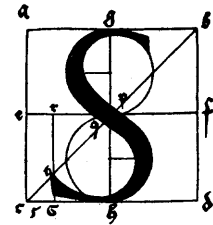


“VILLAGE FIESTA”

Jean Charlot



THE MURAL PROGRAM
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY



Jean Charlot

Fresco decoration in the dining hall
of Shaw Dormitory, Syracuse University

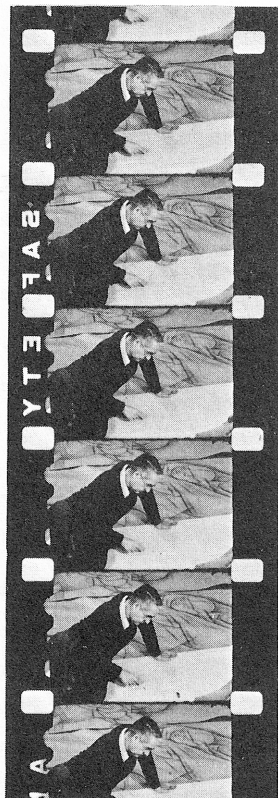
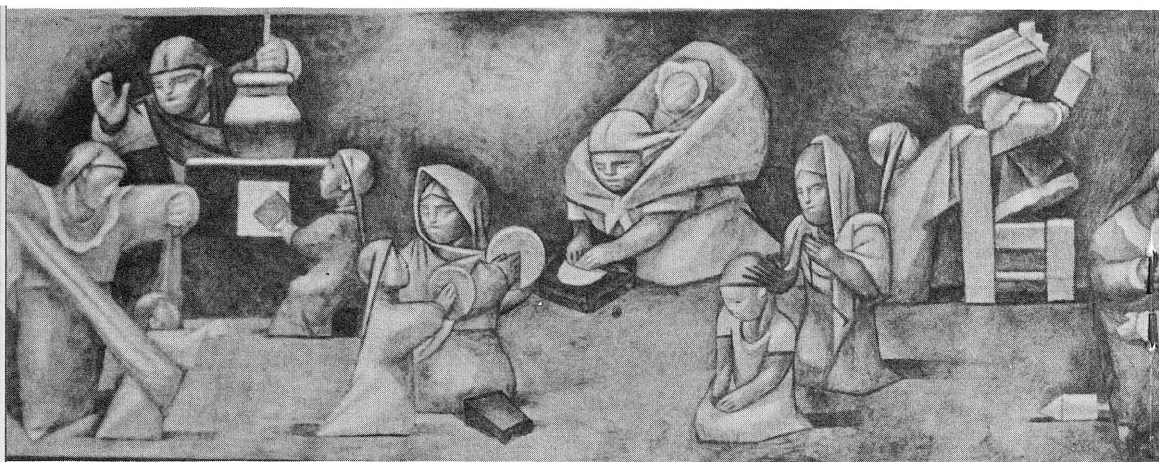
| D E T A I L |

The "Village Fiesta" is a 45 x 9 foot mural decoration executed in fresco on the east wall of the dining hall of Shaw Dormitory of Syracuse University. Jean Charlot is Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Hawaii and was visiting artist on the campus of Syracuse University during the spring of 1960. The following remarks were taken from a description of the mural given by Professor Charlot to a group of students at the dedication ceremonies, June 10, 1960.

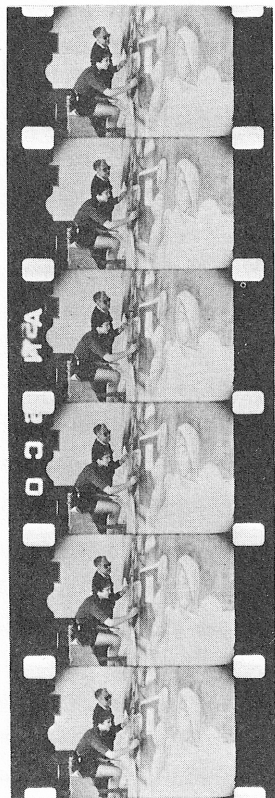
The subject of the mural is the "Village Fiesta." It is neither altogether Spanish, nor Indian, but a fusion of both in a spirit which is essentially Mexican. It represents the day of fiesta and as you read it from left to right, you can see that the composition is defective in the sense that it is not symmetrical. It starts in an orderly manner, in groups that are down and up, down and up, in a semi-darkness which is the inside of an Indian village hut; and then the light increases until at the end you are quite sure that you are in the open landscape. It is difficult to represent a darkened interior with a transition into the light of the open air and to escape the use of perspective and other mechanical accessories to suggest it. Its effect here, if I may say so, seems to be quite successful.

Going on with the subject matter: on the left we're in the kitchen. It is dark, it's early morning, because the women start their cooking before the daylight comes in, so that the pinkness on the floor would be the reflection from the fire. You see that there is a pot of beans on the fire and the cook is stirring them, while the little girl is fanning the fire with a straw fan.

There follows another little scene which has not very much to do with the coming fiesta, but a small child is taking his first steps, his mama has wrapped him up and put under his arms her *rebozo* and she's guiding him while the cook—that could be the grandmother or an aunt—is astonished, and says how wonderful that the little thing is walking.



Film clips from "VILLAGE FIESTA," a documentary film on the Charlot Mural Project produced by the Motion Picture Department, Center for Instructional Communications, Syracuse University.



Next, there's a little girl who is somewhat older than the child and she's learning how to cook. That is called "The Tortilla Lesson." The woman with the yellow *rebozo* is showing the little girl how to pat the tortilla, which she continues until it gets all round like a small *pizza*. Incidentally, some people say Charlot does his heads too big, but those people are not standing, they are kneeling, so you can't find any anatomical defects there. In the background is the matriarch of the family who is actually rolling the dough on the stone *metati*, while on her back there is a little child fast asleep. The rhythm of work, as it were, put the child to sleep. So it is called, "Rest and Work"—the little child rests, and the grandmother works.

The next subject is the coiffure, when the little girls are washed with soap and their hair is braided by the mama. Now this is the moment when the braid is going to be done, and the little girl is resigned; she is going to be beautiful.

In the background are two sisters; the one in nondescript clothing is too small to dance, so she envies the little girl who is all dressed up for the dance and stands on the chair. Incidentally, those are not rockets; they are just rattles, made actually with American tin cans.

The next subject is a girl who is a little shy; the mama is putting the hat on her head, she holds the wooden sword, and the mama and the dog are both urging the girl to go out and dance. Incidentally, some people will say that Charlot can't draw a dog: "We've never seen a dog like that." Well, maybe you've never seen dogs like that, but the hairless Chihuahuas are terrible freaks, though I might admit that there is a little bit of my personality in that dog too.

The figure composition is something like an animation strip in the movies; the little girl goes out and starts a battle with another girl. Now they are not really angry at each other—that's part of the dance which is called the Dance of the Malinches. Malinche is the name of the Indian mistress of Cortez, the Spanish Conquistador. The girls who are the wives of the chiefs are battling the girls who are the mistresses of the Conquistadors,

and the nice point in the dance is that nobody wins, everybody ends up friends, both the legal and the illegal ones.

The next scene is after the battle: one of the girls has lost her sword, and another girl is pursuing her fiercely, so it gives a little dramatic equality to the wall. Of course people often say, "Oh, we like your work, Mr. Charlot, but Mr. Orozco is much more dramatic." They are perfectly right in saying that Orozco's work is more dramatic, but I just wanted to try for a little drama. I don't want people to cry while they are eating. Here in the dining hall, I like things to be appropriate, so the drama is as much as you can get, as let us say, in table conversation: no blood, no tears whatsoever.

The most dramatic part is the little girl, just because she was tired, maybe, or was hit with the wooden sword, and is not really wounded, but is lying down there. There is a sort of, well, I won't use the word "grandeur" because that would be too pretentious, but when people say there is something in the picture that is more than the simple narrative, this is an example. That dance of the Malinches is a very small replica of the conquest of Mexico, and the conquest of Mexico was not altogether a brutal and barbarous thing, because the Mexicans are made up of a blend of the two cultures, Spanish and Indian. A great culture, even a great race, came out of the Mexican conquest. There was, of course, true drama in what we could call the sunset of the original pre-Spanish races, and I put a bit of that which I feel very strongly—of great tragedy—in that little girl in the lower left corner.

It pleased me very much that the room was so beautifully proportioned with a good perspective so that we could really look at the wall at a great distance. As a mural painter I would like people to realize that the works I paint are not easel pictures. They are to be seen as people circulate through the room and when you enter at the door you should be able to read the whole piece. An important problem of style is that of distant vision as well as the close-up. Some people ask, "Why do you make your people so angular?" They are so angular because angles are nice

things to be seen at a great distance. Sometimes I emphasize perspective so that you can look far into the wall, but this room has all the space a human being can take, and you don't need to add space to it. Another device that works very well here is the change of light from the dark side of the room to the windows, where there is the most light, and I've followed with what you call a light composition, according to the amount of light that falls on the wall.

The painting is done in the fresco technique, one of the most ancient methods of painting. Fresco, of course, means "fresh," and every morning, if you have a mason, he puts an area of fresh lime-mortar on the wall. If you don't have a mason you put it on yourself, but then you are too tired to paint. When the mason finishes the job, you come in with colors that have been ground in water. I must be careful not to say watercolor, because watercolor contains a little binder, usually arabic gum, that is a different affair. You can put watercolor on paper, it will stay there permanently, but if you put the fresco pigment ground in water on paper it will fall off as soon as it is dry.

What holds the pigment to the wall is the lime. Lime juice, or the lime "milk," comes out of the wall as it begins to dehydrate and settles on top of the pigment. It is on a microscopic scale, but if you pass your hand over the dry fresco, you will not contact the pigment directly, for there is a very thin film of lime that has settled on top of the pigment, and that is what holds the pigment to the wall. That is one of the reasons why you do have to paint very thinly, because you must be sure that there are no thickly painted areas in which the lime would not make contact.

You have to do your wall piece by piece, every day one piece. After each piece is completed, you trim the edges, either at the end of the day or at the beginning of the next day so that the wall accumulates these pieces as a sort of jig-saw puzzle. This particular wall, for example, is made up of seventeen pieces, and they are carefully joined together so that unless you look for the joints you won't see them. You probably see that in the most beautiful parts of the wall the color is transparent. These are the parts that have not been touched by the brush, namely the whites

of the lime mortar. If you come back in six months or in two years, I think that you'll see that the color is even more transparent, finer in quality, and that the whites are whiter, that the contrasts and the volumes are more beautiful. A fresco takes a long way in mellowing, and when it is a fresh fresco, like this one just finished, it should be a little toned down so as to become stronger as it matures.

