



The Battle of the Temple Mayor, Fresco by Jean Charlot

Escuela Preparatoria, Mexico City

Jean Charlot

By LINCOLN KIRSTEIN

JEAN CHARLOT was born in Paris in 1898, of French parents.* His maternal ancestors have been identified with Mexico for over a century. At the end of the World War, in which he served as an officer in the French artillery, he was involved like many other artists in the restless ferment of the period, and his natural affiliations turned him towards Mexico in 1921.

There he made a close study of the Aztec and Mayan manuscripts which in their precision and formality may be compared to the movements of classical ballet. In 1926 he joined the archeological staff of the Carnegie Institute and was employed in transcribing Mayan frescoes and bas-reliefs. He is responsible for the section on sculpture in the expedition's authoritative report on the citadel of the Chichen-Itza in Yucatan. At the present he has finished with such historical approximation.

Previously as a student in Paris he had become familiar with the experiments of his French contemporaries who were able, as eclectics, to learn from Giotto and Masaccio as readily as from Cézanne and Picasso. The most important "influence" on his work—and by influence one means those exterior sources from which he has drawn and has integrated into his own work, rather than accidental parallels of a superficial style—are Rubens, Goya and El Greco. Rubens at the present moment is considered Olympian, but baroque, hence untouchable. Large forms, the maelstrom of flesh, exuberance in design on a large scale for walls are somehow now in bad taste, as opposed to the skim-milk of Puvis. Charlot has not by any means transcribed Rubens into Mexico. He merely understands as Rubens understood that

the true dignity of subject-matter lies in figure compositions, that the greatest play of bodies can be best acquired on a healthy scale, and that flesh is more interesting, variable, luminous and attractive than clothes. From Goya, Charlot parallels a philosophical attitude rather than borrows personal idiosyncrasies in technique. Charlot is an ironist. His sense of humor is not as ferocious as Goya's. In portraits, for example, such as that of Lowell Houser, the irony is neither destructive, nor a social satire, nor caricature. It is the realization of Santayana's wonderful phrase that "Life in immediacy is tragic, in retrospect comic and in essence lyric." His humor is an essential and a lyric humor, mordant but without the easy bitterness of momentary irritation—however provoked. The whole question of exterior influence is a vicious one. To say that Charlot has been influenced by Rubens and Goya is merely to establish a relation. It neither defines his style nor implies a comparison. To say that Charlot has taken a certain quality of color, of light from Greco is less accurate than to know Charlot has seen Greco—that he selects in part only, a palette Greco had assimilated from Venice or Byzantium. He uses the flicker of light over surfaces describing solid volumes to develop color in a way that is more similar to the possibilities of Greco's palette than a leaning on it.

For Jean Charlot is in the fullest possible meaning of a difficult epithet an "original" artist. Originality in itself is not a particularly valuable asset. In many cases of Renaissance painting, for example, followers are far more absorbing than the masters of a school. Originality as expressed by certain young painters of the School of Paris is surely an easy and irrelevant victory. They merely tap a personal variant and reiterate the

*This biographical information is obtained from Anita Brenner's *Idols Behind Altars*. Brewer & Warren, New York City. 1929.

"style" to an indefinite exhaustion. But Charlot is an original painter as much as he is an integrated human being. He can receive experience, digest it and recreate it in the terms of a vision that is not occupied with the scramble for an intellectual or a social prestige, but only with the possibilities of an open, a really open imagination.

Charlot was the first of the Mexican painters to use buon fresco in the way that Cennino Cennini indicates. His researches in this permanent, gracious and difficult medium preceded the more famous, or at least more frequently reproduced, frescoes of Rivera and Orozco. Charlot realized before anyone else how right was painting on wet plaster, for the open colonnades of a sunny country, where the walls would teach better than

tracts the emerging peasantry of Mexico's past and possibility. His great wall painting, the *Masacre of the Templo Mayor*, an incident of the conquest by Alvarado of an Aztec stronghold, is one of the noblest and most dramatic of the murals in Mexico. While Rivera employs a static and ponderous gravity, and Orozco's nervousness sometimes negates his impending spirituality, Charlot pours a kinetic composition of orderly confusion down a wall, where already there was a flight of steps to set the scale for the debacle. One remembers Uccello, but in contrast to his flat, suspended action. Like the steadying hands of a clock the great red angular spears hold the design in its whirling steady space, intensely dramatic, intensely concentrated. In a corner, as signature and as a dating, he has included



Portrait of Lowell Hauser, By Jean Charlot

John Becker Gallery



Bathers, By Jean Charlot

John Becker Gallery

therein portraits of both Rivera and himself.

His originality in the ingenuity of design, approaching an abstract, but always maintaining a human reference is admirably developed in a recent landscape now in the collection of Mrs. Adrian Iselin. The use of curving forms, projected and repeating themselves in aerial perspective, linked by strong linear bisection, and though perfectly contained within the frame, nevertheless implying an infinite extension of vista, is surely a very important contribution to the tradition of Dutch landscape, if one needs to insist on these historical connections.

Charlot lacks walls at the present moment. North American architects are consistent. They could not afford to mar the solid mediocrity of their achievement by the inclusion of an accent, in lobby or boardroom, however genuinely distinguished. So Charlot industriously works on his

large figure paintings, or his small studies, so well exhibited at the John Becker Gallery, which at any given moment could be set up for broad scaled decoration, so perfectly are they realized in terms of proportion and in the ratio of the forms to the frame. Charlot is a learned artisan as well as an accomplished artist. He knows, as too few in this country do, enough of the mechanics of his craft to presuppose it. We never question a carpenter's ability to plane a board true. Yet when an artist makes it known that he understands the "mysteries" of asymmetrical balance, of the "golden" section as his A B C, then too usually we give him the credit for erudition. Charlot happens to be an unusually well-informed painter. More than this, he is a conscious painter. He takes no stock in the Parisian dogmas of miraculous surprises in naïviste spontaneity. His paintings are built like battleships to with-



Reclining Nude, By Jean Charlot

Courtesy of Hound and Horn

stand the attack of looseness, disintegration, boredom and the facility of wit, that dealers in the School of Paris consider the be-all and end-all of smart paint.

Charlot also works ably in the graphic mediums. Just as his paintings can never fall under the category of colored drawings, so his illustrations, woodcuts and lithographs utilize and exhaust the exact capabilities of wood or stone. They are non-imitative. They are not, as in the case of many lithographers, excuses for paint, or the *tour de force* of a painting without color, cut on wood. His happiest collaboration is perhaps in his decorations for Paul Claudel's *Christopher Columbus*, published a year ago by the Yale University Press. Here the red, gray, blue and black and white are a perfect and charming illumination of the text. His line drawings for a book of Mexican folk tales, in accurate accord with the grayness of the type page, numerous and compact, will shortly be published by Brewer, Warren and Putnam. And recently he has completed designs for Claudel's notes on the *Apocalypse* which will

be cut in the wood by a Japanese craftsman.

The subject-matter of Jean Charlot up to the present time has been almost exclusively Mexican, Indians, Spanish-Indian peasants, or the Maya or Aztec legends. In a lesser man this preoccupation with a single and exotic milieu might seem a weakness, a romantic escape from the present, another Gauguin. Charlot knows Mexico with the passionate science of an alien who has mastered, better than a native, the given locale. It is no escape for him. It is his present and his life. His Indians are fables,—universal symbols. The particular interest in the Aztec has an enormous reference by implication. The subjects remain the same but their treatment varies and enlarges from one picture to another. Bereft of the Church, of landscape and genre painting, Paris occupies itself, and the world follows, with the conceit of personal fancy or the exercise of still life. The American painters who occupy themselves with New York, or the American speak-easy, false-front locale are rarely convincing. They strain too hard towards a subject-mat-

ter that is proximate but somehow not really native, and too often subject for photographers only. Charlot painting Mexicans from a Twenty-First Street studio is more convincing than a hundred New Yorkers cramping Harlem into the strictures of Burchfield or Hopper.

This summer Charlot started exploring new directions. Turning to portraiture, his subjects are not, as formerly, tawny Mexicans, but the synthetic Nordics of North America. Americans have never been crystalized in paint. Gibson and Sargent established a type which was more the artist than the girl. Charlot can afford anonymity. His analyses need no benison of "attractiveness." In Charlot's Americans one can expect the honesty and freshness which have so distinguished his Central Americans. Also, for the coming winter is an appointment to teach at the Art Students League. Since he is an articulate and conscious artist, he is also a penetrating, creative instructor.

Charlot is a stylist—he has an attitude that signs his pictures better than a signature. A sensitive colorist, he has made certain ranges his own. Gray and orange-pink, lemon and deep raspberry red, straw-color and flesh, bottle green and laque de garance—in the subtlest of shifts from tender nuance to chords as harsh as the taste of brandy, usually laid on thinly and with successive glazes, combined with a sense of the breadth of form, of form not necessarily forced into three dimensions as a bas-relief but realized as a description of the control of volumes, elevate him to a position nearly at the head of his profession on this continent. Charlot is a great hope in a sad time for paint. He dares to paint what he wants, what he knows rather than to submit to fashionable salesmanship or to the poverty of an antiseptic industrialism. He can live the life of an artist and a conscious man with an anonymity that has the parallel and reciprocal nobility of his paint.



Malinches II, By Jean Charlot

Courtesy of Paine Mexican Arts

Collection of Frank Crowninshield