
CHARLOT, JEAN

1898–1979 • Artist and Writer

Charlot was born in Paris and died in Honolulu. He worked in France, Mexico, the continental United States, and the Pacific. In each place, he was inspired by the local culture and contributed to it in the visual arts, literature, and scholarship.

Charlot's maternal French forebears migrated to Mexico in the early nineteenth century and intermarried with Mexican, Jewish, and Nahua families. Charlot's great-uncle Eugène Goupil donated the Boturini-Aubin collection of codices to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris as a memorial to his Nahua mother. The Goupils—along with Désiré Charnay, Auguste Génin, and Eugène Boban—were part of a movement to revalorize Mexica (Aztec/Nahua) culture through scholarship and the arts. Charlot grew up in Paris surrounded by Mexican art and folklore, studying Mexica literature and art, and conversing in Spanish with family and friends visiting from Mexico.

A prolific artist and writer from his youth, Charlot belonged to a group of social-minded Roman Catholic liturgical artists who wanted to create public art that was both authentically modern and as legible and moving as the medieval cathedrals. In World War I, however, he was drafted from school into the horse artillery, saw combat, and participated in the occupation of the Rhineland. In his saddlebags he carried the wood blocks of his first great work, the *Way of the Cross*, into which he poured all the feeling inspired by the war. Demobilized in 1920, he was forced to liquidate his deceased father's business and was frustrated by the rejection of his mural project for a parish church. He and his mother decided to join their Mexican family in 1921.

Charlot was overwhelmed by Mexico: its light, its peoples, and its cultures. He soon met artists and writers who became important cultural figures. In their memoirs, they describe Charlot informing them of the latest European

movements and sharing his vast technical and historical knowledge. He introduced Mexican poets to the French Symbolists and illustrated books by the Estridentistas Manuel Maples Arce and Germán List Arzubide.

Charlot's friends record also that he opened their eyes to many aspects of their own world with visits to the new museum of archaeology and his studies of colonial and popular culture, especially his discovery of the print-maker José Guadalupe Posada. Charlot was filling the role of the cultural catalyst, the insider-outsider, the participant-observer. As an up-to-date Parisian, he could reassure his colleagues that the national art they were developing together was more valuable than the imitations of Europe promoted by others.

Charlot's role as a visual artist in the Mexican Mural Renaissance has been the subject of controversy, but is increasingly recognized as central to the development of style, themes, techniques, and ideology. In Charlot's judgment, Mexican subjects previously had been treated with borrowed and thus inadequate styles. Artists had created new views, but not a new vision. Using his *Way of the Cross* as a base, Charlot and others produced a series of woodcuts that were aggressively different: Indian faces pushed up through the wood in dark masses and rough, conflicting lines. In their raw strength, the sheets could have been pulled from the street; in their expressiveness, they made visible the frightening energy still seething from the Revolution.

Just as the Greeks had based their art on the body, Charlot studied the Indian body to develop a new aesthetic, using his knowledge of Cubism and the French appreciation of geometric forms. Charlot chose Luz Jiménez, later a major Nahuatl writer and anthropological-linguistic informant, as the model of Aztec beauty, which he analyzed in line drawings and prismatic paintings. He then synthesized the powerful and memorable image that can be traced from codices and followed throughout the Mexican Renaissance.

Charlot deepened the received themes of Mexican art by opening them to symbolic interpretation. The *Cargador* (Burden Bearer) was not depicted as a colorful detail of a street scene, but was *Crucified to the Stone*, Christ seen in the poor. The kneeling mother grinds corn on the *metate* while the infant strapped to her back is rocked to sleep by her motion: *Rest and Work*, the heroism of everyday life. The *Volador* intones a classic chant before diving from the high pillar to swirl tethered by his feet to the ground. The viewer recognizes the laborer of the day in the poet of the night, a peer in the universal quest of experience and art.

Charlot created three monumental expressions of such themes in his 1923 frescoes in the Secretariat of Education. His earlier *Massacre in the Main Temple* in the Preparatory School was the first completed true fresco of the Mexican Renaissance and the first monumental depiction of a theme that would become standard: the Conquest as the tragic crucible of modern Mexico. The classic and dynamic geometry of Charlot's compositions demonstrated that the new movement could use and extend the highest achievements of the past.

Throughout his stay in Mexico, Charlot was conscious of the historic importance of the period. He collected information, gathered documents, and wrote articles and books that are valuable both for their data and for his interpretation; most prominently, *The Mexican Mural Renaissance, 1920–1925* (1963). He extended his studies to Nahuatl, writing a puppet play in that language in 1946. From 1926 to 1928, he worked as an artist and archaeologist on the Carnegie expedition, coauthoring the official report, *The Temple of the Warriors at Chichén Itzá, Yucatán* (1931), and supervising its publication.

In the United States and the Pacific, he continued the pattern he had begun in France and perfected in Mexico: he studied the people and the local culture in order to develop an aesthetic that could express them powerfully. Young Hawaiian artists now recall his images, and his iconic still-life of Fiji was installed in the parliament of that newly independent nation. In 1968 and 1994, the Mexican government recognized Charlot's contribution with major retrospectives.

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—JOHN CHARLOT