

The theme of the body in the work of Jean Charlot: Two stages, France and Mexico

The artist and writer Jean Charlot was born in Paris, France, in 1898, and died in Honolulu, Hawaii, in 1979.¹ A branch of his mother's family had accompanied the Archduke Maximilian to Mexico in his attempt to establish an empire there and, after his defeat and execution, had remained and intermarried with Spanish and Aztec families. Charlot grew up in houses that contained numerous Mexican-Indian works of art. As a young teenager, he studied the famous collection of codices his uncle, Eugène Goupil, had donated to the Bibliothèque Nationale.

Since his mother was a painter, Charlot was also trained from a very young age in the Western fine arts and worked in the *coulisses* of the École des Beaux-Arts. He was early interested in French folk art and participated in the Roman Catholic renaissance of the liturgical arts, creating sculpture, paintings, and graphic works and designing patterns for vestments and a large mural, which was never executed.

After the death of his father and service in World War I, he left with his mother for Mexico in 1920, where he was a pioneer in the Mexican Mural Renaissance, along with such artists as Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco.² For two years he worked as an archaeologist at Chichen Itzá, co-authoring the final report.³

In 1930, he settled in New York and worked as a painter, teacher, and writer in the mainland United States until 1949, when he became professor of art at the University of Hawaii.

Jean Charlot produced numerous art works in various media and wrote prolifically in several creative and scholarly fields.⁴ One of the principle interests of studying his career is that his dominant themes recur in his many different fields of expression: art, literature, history, philosophy, religion and, not the least, humour.

1 For biographical information, several studies, and a selected bibliography see Ethel Moore (ed.), *Jean Charlot, Paintings, Drawings and Prints, Georgia Museum of Art Bulletin*, Vol. 2/2 (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 1976). Charlot's papers and a large number of his artworks have been donated by his widow, Mrs. Dorothy Zohmah Charlot, to the University of Hawaii, where they will be housed in the Jean Charlot Room and be available to scholars.

2 Jean Charlot, *The Mexican Mural Renaissance, 1920-1925* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963). Charlot was an early style-setter in the graphic arts and completed in 1922 the first monumental mural in true fresco, *The Massacre in the Main Temple*, in the Preparatory School, Mexico City.

3 Earl H. Morris, Jean Charlot, and Ann Axtell Morris, *The Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itzá, Yucatan* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1931).

4 John Charlot, 'Les pièces dramatiques en langue hawaïenne de Jean Charlot,' *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* (Musée de l'Homme, Paris) 33/54-55 (1977), 65-75: 68ff.

In this article, I will trace one important aspect of his thought and work—the theme of the body—through two stages of his career, France and Mexico.⁵ That the body should be of interest to a visual artist is not surprising. For Charlot, however, it was invested with an uncommon importance. The body and sensuality provide in fact the keynote and culmination of his brief autobiographical sketch.⁶

Charlot was in early conflict with the views of his colleagues and co-religionists. Very instructive is a 1917 editorial by M. Huré on Rodin in *La Gilde*, the revue of the guild of liturgical artists to which Charlot belonged. Miss Huré writes:

Rodin made bodies.

And now that he no longer has his own body, now that he is only a soul, he must be very embarrassed. . . .

Matter soft and strong, tender, warm, bloated with desires and drenched with light of the flesh, that was the adoration of Rodin the Erotic. . . .

. . . Everywhere, it is the flesh which palpitates, vibrates, trembles with desire, with waiting, force, suffocation, sterility, being crushed, with dissatisfaction: to that point everything is directed, or rather everything is derived. It is the prelude, the climax, and the end of the entire song. This is the very bitter taste that remains of even the most inebriating impression caused by the whole *oeuvre*. What an immediate and sublime moral is to be drawn therefrom and how clear is all that for a Christian. . . .⁷

Such sentiments were, of course, quite common for the semi-Jansenistic French Roman Catholicism of the time.

Charlot's own view is in marked contrast. In a poem, he writes of the resurrected:

. . . having left behind the old rags,
The clothes of the blessed will be the skin.⁸

The body theme recurs often in the series of poems Charlot wrote from 1917 to 1920, the years of his military service. For example, in 'D'un Art pauvre,' he begins: 'Today, now that I am poor, in contact with the real matter; now that I know the cold, physical fatigue, the body fallen in the thatch, many things that were hidden from me have become clear.'

Contact with the physically real gives insight. The unimportant is seen as such. The important separates itself clearly. Religious values are seen as more real than worldly ones. Similarly, an art for the poor, an art as real and honest as the work of a good craftsman, a popular art such as that of the *Images d'Épinal*, is contrasted favourably with the affluent art of the salon, created 'for ten egoists.' The former art is characterized by the physicality, simplicity, and honesty of its materials; the latter by its 'de luxe' *trompe-l'oeil*. The former will receive the blessing of the Patron Saint.

5 I showed an earlier version of this article to my father in 1972, and he suggested a few minor changes, which I have incorporated.

6 Jean Charlot, 'Jean Charlot,' in F. J. Sheed (ed.), *Born Catholics* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1954), 96-113: 96ff., 112f. See also 111 on Hawaiian 'physicality.' This emphasis cannot be fully accounted for by the article's thematic contrast of the author's type of Roman Catholicism with that common at the time in the North American church, e.g., 107ff.

7 M. Huré, 'Rodin,' *La Gilde, Revue Mensuelle* (Paris), December 25, 1917, 2.

8 Quoted in Jean Charlot, 'Jean Charlot' (see n. 6 above), 98; cf. 112f.

Three influences can be discerned in this view. The first is that of Poussin, who emphasizes a point that should be obvious: art is physical. Charlot copied and carried with him at this time Poussin's famous definition of art:

Definition

It is an imitation made with lines and colors on some surface of everything which is seen under the sun. Its end is delectation.

Principles

There is nothing at all visible without light.
There is nothing at all visible without form.
There is nothing at all visible without color.
There is nothing at all visible without distance.
There is nothing at all visible without instrument.⁹

The acceptance of these principles distinguishes Charlot from movements in liturgical art, such as the Nazarenes, which seek to avoid the sensual in art.

The second influence is folk art. Charlot had travelled to Brittany and, as Gauguin before him, had been very impressed by the indigenous art, as is seen especially in his liturgical, wood bas-reliefs. During his military service in Sézanne, he had studied the *Images* of nearby Épinal.

The third influence is the Christian theme of the good poor, which has authentic New Testament roots and which was used extensively by writers of the French Catholic literary renaissance, such as Péguy and Bloy.¹⁰

These influences do not, however, fully explain Charlot's view of the body, as expressed above. That view would seem in fact to be original with him.

Charlot's graphic expression of the body was in this period strongly influenced by Maurice Denis and Stephan Lochner and the Rhine School. Significantly, Charlot described the French church he had known in the visual terms of Denis' art:

In France the visage of the Church had been not unlike the art of Maurice Denis, like a maypole dance in May, or a provincial out-door procession of Corpus Christi: little boys in blue satin and little girls in pink organdy holding beribboned baskets filled with rose petals to strew on the passage of the Host.¹¹

One of the most successful sections in Charlot's first mural project is, in fact, a scene of little girls in a procession. This impressionistic, 'sunny' vision continues through Charlot's art, for instance, in the theme of the Malinches—young girls doing a Mexican dance—which were inspired by Lochner's angels.

9 André Félibien, *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellens peintres anciens et modernes*, Vol. 2 (2d ed.; Paris: Chez la Veuve de Sébastien Mabre-Cramoisy, 1688), 364. Autobiographical information supplied by Jean Charlot.

10 See especially Léon Bloy, *Le Sang du Pauvre* (Paris: Librairie Felix Juven, 1909). A copy was in the personal library of Jean Charlot.

11 Jean Charlot, 'Jean Charlot' (see n. 6 above), 104. Charlot is reported in *La Gilde* to have attended a discussion with Denis (*La Gilde*, January 23, 1918, 1). Interestingly, Charlot recalls that his childhood crisis of religious doubt was caused by the ugliness of a priest: 'How could a Faith represented by such a symbol have any truth in it?' (Jean Charlot, 'Jean Charlot,' 100).

This painting style was not, however, for Charlot an adequate expression of the tragic side of life, which he was continually facing in the war. A large section of his first mural project is indeed devoted to sufferers from the war; but it is significant that to portray war-death he composed his only painting that is not representational in the usual sense: the centre is an on-coming bullet around which fragmented visual impressions whirl. Interestingly, although Charlot had been deeply impressed during his service by the Isenheim altar of Matthias Grünewald, his artwork of this period shows no influence from that source.

At this point in his evolution, Charlot left France for Mexico. On his arrival at Puerto Mexico, new sights assailed him, which he described in poetic shorthand in his unpublished journal of January 1, 1921. I offer the following excerpt:

The city: barracks in a line, recessed windows, on wooden pillars. American posters. Photos and gold frames. Fruit-sellers at the corner: bananas, coconuts. The Indian: baked earth and Japanese masks. The old with prominent cheek-bones. The beautiful straw hat. The women: young and beautiful. Harmonious gestures. . . .

On the 11th, he attended mass and received strong visual impressions:

This Mexican priest with his hazel-nut-colored neck emerging from the chasuble damasked with gold sheafs on pomegranate. With noble gestures, the sacrifice is accomplished which his ancestors prefigured, when the stone knife burst the panting skins, by the display on the sacerdotal palms of the still living heart, in the glory of the festival evenings.¹²

After only two weeks in Mexico, Charlot was already developing an entirely new aesthetic. He was piercing the skin and winning thereby a very different view of the body. The church in France had been in the style of Maurice Denis. 'In Mexico, the climate of the Church was reminiscent of late Fall, red leaves decaying underfoot or heaped for burning. It also looked like the art of Zurbaran: a black battleground strewn with the guts of martyrs and of heretics.'¹³ The sensual is again the clue to reality, and the entire experience is closely tied to religion. The aesthetics of Mexican-Indian art, as he understood it, was offering him simultaneously both the possibility of a new view of the body, more adequate to his experience and perception, and the possibility of a graphic style to express it. Mexican art, unlike that of Denis, could not be 'characterized by "gentleness and a love of fun and play."'¹⁴ This perception of the peculiarity of Mexican aesthetics is the reason why an imported style, such as impressionism, was doomed to inadequacy.¹⁵ Creating a Mexican style, Charlot 'boldly used the anathematized black.'¹⁶

I might note at this point that Charlot was not influenced by the so-called primitive elements of Mexican art, but by its sophisticated solu-

12 See also Jean Charlot, 'Jean Charlot,' 104.

13 Ibid.

14 Jean Charlot, 'Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art,' in his *Art-Making from Mexico to China* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1950), 29-40: 40.

15 See Jean Charlot, *Mexican Mural Renaissance* (see n. 2 above), e.g., 51-54, 65f., 74f. See also his *Posada's Dance of Death* (New York: Pratt Graphic Art Center, 1964), 5 of text (unnumbered).

16 Fernando Leal, quoted in Jean Charlot, *Mexican Mural Renaissance*, 166.

tions of perennial art problems¹⁷ and by its philosophical and religious density. Even more important, his interpretation of Indian art was original. Thus his formulation of an Indian aesthetics must not be read as a survey of long-recognized principles, but rather as a creation in itself, a part of his own artistic development and the report of his own encounter with Indian art.

Charlot articulated the peculiar Mexican aesthetics by contrasting it with the Greek. The Mayan artist, as the Greek, 'attempts to summarize his philosophy in the choice proportions of the male form, and stakes all on the human body. But in these works palpates a spirituality that clashes with the Greek athletic ideal that gave such a rustic health to both men and gods.'¹⁸

The human form is at its loveliest skin-deep, awaiting only the added health and glow of Greek genius to become a Narcissus or a Galatea. The Aztec, immune to the sight of religious autopsies performed with a sacrificial knife, preferred to observe the same human body piecemeal—a necklace of steaming hearts, or a basinful of blood, or a hill of skulls. Unnice as is death in its plastic manifestations, it has nevertheless inspired great art.¹⁹

This aesthetics is the constant in the history of Mexican art.²⁰ In the Colonial period, one finds a painting of 'Christ after flagellation skinned to the ribs, bleeding on all fours in his cell like a wounded animal in its lair.'²¹ At a later period, 'Death and Posada then entered into friendly contests to see which one could first transform a live potentate into a grinning skull.'²² Orozco, among others, perpetuates this tradition.²³

This peculiarity in aesthetics reveals a different attitude and view of the world. Indian 'classics enshrined horror over beauty and reserved for the representations of physical pain and death the glamour that the Greeks had allotted to lust.'²⁴

Totally unrelated to the cult of physical beauty, which is the mainspring of our own tradition in art, it deals with physical pain and with death. The skull *motiv* is equally dear to Aztec theogony, to the Christian hermit who fondles it lovingly in his cell, and it still runs riot today in those bitter pennysheets sold in the streets of Mexico on the Day of the Dead. It is, however, but the outward sign of a mood of deeper significance. . . . Pain as a positive asset in the building and cementing of the world is one of the Aztec dogmas, consistent with their belief that the universe has come to maturity through the Four Destructions.²⁵

This aesthetics of the body was a more adequate expression of man. Not only was the skin studied, but the bone, the entrails, the insides. Every physical part of man was aesthetically digested. This aesthetics allowed an

17 See, for example, Jean Charlot, 'Bas-Reliefs from Temple of the Warriors Cluster,' in Morris, Charlot, and Morris, *Temple of the Warriors* (see n. 3 above), 229-346: 316, on perspective and substitution.

18 Jean Charlot, 'Mayan Art,' in his *Art from the Mayans to Disney* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1939), 17-25: 20. See also his *Mexican Mural Renaissance* (see n. 2 above), 2.

19 Jean Charlot, 'Mexican Prints,' in *Mexico to China* (see n. 14 above), 98-114: 103.

20 Jean Charlot, 'Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art' (see n. 14 above), 30.

21 Jean Charlot, *Mexican Mural Renaissance* (see n. 2 above), 16.

22 Jean Charlot, 'Mexican Prints,' 105.

23 Jean Charlot, *Mexican Mural Renaissance*, 215ff.

24 *Ibid.*, 2.

25 Jean Charlot, 'Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art,' 30f.

expression of the role of death in life as the skull behind the face, which gave perspective to the glories as well as the vanities of life, individual as well as social.²⁶

The Indian aesthetics was able also to express and artistically assimilate the violence of life. 'Man must be quite a spiritual animal after all to make beauty out of reeking carnage.'²⁷ In spite of such European counterparts as Grünewald and Dürer, one can recognize the unique importance of Mexican aesthetics for the modern world. 'Considering the world today, so cruelly different from the optimistic world of yesteryear, the art of Mexico at its most severe scores a prophetic point . . .'²⁸

I will now quote at some length Charlot's most complete formulation of his view of the body, which ends an article entitled significantly 'The Indian Beneath the Skin.'²⁹ He begins by setting up his accustomed contrast between Indian and Greek art. 'For Western man, the term "classic" may never shake off its European connotations nor the attendant awe, born in the classroom. The greatest of Amerindian art hardly reminds us of Apollo Belvedere or the Venus of Melos.'

In searching for the common denominator of these two great aesthetics, Charlot arrives at man's experience of his own *body*, an experience even deeper than the visual. His train of thought and formulation are strongly reminiscent of his youthful poem 'D'un Art pauvre,' written some forty years before the article under discussion.

Yet, if we go to the springs of the classical rather than loiter on the outer form, the term is not much of a misnomer after all. Man, be he B.C. or A.D., his eyes closed and just feeling from inside what the world is about, finds himself reduced to the irrevocable denominator of his own naked body and its contact with what woven stuff swaddles it. The Greek aesthetic canon—the body naked or draped—marks the limits of this basic haptic world, permanently opposed to the passing visual one made, then as now, of variety, particularities and disorder.

The Amerindian artist, with eyes closed, also took stock of himself as the one basic subject matter of art. Linen was replaced by cotton, and peplum or chlamys by loincloth or kilt, but the body remained the norm. There are basic differences, however. The Greek cherished a sort of immortality, at least the passing immortality of good health. Fascinated by death, the Indian preferred to probe surgically into self, aware of the inner organs stacked within the cage of the ribs.

Greek athletic sports were unknown in a Mexico that thronged rather to a lethal kind of ecclesiastical sport. It made a show of the palpitating heart of the sacrificed, and turned piles of heads into triumphal pyramids. The inner cogs of man turned inside out thus became a part of every man's visual awareness. Skulls and femurs and blood basins are to Indian aesthetics what soft skin and genitals are to the Greeks.

Man must be quite a spiritual animal after all to make beauty out of reeking carnage. The sculptor of masks never loses the consciousness of the bony scaffold that props up the face. Beauty for him resides in the sphere of the cranium, the ridge of the orbitae. These he tools and polishes out of the hard stone with a caressing skill that other cultures reserved for the curl and the dimple.

Charlot's final point is also one that he had made of folk art in the poem: a quality, essential to art and life, is honesty of materials. On this

26 See especially Jean Charlot, *Dance of Death* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1951), and also his *Posada's Dance of Death* (see n. 15 above), 3ff. of text (unnumbered).

27 Jean Charlot, 'The Indian Beneath the Skin,' in his *An Artist on Art, Collected Essays of Jean Charlot*, Vol. 2 (2 vols.; Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1972), 63-68: 68.

28 Jean Charlot, 'Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art' (see n. 14 above), 40.

29 Jean Charlot, 'Indian Beneath the Skin,' 67f.

point, he finds Indian art superior to Greek, not only as art but, in consequence, as a view of life.

Marble into flesh is the Greek's barely credible tour-de-force. Hard stone into hard bone remains the Amerindian's achievement. It emphasizes the hardness and the perenniality of his outlook, in tune with the dense material he chose to carve it in.

Charlot's appreciation of this aspect of Mexican art and thought—which he saw extending in both the fine and folk arts from Precolumbian times to the work of the recently deceased José Guadalupe Posada—was important for his contemporaries' appreciation of their native art background. He was calling attention to and rendering comprehensible an element that was extremely opposite to the European art tradition in which they had been trained and which they still accorded a dominating prestige. Charlot's view—expressed for instance in his writings on Posada—was convincing support for their ethnic consciousness and opened a thematic path to a truly native expression—one followed by succeeding generations of Mexican artists and certain Chicano artists today.

Charlot's view of the body was naturally a factor—along with several others—in the development of his style and choice of subject matter; and was in this way also an influence on the general trend of the Mexican Renaissance. I will mention just a few areas of his visual work in which his view is particularly apparent. In a number of *Pietas*, the skeleton of Christ's body is emphasized as it is stretched limp over the knees of his mother. Charlot painted a particularly powerful example after his own body had been emaciated by the cancer from which he eventually died.

The most extreme use of the skeleton showing through the skin is to be found in a series of nudes painted in New York in the 1930s. The intensity of these paintings approaches them most nearly of all Charlot's work to Grünewald and suggests a spiritual crisis in which the artist is attempting to regain perspective on the flesh.

A clue to that struggle can be found in Charlot's *A Dance to Death*, in which Death, in the traditional form of a skeleton, tells a fan dancer: 'Take off your skin too.'³⁰

But neither skin nor bone, neither life nor death has the last word. The one does not exclude the other. Both are realities to be grappled with and any complete view must take account of both. The final perspective is, however, religious. Charlot was a Christian. His *Dance of Death* is framed

30 Jean Charlot, *Dance of Death* (see n. 26 above), unnumbered. Similarly, in a review of an exhibition of the works of Philip Bonham ('Art,' *The Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, September 17, 1970, D-22), Charlot wrote:

'The young artist bold enough to choose for inspiration fallopian tubes and spermatozoons cannot but strike an overtone of melancholy.

'This soft mass of innards that each one of us, artist or not, carries as his earthly burden, tucked between rib and pelvis, stands for our physical blandness and fragility.

'The flower, the favorite image of Bonham when he deals in comparisons rather than in anatomical facts, is in his paintings, a harbinger of death.

'The publicity that attends such plays as "Oh Calcutta!," "Hair," "Skin," boosts up bodies as if they were the keys to an earthly paradise. Searching along these same paths, a true artist eventually will reach the end of the road, with a terminal masterpiece called "Bones."'

by the Fall—when death was born—and the Resurrection—when death died. He wished neither to ignore nor to exaggerate death. The experience of life and death provides, however, a standard by which art, thought, and religion can be measured: a standard by which the Indian achievement ranks high.

Jean Charlot's thought is a whole. Thus, no presentation of his view of the body could be complete without a more adequate discussion of his views on man, culture, and religion. Moreover, his thought developed into a third stage. Pacific Island, and especially Hawaiian, culture provided him with yet another and very broadening perspective: the relationship of man to nature, symbolized by the naked Hawaiian swimmer, weightless in her ocean element.³¹

31 See especially Jean Charlot, 'Petroglyphs of Hawaii,' in *Artist on Art* (see n. 27 above), Vol. 1, 235-40. Also see John Charlot, 'Jean Charlot and Local Cultures,' in Moore (ed.), *Jean Charlot* (see n. 1 above), 26-35, and John Charlot, 'Les pièces dramatiques' (see n. 4 above).