

1. Pablo Picasso: *First Steps*, oil on canvas, 1943, Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Stephen Carlton Clark

John Charlot

The Source of Picasso's *First Steps*: Jean Charlot's *First Steps*

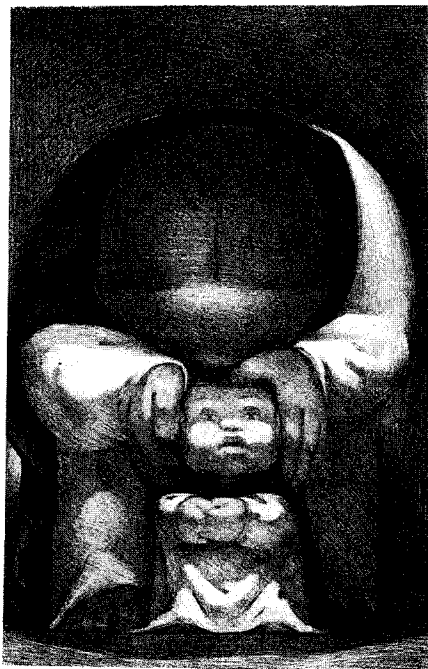
The eclectic character of Picasso's art has long been recognized and appreciated. Identifying his sources enables us to recognize which works impressed him and how he was able to use them in his own creations.

Picasso's monumental oil painting of 1943, *First Steps* (fig. 1), in the Yale University Art Gallery, is unusual in his life work. Françoise Forster-Hahn

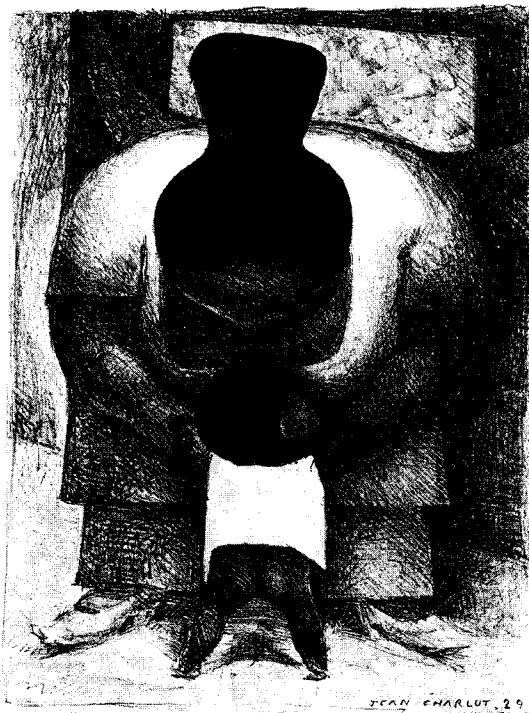
writes, »*First Steps* is unique among the many paintings of mother and child in the specific crucial moment it depicts«¹. Such singularity in an artist who often repeated subjects and compositions suggests a specific influence. Katharine B. Neilson has cited Byzantine mosaics and stained glass windows,² but those influences would apply only to details in the painting.

¹ Françoise Forster-Hahn, *French and School of Paris Paintings in the Yale University Art Gallery*, New Haven and London 1968, 22.

² Katharine B. Neilson, *Selected Paintings and Sculpture from the Yale University Art Gallery*, New Haven and London 1972, no. 113.



2. Jean Charlot: *First Steps*, lithograph on stone, 1936, Morse no. 317



3. Jean Charlot: *Mother and Child*, lithograph on zinc, 1929, Morse no. 79

As the source of the subject and general composition of the painting, I propose Jean Charlot's lithograph of 1936, *First Steps* (fig. 2)³. This lithograph was printed in an unlimited edition for the American Artists Group, New York, and was sold in large quantities at low prices. Moreover, the lithograph was soon available as a book illustration⁴. A photograph of an oil version of the composition

was published in 1936⁵. The related print *Mother and Child* of 1929 (fig. 3) was also published in 1936⁶.

The most obvious signs of influence are the identical title, the unusual subject, and the strikingly similar compositions. The subject is used only in this one major oil painting by Picasso,⁷ but is found often in Charlot's work⁸.

³ Peter Morse, *Jean Charlot's Prints: A Catalogue Raisonné*, Honolulu 1976, no. 317. Jean Charlot, 1898–1979, was born in Paris and moved to Mexico in 1921, where he became a founding member of the Mexican Mural Renaissance, completing the movement's first mural in true fresco in 1922–1923. After working as an archaeologist, he moved to the United States in 1928, where he worked as an artist, teacher, and writer, moving to Hawai'i in 1949. The prolific Charlot created seventy-four murals and monumental sculptures, over twelve hundred oil paintings, seven hundred and seventy-two original prints, fifty-one published books, plays and portfolios, and numerous scholarly and popular articles. For further information, see Ethel Moore (ed.), *Jean Charlot: Paintings, Drawings and Prints*, in: *Geor-*

gia Museum of Art Bulletin, The University of Georgia, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Fall 1976); Tom Klobe (ed.), *Jean Charlot: A Retrospective*, Honolulu 1990.

⁴ Carl Ziegrosser, *Six Centuries of Fine Prints*, New York 1937, no. 421.

⁵ James W. Lane, *Masters in Modern Art*, Boston 1936, facing page 106. The author expresses his negative judgement of Picasso, 111.

⁶ Morse, *Jean Charlot's Prints* (note 3), no. 79. Carl Ziegrosser, «Mexican Graphic Art», in: *The Print Collector's Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (January 1936), 64–82, 79.

⁷ For Christian Zervos, *Pablo Picasso*, Vol. 13, *Œuvres de 1943 et 1944*, Paris 1962, no. 261, see below.

⁸ To mention prints alone, see Morse *Jean Charlot's Prints*, nos. 79, 402, 485, 489.

The main features of Picasso's composition follow Charlot's, such as the rounded back of the mother into which the head has been integrated, the relation of her arms to the vertical lines of her dress, and the mother's form enclosing the child's »as a symbol of protection and possession«⁹.

Details in Picasso's work also indicate their source. The right foot of Picasso's child corresponds to the mother's bared foot in Charlot's print. The zigzag line of the mother's dress at the left edge of Picasso's painting corresponds to that of the mother's robe in the print. The pug nose, eyebrow lines, and upper right cheek line of Picasso's child resemble Charlot's. The V shape of the kilt between the legs of the Picasso child rising to an inverted V above one leg varies the more regular form of the child's clothing in Charlot's print. The unusual hair of Picasso's child resembles the side of the shawl of Charlot's mother on the viewer's right.

Picasso has introduced characteristic changes into his painting. The costumes are converted from Mexican Indian to Spanish. The emotion of the mother is expressed through her face rather than through her body and hands as in Charlot's print.

The hands of the two figures are joined as in Charlot's 1929 print *Mother and Child*, but a certain awkwardness of posture is introduced because the child is facing forwards rather than towards its mother.

Charlot's print is composed frontally. The child seems to emerge from the mother as if undergoing as second birth. In Picasso's painting, the mother faces slightly to the viewer's left, and the child steps out towards the viewer's right. This torsion emphasizes the dynamism of the first step in contrast to the anticipatory stillness of the print. In line with this new emphasis is the increase in the size of the child.

The soft, post-Cubist three-dimensional modeling of the child's face in Charlot's print is made

linear by Picasso and distorted to fit the general composition: e.g., the nose echoes the raised foot, and the eye above that foot is itself raised.

In general, Picasso substitutes a linear composition for one based on space and mass. Thus the angles of his figures jut out towards all four edges of the frame. The setting of the figures at angles, mentioned above, is necessary also in order to articulate space, since Picasso does not want to use Charlot's modelled mass.

A study of Picasso's drawings for the painting and related sketches reinforces the above conclusions¹⁰. Firstly, the composition is unlike anything else Picasso was doing at the time, another indication that he was working under a particular influence. The left half of Zervos no. 34 seems to be an abstract study of the mass and space composition of Charlot's print. The face on the right margin of Zervos no. 18 seems to be a caricatural study of the pudgy, full-front face of Charlot's child.

If the drawings are in the proper sequence, Picasso seems to have started with the articulation of the mother's face and the angling of her body towards the viewer's left, Zervos nos. 14 and 15.

In Zervos nos. 16 to 18, Picasso introduces the child as smaller in relation to the mother, but gradually increases its size to approximate the ratio in the print. The child is dressed in a robe similar to that in the print. Picasso's child is, however, emphatically active; in Zervos no. 18, it is running in profile across the front of the mother.

Zervos no. 20, apparently the only complete study before the creation of the painting,¹¹ is very close to the print, but the child is now in the clothes it will have in the painting.

The great increase in the size of the child in relation to the mother is a special characteristic of the painting, perhaps an on-the-spot response to the large size of the canvas. As a result of this increase, the mother is deemphasized almost to the point of becoming a backdrop.

⁹ Neilson *Selected Paintings* (note 2), no. 113.

¹⁰ I follow the numbering of Zervos, *Pablo Picasso* (note 7). On these sketches and the resulting problem of dating the painting, see Forster-Hahn, *French and School of Paris Paintings* (note 1), 22.

¹¹ If Forster-Hahn, *French and School of Paris Paintings* (note 1), is correct in changing the date of execution.

After the painting, Picasso returned to a size relation between mother and child that was nearer to that of the print¹². He kept this general size relation through a series of later attempts to use the composition again in other contexts: as a single group in a larger park scene, as a bather, and in profile and three-quarter¹³.

Apparently, none of these attempts satisfied Picasso sufficiently to be used in a large-scale oil. That is, he was unable to adapt Charlot's composition past the painting *First Steps*, which is demonstrably close to its source. The reason for this is

perhaps that Charlot's composition uses mass and space to express its very subject: a smaller mass half-emerges from a larger one. Picasso was, however, working with linear and kinetic compositions at the time, for which the necessarily massive figure of the mother was difficult to appropriate. In other words, Picasso seems to have responded to the emotional content of Charlot's print and tried to express it in his own style, but found that in this case content and expression were inseparable.

¹² Zervos no. 40; and no. 20, if the date written on the back of the painting is in fact correct, as opposed to Forster-Hahn's view.

¹³ Park: Zervos nos. 112–120, 214, 230–231. Bather: Zervos

nos. 261, 290–291, 316–319, 322–323, 325. Profile and three-quarter: Zervos nos. 261, 290; the group to the left in each work. Charlot also turned the compositional group in several of his works listed above.