

Jean Charlot Talking on Edward Weston

Transcript of a taped interview

January 14, 1978¹

KN: Let's start at the beginning—how did you meet Edward Weston?

JC: Well, I'm part Mexican, that is, a French Parisian family. In fact, the Great Grandfather of mine came to Mexico in 1820. And my Grandfather on my mother's side was born in Mexico, married in Mexico, so, well, they're mixed up with Mexico.

And after the First World War, I was in Bonn at the end of the war. And then in the trips of occupation on the Rhine, my father died, and my mother wanted to go and visit—and stay in fact in Mexico. So we went there from France, and I was there at the end of the Revolution and just in time to take part in the mural movement.

The group of artists... I think actually by now, of course, when I look back at them, I think they were all young because the oldest were in their thirties. But I was 22, I think, when I got there.

And the smoothing up of the bloody revolution into a government was something that included giving large mural commissions. Not that they were highly paid. The masons, for example, who were cleaning up the walls, received just a few pesos a day. They were those very beautiful walls of official buildings, and also most of them were buildings of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The great walls and the great architecture, and we were asked to decorate them.

I think the idea of the Government, of José Vasconcelos, who was the Secretary of Education, was really to frighten the bourgeoisie, to frighten the people that were now the underdog after the Revolution—by then though they had been the over dog so long—by putting some sort of modern art we could see on those walls. Well, what turned out did frighten the people, who were conservative enough. But at the same time it happened that, nearly as an accident, we all were good painters. The people expected the walls to be whitewashed much after the violent revolution was over, but then they discovered that the paintings were good things, that they gave a good name to Mexico outside Mexico, which wanted at that time a good name very much.

1. Edited by John Charlot and Ellen Chapman with the assistance of Lewis Andrews. This text, labeled "Rough Draft," exists only in a poor photocopy of a missing original. The tape-recording itself is also missing. Some words cannot be read on the photocopy. Others were clearly misheard by the transcriber, and yet others are so unusual for Jean Charlot that they raise suspicions. All such textual problems will be footnoted here. The interviewer, "K. N.," is unidentified. Charlot's diary entry reads: "college fellow visite ['visits']...does tape recording on Edward in Mexico."

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So when Edward came, that was in 1923, he found there something of interest. That is, he was coming from Los Angeles—or, more or less Los Angeles—where there was some art, and the art was extremely, from the point of view of Mexican artists, rather decadent. The very first photographs of Edward are bathed in that atmosphere of decadence. I mean, I remember a portrait that was mostly geometric lines, and the man was represented by more or less his nose, I think. But those things are considered much more refined than if the whole face had been shown. So I think for himself it was a very nice thing to fall into a milieu of people who were artists, of course, or could be described as artists, but did not consider themselves artists and were more “of the people,” we could say, than certainly pertaining to literary salons or groups, or museums, and so on. I think it helped him to look at things more straightforward.

He knew Stieglitz. You mentioned Stieglitz. He knew Stieglitz, and he admired him, and considered him his master, though I think there had been very little contact between them. But he respected him, and it sparked him into doing photographs. Stieglitz himself was part of that group of people who believed that art should look like art, not nature. I remember one of his best things at the time was a transparency of the leg of a woman, and in the leg of the woman there was a landscape or rather something like that.

So it is in Mexico that Edward began to look at the objects, I would say, at the fruits at the table—or you probably know his picture just of a toilet seat—straightforward, without trying to embellish them and make art of them because the painters helped him to realize that the art was there. There was no need to, well, add parsley to the meal, so to speak, like they do in restaurants. From that point of view, we had an influence on him.

We had no relation whatsoever with the United States point of the art. Our relation was through, in fact, armed clashes. It is at the border of the United States that Villa had started the Revolution with an invasion, an invasion of the United States, and General Pershing was still running around looking for him in Mexico with the permission of the government, who didn't give a damn, of course.

So it was a pleasure to see an American who was not either military or commercial. And certainly Edward was none of those things. There was there a contact between the two peoples, and the very fact that each one learned from the other gave a sort of a friendship to the whole thing.

The most obvious influence that Edward had on, let's say, Orozco and Rivera both, was to cleanse them of what was still in them of what we could call the fine arts. If you look at the paintings of Rivera, if you look at the paintings of Orozco, before and after knowing Edward, you'll find out that they are much more straightforward than they were before. For example, the self-portraits that both Rivera and Orozco made of themselves

from then on, are copies, elaborated and beautiful because they were great artists, but copied from the portraits that Edward made of them in photographs.²

There was a nice give-and-take between Weston and the group of the muralists, and that happened around 1923. At his first show in Mexico City, he did sell a few pictures, but he also gave quite a lot of them to the artists, who gave him in exchange, of course, some of their drawings, some of their art that was portable, because what we did at the time was fresco and was not, of course, movable. It was a happy coincidence that he met us and we met him. OK?

KN: You mentioned Diego Rivera ...

JC: Yes.

KN: And Weston says quite a bit about you three in his daybooks.³ He held you in very high esteem. I got the impression of almost a higher esteem than Rivera.

JC: Well he could not quite swallow the idea of a mural painting on enormous surfaces. He could not swallow the idea—that is Edward Weston—of the social content, which was at times very loud, of the muralists, of Rivera and Orozco, and so on. And so, in spite of himself, he had restrictions on what for us seemed to be the best possible art. That is, he enjoyed popular art a little bit like sophisticated people do: for the innocence he found in it and naivety. And I think we can say in that sense that we Mexicans—because I'm part Mexican—look with great respect, in fact with sort of awe, at popular art because it was the purest expression of what people like nowadays to call roots, the roots before the Spaniards came to Mexico. And of course I've been an archeologist myself and have done a lot of archeological work in Yucatán—that was the Mayan civilization—and in Mexico City on the plateau—that was the Aztec civilization. And in both fields, I know more, I was more identified with the people than many of the Mexicans.

So there was there still a difference, and there should have been a difference between his approach and our approach. The things that I even nowadays consider most admirable in Rivera's work—which is that dedication to what some people would call non-art—was something that rubbed Edward the wrong way. On the other hand, the photographs he did of Rivera are a great analysis of the man in the middle of that

2. Original: photograph.

3. He refers to Rivera, Charlot, and Orozco.

enormous task that he had given to himself, and Edward could see that point of view but he could not adapt.

I was a Frenchman in a way. I had the classical knowledge that I had acquired from museums like the Louvre or the great classical painters like Poussin, for example, the great classical authors. I mean I knew so many things that it was easier for Edward to admire, to know, and to feel in my work, than the more difficult sources on which both Rivera and Orozco applied their own aesthetic. So when he speaks of me as being more an artist than Rivera, he meant it naturally as a compliment and I took it as a slight “slight.”

That answers that question.

KN: You mentioned that he had influenced you and the others that he worked with. Edward had influenced your work and...

JC: Well, it's the same thing, yes? As part of the group, I admired, not the things that he brought from Los Angeles, because there are some things there that certainly for us at the time appeared purely decadent. If you know the earliest things of Edward—Introduction to an Early Spring, and such things—they would have been beautiful in Los Angeles. They were too much, too obviously fine arts for us. We couldn't swallow that just as he couldn't swallow the roughness that was going on in our sort of art. But at the moment he progressed⁴ by doing some straightforward representations. For example, that series of bell peppers, which usually he is represented as having done in the United States after his stay in Mexico, those things were done in Mexico itself, the first series. I think that the toilet seat—which I thought was a masterpiece, because it didn't contain that quality of the drawing room that some of his art contained—was, of course, done in Mexico. We admired him because we knew he was a great artist! And that is, incidentally, before he was recognized as such in the United States.

KN: You mentioned the pepper series and the toilet seat. I was going to ask you about the peppers and also about the shell series that he did. He had a lot of comment from a lot of people on the shell series. Diego Rivera had something almost visceral to say, that they impressed him...

JC: Well, I'd say that it's very difficult to say. You see for the Mexican of the time, that sort of attitude of alluding to sex, which is obvious in the shells—I think, that was what

4. Original: confessed.

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Americans admired in them—was a little annoying, I mean, because why allude when you can have the stuff? Why, why have the image when you can have the thing itself. The revolution was a little bit like the French Revolution, you see, where people would cut heads, and that was part of the thing. There's a little story, for example, of Pancho Villa, who came into a town. He had just fought a battle, just won the battle, and he was there with his Dorados. The Dorados were those big strong guys who were all dressed in leather with those large hats, all that stuff. And they were received rather well by the people in the town. Not the men because the men had been killed, most of them. But the women received them, gave them dinner and so on, and then at the end of the evening one of them said "But Mr. Villa, when do you rape? When do you rape?" Now that was the Mexican thing. I mean it was either amusing or tragic or factual, but it wasn't anything to allude to. For example a Mexican of the time would not have known what was meant by sex appeal, because there was no time to appeal. So that thing of Edward has been more appreciated in the States than it has been in Mexico.

That he strived, especially he strived through folk art, with the roots of Mexico, is something that was important for us. He had a commission from the Government, which was partly done by himself, partly done by Tina Modotti, and they made over two hundred photographs, sometimes in very difficult conditions, of true folk art. I was with him, for example, when he did some photographs of what we called *pintura de pulquería* on the wine shops, you know, because those were murals and we were muralists. And there was a group of people, you could call them. They certainly were not rich people, but perhaps small bourgeoisie; not exactly the people themselves but, you know, dressed up, perhaps small lawyers or so, different people like that who gathered around us. And when they saw that Edward was taking those photographs of those walls—it just happened that there was a gentleman who perhaps had been drinking a little too much who was seated there and asleep—they thought that we were taking a photograph of a drunk to show it in the United States and give a bad image to Mexico. And we were nearly lynched! It was pretty much touch and go. It was a good thing that Tina Modotti, who was a very beautiful girl, took out of her bag an official document by which the Secretary of Education had ordered us to take those photographs. Those people were absolutely confused, I think! They didn't know what was happening. They had to let us go, of course.

KN: What was it like to sit for Edward? What was he like?

JC: You never sat for Edward. He just was around you and you ended⁵ by forgetting he was there, and he just came out. Both Zohmah⁶ and I have been photographed, photographed many times by him, and he never asked us to move, to change, to do anything. He just watched.

But he had his life. He had also the series of commercial photographs, and those were commercial photographs, and incidentally those are carefully retouched to make them look even more commercial. I mean you have to make a difference with the different branches of his art, but with friends, of course, it was his own art and nothing else.

So, I never “posed” for him in my life, and Zohmah never posed in her life for him. He just was around, and that’s all there was.

KN: Was he very vital or intense behind the camera? Zohmah had said that he was very, almost, obsessed with the camera, the image, the process, what he was doing.

JC: I think there was a moment of creation. That was obvious, that he didn’t disguise it, but he... I remember him doing things even physical that seemed impossible, like jumping on the table, jumping here, jumping there, to get what he wanted. In a painter it’s in slow motion. At first, he’s seated in front of his easel and doesn’t go through those contraptions? But there was really a vital moment in the things that he took, and he couldn’t really disguise that moment. It was a summit of emotion in him. OK?

KN: Yes, definitely. Thank you very much!

JC: Well, that’s fine. You are quite welcome.

5. Original: entered.

6. Zohmah Day Charlot, Jean Charlot’s wife.

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