

Jean Charlot and Local Cultures

Jean Charlot's preoccupation with local folk and indigenous cultures is one of his principal characteristics. This general essay will touch on only some aspects of this broad subject.

Charlot's career can be divided into the four main geographical areas to which the accidents of his life have led him: France, Mexico, the continental United States, and the Pacific (Hawaii and Fiji). In all these, Charlot researched the local cultures and was influenced by them in his own work. In Charlot's personal view, these areas, for all their dissimilarities, share a curious common situation: important local cultures, such as American Indian or Polynesian, have been more or less overlaid by an imported one, but persist and influence the new. Even France has its regional cultures to which Charlot has paid particular attention.

This historical cultural situation severely qualifies the use of two standard pairs of categories: folk art vs. high art, and indigenous art vs. imported art.

A given Hawaiian *mele* might seem a folk song to a Westerner, but would be considered a piece of high poetry by a Hawaiian speaker. An Indian dance might be a religious and cultural high point in the life of a tribe. The medieval French church artists and the Mexican illustrator José Guadalupe Posada cannot be forced into the originally sociological categories of folk and high culture. Most important for Charlot is that all segments of society have produced art that is great. At that peak of achievement, in his view, social origins become secondary.

Charlot naturally recognizes examples of art works which belong purely to either the indigenous or the imported culture. But he studies and appreciates the broad spectrum of combinations between the two as well. This attitude was unusual in the Mexico of the 1920s and is very rare in Polynesian studies even to this day. Again, the primary point for Charlot was the quality of the work produced.

Inclusive expressions such as "local art" or "local

culture" are best able, in my opinion, to express Charlot's thinking.

Charlot's work in local cultures is well known and most obvious in regard to Mexico and the Pacific. The beginnings of this interest are, however, to be found in his French period. Foreign students of a high culture such as that of France or Japan often tend to forget its broad popular roots. Jacques Louis David produced several political graphics in the style of the broadsides of his day. From his childhood, the Pointillist Seurat studied his father's large collection of *Images d'Épinal*. The Cubist Jacques Villon worked as a magazine illustrator. The lithographer and cartoonist Honoré Daumier escapes the conventional categories as completely as does Posada. When Flaubert attended a park puppet show of *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, he was charmed when the alert puppeteer announced that "the author" was in the audience. Moreover, interest in medieval and popular art was an aspect of the French Roman Catholic Renaissance of Charlot's youth, especially in La Gilde Notre-Dame, the liturgical art association to which he belonged in his teens. Even more immediately, the multi-lingual, multi-cultural homes of his parents and relatives were filled with art works from Mexico, Russia, and China.

Yet even in this perspective, Charlot's interest in popular and local cultures is remarkable. He made a large collection of popular prints, especially *Images d'Épinal*, which he found at the Marché aux Puces, the Flea Market, and in book stalls along the Seine. He collected nineteenth century illustrated books as well. He made an intense study of medieval art and read widely in French medieval literature, which was unusual for the time. After the death of his father at the beginning of World War I, he spent a summer in Brittany, where the regional art impressed him greatly, as it had Gauguin some thirty years earlier. Charlot also had contact with the living oral tradition of Breton poetry. During his

military service in the occupation of the Rhine, he made an extended study of the Alsatian and Rhine masters.

Charlot's study was not conducted exclusively in libraries and museums. To appreciate the unusualness and possible impact of inter-class contacts in early twentieth century France—especially for the class of *grands bourgeois* to which Charlot belonged—is difficult for Americans of today. Charlot deliberately sought and cultivated acquaintance with other classes. He sat in the kitchen with the servants. He listened to the oral historical traditions of an old woman he employed as a model. After the War, he found a small village shop to print his series of wood engravings on the Way of the Cross and deeply appreciated the comments of the printer.

Popular and local cultures had a definite influence on Charlot during this period. In literature, he wrote poems based on medieval French models and one in the *argot* of the *poilu*. In his art, certain basic choices were influenced by his studies and contacts. For instance, he would work in prints, especially the more popular media of wood block and lithography. He wanted to do public, monumental art, especially liturgical, so early thought of fresco murals and the polychrome wood and stone sculptures he had seen in Brittany and the Marne. Stylistically, he consciously based some of his early works on the popular prints he had studied. A series of colored wood bas-reliefs are clear evocations of those he had seen in Breton churches. These works are, of course, in no sense copies, but very personal creations.

The basic pattern of Charlot's relationship to local cultures is, therefore, set in France: broad and detailed scholarly study of language, literature, and the arts; personal contacts with the people; and assimilation and utilization in his own creativity in literature and the visual arts. Charlot works on an extraordinarily broad front, and one of the interests of studying him is learning how he coordinates fields and activities which are usually separated. Charlot also has an independent taste, a good collector's eye, and is not inhibited by fashions or received opinions. As a result, his scholarship is creative, marked by discoveries and new perspectives. This is also true of his art.

The basic pattern established in France continues very clearly in Mexico and the Pacific. Charlot produced scholarly books and articles on various pre-contact, post-contact, and contemporary subjects. Just as he had collected French folk prints along the Seine, so he bought broadsides from street vendors in Mexico and discovered Posada and Manilla. He did not restrict himself to the pure, pre-contact indigenous cultures, but studied, to name just a few examples, Colonial art, Juan Cordero, and the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico; and, in Hawaii, post-contact petroglyphs, Louis Choris, missionary prints, and Roman Catholic newspaper woodblock illustrations. He learned Nahuatl and Hawaiian.

As in France, he sought out the people who produced the culture he was studying. He lived in Indian villages in Mexico, participated in pilgrimages, and visited artisans and craftsmen. One Hawaiian told him, "Many people talk *about* us, but don't want to talk *to* us!" I once asked my father why so many who had worked on Hawaiian subjects had never learned Hawaiian. He said, "I think you have to love Hawaiians to learn Hawaiian."

Charlot had become acquainted with oral traditions in France. In Mexico, a model and close friend was the important Aztec informant Luz Jiménez. When Charlot came to Hawaii, he searched for Hawaiian oral historical traditions, which often differ considerably from Western academic versions of the same events.

This personal research and encounter is the background for Charlot's own creative activity. He wrote a puppet play in Nahuatl; two plays in the Hawaiian language and six English language plays on Hawaiian subjects. His visual art works include pre- and post-contact, as well as contemporary subjects. The stylistic influence of Mayan, Aztec and Polynesian art on Charlot can only be mentioned here.

Charlot feels that, given the opportunity, he could have done for the culture of the continental United States what he did for those of Mexico and Hawaii. He has said that the United States has just as much interesting local material as Mexico, but that we Americans are still commonly unaware of it.

Charlot did, however, accomplish enough in the

United States to reveal the basic outline of his view and the fact that he followed here the basic pattern he did elsewhere. One of Charlot's first vivid impressions of Mexico had been the dark green skin of an Indian priest's hand against the white of his chasuble. His first strong impression of a United States Caucasian was the pink skin and sharp Puritan profile of a young woman he saw during a boat trip in 1930 and immortalized as "Grace" in the last lithograph of his 1933 *Picture Book*. She is the spiritual antecedent of the American missionaries in Charlot's 1952 mural *Early Contacts of Hawaii with Outer World*. Something of Charlot's astonishment can still be felt in the appearance of the pink, beribboned, periwigged Captain Cook late in Char-

lot's Hawaiian language play *Na Lono Elua, Two Lonos*.

Other sights awaited Charlot when he moved to the United States: a roiled sea of piggy pink faces at a boxing match, a street full of businessmen excited at news of the market, construction workers and union meetings, salesman-clean clerics, ramrod-backed members of good families, flushed Irish policemen in wet slickers, Indians, blacks, and immigrants.

Charlot plunged into a long study of this exotic milieu. North American Indian art, Civil War photographs, United States painting and literature, were a few of the obvious sources.

Much more unusual at the time, but perfectly



Detail of **Hopi Snake Dance**, 1951
Tempe, Arizona

aligned to Charlot's previous interests, was his attention to newspaper comics, the popular prints of the United States, available on the street. In 1938, Charlot exchanged art works with George Herriman, creator of *Krazy Kat*, who dedicated his picture:

A "Jean Charlot"—Biens Regards
From les enfants de
le County de Cocomo—
ET LE VIEUX
"Herriman"
KEE VOOZ APPORT LA MOOR" 1938

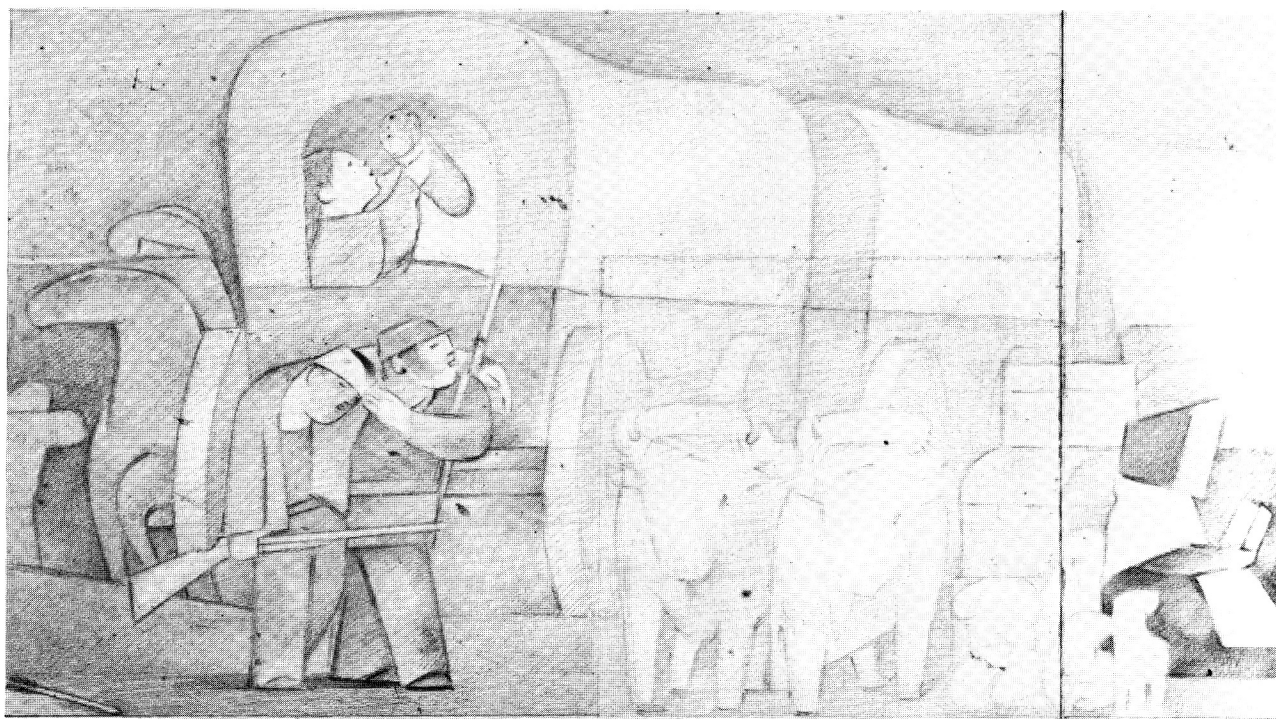
In Athens, Georgia, in 1944, Charlot exchanged art works with Milton Caniff, author of *Terry and the Pirates*, who inscribed, "For Jean Charlot—Whose interest is most heartening. . . ." Charlot later made similar exchanges with Crockett Johnson of *Barnaby* and Roy Crane of *Buz Sawyer*. In 1938, Charlot delivered a series of lectures on art theory and history at the Disney Studios, ending with a scholarly analysis of the art of animation, summarized in an article published in *The American Scholar* and in Charlot's 1939 book of essays *Art from the Mayans*

to Disney (I remember an American esthete looking at the title in 1955 and wondering who this artist Disney was!).

In Mexico, a terra-cotta statuette of a woman shaping tortillas—made and presented to Charlot by Panduro, a master potter from San Pedro Tlaquepaque—had been a stylistic inspiration. In the United States, an old wooden decoy duck rescued from a garbage heap would have had an equivalent place in Charlot's work.

Charlot did produce a number of scholarly works on aspects of continental United States culture, but feels he lacked occasions to realize fully his potential in the visual arts, especially monumental murals. His *Hopi Snake Dance* at the University of Arizona at Tempe (the dancers contrasting with the pink hands of the modern serum researcher in a subordinate panel) is his only large scale mural on North American Indians, a subject to which he could have brought his Mexican experience. (While in Hopi country, Charlot was a guest of Fred Kabotie, the famous Hopi painter of Indian subjects.)

Charlot designed two monumental mural pro-



Detail of drawing for unrealized mural of pioneer life, planned for Colorado

jects on United States historical subjects which were never realized. The first was for a competition for a series of panels on American negroes. Charlot's treatment was dynamic. In one panel, black Civil War soldiers charge the viewer. Charlot feels his series would have been very powerful. He heard, after it had been rejected, that the jurors had found his negroes "too black."

The second unrealized project is one of Charlot's most successful designs. The large fresco mural would have been on a semi-circular free-standing panel set in a park against the background of the Colorado mountains. The subject was the inside half section of a circle of covered wagons, the canvas tops of which would have echoed the snow-covered peaks. Inside the circle, Charlot had projected a historical portrait of pioneer life. White settlers and Indians of the Plains, their clothes, implements, artifacts, and animals would have been assimilated into Charlot's esthetic vision of American culture. When Charlot left Colorado, he stated that his great regret was not to have been allowed to do this mural.

If Charlot's murals of modern Hawaiian subjects are excluded, his Georgia murals *Cotton Gin* at McDonough and, at Athens, *Paratroopers Land in Sicily* must be the primary bases of any study of his monumental vision of contemporary North American culture. The freshness and originality of his depiction is immediately striking. A comparison of the McDonough mural with Covarrubias's once celebrated Harlem illustrations reveals Charlot's freedom from cliché and stereotype. In his subject matter, Charlot emphasizes the continuity of modern United States culture with South America and its Indian heritage: Aztec reporters of Cortez's arrival parallel the United States reporters accompanying the Sicily parachute drop. Stylistically, Charlot emphasizes geometric composition, in which he found United States monumental art deficient on his arrival. These murals may yet prove as seminal for North American art as Charlot's first frescos were for Mexican art.

In my opinion, Charlot's neoclassical murals must also, however paradoxically, be understood in the context of local culture. I have emphasized

Charlot's independence and originality of taste and his non-purist appreciation of mixed cultures. In 1923, in his first Mexican mural *Massacre in the Main Temple*, he used a device which was not adopted by later muralists and has been ignored, as far as I can see, despite Charlot's calling attention to it. In order to unify his mural esthetically to its setting in an eighteenth century building, Charlot based his depiction of the Aztecs not on archeological evidence, but on eighteenth century versions of Indian subjects. That is, this fresco can be called neoclassical, rather than archeological. Similarly, in the United States, Charlot did not ignore, as so many have, the neoclassical architecture he found in such abundance, but accepted it as an aspect of local culture which was to be appreciated and utilized. By fitting his Fine Arts Building fresco to the antebellum style facade and including a classical Greek quotation extolling the beauties of Athens, Charlot showed his respect for the cultural claims and aspirations of the namers and builders of Athens, Georgia.

This brief summary of Jean Charlot's relationship to local cultures demonstrates its importance for understanding his career. That relationship is, however, only one aspect of his work. At least equally important is that Charlot considers himself a member of a specifically French tradition of classical art, that of Poussin, David, Ingres, and Cézanne. This is an intellectual tradition, characterized by education and training, probing experiments in composition and color, and theoretical interests. For Charlot, this intellectualism is a deeply human factor; indeed, a touchstone of one's humanity. At the end of his *The Mexican Mural Renaissance*, he quotes Napoleon's words to David on first seeing that painter's monumental *Le Sacre de Napoléon*: "Monsieur David, vous êtes un homme!"

Charlot contrasts this French tradition to that of the Italian classicists, such as Piero della Francesca and Mantegna, who, in his opinion, press their subjects ruthlessly into their geometric, compositional molds. The French classicists, Charlot feels, retain a sensitivity to and respect before their subjects themselves, as he observes, for instance, in the portraits by Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec.

An important aspect of Charlot's career is the positive and negative interaction between his native classical tradition and the local cultures he encountered. Charlot early studied his uncle Eugène Goupil's important collection of Aztec codices. Charlot's reaction to them is an early indication of what has continued to interest him in local cultures: he found Aztec art more cubist than that of the Cubists. For Charlot, the Cubists were closely related to the French classical tradition, so he was detecting a common ground between his native culture and Aztec art.

Even more significantly, Charlot was interested in the *intellectual* element in Aztec art. Charlot's writings on the visual arts of local cultures concentrate almost exclusively on problems of technique and composition, on the authentic esthetic and expressive values of the works discussed. The folkloric, in the conventional sense, is severely rejected. Once, while visiting with my father the charming natal village of Piero della Francesca, I exclaimed in admiration, "Imagine Piero coming from here!" "Yes," said my father. "It gave him his horror of the picturesque."

Similarly, Charlot was interested in people, not because of any superficial cultural phenomena they might embody, but because he was deeply impressed by them as human beings.

On the other hand, the critical function of foreign cultures and attitudes in regard to Charlot's art and life is also important. In Mexico in 1924, Charlot was painting a portrait of Luz Jiménez. She objected to the highlight in her hair, saying "I don't have any white hair!" Charlot, with great effort, developed a method of painting a spherical shape without the use of highlights. Clearly, the encounter with an alien tradition can cast a light on ways of thinking and working which have been so accepted as to become unconscious. An artist can use this experience, as Charlot did, to free himself from cliché and to develop original techniques and ways of seeing. Characteristically, Charlot used technique to hide technique, but any new solutions devised by him had to be worthy of the classical tradition in which he was reared.

That Charlot submitted his art to such a critique

indicates that he had already begun a similar process of purification in his life. Each milieu offers factors by which a person can demonstrate his importance. When a person changes milieu, he can be thrown back on deeper foundations for identity.

As Charlot deepened in his art and life, he saw a spiritual commonality between the cultures that absorbed him. The courtesy, mildness, and uncompetitiveness of village mores could be related to Christian humility. The village potter, the sign painter, and the builders of temples and canoes were nearer to the idea of the artist as artisan—which Charlot had accepted from a current view of the Middle Ages—than to the Renaissance concept of the artist as genius. Religions of deep simple piety with rich casts of holy people and spirits and a pervasive sense of the presence of God accorded with Charlot's Roman Catholicism.

Charlot agreed with these local cultures that art is not the ultimate value but has a purpose beyond itself to which it must be subordinated. With Posada, the medieval cathedral artists, and the Hawaiian petroglyph maker, he agreed that style should be clear and readable, and should not distract from the subject. This requires, as he and others have found, a great deal more effort and technique than styles which call attention to themselves.

The basic motivation of this according priority to, or saving of, the subject matter, rather than sacrificing it to an obvious, self-assertive style, is the interest in and respect for the subject itself, which is a characteristic of Charlot's native French tradition. Charlot rejected his print *Vendedora de Plátanos* of 1925 because he felt his style had become too dominant in it. One feels the subject would not have enjoyed seeing herself portrayed thus.

But even more fundamental is the fascination for the artist of the inexhaustible riches of visual phenomena. Charlot once tried to explain to a somewhat hostile audience of abstractionists the intense joy he feels in following with his brush on canvas the line of a leaf or the turn of an ear. Ultimately, this joy is religious awe. This immersion of the eye in the subject, as of the self in life, gives context to style and forward direction to technique.

This attitude toward art explains why Charlot has neglected such traditional subjects as the studio nude and the still life. The great majority of Charlot's subjects are people engaged in activities which are manifestations of their particular cultures. The Aztec *Voladores* erupt from their long silence into chant and dance before diving from the high pole to twirl by their tethered feet to the ground. The American construction workers move in a geometric skyscraper scaffolding almost as complex and impressive as the organic accidents of the forest they replace. The Hawaiian drummer feels through his body the energy surge of the earth beneath him.

These activities are not expressions merely of a given culture at a certain moment in time. Rather, they are cultural expressions of a basic humanity. The Mexican *Malinche* explodes with the verve of the universal child on holiday. The naked Hawaiian swimmer revels as we all would in such environmental beauty. In *Work and Rest*, the kneeling

mother's rocking motion as she grinds the tortilla dough quiets the child wrapped to her back. Charlot saw this being done in Mexico in the 1920s. But the achieved symbolic character he gives the image and the purified, perennial compositional principles of the style with which he expresses it, enable the subject to transcend the boundaries of any single moment or culture.

Charlot broadened and deepened through several cultures to a vision of, and personal identification with, a basic humanity. That he then devoted himself to expressing that vision through images of those cultures indicates his view that humanity, just as art, does not exist in the abstract, but in actions which are culturally formed expressions of its infinite richness. Cultures teach ways of being, as artists ways of seeing. Charlot teaches us to see our lives and those of others in all their freedom, transparency, and resonance as creative expressions of our common human greatness.