

## DRAWINGS BY

VIA CRUCIS, TRIAL PROOF

BY JEAN CHARLOT



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CHARLOT**

**BY  
LINCOLN  
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THERE is a shifting scale of prestige in the hierarchies of a painter's modes more difficult to define than to observe. If an artist is a painter, obviously his most serious work is in paint. But the question immediately arises—paint on what? Paint, fresco, for example, is taken to be larger in scale than oil on canvas. Tempera is heavier, at least, than water colors. Surfaces washed with color seem more readily attractive than monochrome drawings. Which brings us to the relative importance of drawings. Most painters draw, but few consider their drawings equivalent in expression to their creation in more complex media. Preparatory sketches for larger works have an accidental interest and can stand framing, but rarely are drawings the peers of paint. One naturally thinks of Ingres and Degas, but contemporary draughtsmanship, when it is not adequate, cool academicism, is usually more suggestive than realized. Drawings of the masters of the School of Paris recall their paintings, or are their paintings in thinner terms. But crayon, lithographic or sanguine, or lead pencil, nevertheless present remarkable possibilities of fulfillment, and nowhere at present more so than in the work of Jean Charlot.

It is unimportant in considering his quality to determine whether he is predominantly French, due to his birth and training, or Mexican due to his choice and practice. He was both, and has become neither French nor Mexican, but an American living and working in New York City. It is not valuable in attempting to place him to decide that he is primarily a mural painter because he has painted large walls, or an easel painter because he lacks walls now, or a graphic artist because he is conspicuously popular in this field, or a pedagogue because he is a splendid master and does teach, or a fine draughtsman because he can draw. He is, of course, all of these things, but not primarily any of them. He is, in fact, a rarely equipped and articulate artist acutely conscious and capable of expressing his consciousness on plaster,

canvas, stone, paper or in the written or spoken word. It is particularly rewarding to consider his drawings, because they are unfamiliar to many people, and his recent exposition of them at the Florence Cane School of Art is an admirable point of departure.

The drawings shown have a double interest. In almost every case they also exist pushed ultimately into paint. But they are not exactly drawings for paintings. Often there are several of the same subject, one of which serves as a springboard for paint, but it may not be that particular one which he has chosen to preserve individually as a drawing. The drawings anticipate the painting, but they are more than essays. They are consecutive studies in terms of lead or charcoal, discoveries in form, in linear direction, maps of surfaces needing no color to clothe them.

Technically they are of considerable interest. The direction of pencilled strokes delicately express contour, but as an underhaze of furnished air, rather than an excuse for local coloration. The outlines vary with the plastic interest of the modelling; they do not constrain the edges of the forms. The edges are often bold in accent, but exist as suggestible white areas in a parenthesis of profiles. The handling of the pencil is controlled, fastidious. Heavy darks have little place. The values of his modulated gray surfaces seem to exist under a strong light, a light capable of eliminating bold shadows, but revealing the structure of the form beneath the skin. In the lead pencil drawings there is no trace of the use of an eraser. The lights are thought out beforehand. The cross-hatching is only a suggestion of thickness. In the charcoals and sanguines, the eraser is employer for clean cut accents, swiftly removing any trace of ambiguity from the shell of form. In the lithographs, there is, fitting the wider gamut of its crayon, a heavier tone of darks, but crisply caught in a net of exact outlines, a calligraphic pattern of bitten, hard, thin borders, witty, economical and tense.

Charlot is a vigorous draughtsman, but his technique, as with all artists who are more than technicians, is subordinated to the services of his subjects. His subjects are not accidental finds which attract him by an appeal of personality or of easy interest. All the things he portrays are witnesses to his large subject-matter, a subject-matter which is widely relevant, but personal to him. To put it in its simplest and at the same time its most involved, if comprehensive terms,—his subject matter is incarnation and apocalypse. It is not the subject matter of any established religion in a canonical sense, though Charlot is as serious a Catholic artist as there is alive today. His incarnation is the flesh, the face, the figure of the man or woman he is observing made into the portrait of its essential spirit. This portrait is the representation of the given subject in a state of judgment. Charlot is not final judge; he merely submits his sitters, still life or youthful face to a withering process of formal, essentializing rearrangement. The form undergoes a smelting process, and reappears in a testimonial document to the given character stripped and expectant. The flesh and its relations in mounds, hollows, cylinders, breathe in residual formality. Similarly Greco put flesh to flames in his vision of the Apocalypse. Similarly, Gaston Lachaise and Rouault take glorifying liberties with their plastic materials. Charlot's nudes are more sudden than serene. They exist while they are being consumed, or in spite of their consumption. His portrait heads emphasize the overwhelming characteristics of their sitters' psychology, although these may not be so frankly apparent in the sitter's proper face. The real becomes es-

sential, nervous, almost ferocious. A single feature; for example, the snaky locks of hair in the pencil drawing of the shut-eyed girl are developed for their own sake and become a salient contribution to the synthesis of her head. She is a Medusa writhing in light, lips, nose, firm lids and heavy chin presenting a disquieting but consistent and beautiful alchemy of personality.

The small round lithographs illustrating the *Via Crucis* are among Charlot's most recent work. If a person not familiar with his previous achievement were to be faced with them, he might be at a loss to place the curious figured types. For here is an excellent example of moulding influences sublimated, digested and recreated. The Aztec profiles, the calligraphy of ancient Mexican codices, is obvious not as echo but as revivification, in Charlot's own terms. They almost seem Gothic, but that is because their story's sequence is gothic, not his handling. They almost seem playful, until one feels that they are rather, in the best sense of the word, popular, familiar, presupposed as part of one's daily imaginative experience. The well-known homely symbols are rehabilitated. Within a small circle, inscribed with the barest indication of intensifying shadows, heavy, confused, hapless Pilate thrusts his paws into the waiting basin. A centurion is apathetic and cynical. Christ is unmoved, his mask in a sincere parody of agony. On the Cross he sags on his drapes. The upthrust hands of his survivors flicker indignantly. This is serious wit and sober irony. A quality is achieved here, due purely to the medium of drawing, that would have been impossible to obtain in any other way.



STUDY FOR "DAWN"

JEAN CHARLOT