

# Mexico in the art of Jean Charlot

*Yohualli de la Villa \**

**T**he French artist Jean Charlot, a leading exponent of the Mexican muralist movement, was recently honored in an exhibition, "Mexico in the Work of Jean Charlot," held in the old Colegio de San Ildefonso building, from April 12-June 9.

A man of multiple origins—French, Jewish, Russian and Mexican—Henri Louis Jean Charlot arrived in Mexico in 1921 to lead the "revival of Mexican fresco painting," together with Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Fermín Revueltas, Ramón Alva de la Canal and Emilio García Cahero.

Charlot came out of France full of energy, and infected Mexico's artistic and cultural milieu with his vitality during the second decade of this century. He discovered the artist José Guadalupe Posada, revived the technique of wood engraving, illustrated poems, books and magazines, wrote outstanding articles on Mexican art, served as artistic



*Playing with the Dog, lithograph, 1947.*

director of the magazine *Mexican Folkways* and, in 1926, took part in the archaeological restoration of Chichén Itzá. In 1947 he published a seminal work for Mexican art scholars, "The Revival of Mexican Fresco Painting."

Although he lived in the United States from the forties until his death in 1979, the artist continued to include Mexico in his art. Charlot spent the last three decades of his life in Hawaii, where he perfected his talent as an engraver, book illustrator, critic, sculptor, painter, muralist and teacher.

Charlot produced a total of 70 murals, 30 sculptural projects, 1,500 drawings, 800 graphic works,

countless sketches and paintings on canvas; he wrote 19 books and over 100 articles on art, and illustrated 52 books and magazines.

### **The exhibition**

Sponsored by UNAM, the Federal District Department and the National Culture and Arts Council—and with the support of the Honolulu Academy of Arts, the University of Hawaii and the Charlot family—"Mexico in the Work of Jean Charlot" is a historiographical retrospective that covers most of the French painter's artistic development. Over 500 pieces, the majority from public and private collections in New York, San

\* Writer.



Sergio Dorantes.

*Luz, watercolor, 1927.*

Francisco, Los Angeles and Hawaii, reveal the many sides of this multicultural artist.

The exhibition in Charlot's honor was the result of research carried out by the Diego Rivera Museum on Rivera and his contemporaries. This extensive research was coordinated by Blanca Garduño and Milena Koprivitz, who spent two years assiduously compiling material that was either unpublished or unfamiliar to many researchers of the period.

The exhibition is divided into six parts: The French Years, The Mexican Years, Jean Charlot and His Contemporaries, The Art of Book Illustration, Religious Aspects of Jean Charlot's Life, and Hawaii in Charlot's Time, with the aim of showing the different periods in the artist's life and work, from his stay in France, his residence in Mexico, the archaeological trip to the Yucatan and the last three decades of his life in Hawaii. The combination of engravings, books, photographs and personal accounts of the artist reveals Charlot's skill as an engraver, painter, muralist, art researcher, book illustrator and sculptor.

In addition to Mexico City, the exhibition will also be shown at

the Tlaxcala Palace of Culture, from July 29 to October 29, and in the Monterrey Museum from January 17 to March 27, 1995.

#### Family background

Jean Charlot was born in Paris on February 7, 1898. His grandfather, Louis Goupil, was born in Mexico of a French father and Mexican mother

and was a keen horseback rider, while his uncle, Eugène Goupil, an antique dealer and industrialist, acquired the collection of the Boturini-Aubin codices, with themes, chronicles, histories and maps of pre-Hispanic Mexico, its conquest and the Colonial period.

In addition to these influences, Charlot grew up surrounded by a



Sergio Dorantes.

*Kitchen in Red, oil on canvas, 1971.*



*Massacre at the Templo Mayor, mural painted in the old Colegio de San Ildefonso building, 1922-23.*

collection of pre-Hispanic figurines and souvenirs of Mexican origin that his family owned. He was given some ancient pieces of funereal pottery by the French researcher Desirée Charnay as a First Communion present.

Educated at the Lycée Condoret and the École de Beaux Arts in Paris, Charlot won prizes for abstract sculpture and a series of wood engravings on the Viacrucis. During the First World War, he enlisted in the French army and fought as an artillery lieutenant. In 1920, at an art exhibition at the Louvre, he submitted sketches for the murals of a church, which unfortunately were never produced.

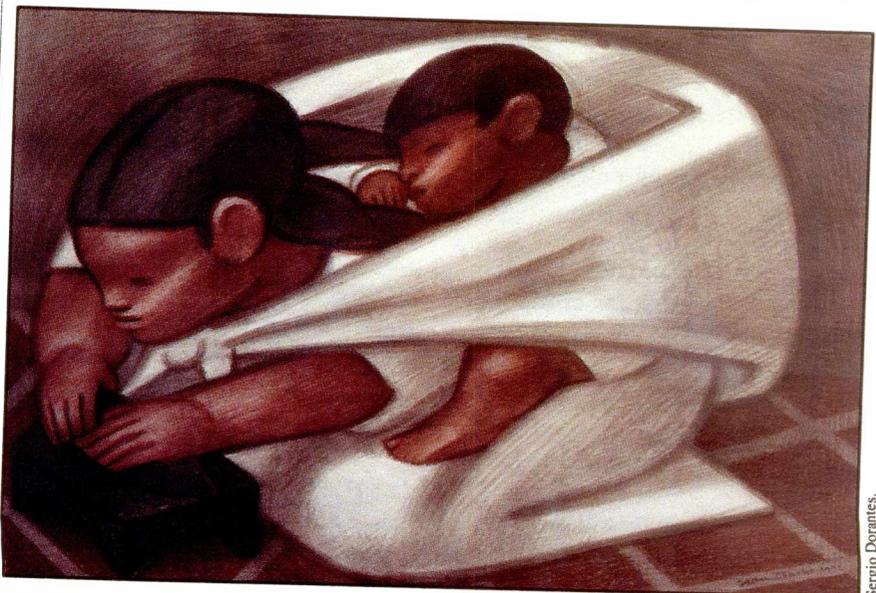
Charlot and his mother came to Mexico in January 1921 and were rapidly included in the artistic circles of the day. According to the art critic McVicker, "Charlot was absorbed by Mexicanness and the search for aesthetic and spiritual denominators.... He was so influenced by pre-Colombian art that his painting is still full of it."

The painter Fernando Leal invited Charlot to share his studio at the

School of Outdoor Painting in Coyoacán, where he met the engravers Gabriel Fernández Lezama and Francisco Díaz de León, as well as the sculptor Ignacio Asúnsolo, who introduced him to Rivera. It was there that he met an Indian model who was to have a profound effect on him.

A native of Milpa Alta, Luz Jiménez taught Charlot about the Nahuatl language and the customs of her ancestors.

In 1922, together with Luis Escobar, Xavier Guerrero, Carlos Mérida and Amado de la Cueva, Charlot helped execute Diego Rivera's



*Tortilla Maker with Child, color zinc print, 1941.*

Sergio Dorantes.



Sergio Dorantes.

*Temple of the Warriors II*,  
oil on canvas, ca. 1934.

composition *The Creation* in the Simón Bolívar Amphitheater. That same year he produced his largest mural painting, *Massacre at the Templo Mayor*, and then painted three murals at the Secretariat of Public Education.

### Massacre at the Templo Mayor

In the early '20s, many Mexican artists who had left the country at the beginning of the century began to return. They encountered the social and political changes that the Revolution had produced and which the Minister of Culture, José Vasconcelos, had brought into the field of culture. The work of these artists synthesized what they had learned in Europe with their Mexican roots.

The French immigrant Charlot, who was in the vanguard of European fine arts, carried out his synthesis in the opposite direction. Between 1922 and 1923, he painted *Massacre at the Templo Mayor*<sup>1</sup> on the second floor of the south wall of the stairwell

<sup>1</sup> The Templo Mayor (Great Temple) was built by the Aztecs in the center of their capital city, Tenochtitlán. Today it is one of the most fascinating sites in Mexico City. (Editor's note.)

leading up from the main courtyard of the San Ildefonso building. This mural was the first of those in the Mexican fresco painting movement to be based on a specific historical topic and, because of the technique used, was the first fresco produced since the 16th century.

Charlot's mural was a summing up of the greatest influence of universal art on Mexican fresco painting: the Italian Renaissance. Charlot used Pablo Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* (1456-1460) as a reference for his portrayal of the Spaniards' violence towards the Aztecs during the slaughter carried out at the Templo Mayor under the leadership of Pedro de Alvarado.

Charlot included robotic figures similar to those of Giorgio de Chirico, inserted portraits of his contemporaries, such as the one of Diego Rivera at the bottom of the mural, and—in the style of Renaissance frescos—added a legend taken from the *History of the Indies of New Spain*. He used brass objects to

consequences of the Revolution in her hometown.

A Nahuatl and heir to a legendary tradition, the beautiful Indian woman began selling flowers at the Santa Anita pier in Iztacalco, where one spring she was named the "most beautiful flower in the countryside." Luz was persuaded to pose for art classes at the National Academy and from then onwards her name was linked with artistic and cultural circles in Mexico.

Charlot, who was proud of the Mexican past, was profoundly affected by Luz. She served as an interpreter of indigenous culture, popular customs and traditions of the time, as well as being a superb teller of Indian tales.

The Revolution had frustrated Luz' aim of becoming a teacher. Since childhood she had shown a great ability to learn and proved to be an acute observer of the events that surrounded her. By the time she met Charlot, she spoke Nahuatl, Spanish and a smattering of French.

“ Although I have not been able to return to Mexico, it will always hold a special place in my heart ”

Jean Charlot

decorate the Indian priests' necklaces and the horses' bridles and harnesses, and also included Expressionist and Abstract Expressionist features.

This work, with its strong vein of social criticism, is not a mere description of events; it also showcases Charlot's great artistic skill.

### Luz Jiménez

Luz (1897-1965), whom painters called "Luciana" or "Lucecita" and whose real name was Julia Jiménez, had arrived in Mexico City in the first decade of this century, fleeing the

She became the prototype of the Mexican Indian woman for Charlot—his muse and favorite model, symbol of a people's eternity. Charlot painted Luz in a broad range of popular traditions, as a weaver, a washerwoman, or holding a child or a basket. She also served as an allegory for other works in the variety of techniques that the artist used.

As a result of their fellowship and humanist viewpoint, a close friendship developed between them. This friendship continues to this day between the two families ✨