



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with Jean Charlot,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Jean Charlot on August 18, 1961. The interview was conducted at the Detroit Institute of Arts by Miriam L. Lesely and Alice W. Hollis for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Also present are Paul Hendrickson and Brother James Roberts.

## Interview

MIRIAM LESLEY: I would like to welcome Mr. Jean Charlot to the Archives of American Art. We are here in the Detroit Institute of Arts on the 17th of August, 1961 ( It was actually the 18th of August). Mr. Charlot has been working in Farmington at the church of Our Lady of Sorrows was built in 1959. With him are Brother James Roberts and Paul Hendrickson both of who have been assisting with his work in Farmington as well as Alice Hollis of the Archives and myself, Miriam Lesley. Mr. Charlot, is this your first visit to Detroit in this area-your first work here?

JEAN CHARLOT: No, I have been here before. I did the fresco for Lincoln Park of the Church of Christ the Good Shepard for Father Torzweski that was done some six, seven years ago, I think. So have been here before.

MIRIAM LESLEY: We were wondering how you took the subject for the mural that you have just completed.

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, you actually use the title of the church, and this was the church of Our Lady of Sorrows. Already the windows have given the story of the sorrows of Mary as they are known and I had to think of another one that would be a little more general and less anecdotal than things like the Flight into Egypt, for example. So I thought that by making the center theme Christ which is that liturgically we should do and on the apsidal wall on the back of the main Altar could tie Christ and Mary in some way. I chose the Ascension of Christ. It is of course one of the glorious mysteries but from the point of view of Mary it is the separation from her Son, that is, in His body, and must have been a sort of , now sorrow, at least a strain. It shows that particular Ascension of Christ combined with the relationship to Mary at the time. So, Christ ascends and there are angels around him that hold some of the instruments of the Passion, Veronica's veil and so on, as a remembrance of that other sorrow of Mary which was the Passion. And underneath some angels are bidding the Apostles go on their missions all over the world which is, of course, the text in the New Testament. And Mary remains the center of attention. Christ ascends in a white, very white robe that is tinted with yellow as sort of a glorious effect. Mary remains on earth in black, holding a chalice which is symbolic of sorrow usually, for example, the Garden of Olives, the chalice is mentioned as the symbol of sorrow and the Apostles James and Peter make ready to go on their missions. Then there are in the background, in the distance, two figures that symbolize the Old Testament. It's a prophet, I am not sure which one, but it is a prophet with a scroll which suggests the antiquity of the text of the Old Testament. And the New Testament is symbolized by John the Evangelist holding a book. And that is the subject matter. Also a great number of angels that people the ceiling, angels in flight.

MIRIAM LESLEY: We were wondering whether you went ahead with the first design or the first plan for the mural or if you perhaps submitted several suggestions to the parish priest.

JEAN CHARLOT: Yes, and no. That is, Monseigneur Beahan, who is the parish priest, knew my work, he is very conscientious man. He went and he studied whatever frescoes of mine there were in churches. I think he has seen, of course, Lincoln Park here, but he went to Atchison, the Benedictine Abbey, saw the fresco there. He went to the Centerville, Ohio, where I did the fresco for the Franciscan Friary. I think that at the beginning at least he may have had a few reservations about the art that I make which is, of course, original if you are not acquainted with it. But very soon he realized, I am sure, that the things were sincerely thought out and would be better than standardized art. So he just wrote me a little note and said that it was fine and that I would do the job. From then on we have had an easy relationship. He has told me what he thought of the first sketches. We have changed, in fact, from the idea of a Pieta of Christ dead and Mary mourning at the foot of the Cross to this idea which includes a more complex mood including the glorious mood. And then in the details he has also made suggestions that have proved, in fact, very useful about certain refinements in the expression of the picture.

MIRIAM LESLEY: One thing we were wondering about yesterday was some of the technical details that must have presented themselves with the way the light came in the clerestory windows and the general arrangement of the ceiling of the apse which in a way is hidden from the body of the church when you are further back. I was wondering just how you overcame some of those difficulties.

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, I think, difficulties are always fruitful if you face them frontwise. And I received a three-dimensional model of the church when I was in Hawaii in which the difficulties were indeed very obvious. One of them as you mention is that most of the ceiling is invisible from the church from the point of view of the

parishioners. That is, when they are in the pews. And the other one is that the apsidal wall itself is partly invisible. The top part of it anyhow. I think that is what started me on that idea of the Ascension. It wasn't a choice that just entirely pious or religious but I would say nearly mechanical. One of the phrases in the report of the Ascension, I think, is that one of the Apostles mentioned that Christ disappears in the heavens. There is a cloud and then he disappears in the heavens and I was quite sure that the top part of my fresco would disappear, perhaps not in the heavens. So I thought that was the only respectful way of presenting the figure of Christ disappearing was the theme of the Ascension. It really started on that difficulty that I had to hurdle, of part of the wall being invisible.

MIRIAM LESLEY: And then what effect did the lights in the clerestory windows up there have on the colors that you used. They seemed to be in greens and yellows.

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, the lights themselves are made of what is called church glass which is a translucent affair and they are very faint, actually much fainter than they appear to the eye. And I don't think it does very much to my picture.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Were the colors in the glass before you started your painting, or did you specify what they should be?

JEAN CHARLOT: No, the colors were there. It was built that way and if I had specified anything I wouldn't have specified that. But actually it isn't offensive in the least. In fact, while we were working up there it was very hot and I suppose that white glass would have been worse than colored glass so we were grateful for the semi-shade that the color afforded. As far as visual effect goes, I think, it doesn't influence the fresco colors.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Did you find that the pattern, the strong pattern, in brick at each side of the mural made any difference or detracted in any way?

JEAN CHARLOT: Again, it is one of those difficulties that usually result in something positive. Monseigneur Beahan is very fond of his brick work and the pattern is a functional pattern because he plans to put an organ behind those open bricks. So I decided to be nice to the bricks and to meet them at the bottom of the ceiling and wall with actual brick color so that the end of the picture is a little before we touch the wall. Then we have a suggestion of a border line, which as I said is brick color, and the whole thing melts in value with the bricks themselves. Sometimes I can be pretty strong and destroy an architecture. It is one way of making a mural, not a very valid one. But here I thought I should be gentle and work with the architecture as I found it. I think also that I like brick very much. I like natural textures. I like a sort of a lack of affection. I think that is why I like fresco painting because it is really line and sand, that is, materials that in themselves are not luxurious but that are rather humble and very sincere. The bricks did work with that philosophy of material that is true—that is natural. If there had been some polished marble, perhaps I would have done something very different.

MIRIAM LESLEY: It was very interesting the way the colors went from the greens and yellows of the clerestory lights down into the brick. That was one of the first things we noticed on looking at it. When you were speaking of the lime and mortar and all that went into the fresco work, we were wondering about the help that you may have had. Did you have students or apprentices or formal help of any sort. Just how was that done?

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, I think that Paul Hendrickson here could answer the question very well. He is the fellow who has done the plastering for many of my major jobs, and I made it, in fact, a condition of the work here. Because I knew that plastering of ceiling is very difficult. And he was nice enough to take time and come and help us on the job. He has done Centerville which was a rather difficult problem. Mostly it was a round wall, a hemicycle. When we work together we know that the wall will not fall down. Isn't that so, Paul?

PAUL HENDERICKSON: I think so.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Does he come by himself or does he bring someone else with him? There were several people out there yesterday and we were wondering just what part you all played in this.

PAUL HENDERICKSON: I came up by myself from Ohio.

MIRIAM LESLEY: And did you have someone here to help you with it. We noticed several young men out there yesterday and weren't sure whether they were actually part of the project or just cleaning up afterwards.

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, Brother James Roberts came specially to do the job with me. Of course, when he paints on his own he is a mature, seasoned painter. He does paint in his own style but he wanted to learn the technique of fresco among other things. So that he also came specially from San Francisco, I understand, to work with me. And I think that he knows more about fresco than he did at the beginning. Isn't that so, Brother?

BROTHER JAMES ROBERTS: I certainly will agree with you there.

MIRIAM LESLEY: I can't imagine a better teacher.

JEAN CHARLOT: Also I had my son Martin who came with me from Hawaii. He is high school age. He has already worked in fresco with me. And another son, John, came from Harvard to help me with the job at the end. He has also done work with me. It is rather pleasant to have groups of people that work in union with my intentions or, if they are not in union with my intentions, are obedient enough so that they do the things I ask them to do. And it is really team work. It is impossible to do a fresco 1300 hundred square feet all by myself with a little brush simply to preserve my personality. I think the thrill of fresco is working as a team. I always like to remember the cathedrals of the middle ages where one man would have been incapable of doing the whole thing and yet which stand as a unit, and we think of them as a unit of art. It is the same thing with those large fresco jobs.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Well, it all goes together in making the church. I mean you architecture, your brick layer, your stained glass man and so forth.

JEAN CHARLOT: That's right.

ALICE HOLLIS: Could we go back to this matter of the plaster? How would your plastering work differ, for instance, in preparing for this than it would in any plastering job?

PAUL HENDERICKSON: It is a whole lot different mixture than you use in commercial work plastering. It is designed specifically to have a sort of porous effect where the paint can soak right in through it. It is harder plaster than is used in commercial work. It has got a lot more sand in it. If you have more lime than sand, it will close the pores of the wall itself to where the paint itself can't soak through the wall.

ALICE HOLLIS: Then is that sized in some way before the paint work is started?

PAUL HENDERICKSON: It has a coat of plaster underneath it that is prepared for the wall itself.

ALICE HOLLIS: So that is would be sort of like a shell that is over the softer plaster or something of that sort?

PAUL HENDERICKSON: Well, the plaster isn't really softer, but is made for a specific job.

ALICE HOLLIS: Then what would be the next step after the plaster? Do you take over at that point?

JEAN CHARLOT: I have been working, of course, on the design long before we arrived here. The whole job took us six weeks or, as we divide it into daily pieces, I think we have 27 days tasks as fresco is concerned. But since last summer I have been working on all the problems as far as I could them from Hawaii, which is a far distance, and solved them as far as I knew. For example, I had a three-dimensional model of the church and I built up paper dolls the size of parishioners and put them in the different places where they would be in the traffic, we could say, of the church-kneeling at pews, kneeling at the Communion rail, taking the extreme side views so that the angels that they would see from there would be looking at them. And what you call the dead angle on the ceiling is, of course, seen from the Tabernacle and the Blessed Sacrament so that it should also be decorated. There was a suggestion that it could be left blank but I felt it wouldn't be the proper think in a church, which the House of God, not to do the same work for God that we would do for man. I would put it that way.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Is there much in the way of fresco work going on in the Hawaii Islands?

JEAN CHARLOT: Yes, there is quite a lot being done there. There has been a film that has been done by George Tahara who is a very good technician on fresco in Hawaii. It is mostly centered around two frescoes that I did. One for the University of Hawaii Administration Building, the other for the First National Bank in Waikiki. And both of them are quite large things and related to Hawaiian themes. Now there has been many other murals done by other artists there. Perhaps the technique of fresco comes a little bit from my being there and having trained some squads of people to fresco painting. But even before I was there were muralists of note like Juliette May Fraser for example.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Does the warm climate and the consistent summer out there make any difference?

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, the difference is that things sometimes dry a little quickly and you to be careful about cracks in your wall. But I don't believe that fresco is a very delicate affair. I think that if you nurse your mortar through the first days of drying out, it becomes very quickly tough. One of the toughest medium. And I think that there is a little bit of affectation when you read the books about fresco painting-about people saying that they cannot paint fresco in such and such place. I read for example that in Pittsburgh a fresco would disappear in two weeks. Well, I would to try-I am going there now-because of the soot in the atmosphere. I think the worst example of that sort of precious approach to fresco was Puvis de Chavannes, the French muralist. We are grateful to him because he is one of the few muralists that truly was born a muralist in the 19th century. But all through his life he was afraid of fresco painting and he imitated the effects of fresco in oil. The French

government in that sense was very enlightened and they pushed him to do fresco. They asked to do fresco, so had all sorts of excuses. He said I cannot do fresco unless we bring Italian masons here. They are the only fellows who know how to do fresco. So they said we will bring Italian masons. And then like all those other people, he said, the climate of France is not suitable to fresco. So instead of having true frescoes by Puvis we have imitation frescoes. And great as they are, they are still a fake of a sort.

MIRIAM LESLEY: They probably won't last as long as the true fresco method, will they?

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, we will speak of that in 1,000 years.

MIRIAM LESLEY: And how about some of your other work in Hawaii? Your graphic work and the work that you do with your students there?

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, of course, I am really a professor of history of art. This is what I do now. I have lectures courses. I have retired a little bit from studio work because I am not sure that I can give a keen criticism of abstract expressionism. Though I do like very much to have some of my students do abstract expressionism. There is a moment where the eye gets dull about it and I wouldn't know quite what to say. On the other hand, those young people, of course, consider me like, what I am, a much older man. But they also consider that my insistence on story telling in art is a certain sort of disaffection from purely subjective approach to art, is old fashioned. Of course, they prefer people who in their opinion are more progressive than myself. I speak purely from their point of view. I don't consider myself as an old fogey in the least, and I believe that story telling in art is nearly an obligation of great art. I think that anybody who has visited the museum realized that, anyhow, story telling is nothing against art. In my opinion they go together.

MIRIAM LESLEY: There again the 1,000 years perhaps will be the judge.

JEAN CHARLOT: No, I think ten or fifteen years is enough to see a reversal of the values. I may live that long.

MIRIAM LESLEY: But there is a great interest in the Islands in art history and in the practicing of art?

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, it is a very interesting art department because we have there, of course, many people who are from Asiatic backgrounds-mostly Japanese-but we have also Chinese there. And when we speak of the history of art we speak both of the Eastern art and Western art. We have courses in both and they are on the same foot really. And it is one of the best places I think, though I know many colleges and universities here, to learn about Chinese art and Japanese art. I have learned myself to consider Asiatic art as simply part of the human heritage. While in the work I did before on the mainland in universities, I still felt that Chinese art was far away. It was something beautiful, something picturesque, but I didn't see it in the same great tradition, we could say, of my favorites-men like, for example, Poussin in France. But I do now consider it as very much a part of my own make-up. Probably because since I have been in Hawaii I have befriended Chinese artists, for example, and had among my students Chinese and Japanese people.

MIRIAM LESLEY: I should think that would be a very great advantage for your students-to be able to look both ways, East and West.

JEAN CHARLOT: Yes, sometimes it makes them a little cross-eyed, but that is something that happens to some of them. They don't quite know if they are coming or going. But the very young people have a way of holding the brush, for example, which is so much more able than the same young Americans here of the same age. I hope that that doesn't fade out. There is a danger as they learn to be Americanized that they get a little shy about their own racial background and we are doing our best to avoid that. To make them proud, in fact, of their own racial background.

MIRIAM LESLEY: You have been there now, for, is it close to 17 years did you tell us the other day?

JEAN CHARLOT: Thirteen.

MIRIAM LESLEY: You had done teaching in this country hadn't you?

JEAN CHARLOT: Yes, I have been teaching in many parts of this country. I suppose my earlier teaching was in New York. I taught summer courses in Columbia and so on. Well, there are so many places. I suppose, my most glorious assignment as a teacher was a series of lectures at Yale on the subject of Mexican art. I like teaching. I never felt that it got in the way of my painting. I have managed to move forward.

MIRIAM LESLEY: You're very fortunate in that respect, I think, not to let one take place over the other when both can give you the satisfaction that they do.

JEAN CHARLOT: Yes, of course, one thinks of the pay check. But I do think then even if I was a millionaire, which I am not, I would go on teaching. I like very much to see the succeeding generations and it makes me feel a little

settled to see their successive conclusions.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Yes, and there is something about the contact, too, with young people who have so very much to learn and so much to get from you.

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, I don't know that, unhappily. But as for the last generation that we have been training, I would say, the great majority of the art that the students contact at the University, as in any other college or university, the great majority is abstract. They see mostly abstract expressionism, abstract impressionism. They themselves are taught to paint within those schools; and it is very amazing to see the younger men who have just arrived at the university contact, sometimes by accident, representational art. And it is for them an amazing discovery that art can represent something beside themselves, I would say. I was speaking the other day of my son Martin, who is a good example. He is high school age. He has been, of course, trained in the kind of artistic milieu in which we live naturally, being artists. But his discovery of American art was something wonderful for me. And, for example, his worship of Hopper is very good example of that amazement of the very young people when they find out that there is some other way of doing art than the fashionable way of today. I would like to live up to 90 or so just to be sure that I am right about what I am saying.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Well, you may very well.

JEAN CHARLOT: Not from those high scaffolds on which we have to paint these days.

MIRIAM LESLEY: I am sorry that your son wasn't able to be in here today because we would like to have had him listen to our Hopper tape.

JEAN CHARLOT: He may have another fortunate time.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Well, I hope so and I hope that it won't be too long before you come back.

JEAN CHARLOT: He may have another fortunate time.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Well, I hope so and I hop that it won't be too long before you come back.

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, I don't know. There are still churches being built and some of them need some sort of decoration. So probably all three of us, Brother, Paul, and myself will be back.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Yes, there is so much activity in building going on in Detroit today that there should be a lot more opportunity for you here.

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, I don't know. They think they love marble. I've seen those new building by the riverside and once you have polished marble it is the saddest thing because you can't put mortar on top of that thing. It would slide down and it's finished. Now I think marble is a luxurious covering but I think that art is a little more human.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Yes, the marble is cold and not as personal. Although, don't you feel that as long as there is church architecture that there will be room for the work that you do?

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, I don't know. I have been fighting since I was 18 years old. It was in this century, but long ago. I fought fore good liturgical art. There have been great progresses made. And certainly in architecture the freedom nowadays in the forms of churches is amazing compared to the old idea that Gothic was the best but that you could use perhaps Byzantine. That's all there was around 1910. so, there is progress. Only my hand is beginning to be a little wobbly and I may not be the one to carry the torch when the decoration of churches will be absolutely freed.

ALICE HOLLIS: You seem to have been quite a biblical scholar and liturgical scholar. Do you do much research in that way, particularly for these various things relating to the symbolism?

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, I don't know. Since I was a small boy I kind of mixed up a sort of scholarship- scholar approach I would say-to an artist's approach. I really have worshipped, visually anyhow, the old masters and I was always interested in the story telling in their work. For example, when you looked at reproductions of Giotto in the time when cubism, for example, was the last in art, people would speak of the form of Giotto and the significant form of those drapes and they were quite right. But I never like to drain out a picture of its purpose. Now Giotto was a fellow who worked for the Church and the was a pious man and he wanted to put certain feelings in his pictures that would make them devotional. I think it's no compliment to an old master to simply use him from the point of view of modern art and forget his own aims. I was speaking of cubism, well that is of course, of 1920's. But there are other masters who have been reassessed in our day in term s or surrealism, let us say, like Bosch or perhaps abstractionism like Turner, and I think it's not a compliment. They are more complex. They are not men that are good because they are close to the fashion of the day. There are men that

are good because of an extreme complexity and I don't think we have the right to separate the different elements that make their own complex person.

ALICE HOLLIS: We just touched lightly on this business of the architect and the artist working so well in the Gothic times. Do you think that that is getting to be more so now than it was say through the 20's in the church work. Do you think that this liturgical movement, for instance, has added anything to that?

JEAN CHARLOT: Oh, I don't know. I don't think that there is a progress in the arts. There are changes. I don't think there is a progress in human nature very much. I think we are not perfect but I wouldn't like to present the 20's as simply a springboard for the sixties. It was a time when at least a few liturgical artists were rather heroic about it because they were going against the grain much more than liturgical artists do now. And I think they were heroic also because all the liturgical work that they did that was really good was never commissioned and very rarely eventually put into a church. Nowadays with the relative success of what we could call modern liturgical art, I suppose some people will do it because there are commissions, and perhaps the heroic quality of the earlier work may be lost.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Have you done much work in nonliturgical buildings in recent years?

JEAN CHARLOT: Yes, I have. I have done quite a lot of work in universities, in schools and colleges. My last job was done at the University of Syracuse in New York, and we have already there things like the large Descent from the Cross from Rico Lebrun which is in the library and was saved I would say from destruction by Laurence Schmeckebler who is the head of the Department.

MIRIAM LESLEY: My old teacher.

JEAN CHARLOT: Lebrun was getting desperate about storing the thing and Schmeckebler really gave it a very correct setting in the Library. I have known him, of course, since about 1928 when he was working on his history of Mexican painting, one of the first published in English. He came to see me at the time and some of the data I gave him was incorporated in his book. Since then we have seen each other rather often. And he wanted to add to the Lebrun mural a sample of my own fresco murals. So when I was in New York he phoned me and said that if I accepted immediately there would be the commission of making a large mural-it was about 50 feet long. He had only four weeks, I think, before he left on his vacation. So I said, "I accept if I have the right to do just what I want and choose the subject matter that I want." So I went there. He said, "All right." I did a Mexican fiesta. For a long time I had wanted to do one of those village fiestas with girls dancing that I'll call malinches or malintzins in Indian with their little wooden swords and their rattles and so on. I have done many of these pictures of the subject but I wanted to do a mural of it. And I put it there on the wall of one of the dining rooms to the great astonishment of everybody concerned who asked me what relation there was between those little girls dancing and the University of Syracuse. Well, it was the dining room for the girls whose dormitory adjoined. So, I said that there were girls in the dining room and there were girls on the walls, and that was fine. Everybody like it-it has nice colors and is a pleasant thing to look at.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Do you get back to Mexico nowadays?

JEAN CHARLOT: The last time I was there was when I got that two year Guggenheim fellowship to finish writing on the history of Mexican murals. That was already a long time ago. It must have been at the end of the 40's and since then the work has been finished and is to be published very soon by Yale University Press.

MIRIAM LESLEY: That book of Schmeckebler I think did a lot toward making use aware of what was going on in Mexico. That, in addition to the work that Rivera was doing here and in New York in the 30's. Although I think Schmeckebler's book was about '39, '40?

JEAN CHARLOT: No, it was ten years before, around 1930. There is only one book that was published prior to that, and that was Anita Brenner's *Idols Behind Altars* which was an excellent introduction to the spirit on the renaissance in Mexico.

MIRIAM LESLEY: And then you did an earlier book, didn't you?

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, you have a little list of my books there. There is quite a number of them. I did certainly many articles that pinpointed certain facets of the movement and so on.

MIRIAM LESLEY: I think that probably was another case of people's not being aware of what was close to them-in the same sense that students feel they have to go back to Europe to study. They weren't, before the 30's, aware of what had been going on in Mexico over the centuries.

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, most probably but also the Mexican tradition and the American tradition are quite distinct.

MIRIAM LESLEY: They were so far apart that it was, though, rather strange that our appreciation of what was being done was so late in coming.

JEAN CHARLOT: I tried once to boil down to a very simple statement. I said that art in the United States is a question of buying and selling and art in Mexico is a question of making it. And it is very true. I have astonished. For example, I have been on the Advisory Board to a museum where it is always the question of buying and selling that comes in. I think there is no secret in saying that was the Museum of Modern Art in New York. And I remember presenting to them a project which was to keep the documentation of the murals that were being done at the time. That was in the 30's-Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros, and, so on, who were doing their large murals and there was so much being done could be saved-the cartoons on butcher paper- the architectural models with the first sketches. I gave a detailed project in which I suggested a mural department that would keep those different things plus photographs, of course, of the murals in place. There was not much reaction because of the Museum of Modern Art divided its departments into oil painting, water color, drawing, prints and photographs. And my own suggestion would have by-passed all those different departments. Furthermore you can't buy or sell murals. And really that counts very much against mural painting.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Well, of course, that we are trying to do here in the Archives is the same sort of thing. To save what went into the preparation for any sort of work of art, whether it is a mural or a portrait, or a landscape. And to try to get some idea of what was in the artist's mind as he was making the foundations for it. The same sort of thing that you have been telling us this morning about your preparations for the work at Our Lady of Sorrows.

JEAN CHARLOT: But, I think also that you are a little afraid of stepping on the toes of museum people and if you were offered the drawing that were really spectacular drawings that museums may want, you would hesitate in accepting them, I think.

MIRIAM LESLEY: No, we are more interested in the preliminary sketches and things for study purposes rather than anything would be of value as an exhibition piece in a museum.

JEAN CHARLOT: Actually, some of my mural cartoons done on brown paper have been accepted by Agnes Mongan at Harvard. They are very glad to have them before, because otherwise those things get destroyed so easily.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Yes, they have to be in a library with a dragon keeper to be sure that they do exist fifty or a hundred years from now.

JEAN CHARLOT: They are not the size that you can put on a wall. If you want to frame them, they are too expensive framed because they are too large. We mural painters are really very unhappy as far as preserving our art goes, with the exception of the actual mural, because only that remains.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Yes, and then too, they can't be shipped around for exhibition in other places. That is another disadvantage. But at the same time I think that a mural in a church, or whatever its setting, can in a way be appreciated and felt and experienced more than an easel painting. At least that has always been my experience with architecture and murals.

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, I love to work for nonartists. I think that the business of the artists is really to work for nonartists, and I am always a little doubtful of people who know all about art. First, they never know all about it, they just think they do. Secondly, they have sort of snap judgments. And in very mural that I have done if I could please, let us say, the janitor of the building where I did the mural, I knew that I had achieved my aim. I mean it very seriously. Nonartists are more able to see the impression that the artist would like to give. I don't believe in art for art really very much. That is, I don't see the point. It is a magnificent means but it should be a means to some end that has to do with that word that people nowadays use so much-communication.

MIRIAM LESLEY: That probably is one of the reasons for your success as a muralist, don't you think? Because in a work that is exposed on a wall to people's view, the majority of whom who are not artists, there you have to consider more the approach of the nonartist, whereas your easel painting is exhibited in a museum to which people come specifically to see that painting rather than being exposed to it whether they will or not.

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, it's a rather difficult thing to say but there are some people, for example, who like to be with children and to play with children. We could say that the nonartist for the artist, anyhow, has kept a quality of sincerity. And that naive quality of the eye that people who are trained, so called art lovers, and, even worse, collectors and museum people have lost. They have lost it long ago and cannot recapture it.

ALICE HOLLIS: We haven't touched on your illustration. I think it probably ties in your ideas about art, that you like to see a story and so on. How do the two work together. Did one come before the other?

JEAN CHARLOT: No. They came pretty much at the same time. I think my first illustrations were in Mexico, in the

20's, at the same time that I was doing my murals there. And they were done mostly because they were illustrations of Indian stories that I had heard told by my Indian friends and I wanted very much to bring out a visual equivalent of the words that I had been told. And from then on I have been labeled by publishers as the fellow brown people in it, they ask me to illustrate it. It doesn't matter where the brown people are. It can be perhaps Cuba, Peru, or Mexico sometimes. I'm the fellow who is in charge of the brown people. It is a good thing because I like to do it.

MIRIAM LESLEY: When you are given a book to illustrate, do you read it through several times to find just the places that you think will be best for the pictures or does the author sometimes feel there is some points he would like to be brought out in illustrations. Just how do you go about that?

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, it depends what the bulk of the text is. Sometimes I have been illustrating books that was very bulky and I forgot to read them. But in the case of stories that I prefer which are for children, age four to six, I read every word of the text because there is so little of it. Usually I receive two sheets type written in those short lines-that is the whole book-and a note from the publisher saying, "Do 32 full page drawings in full color." So, I have to mull over the texts to find out how I can make those drawings. I remember one little line that read-it was in the GOOD

NIGHT BOOK-"All the animals on all of the earth go to sleep." That was the only thing there was for text; and the publisher had added a little note to show all the animals and all the earth going to sleep in full color. I was a little mad at the author for that particular page.

ALICE HOLLIS: You have done several things for Paul Claudel. Is he a friend of yours?

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, of course, he is dead now but he was a very good friend of mind. I knew him when I went to Washington. He was French ambassador then. Of course, I had read his work. I was an enthusiastic Claudelian as we say of the people who are friends of Claudel. When I was in my teens, it was a great treat for me to meet him. And even though he was French ambassador and a great eminence there, he met very few artists in his political rounds. So inspite of the difference of age we really became close friends, and I illustrated quite a number of his works.

MIRIAM LESLEY: And he wrote introductions to several catalogs of your exhibition?

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, he wrote an introduction to the exhibition at the John Becker Galleries in the 30's.

ALICE HOLLIS: Do you still find time for easel painting?

JEAN CHARLOT: Yes, indeed, I do. Before I came here I just had a rather large one-man show of easel painting and mural cartoons but mostly easel pictures in Hawaii. I think oil paintings is a very nice thing for easel painting, and fresco is a very nice thing for mural. Two distinct things.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Tell me, do you do your easel paintings as the spirit moves you, do you wait for a commission, do you do it in demonstrating to your classes or what is largely the motivating factor behind your starting a new picture?

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, if I waited for commissions, I would wait a very long time. Though I have had a few commissions of portraits which were very interesting. And I wouldn't quite say that I do my easel pictures as the spirit moves me. I'm unusual in that sense that I think I prefer discipline to freedom. I remember how young painters come to my studio and see pictures that aren't finished and they say they are so happy to see that I am getting a little freer in my old age and so on. And I look at the picture and say, "Wait a minute, I see a few free forms in there that I have to modify till they disappear," so they gave me up in despair. I don't like freedom as such. At least I like a sort of limited freedom. I would say even in my inspiration I'm not wild and woolly, but the inspiration is a sort of ordered inspiration. I think in my easel pictures as in my mural painting there is a quota of architectural thought and that is the link between the two. In mural painting you receive an architecture, you have to cope with it. In easel painting you create your own architecture.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Was there anything else you would like to tell us while you are here? Because I think that with all of the different sorts of work you have done and in so many different surroundings that your career perhaps has been more varied than most artists. And I think it has shown up very well in what you have been saying.

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, I have never been bored, I would say.

ALICE HOLLIS: Could we go back just for the last couple of minutes to very early days, perhaps to your education, and how you go into art rather than something else.

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, my mother was a painter and she had a little studio in our summer house where she

painted. She was an easel painter, of course, and as I grew up she would make portraits of me. I was a model, an artist's model, before I became an artist. But I really didn't know better. She had the brushes and the paint there, and when I found which end of the brush to use I did use it.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Well, I must say that you are very generous in having come to speak with us today.

JEAN CHARLOT: You are welcome.

MIRIAM LESLEY: And I think that this recording will be on that will be used and quoted from, I hope, if we have your permission for that.

JEAN CHARLOT: Well, I think that some people from Farmington probably will come to hear the recording when they know that it is in existence.

ALICE HOLLIS: I think one of the articles in TIME said that you had the best of both worlds in being both the artist and the critic which you can confirm or deny.

JEAN CHARLOT: Yes, but I have a blind spot about my own work. I never criticize it. It is always the work of my fellow painters.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Will you come see us next time you are in Detroit?

JEAN CHARLOT: I will indeed and I hope to be able to send you a few things for the Archives.

MIRIAM LESLEY: Oh, that would be grand and if you have any sketches that are not of museum caliber...

JEAN CHARLOT: I may find some sketch books and so on that are mixed up with writings that it will be right for you.

ALICE HOLLIS: What is this commission you are going to do in Pittsburgh, did you say?

JEAN CHARLOT: No, I am just going to see my son there who is going to become a monk in the Order of the Oratory-to see him and to say good-bye to him.

END OF INTERVIEW

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