

John Charlot

A Note on Jean Charlot's View of Diego Rivera

Jean Charlot and Diego Rivera had a very long and complex relationship from their first meeting in the early 1920s to Rivera's death.¹ They worked together, studied each other, and in many ways felt quite close. Charlot said that when he came from Europe, he was happy to find someone he could talk with, someone to whom one did not have to explain a name or an art movement; Rivera was indeed a very learned man. Their personal relationship persisted through their later differences. But Charlot's interest in Rivera was more than personal. Indeed he once said that he did not want to write his memoirs because he felt it wrong to reveal personal details about his friends. He treated his own differences with Rivera strictly as a historical problem in his *The Mexican Mural Renaissance: 1920 – 1925* (1963).

Charlot obviously considered Rivera an important subject of study. In his writings in Mexico, he defended Rivera's work against his many critics. In 1950, he published »Diego Rivera at the Academy of San Carlos«, material later used in his *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos* (1962). Charlot's »Diego Rivera in Italy« (1953) called attention to a study trip taken before Rivera's return to Mexico, a trip that had a profound influence on Rivera's later work there. Angelina Beloff had given Charlot some of Rivera's Italian drawings because she knew he would appreciate them, and Charlot's article is the first recognition of the importance of that document. Besides discussing Rivera extensively in *The Mexican Mural Renaissance*, Charlot wrote Time-Life offering to organize *The World of Rivera* for their series. In

the book, he would have placed Rivera's work in its various contexts. Unfortunately, Time-Life never responded. Charlot wanted also to write a long article on Rivera's compositions, especially the later ones, because he considered Rivera from that point of view the most interesting of the muralists. Throughout Rivera's long decline in popularity, Charlot maintained publicly and insistently that he was an important painter.² This stance had an effect. I remember talking in the late 1950s with an art critic who was using Rivera's later work as proof that he had degenerated completely.

»But my father thinks those murals are very good,« I said. After a long silence, the critic said, »Well, I'd better look at them again.«

In July 1971, my father said to me, »If any young person is looking for someone to spend his life studying, it should be Rivera.« Moreover, he spoke of Rivera as a model for young artists. Of all the great artists my father knew and appreciated, why did he single out Rivera as a subject to be studied and a model to be emulated? Charlot did not see Rivera's greatness in those characteristics that people usually look for in an artist today. In fact, he felt that because people *were* looking for those qualities, they misunderstood Rivera.

Firstly, Rivera did not have the »sizzle,« the brilliance, so prized in modern art and so apparent in the work of Orozco and Siqueiros. Moreover, Rivera was not a stylistic innovator. This was a disadvantage in public perception because the history of modern art is now written like the history of science: who did what first, not who did what best or the most. Rivera was more like Raphaël

¹ This essay is based on the symposium talk I gave at the opening of *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective* at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1986. All unpublished materials are

in the Jean Charlot Collection, Hamilton Library, University of Hawai'i.

² Mrs. Jean Charlot, personal communication.

and Picasso: he picked up his styles from others and used them in a great way. This procedure, which often results in a mixture of styles in one painting, is an important point to study in Rivera's art. Moreover, the identification of influences on Rivera becomes unusually important: Cubism, Byzantine and Renaissance art, Edward Weston (on realism and textures), and the »Dieguitos« (on style and subject matter). Finally, in accordance with this method of working is the intensely conscious and intellectual aspect of Rivera's art. This again invited criticism in an art world where the unconscious was so highly prized. In fact, all the above points have been heavily criticized in Rivera's work – in his own lifetime and after his death. Charlot wrote in 1952 (p. 139): »Among the figures of the first rank in contemporary art, Rivera stands out as the more objective master, meaning perhaps that his head consistently retains a priority over his heart. This also explains why Rivera is unashamedly an eclectic, who backs his own style with chips out of a history of art that he knows and appreciates better than many a scholar. Even if he were a less gifted artist, this position would single out Rivera from among his colleagues, who prefer to tug at their own heart-strings and to perform strictly personal antics with the brush.

Thus, what comes perilously close to a lack of originality – at least according to the contemporary usage of the term – has come to constitute Rivera's originality. While the passionate output of Orozco exhibits all the idiosyncrasis expected from the composite personage known as the modern artist, Rivera's work remains-out-of-bounds.«

My personal opinion – not my father's – is that some of Rivera's actions can be explained as a defense against those criticisms, as an attempt to establish himself as a painter of the »modern type«: his showmanship, his fabulizing about his own life, his provoking of incidents, and his arcane

experiments and claimed inventions – like the 4th-dimension machine in France and »The Secret of the Mexica« in Mexico (in fact decomposed nopal stumps in the water in which the brushes were dipped).³ Rivera is misunderstood if we are taken in by these tricks.

Where then did Charlot see Rivera's greatness and importance? The expression Charlot uses is so modest that one can easily miss its high praise. It is an expression that has no place in the modern mythology of the artist. Charlot said and wrote over and over again that Diego Rivera was a good worker. People noticed this throughout Rivera's career. His Paris dealer, Leonce Rosenberg, said Rivera was reliable and prolific – he could be counted on to fill his orders.⁴ José Vasconcelos said in an interview with Charlot, probably in the 1940s: »Rivera was the only one who did what he said he would.« In contrast, Vasconcelos complained, »Siqueiros never finished anything!« All who knew Rivera – such as his assistants and fellow artists like Edward Weston – spoke of his immense capacity for work. But this quality was a great oddity for the usual conception of the artist at that time. The artist was supposed to work on impulse, as the spirit moved him. Instead, Rivera went to the wall and worked fourteen hours a day or more, and he created undeniable art. »Mural painting can alone quench the need of the mural painter, and then only while in the making. Fame and success hallow this world only at the fringes. Young Rivera, penniless and lusty, sat fourteen hours a day up on a plank, brush in hand, face to the wall like any scolded schoolboy. Old Rivera, toothless, famous, and wealthy, sat brush in hand, fourteen hours a day, on a kitchen chair hoisted on four planks, his back still turned on the objective world.«⁵

Rivera's art was all of a piece with his approach. It was the planning, the intellectualism, that enabled Rivera to work in that way and on that scale. It was the same intellectualism that accomplished the vast and coherent programs that Rivera elaborated

³ Charlot 1963, 258ff.

⁴ Wolfe 1939, 90f.

⁵ Charlot 1963, 317.

⁶ Charlot 1963, 303.

on a scale to rival the great Renaissance projects like those of Annibale Carracci, whom Charlot also admired.

Charlot himself was imbued with the Medieval view of the artist as craftsman, as artisan. He disliked intensely the modern idea of the artist as genius and all that view implied, including the art market. For Charlot, Rivera was the embodiment of an earlier and better type of artist: »The critics of our period are naturally keyed to an appreciation of this introverted, disorderly quality that we lavishly call genius, and favor autographic scribbings, shorthand sketches, and color notes. A future generation of critics, more objectively minded, may decide that, after 1924, the great quality of Rivera's output was precisely its articulate thinking and rational approach, on a scale equaling the conscientious output of such grand mural contractors as Vasari and LeBrun.«⁶

So Rivera was important for Charlot because he demonstrated that the »modern type« of artist was not the only possible one.

Rivera was even more important of course for his work, for that work also reached back in time beyond the latest movements to an earlier and great tradition. Before art for art, before art for the few, there had been art for the many. The great artists of that classical tradition – Giotto, Poussin, David, and Ingres – spoke a language that was both rigorously esthetic and comprehensible to its audience. They also spoke of important subjects – heroism and tragedy, nationhood, and the divine.

The great genres – narrative, history painting, didactic painting, and mythological and religious painting – and the artists who worked within them, were much appreciated by the Cubists as they had been by Cézanne. Charlot saw Cubism, not as a revolution, but as an extension of the compositional accomplishments of the great classical painters. For him, Cubism should have led to muralism, as it in fact almost did on several occasions. Cubism had the language for the walls. But most

Cubists moved in a different direction, towards an intensification of those aspects of the art world that Charlot liked least.

Rivera took another road – not out of ignorance or provincialism or simplicity (for Rivera was a very complicated man) – but by conscious choice. In Italy, in front of Byzantine and Renaissance murals, Rivera understood »that art was greater, that art was better, if it was an art not for the few but for the many.«⁷ Cubism helped Rivera to be a muralist. But it was Rivera who fulfilled the mural promise of Cubism: »there were elements in cubism, even experimental cubism, that allowed a man like Rivera to become, without having to change but simply to enlarge his point of view, a mural painter ... I have always felt that the cubism of Paris would have been greater and eventually would have become a mural language.«⁸ It was Rivera who relinked the concerns of Cubism to the great tradition: »When he was instrumental in welding cubism and mural painting on a vast scale, when he adapted the borrowed means to their forgotten function, and especially when he joined anew abstract means and didactic ends, Rivera was truly a pioneer.«⁹

The great classical tradition was a humanistic one: »The implications of this humanistic concern mean more to some artists than artistry itself.«¹⁰ That is, art has a larger purpose than art itself. Rivera himself wrote: »To be an artist, one must first be a man, vitally concerned with all problems of social struggle... never withdrawing from life.«¹¹ This concern and the works it inspired in Rivera are enough to justify the reevaluation of Rivera that Charlot called for in 1963.¹² But in that reevaluation, we will have to go beyond that human sphere to the cosmic context within which Rivera depicted it. For all through his work, we see the connection of human beings to nature, the analogy of human work and history with natural processes, the male and female principles that run through all things. Rivera explained even his own

– Charlot n.d., 14.

⁸ Charlot n.d., 15.

⁹ Charlot 1963, 136.

¹⁰ Charlot 1963, 318.

¹¹ Arquin 1971, 3f.

¹² Charlot 1963, 316.

work by means of the analogy of a tree bearing fruit.

For Charlot, this cosmic consciousness was religious. He felt that Rivera's work not only used religious imagery, but that it had an authentic religious resonance. It was very hard, he felt, for a Mexican not to be religious. He remembered Rivera getting up a meeting and saying, »I thank God I'm an atheist!« Later in his life, Rivera identified himself as a Catholic. Charlot, more consciously religious than Rivera, had no trouble expressing his admiration for Rivera in religious terms. In 1923, Rivera completed his first mural, *Creation*, a mural on which Charlot had worked as an assistant. In *Creation* Rivera gathers together personifying figures. In his later murals, such figures – in the form of elements, Mexican gods, or classicizing goddesses – will dominate from above Rivera's realistic depictions of human living in this world. Those figures make visible the meaning, the cosmic significance of our mundane activities – our connection to the universal processes.

In the monumental figures of *Creation*, Charlot saw personified qualities that linked art or human activity first to human nature itself and then to the cosmic, religious context. To explain this, he

wrote a long poem in French on those figures and on the mural as a whole. In his section on *La Science* – Science or Scientific Knowledge – he paid tribute, I believe, to that quality not only in all human beings, but especially in Rivera: his gargantuan thirst for knowledge and experience, and his immense productivity in painting for the people his synthesized vision of what he had learned and lived. Experience, synthesis, articulate and accessible expression: these are the qualities of the great Classical art tradition that Rivera exemplified for Charlot.

In his poem, Charlot reveals what for him is their ultimate source and significance:

*Elle se suffit à soi-même
Ramenant d'un geste sur sa poitrine,
assimilant pour sa plénitude
le spectacle renouvelé des mondes et la réalité des
essences.*

*Elle était avant les montagnes et les abysses;
elle sera après la disparition des temps
car elle est la respiration même de Dieu
la gloire qu'il reçut au septième jour
quand il vit que son œuvre était bon.*

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