, besides making his art controversial, has not improved its aesthetic appeal. But Charlot, for one thing because he realizes that the Mexican problem is extraordinarily complex, has for the most part left sociology severely alone. In addition to being good art this is good sociology. For when sociology is simplest, when it can be reduced to everyday, easily-understood morals, it is at its best. Thus, one could be the most stony-fisted Midas and still love the congenitally poor *mestizos*

CHARLOT

of Charlot's art, because, not only do they speak for humanity but because they do so with such a sweet, unangry note. Charlot has seen that these half-castes or full-blooded Indians are the remnants, the maintainers, of a beautiful and harmonious civilization. He has found their forms, broad, unangular, corpulent, the basic material for his art. As we think of the brown men of Mexico today, we, or at least I, think of them in terms of Charlot's block-like forms.

In contradistinction to the Mexican Indian's ample forms, well-cloaked as they often are in *sarapes* for the men and *rebozos* for the women, Charlot finds the forms of the average white model replete with angularity, sometimes graceful, sometimes gawky. Working as he now does in the United States, he is changing the character of his forms to suit his new knowledge. Of course he can draw upon his store of Mexican forms at will; set him a scene of Mexican life and out come the memories of intimate Mexican family life he has piled up in his scholarly and retentive brain.

But he is getting interested in the forms of non-Indian people also. Some of his crayon drawings of heads and torsos show this extremely well. The bony structures of features, the lozenge-like patterns made by crossed limbs, are emphasized by his pencil and brush, until we have results as full of bosses and patterns as a rocky hillside is of boulders. To keep essential direction or cast of countenance under the application of such guiding principles — and Charlot does it—is an achievement. There is nothing soft in any of his faces. Even those of the Mexican Indians in his family groups are as much characterized by planes and prisms. It is a modernistic manner, but, when employed

MASTERS IN MODERN ART

by a Charlot, it adds great strength to the portraiture. The same may be said of his illustrations for Hilaire Belloc's "Reformation Portraits."

Charlot, I am sorry to say, has done very few landscapes. My regret is due to the fact that the one landscape I have seen—he calls it "The Storm"—is so good that my mouth has ever since been watering for another. Very sensibly he adopts the Chinese philosophy in landscape. The Chinese believe that space, which is the most important thing to suggest therein, a space that shall shrivel up man into insignificance, is best suggested by direction and not volume. The early and late nineteenth century English landscapists from Crome to Sisley got their spatial effects more from volume and child's-play perspective than from direction. Their chief directive quality came in their handling of clouds. But with a Charlot landscape, like his one in the Glusker, or that in the Iselin Collection, New York, every form of tree, mountain, road, or field-furrow is directive, leading the eye back, around, across, up, or forward. Here direction as well as high-light creates atmosphere. Again is Charlot's ideal realized: to see an ancient beauty, here that of landscape, reborn.

Rhythmical, rightly repetitive, and geometrical, then, are great attributes of Charlot's painting, no matter whether he is landscapist, portraitist, or commentating muralist. But one could never conclude an estimate of this serious painter who seems always to be thinking in terms, if not of the past, then of culture, without mentioning two other characteristics of his work. One is the really amazing variety of his palettes—he never plays, like some painters, in one key ad

CHARLOT

infinitem, or at least ad nauseam—and the other is the strong, distinguished character, the range of facial expression he can summon particularly in the region of the mouth, the brow, and the eyes. It is a character very close to human feeling. A person sleeping soundly has a deep disinterest and unconcern about this world. The face of the sleep-walker or of the snorer—that is a face that Charlot has mastered! Again, the distrust, or the pig-headed skepticism of ignorance or fear he can depict masterfully. He has known the exploited "little people" of this earth, the Mexican Indians, who have such emotions, and they have made wonderful "copy" for him.

But the variety of his palettes I find extraordinary. Time was when a painter needed to have only one manner, and one palette, to grow popular. I say this and one instantly, without doubt, thinks of Corot, with his fluffy, filmy blue-green groves. Yet many other painters of the past, and even some of the present, are distinguished by one style. It is like one metal and one locality that has been so frequently ored that the mine is in danger of running thin. This sort of thing, however, doesn't go so well today. Today the successful painter, if only to show his intellectual alacrity and artistic sensitiveness, usually goes through a very gauntlet of styles. People feel that this adds to his stature, as they say it does to Picasso's, although I disagree with that, as I believe Picasso is a sadly overrated painter who has been intent, part of the time, on ramming jokes down the throats of the public. But he has gotten away with it, for he is nothing if not clever. Where a variety of style readily adds to stature may best be seen, I think, in the case of Charlot.

MASTERS IN MODERN ART

I believe painters change their styles quite sincerely. They wish to find a medium or palette more stimulating to them. It follows that if you feel that one palette brings out what you have to say better than another, you work in that. It also happens that you had nothing to say in one palette, and find a great deal in another. Or you are simply bored, and want to try something new and original. This idea, rather than that of shocking people, lies behind many of the *volte-faces* made by painters. Then again, there is the idea, essentially the most profitable of all, that only in constant change is there in art any progress. It is a good religious hint which says that "as long as the understanding finds no trouble or difficulty, and is at ease, that is a sign that one's faith has not gone far enough." This may be paraphrased for the world of a painter's conceptions.

Well, Jean Charlot, as a mark of his progressive nature, enjoys changing his styles. I have referred to the natural change in his forms that came over him with the change from Mexico to the United States, the change from broad forms for people to angular, svelte forms. I have seen drawings of his so free that you might have thought Max Ernst had evoked them; and I have seen drawings of his—the ones for Belloc's book—so "tight" that Ingres, if he had had a sense of humor, would have been marked as their author. But even these drawings, disciplined to mere facial cameos by publisher's requirements, had as much strong differentiation as though each had been by a different artist.

But I promised to speak of Charlot's different palettes. It is in color that his range is especially wide. Note the way

CHARLOT

in which after painting his picture in the conventional palette, he can add another color in very small amount, which acts *sostenuto*, like the middle pedal of the piano. Thus, in one of his landscapes, of a storm or of "The Agony in the Garden", he composed the scene in turquoise and a light, neutralized blue containing a tinge of purple. Suddenly, wrapped in the whirlwind, as a sort of mandorla, appears the angel, rendered only with one wing and the head, but these in a loud, intense purple. The use of this color might almost scream, but Charlot makes it sing. In another composition, "The Nailing to the Cross", the painter has been able to introduce ultramarine into what would ordinarily be the closed corporation of pinks, greens, and straws. In the "Annunciation", lemon and white is the palette; in "Christ Before Pilate", sapphire and rose madder.

These religious compositions bring me to the notes on which I should like to conclude—Charlot as a religious draughtsman and Charlot as a muralist. It seems to me that, judging from his series of *tondi* representing six of the Christian mysteries of the rosary, he lays himself open to the criticism of a lack of religious sensitivity. He has obtained powerful artistic effect through beautifully fused palettes and through the force of original directive lines and foreshortenings. But his paintings of Mexican Indians showed the same virtues; only to the faces he added the characterful notes of human feeling. He does not really do this to the faces of the characters in his scriptural scenes. They are strangely wooden and unmovable.

But with Charlot as a muralist one is on much more

MASTERS IN MODERN ART

positive ground. He seems to have an unerring instinct for choosing a canvas and a blocked-out design for carrying well. The canvases he used for painting the six Christian mysteries were not particularly large. They were square in shape. Just inside the frame, on the canvas, he painted, in each case, a black circle and into that the composition went. Yet in the little world created within that circle how much space could Charlot not suggest! It was almost as if we looked at the past through a telescope. It was magnified yet it spread out. If only the paintings could be themselves enlarged and transferred to a large frescoed wall, their effect would be *terrific*.

This, then, is where I prefer to take my leave of Charlot. If he has long life, he cannot fail to achieve a great deal, because his work, except for the strictures made, is instinct with human feeling which he expresses in original modern design and color. To his sense of human drama is added a profound sense of the history as well as the painting of the past. A bright augury for any painter!