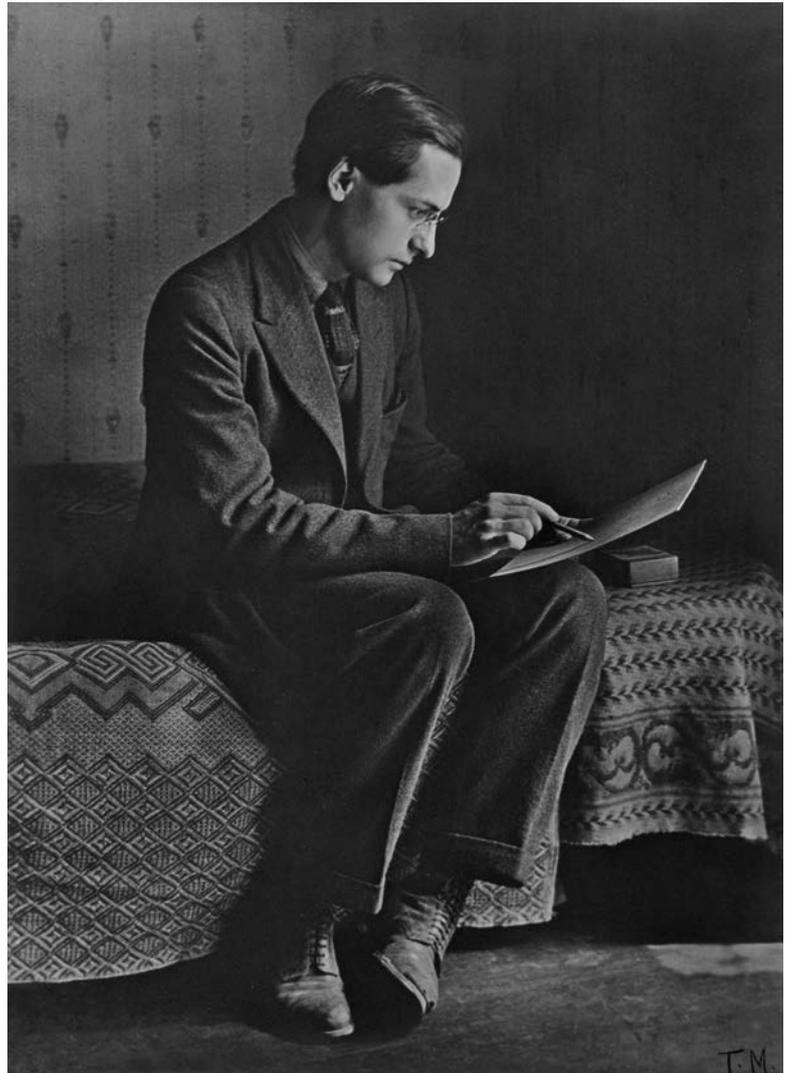


Dafne Cruz Porchini*

*El renacimiento
del muralismo
mexicano
(1920-1925)*
by Jean Charlot



My desire to tell this story stems in part from a concern with the development of aesthetics, given that it is quite uncommon to see the birth of a national style, something as valuable as narrating how a volcano is born. Jean Charlot's "Preface" to *El renacimiento del muralismo mexicano (1920-1925)*.¹

In 2022, we commemorate the first centennial of Mexican muralism, taking as its starting point Diego Rivera's 1922 mural *Creation*, painted in the Simón Bolívar Amphitheater of the Old San Ildefonso College, formerly the National Preparatory School. As members of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) community, we must continue to study the muralism in the university's heritage from different points of view. This article

will therefore deal with one of the almost forgotten figures of Mexican muralism, Jean Charlot, and his impact on the narratives of the history of national art.

A young French artist named Jean Charlot came ashore in Veracruz in late January 1921 in the fervent hope of finding and understanding the part of his Mexican heritage that included his memories of his paternal uncle Eugene Goupil's collection of pre-Hispanic objects, gathered while living in Mexico.² We owe Charlot, a painter and writer, the historical and testimonial work *El renacimiento del muralismo mexicano, 1920-1925* (*The Mexican Mural Renaissance 1920-1925*), published first in English in the 1960s and later translated to Spanish by the Domés publishing

*Dafne is a researcher at the UNAM Institute for Aesthetic Research. You can contact her at dafne.cruzporchini@gmail.com. Photo courtesy of the author.

house (1985). The book is a history of the beginnings of the Mexican mural movement and the role played by José Vasconcelos in that great historic-artistic achievement.

But first, let us speak of the author. Charlot had studied informally in the Paris Fine Arts School and very quickly reached out to the Catholic Gilde Notre-Dame group, where he had the idea of becoming a “liturgical artist” and leaving behind his life as a soldier.³ He did some sketches for friezes that would decorate a suburban Parisian church, which he considered his first attempt at mural painting. The project failed, which may have motivated his journey to Mexico.

With the clear tone of the chronicler, Charlot took notes about his arrival:

Rebozo, sarape, flesh, and hair partake of those shades that are the palette of Nature: yellows, reds, and greys of earth colors, the blue grays, the grays-blues, and as a climax, those changing colors of the pigeon’s throat. I arrived with good chemical colors bought in France, ready to match monkeys and palms, as an explorer carries gaudy calicoes for bartering. How could they stand for these, the very colors of water, earth, wood, and straw. Even my up-to-date theories of art must go overboard, as I face the features of this land, truly secretive and classical, whose perennial mission seems to be the apotheosis of the poor and the scandal of the impertinent.⁴

Charlot rapidly became part of the country’s artistic life. Thanks to Alfredo Ramos Martínez, he joined the School of Outdoor Painting and, together with Fernando Leal, worked in wood carving, which he had already done in France. The brotherhood of artists soon began calling him “the little Frenchman,” mocking his serious, formal demeanor. David Alfaro Siqueiros remembered, “Charlot made great efforts to show that our revolution fit entirely into

With the clear tone of the chronicler, Charlot took notes about his arrival: Rebozo, sarape, flesh, and hair partake of those shades that are the palette of Nature: yellows, reds, and greys of earth colors, the blue grays, the grays-blues, and as a climax, those changing colors of the pigeon’s throat.

Catholicism. . . . His ideological digressions were mixed with frequent regrets. After signing the union’s manifestos, Charlot usually went to confess to the French fathers at the Franco-English College.”⁵

The artist also assisted Diego Rivera on his mural *The Creation* and always recognized Rivera’s intellectual weight in founding a group of artists who admired him, since he had interacted with Pablo Picasso in France. Very soon, Charlot would find his own space for a mural on the stairway of the west patio of the same building, where he painted it al fresco, naming it *The Massacre of the Templo Mayor* (1923).

Charlot scrupulously kept a diary in French, where he details his work as a muralist. He casually gives the reader a glimpse of parts of the process, the technique he used, and the interaction with key people. He notes using a “geometric design” and the “dynamic style of cubism,” that he “signed a contract with Lombardo,” “visited the mural by Epazoyucan,” and developed a “diagram of the daily process, fitting together the adjoining areas, like a gigantic puzzle.” It is particularly noteworthy that he inscribed the following on the mural: “This mural was made in Mexico and was the first since the colonial era.” José Vasconcelos approved the mural and considered it “quite strong.”⁶ Charlot definitely chose his words very well in this section of his own chronicle.

Charlot began writing about artistic topics very early and this can be added to his wide-reaching publishing and research efforts in different periodicals like *Forma* (1926-1928). He co-authored a series of articles with David Alfaro Siqueiros titled “El movimiento actual de la pintura en México” (The Current Movement of Painting in Mexico), published in *El Demócrata* in July 1923. Together, they signed the articles under the pseudonym Juan Hernández Araujo, a fact that was only revealed years ahead. Several years later, each from his own point of view took up the task of reflecting and polemicizing about the development of Mexican mural painting and its techniques.⁷

What was it he wrote about in these articles that he also actively participated in? As a historian, he used sources to write about his impressions and the events as they happened. Finally, he was close to all the muralists of his time until they had to leave due to Vasconcelos’s resignation from the Ministry of Education.

It is important to note that Charlot referred to these works as a *renaissance*, in which he wanted to emulate the paintings of the Italian Renaissance, but, above all, refer-

ring to a new phase of artistic renovation in the country after the Mexican Revolution.

In his chronicle, he presents the main characters: Rivera, Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, Gerardo Murillo “Dr Atl,” Ramón Alva de la Canal, Fermín Revueltas, and himself. His book is divided chronologically and underlines the “indigenous, colonial, and folk roots” of muralism. He also refers to certain precedents in the nineteenth century and takes the reader through the historical buildings and works in the National Preparatory School and the Ministry of Public Education, and the founding of the Workers, Technicians, Painters, and Sculptors Union, to finish up with that important visit to Guadalajara, where several of the artists were able to continue painting murals.

Siqueiros also wanted to talk about that history. In his memoirs, he details the different applications of fresco technique, in which the reader can follow a certain exchange of ideas with Charlot, attributing to him knowledge about Cenino Cenini’s treatise on painting, complemented by the “indigenous” contributions of artist Xavier Guerrero. Both Siqueiros and Charlot returned to the origins of the mural movement to situate their own role as artists, theoreticians, and historians. However, it is Charlot’s work that underlines the nostalgic. The French painter not only evoked the arrival of a new artist to post-revolutionary Mexico, but also justified the impact of European art and exposure to the works of Uccello, Poussin, and David, among others, in the Louvre. Charlot was able to adapt the aspects of his artistic training, such as cubism, and always saw history and classical geometric composition as the thread running through his thinking that he tried to extend to his own conception of a muralist. His stay in Mexico marked him for his whole life, and he was very aware that the events he wrote about would mark the history of art in our hemisphere, as one of the best articulated collective and individual strategies from the point of view of state patronage. Given the muralists’ hegemony, Charlot also wanted to *appropriate* for himself that fundamental legacy of Mexican art.

In conclusion, we can say that the history of Mexican muralism can be explained based on the historical events after the Mexican Revolution, President Álvaro Obregón took on the task of rebuilding the nation, and a central part of that effort was education. He therefore entrusted José Vasconcelos, previously the president of the National University, with the task of creating a federal institution ded-

His stay in Mexico marked him for his whole life, and he was very aware that the events he wrote about would mark the history of art in our hemisphere, as one of the best articulated collective and individual strategies from the point of view of state patronage.

icated to teaching literacy and educating Mexican society. Between 1921 and 1922, Vasconcelos invited painters Roberto Montenegro and Diego Rivera to paint in the University Hall of Free Discussions, located in the former San Pedro and San Pablo Church, and in the Simón Bolívar Amphitheater of the National Preparatory School. These murals were followed by others in the same building, painted by young artists given the opportunity to paint those walls for the first time.

Research about muralism continues and it has been possible to make its discourse more sophisticated thanks to the thematic and visual contents of the murals, the architectural surroundings, the commissions, the relationship between art and politics, and other factors, including new discoveries in the broad graphic and visual documentation advancing in the discipline of art history. No better commemoration could be held for this centennial of muralism than fostering critical approaches for encouraging the public to delve into it though the dissemination of this artistic movement, considered Mexico’s greatest contribution to universal art. 

Notes

- 1 Jean Charlot, *El renacimiento del muralismo mexicano, 1920-1925* (Mexico City: Domés, 1985), p. 9.
- 2 Charlot had Russian, Jewish, French, and Mexican ancestry. Jean Charlot. *A Retrospective* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Art Gallery, 1990), pp. 5-6.
- 3 Jean Charlot, *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 4 Jean Charlot, “Mexico of the Poor,” *An Artist on Art. Collected Essays of Jean Charlot*, vol. II *Mexican Art* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1972), pp. 99, 104. The translation is by the author of this article.
- 5 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Me llamaban el Coronelazo* (Mexico City: Gandesa, 1977), p. 211.
- 6 Jean Charlot, *El renacimiento...op. cit.*, pp. 216-218.
- 7 Ing. Juan Hernández Araujo [Jean Charlot y David Alfaro Siqueiros], “El movimiento actual de la pintura en México,” *El Demócrata* (Mexico City) (July 11, 19, 26, and 29 and August 2, 1923).