

The Monthly Letter of The Limited Editions Club

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DE LA LITHOGRAPHIE

He was born in Paris in 1898. He was only sixteen, therefore, when the first part of the World War began and he was called upon to defend his native city. He served in the defense of his native city; and then in the defense of his native land by fighting with desert troops in North Africa. So it was logical that, when the second part of the World War began, he should enlist and await the call to serve with the French forces in North Africa as an experienced officer in command of desert troops. But then France fell, and he was still in New York. The Nazis marched into Paris. Jean Charlot was able to finish his lithographs for *Carmen*.

Between the year 1898, when Jean Charlot was born in Paris, and the year 1940, when Jean Charlot finished his lithographs for *Carmen*, he lived an exciting, eventful, curious life: so curious that, although he is considered one of the world's great painters, he is not grouped by the critics with Frenchmen like Dufy and Derain and Matisse, he is always grouped by the critics with Mexicans like Rivera and Orozco and Covarrubias! Jean Charlot, that Frenchman, is referred to by the world as Jean Charlot, that Mexican.

Yet he was already twenty-two when he went to Mexico. He was already an artist, and able to join in the art movement of the People's Revolution. He was prepared to make paintings on walls, that manifestation of the desire of the Mexican people for art in their lives which caused a group of Mexican artists to become famous because of the mural paintings and the fresco paintings with which they adorned Mexico's public buildings in the third decade of this century.

Jean Charlot's murals, on the walls of the Uni-

versity of Mexico and on the walls of the building of the Ministry of Education in Mexico City, were done in true fresco, the color applied (in sheer panic) while the plaster is still wet. As a result, he found himself violently interested in ancient Mexico, in the lives and habits of the Toltecs and the Aztecs. For four years beginning in 1926, he joined in the archaeological expeditions which conducted excavations in Yucatan the results of which thrilled the world of those people seriously interested in re-discovering the ancient arts. Out of his activities, he created two books: *The Temple of the Warriors*, which he wrote and published in 1929; *An Introduction to the Ruins of Cobamacanxoc*, which he wrote and published in 1930.

Then he journeyed to New York, and has been a New Yorker since 1930. Like all true New Yorkers, however, he has spent little time there. Although he taught at the Art Students' League in New York in 1931 and again in 1937, he also lectured on art, to those amazing artists of the Disney studios in Hollywood, in 1932 and 1938.

While he was in Hollywood, he made some lithographs. This was a new endeavor for him. His first world fame had come to him because of the murals he had made in Mexico. His second world fame came to him because of the oil paintings he turned out which were being hung in some of the country's leading museums and galleries. He could not have hoped that so many people who find pleasure in fine books, so many people who do not necessarily care about frescos or oil paintings, would rush to hail him as a minor messiah in the world of the graphic arts.

From Hollywood he issued a book which was called, with painful simplicity, *Picture Book*. Merle Armitage designed it. John Becker, the New York art dealer, published it. The pictures

are studies that Charlot made, of Mexican infants, Mexican women, Mexican places. Each picture is an original lithograph, each printed in many brilliant colors, and each extraordinary for that reason.

When Alois Senefelder invented the process of lithography, in Munich in 1798, he invented a process by which an artist could draw a picture upon an especially prepared stone surface and then, by covering the surface, first with grease and then with ink, make prints directly from the surface. He could not have known that the twentieth century would witness the conversion of the process of lithography into a method by which a photographic reproduction of an artist's drawing could be printed in endless quantities.

Now, however, in this overly-practical twentieth century, we in America usually mean a printing process called *offset lithography* when we blithely refer to *lithography*. An artist who makes drawings in color, as illustrations for a book, often proclaims to the world the fact that his illustrations are reproduced by lithography. Actually, however, his drawings are reproduced by the "offset" process; a camera has photographed his drawing, other men have etched the photographs onto especially prepared plates, other men have pulled the prints: with the result that the reproduction of the artist's work, pretty though it may be, is no longer the artist's work, but the work of the artist and several dozen artisans. Lithography, in the pure meaning of the word, has gone out of fashion. And this is unfortunate, for there is no greater satisfaction (to which one can refer in print!) than one can find in a print of an artist's work which is a faithful *production*, and not a faithful *reproduction*, and which therefore is made by the artist himself.

When Jean Charlot issued his *Picture Book* from Hollywood, therefore, he was hailed by men of the graphic arts as a modern messiah. For he had drawn each of the colors separately on the stone, and had himself arranged the printing of each color onto the sheets of paper. His brilliant pictures proved to be *lithographs*, self-made lithographs, auto-lithographs, full of the special flavor

and color which only the honest lithograph can be full of. No other artist in modern America had attempted the feat, of printing lithographs in color with which to fill a book. One artist was already blazing the trail in England, a round young man named Barnett Freedman, whose lithographs have appeared in this Club's edition of *Lavengro* and in this Club's edition of *War and Peace*: both produced for us in Great Britain.

So it was natural that we should consider this a duty we owed our members, to persuade Jean Charlot to illustrate a book for *us*. We began the persuasion in the year 1937, and Mr. Charlot succumbed to our persuasion in the year 1938; now, in the year 1941 and after three years of blood and sweat and tears, we are distributing to our members a book illustrated with lithographs in color made by Jean Charlot.

The book is *Carmen*, the novel by Prosper Mérimée. The suggestion, that he should illustrate this book, came from Charlot himself, after we had discussed nearly four thousand, or what *seemed* nearly four thousand, other titles. We leaped upon the suggestion, it seemed to us high time that this Club should create for its members a fine edition of Mérimée's world-famous story.

Those who think of the opera when they think of *Carmen* will be delighted with a fresh reading of Mérimée's novel. For the opera is a bastard musical form, the librettists who create the words of our operas are seldom inspired, and so Bizet's opera can scarcely be said to convey the power and the charm of Mérimée's novel to its listeners.

Mérimée put both power and charm into the writing of the novel. It is full of rich Southern skies, of inscrutable and beautiful women, of the hurly-burly of street life, of the smell of oranges and the click of swords, of fierce smouldering plot and counter-plot in an amorous, revengeful Spain.

Mérimée had been born in Paris also, in 1803, the son of a painter. His mother was English. He was educated for the bar, but turned away from the law to devote himself to literature. He evaded responsibility for his literature at first. His first book was a volume of tragedies, and he attributed them to the authorship of a Spanish lady whom he said he had met at Gibraltar! A year later, he published another volume; and he claimed that this was a translation from the Illyrian! The Russian poet Pushkin and many other Slavs were completely taken in by Mérimée's hoax, and his "translation from the Illyrian" had a great vogue.

But we must remember that the nineteenth century was the era of literary hoaxes, perpetrated by men like Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Richard Burton.

When Mérimée issued *Carmen*, therefore, it was only natural that he should begin the story with a minor hoax, a dig in the ribs of the geographers-of-antiquity, and the archaeologists, of his time. Even before he gets down to his story, Mérimée attempts to establish himself in the eye of the reader as a Hellenist, an archaeologist, a geographer, a Latinist: one to whom truth is the highest of virtues. The result is that, when he does get down to the telling of his story, his people leap to life out of the pages of the book; their actions become convincing because the author has already convinced us of the fact that he tells only the truth and that the people of his story must be flesh and blood.

They are flesh and blood even to the real-life descendants of his fictional characters. Konrad Bercovici tells the story of a day when he sat talking with a family of gypsies in Spain. The eldest, a blind and famous guitarist, asked about the gypsies in other parts of the world. So Bercovici read four gypsy stories aloud. When he read from Borrow, he was greeted with scornful laughter. When he read from Gorky, he met with shocked surprise. When he read from Cervantes, he was stopped half-through with the assurance that gypsies are not like that. But then he read from *Carmen*, and they were all silent to the end; they wondered that a foreigner could have known them like that.

This is why Prosper Mérimée's *Carmen* is one of the world's great stories. He knew less about the gypsies than George Borrow did; but he breathed fire into his characters and gave them passions. Their passions are gypsy, they are human, and their passionate humanity it is which has made the love of Carmen and Don José known throughout the households of the world.

An illustrator of anybody's yarn is able to put fire and passion into his illustrations chiefly through the medium of color. Because Jean Charlot's drawings in illustration of *Carmen* are lithographs, he has been able to make use of brilliant

inks which would not survive any ordinary and reproductive process. He has illustrated *Carmen* with thirty-seven lithographs. These lithographs strike the eye with the fierce reds and the vivid blues and the passionate purples which the illustrator has used.

Each of the thirty-seven illustrations is in color, some in five colors, some in six, some in seven and several in eight. Each color has required a separate plate, a separate printing. Upon the process of lithography in color which Charlot has used in illustrating *Carmen*, he has obtained a patent, which was registered in Washington in 1937. This patent he now shares with a young man named Albert Carman, whose name was once Carmen but who allowed himself to be kidded out of it, a young man who has set up a small personal lithographic establishment in New York. To make the illustrations, Charlot made over two hundred plates and Carman put the sheets through the presses more than two hundred times in order to do his job properly.

Because each color of each illustration was drawn separately, it was necessary for the artist to create the combinations of colors. Having created a first plate from which to print the black part of a drawing, he then had to create a second plate from which to print the red part of the drawing on top of the black, and a third plate from which to print the yellow part of the drawing on top of the red and black, and so on; and, since each color changes at those places where the ink is laid on top of the previous colors, the artist must be careful that the resulting combinations are combinations which he wanted, or is willing to accept! You can perceive how tedious, how painstaking, is the job of illustrating a book with original lithographs in color. You can perceive the reason for the fact that the process has gone out of fashion. You can perceive the demand which SHOULD arise, on the part of those people interested in beautiful books who are not members of this Club, for the possession of copies of this edition of *Carmen* which is this month to be distributed to those people whom we consider the lucky members of this Club.

The edition is a large square quarto, size 8½ x 11 inches, and containing 160 pages. The printing of the letterpress has been done by the Aldus Printers in New York: an admired and alert printery which produced our edition of *Faust* eight years ago, was then proudly associated with the

famous Bartlett-Orr Press in New York until that famous press went out of existence, and has since begun to produce beautiful printing in its own right again.

The type selected is a linotype face called Bodoni. It is used in the large 18-point size, so that its rich black color may bravely stand up to the rich coloring of the Charlot lithographs; and the lines of type are widely separated with leads, so that the typographic plan may be as modern in flavor as Charlot's drawings are modern in flavor.

It is seldom indeed that the type called Bodoni is used in the setting of one of our books, and this is chiefly because the modern types called Bodoni have little beauty. A type called Bodoni, created for use upon the monotype machine, was used in the setting of our edition of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, which was printed for us in Paris in 1930, and also was used in the setting of our edition of *The Pickwick Papers*, which was printed for us at Oxford in 1933. In the first instance, we can only suppose that the French printer didn't know better; in the second instance, we know that the English printer wanted to use a type suggestive of the period in which the book was written.

Yet Giambattista Bodoni created some of the world's most beautiful books. He lived between the years 1740 and 1813. He was the son of the Vatican's printer, and worked for a time at the Vatican's press. Then he went to Parma where he worked under the patronage of the Duke, and became the Royal Printer. He produced stately quartos and magnificent folios, with impressive title pages and luxurious margins around the pages of type. His books were frankly made to be admired by the affluent, and he received high honors from many sovereigns, including Napoleon when the Little Corporal was affluent. He was a leader in originating the modern style of types. In drawing the letter-shapes of the types he used, he emphasized the contrast between the light and heavy lines of the drawings and made long and heavy serifs to adorn the letters; it is this kind of emphasis which creates the "modern" kind of type, as different from the "old style" types, drawn by Caslon and the older printers.

Bodoni's books are known to us as masterpieces of typography. But the copies of his types which are made available to us for use upon the typesetting machines have missed most of the charm of his letter drawings, and a book set in a modern Bodoni type can be considered handsome only if the block of type printed on the white page is surrounded with luxurious margins in the true and intended Bodoni fashion.

The fact that such luxury surrounds the Bodoni type which the Aldus Printers have used in setting this edition of *Carmen*, is brought home to the eye by the excellence of the paper upon which the type is printed. It is a very white paper, the whiteness of the paper tending to enhance the brilliance of the black type and of the colors in the lithographs; it has a surface which is pleasantly rough, an agreeable "tooth" when taken in the fingers. It was made for us by the Worthy Paper Company, and agreeably watermarked with the title of the book.

The sheets are folded and gathered and bound into boards, and the boards are covered with a material which makes this binding unique in American publishing history. Its quality of uniqueness does not attach to the material covering the spine of the book, for that material is buckram stamped with the title. But the sides are covered with a hand-blocked gypsy silk!

The ingenuity which went into the preparation of this silk resides in the brain of a young man named Adrian Joseph Weil, who is associated with an enterprising New York silk merchant yclept Jerry Rossman. We asked him only whether it were possible to obtain, for the binding of this book, just such a brilliantly colored silk as a gypsy queen might coil about her raven tresses. He prepared for us a fine heavy quality of pure silk, of which there is not much left in the world today; and he had printed on this silk, from wood-blocks and by hand, a brilliant pattern of bright and vivid and fierce colors. If you know a gypsy queen with raven tresses, you will probably remove this hand-blocked silk from the covers of your copy of this book, and coil it about her tresses with your own fingers. Not knowing a gypsy queen with raven tresses you may be happy to rest your eyes upon this brilliant and unusual binding material, and feel some contentment in the fact that the material encloses a book beautifully printed and astonishingly illustrated with original lithographs in equally brilliant colors.