Américas

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Front cover
Tiny tree frog from papyrus swamp near Turrialba, Costa Rica. Its striking colors serve to warn enemies that the skin is more or less poisonous. Photograph by Roger H. de Rageot. (See page 36)

Opposite
A Cuna Indian woman wears enormous gold earrings, nose ring, and coin necklace. The Cunas, of the San Blas Islands, Panama, were involved in the last Indian uprising in the Americas, in 1925. Photograph by Walter R. Aguiar. (See page 14)

Editorial

Street in Huaraz, Peru, after May 31 earthquake. Photo courtesy Diario Correo. (See pages 44 and 48)

Jean Charlot

STEFAN BACIU

A TWENTY-THREE-YEAR-OLD Frenchman, whose ancestry also included Aztec forebears, disembarked in Mexico in 1921. He had recently served in World War I as an officer in front-line combat, and had been a member of the occupation forces in the Rhineland.

If the war had impressed him profoundly with its suffering and horrors, it had also turned out to be an artistic experience for him. As he later explained, "because of the war, I came to know the old German masters. In Colmar, Alsace, I discovered Matthias Grünewald, and in Cologne, Stephan Lochner." The war had a positive outcome for him that would leave a mark of undeniable importance throughout his life.

Before the war he had taken classes in painting at the famous École des Beaux Arts in Paris, studying under renowned masters, and as a child he had had the opportunity of watching his mother paint. As he wrote afterwards, "I am very thankful that my mother was a painter."

That young man who came from a Europe shaken by the turmoil of war to a Mexico rocked by the Revolution was Jean Charlot, and, significantly for his intellectual development, he carried in his meager baggage a copy of Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*.

One should not overlook another important fact, although at first it may seem a mere detail: during almost the same period another artist also came to Mexico, returning to his home and country from Paris, where he had spent many years—the painter Diego Rivera. Even then, as Jean Charlot observed in an essay on the famous Mexican's first phase, Rivera had already revealed himself in a notable manner in a purely European world, as he worked alongside such artists as Gino Severini, who were an astronomical distance from the new phase that shortly afterwards was to be initiated by Rivera. But not by Rivera alone—by Jean Charlot as well, and along with them a whole series of young artists, most notably José Clemente Orozco (perhaps the youngest of the group), Carlos Mérida, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, among others who over the years achieved artistic and often political fame as well.

The intellectual mentor of the group, responsible for what was to be in a short time a powerful movement—the most vigorous movement in Latin American or Indo-American art since the Conquest—was the philosopher José Vasconcelos, who, as Secretary of Education of the Revolution, chose Diego Rivera as the most suitable personality to gather a group around himself, the group that would soon be nicknamed the *Dieguitos*.

As one of the last remaining members of the group expresses it, Vasconcelos began to distribute blank walls with a truly Revolutionary generosity that perhaps was not always matched by the quality of the works produced. A tremendous amount of work was done in those days. Feverishly, patriotically—though not always artistically, which, in a world full of convulsions, was more than natural. Sometimes the painters were better with the pistol than with the brush, as in the case of the famous and picturesque Nacho (Ignacio) Asúnsolo, whose feats are part of the anecdotal and picturesque side of art today.

There are various key books for the comprehension of that period. Foremost among them is *Mexican Ulysses* [English version 1963], the baroque autobiography of José Vasconcelos, which itself has much of the mural flavor about it. Others include *Idols Behind Altars* by Anita Brenner, a U.S. writer who witnessed that period; the autobiographies and confessions of Diego Rivera, who was not only a great painter but also a great conversationalist; Bertram D. Wolfe's *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, which contains some exceptional pages followed by some others that are quite debatable; the memoirs of José Clemente Orozco; and, finally, the documented and discrete work by Jean Charlot—*The Mexican Mural Renaissance*, which has not yet been translated into Spanish, having been initially published in the United States.

But let us leave the world of books and return to life. To Mexico, 1921. The Revolution. The Revolution that had begun in 1910, and whose visionary genius, by chance, was neither a politician, a writer, a philosopher, nor a thinker, but an artist and engraver: José Guadalupe Posada.

What Posada had foreseen, seen, and announced for so many years in his terrible works, in which death goes hand in hand with life, was a terrifying and brilliant vision. What would now begin was, if one may so describe it, a fusion of Posada's vision with everyday life, from which no one could flee, much less the artists, although at that time the controversial idea of the "artist-participant" had not yet been invented. Nevertheless, it was certain that the *Dieguitos*—unlike most witnesses of that time—were participants in the present, on the one hand, and, on the other, submerged in the past, in the great world of Aztec traditions. Therein, I believe, is the source of the strength of their art and, implicitly, of the art of Jean Charlot.

Pancho Villa was still alive and the memory of Emiliano Zapata was still fresh—their impact was

still felt as Revolutionary symbols and as outstanding human beings. They had not yet been relegated to history. That was the political and social side; in the world of art and letters, an *avant-garde* movement had erupted in Mexico with considerable noise, appropriately termed *estridentismo* (stridentism), whose intellectual capital was to be the city of Jalapa, although the movement commenced in Mexico City and Puebla.

Carleton Beals, a controversial and most interesting man familiar with the realities of that time in Latin America, wrote that Latin America was under three literary influences: that of Spain, that of France, and that of the Jalapa *estridentistas.*

Witticism or not, the statement has a certain historical value: at that moment, the *estridentistas* were quite close to the *Dieguitos,* and some of the artists collaborated with the writers, as was the case with Charlot himself.

A tranquil man, calm and peaceful, with certain mystical inclinations, as various of his companions have observed in their memoirs, Charlot was what might be called today a "silent protestor" (*estridentista silencioso*). Just as his art appeared not only in the shows at the famous Café de Nadie (Nobody's Café) but also in the pages of books written by orthodox and iconoclastic *estridentistas* like Manuel Maples Arce, Germán List Arzubide, and Arqueles Vela, it was also to be found in the magazines of the movement, notably in one little mentioned today, *Irradiador* (Radiator), the first in Mexico to have a Latin America-wide flavor.

For those familiar with the spirit and art of Jean Charlot, which ascended little by little from the national to the universal, it might seem paradoxical that he took part enthusiastically and directly in a movement that had as one of its mottos *Muera el cura Hidalgo, viva el mole de guajalote!* (Down with Father Hidalgo, hoorah for turkey stew!), and among whose works are books like List Arzubide's *Mueran los Gachupines* (Down with the Spanish Colonials).

Any kind of petty nationalism was far from his spirit: his presence in the artistic group was due to a profound ancestral tie, on the one hand, and on the other to what, in the best and highest sense, could be called "Mexicanness."

In other words: humanity and "Mexicanity" are the poles between which Jean Charlot's art can be placed during his first phase. His participation in the *estridentista* movement—even though that "revolution" had a more limited, more literary meaning—proves the artist's adherence to the new and the innovative.

A little over a year after his arrival in Mexico City Charlot had finished the wall that had been assigned him—the first artist to do so. The painting was the now famous *Massacre in the Great Temple* at the National Preparatory School.

First, there is his fervent

Jean Charlot in Hawaii, where he now lives

Mexicanism, which, far from being mere enthusiasm or patriotism, is deeply rooted in the land and in history. That is the only possible explanation for the presence of a young man recently arrived from Paris in a place where, for the first time, the arts of Latin America would play a part, body and soul, in a popular revolution. In this context, it is convenient to add another detail: the man who rediscovered and republished the work of José Guadalupe Posada was "El Francesito" (The Little Frenchman), as Charlot's friends used to call him then.

Second, there is the fact that, according to the testimony of one of his colleagues and also of the quality of his work, for decades he was the artist most profoundly familiar with mural technique—the most finished muralist.

Along with his knowledge of technique, which made him stand out among muralists, Charlot was also an excellent painter, wood engraver, and draftsman, in whose work the Mexican people live with a force seldom equalled.

Luz, a woman of the people who often appears in his oils and sketches, far from being just *any* woman, was an archetype, just as were his country folk and his baggage carriers, his washerwomen and his anonymous mothers, his Malinches [Indian women who became mistresses of conquistadors, like the famous Malinche given to Cortez] and his tortilla-makers.

People without a name, but with an unmistakable identity: the Mexican people. This was due primarily to the artist's *métier,* to his technique, but also to a reality that must not be overlooked: to Charlot the artist, the people of Mexico were people, just that and no

Charlot found inspiration for his Massacre in the Great Temple (detail, **below**), *a mural at Mexico City's National Preparatory School, in the works of Paolo Uccello. Detail of Uccello's The Rout of San Romano (National Gallery, London) appears* **above.** *"Of all the great artists in the world, Paolo Uccello remains my favorite. His lances shining against a dark background on Medici walls, and his geometrically arranged warriors influenced my work"*

more. That is, no ideology intrudes itself into his art. Charlot does not lend himself to the service of a movement, but rather to the service of mankind. People appear in his paintings as the artist sees them—as they are, in their most hidden aspects.

Posada also worked that way, and those who abandoned that tradition, even with good intentions, abandoned Mexico in an effort to attain a "militancy" that would lose more and more artistic and human expression every day.

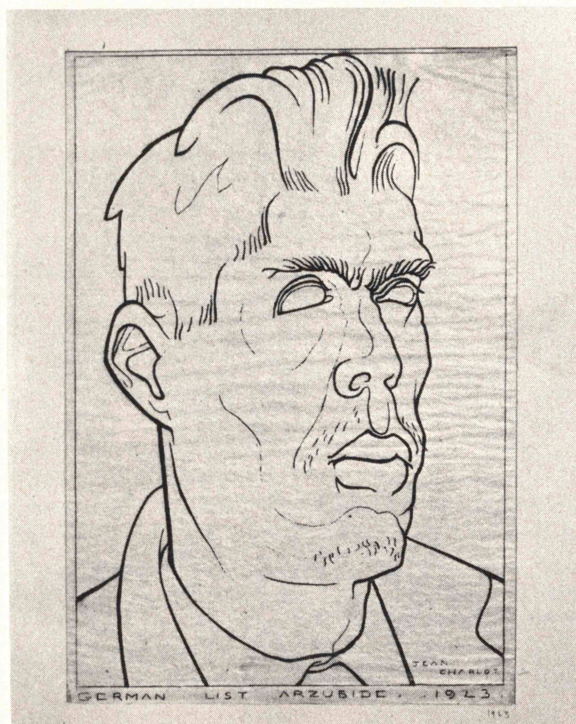
Years later, in conversation, Charlot related his first Mexican phase to its beginnings in the following manner:

Of all the great artists in the world, Paolo Uccello remains my favorite. His lances shining against a dark background on Medici walls and his geometrically arranged armed warriors influenced my work. It was Uccello who inspired my first Mexican mural.

If we analyze that statement, we find: Paolo Uccello, universal artist, inspired Charlot, a young Frenchman recently arrived in Mexico, to become one of the painters most representative of "Mexicanness." This means that Charlot is not cosmopolitan but universal, since he has a well-defined place in universal art—Mexican muralism—both among the Mexicans from Mexico and among those who, becoming Mexicanized without renouncing their personalities, made notable contributions to the art of muralism.

One must not forget that among those who recorded the Revolution, along with Charlot, the Frenchman, there were also Carlos Mérida, the singular "Maya" from Guatemala; Isamu Noguchi, of Japanese descent; Pablo O'Higgins and Grace

Charlot's 1922 drawing of Diego Rivera at work on his first mural. "What happiness to be able to carry an entire world to the realm of the vertical and to climb on a great ladder!"



Estridentista leader Germán List Arzubide, drawn by Charlot in 1923

Detail from Charlot's Massacre in the Great Temple, *painted in 1922, shows (from right) Fernando Leal, Diego Rivera, and Charlot*

and Marion Greenwood, of the United States. All this goes to demonstrate the universality of Mexican muralism, created by men from various countries and of various origins, who were united under the sign of the same ideal, the same sky, but who had different techniques and visions. From that diversity came the greatness of the Mexican muralist movement, so often imitated from the very beginning but always without success.

The search for the new, the profound, the unknown carried Jean Charlot in 1926 to the little-visited land of Chichén-Itzá, where he was one of the first to see what had scarcely been guessed at. That grandiose discovery, to which he was witness and day-by-day contributor, left signs in his art that could not be erased: his work became even more closely related to those great traditions, and at the same time, more profound and more individual.

In 1931 when, after a decade of intense Mexican work, he had a show in New York at the John Becker Gallery, the catalogue preface, by French poet Paul Claudel, contained among other enthusiastic comments certain passages that could be called prophetic. Once more, Claudel showed that the poet is a prophet:

The milieu in which Jean Charlot fulfills his vocation is Mexico, I mean ancient Indian Mexico. There could have been nothing more favorable for a constructor. One of the themes that he never tires of interpreting is that of the Maya stonemasons at work on one of the sacred pyramids in Yucatán or Guatemala, which he earlier explored—Chichén-Itzá or Macanxoc.

Let us call attention to the term *vocation*, or *calling*, since Charlot saw himself—if we may say so—called by a mysterious voice to Mexico; a vocation that he obeyed, and according to which he would later build his world, constructed over the great world of the ancients. And Claudel then writes, here truly prophetically:

Charlot was born for the fresco. His painting has the smell of fresh gesso. How-

ever rich his groups are, they ceaselessly summon around themselves other, more important groups. He would need great spaces to fill—why not the whole immense panel between the Atlantic and the Pacific? What happiness to be able to carry an entire world to the realm of the vertical and to climb on a great ladder!

□

After this began a period of ten years in the United States during which Charlot worked in New York and other places on the Atlantic seaboard, where he made various murals that are part of the country's artistic heritage. But he never abandoned his individual manner; his style, his expression, and what to us seems fundamental—his vision of the world, which continues to be but one: Man, portrayed in all his physical and spiritual dimensions.

In 1949, when he came to the University of Hawaii, Charlot found new worlds for his art, his reflections, and his means of expression.

When Claudel spoke of the great landscape that ought to extend from the Atlantic to the Pacific, he may or may not have had in mind the adventures of Paul Gauguin, like Charlot a Frenchman who could also claim Indian ancestors.

It should not be, could not be, mere coincidence that those two French painters—Gauguin, descended from the noble Indians of Peru, and Charlot, from the Aztecs—ended up in the Pacific, if not under the same conditions, humanly speaking, at least both in search of another world, which each—in his manner—knew how to express masterfully.

With the exception of the great painter Madge Tennant, Hawaii had no special painter until Charlot's arrival. About that time one could begin to speak of the appearance of a group of

Tortillera (Tortilla Maker), detail from Charlot's mural at the University of Georgia, Athens. "People appear in his paintings as the artist sees them—as they are, in their most hidden aspects"

Portrait of Charlot's wife, Zolmah, done in Mexico in 1931

representative painters who, as time went on, would win fame. Ben Norris, Ed Stasack, and the exceptionally gifted Tseng Yu-Ho all deserve special mention. For the man who had been shaped by Mexico and her art, coming to these islands of singing and of people who awaited their painter to become known throughout the world was a happy adventure (in the artistic and intellectual sense).

Charlot painted his first mural in Honolulu in 1949, *Relationship Between Man and Nature in Ancient Hawaii.* As much for its artistic expression as for its message, the painting constituted the first step for a painter who would go much farther from then on. On various islands of the Hawaiian archipelago where the tourist rarely travels Charlot's art began penetrating little by little—first on the walls of institutions that offered them for murals, then in churches whose altars he knew how to make speak with his brushstrokes, unmistakably graced with faith and novelty.

Some might say that in certain aspects of this phase of his art Charlot has remained too close to his Mexican roots, but this can only be said by those who approach his art superficially, as it was beginning to have another dimension.

His preoccupation with the Hawaiian past has also manifested itself in his intellectual activity. It will always be somewhat paradoxical that the most prolific writer on Hawaiian themes in the local language was a French-Mexican who came to absorb the traditions of the old culture to such an extent that he actually decided to write a play *in Hawaiian* on a theme so often treated as the arrival of Captain Cook in Hawaii. Now this adventure is being presented with a "local" fla-

Charlot's Fiji Scene **(left)** *and The Bathers, by Paul Gauguin* **(right).** *"It should not be, could not be, mere coincidence that those two French painters . . . ended up in the Pacific, if not under the same conditions, humanly speaking, both in search of another world, which each—in his manner—knew how to express masterfully"*

vor. And it was written by a Frenchman from Paris, the Mexican from Chichén-Itzá, who entered the world of Rainha Pele, the world of mountains and volcanoes, to preserve what was threatened with being lost more rapidly each year, carried off by tourism and civilization.

The desire for continual renovation, for more and more knowledge, carried him to Fiji as well, where he painted and observed, wrote and took notes, in order to paint those pictures so beautifully mysterious, in which the profound blue blends with the humid, copper green of the jungle.

At sixty-eight, in 1966, Charlot held a retrospective exhibition in Honolulu, and in April of 1968, two years later, the Mexican Government decided to invite him (better late than never!) to organize another retrospective, which extended from the mural in the National Preparatory School to the walls of Hawaii and Fiji.

Asked how he views his art today, his work in the Pacific world, Charlot said only this: "I believe that the Pacific Islands are, for my work, more future than present. Like the fisherman, when fishing, I am superstitious. For this reason, at this stage I prefer to fish rather than talk."

We admire this painter. Let the fisherman pursue his task in the limitless waters of the Pacific, continuing along the road from Paris and Mexico. His art, above all, is a unity in stages. □

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The Paratrooper, *detail from fresco by Charlot in the Journalism Building of the University of Georgia, (1943-44)*