

The Place of Heavenly Song

The Evolution of a Mural; Zohmah Charlot Describes--Step by Step--Her Husband's Work

Two years ago Mr. and Mrs. Jean Charlot of Honolulu were in Fiji where the noted artist was executing a mural for a Catholic church. Here Mrs. Charlot tells the step by step story of an inspiring experience.

By Zohmah Charlot

JEAN had been invited to go to Fiji by Monsignor Franz Wasner, famed chaplain of the Trapp Family Singers. Monsignor must have thought of music and art as first steps in his mission work, for Jean heard from him in the very beginning, asking that someday he should share in the task.

Jean accepted. Murals gets painted in so many far places and I usually miss seeing Jean at work, but from typing my husband's reply until the

completion of the requested picture I can give an eye-witness account of the Fiji adventure.

We found the mission on a hill high above the King's Road, 80 miles from Suva by winding, dusty, scenic travel before reaching Naiserelegi and again the sea.

On our first evening Jean was greeted with the presentation of a *tabua*, a whale's tooth and highest Fijian ceremonial symbol. Representatives of the village were expected, so we were waiting with suspense on the porch of the rectory. Their approach was first made visible by the lantern light shining on the bare legs of the *sulu* clad men. When they had seated themselves on the floor facing us I could acquaint myself with indi-

viduals as well as get a first impression of the Melanesian race.

A chant and a responding chant, then a clapping of hands, and we were caught up in a drama of such dignity and artistry that we could not fail to understand the importance of the ceremony in Fijian life. The village chief, as formal spokesman for Jean, made sure all ritual was properly done.

Jean was happy with his chiefly whale's tooth, but a few generations ago many here were cannibals, so all the ingratiating smiles made him feel he might be tasty.

Next the *yaqona* roots are presented by a gentleman who leaps suddenly forward in a fine array of grass and pandanus pleated and shredded into a handsome skirt, and a neck *lei* of wood shavings dyed red. In the old days this root would have been chewed and spat, but this night it was put aside while a powder and water got stirred up by hand in a carved wooden bowl—we now have instant *kava*.

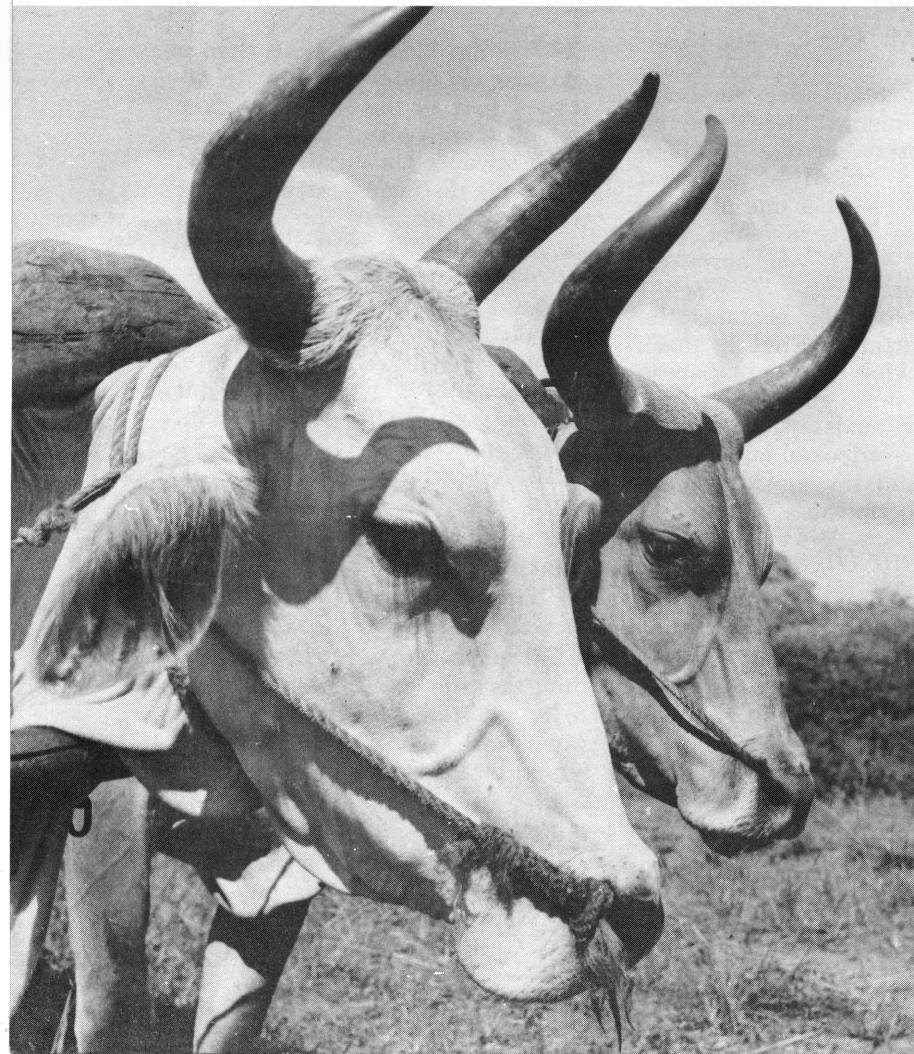
By Fiji custom I was served last, but with Fijian politeness that third round was woman-first according to strange American custom. Remembering to clap my hands, I take my turn drinking from the coconut shell, leaning my head back to make sure to get every drop, then returning the cup with a casual toss I had watched the other drinkers use.

The villagers then depart but on through the night one could hear the loud beating of drums, the pounding of scooped-out tree trunks, called *lalis*. However this savage sleep-rending noise wasn't in honor of any fresco painters, but called all to a midnight mass and adoration until 8 a.m. This was the mission's contribution to the opening day of the Ecumenical Council!

Sunday morning, our first morning! The church dedicated to St. Francis Xavier was sturdily

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Models for Fiji fresco.

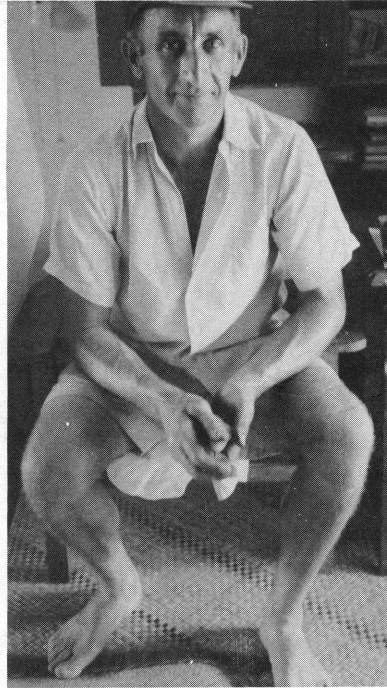




Zohmah Charlot



Msgr. Franz Wasner



Franz Glinserer



Jean Charlot

built of stone and cement by French missionaries some 50 years ago. It has a pseudo-Gothic appearance except for the metal roof which is strongly lashed to open timber beams on account of hurricanes. Behind the altar is the wall to paint on.

The space is a triptich shape, about 30 feet wide by 10 feet high. Franz Glinserer, a lay missionary from Austria, has walled in three of the five windows and put on a rough scratch coat of mortar. As Monsignor said, "Nothing to interfere with things to come."

The church floor is carpeted with hand woven *lauhala*. The people sit or kneel on the floor, males left, females right, school children in front, older people and babies rear, nuns and teachers have a couple of benches right wing, and from a few chairs opposite we chose a place that was then our place for the rest of the time we were at the mission.

I don't try to imagine what Jean will paint as I look up at the wall for he always surprises me, and mass was beginning.

What a burst of song! Monsignor meets his people with appreciation of traditions, although what can still be heard of their own music is strong stuff to use for the glory of God. He listens to sounds and souls with sensitivity, and teaches "The Sound of Music". Joyfully prophetic is the meaning of Naiserelagi, "The Place of Heavenly Song".

It is delightfully distracting to hear the children chant perfect

Latin between yawns. Their bright black eyes shine in the candlelight. The wide doors of the church open to palm tree shadows and sunlight on the bay of Viti Levu. The song joins other sounds, of the wind, and at times of the pouring tropical rain.

Even though sleepy from the night with the drums, Jean started right in sketching breadfruit from a vantage point on a slope of the hill. He was quickly surrounded by eager, curious boys and girls and Monsignor explained to them that art is a manual prayer, and Jean had no qualms to work for the church on Sunday.

The breadfruit is to be a most important part of the fresco. The Fijian word for breadfruit "*Utu*" is symbolically the same word used for "heart". Jean will paint a Black Christ for black Fijians, and the sacred, exposed, burning heart is to be emphasized. A background of heavy green breadfruit leaves and fruit will completely surround Christ, to express a close relation to nature. As Monsignor said, "Breadfruit trees would walk into house and church if we'd let them."

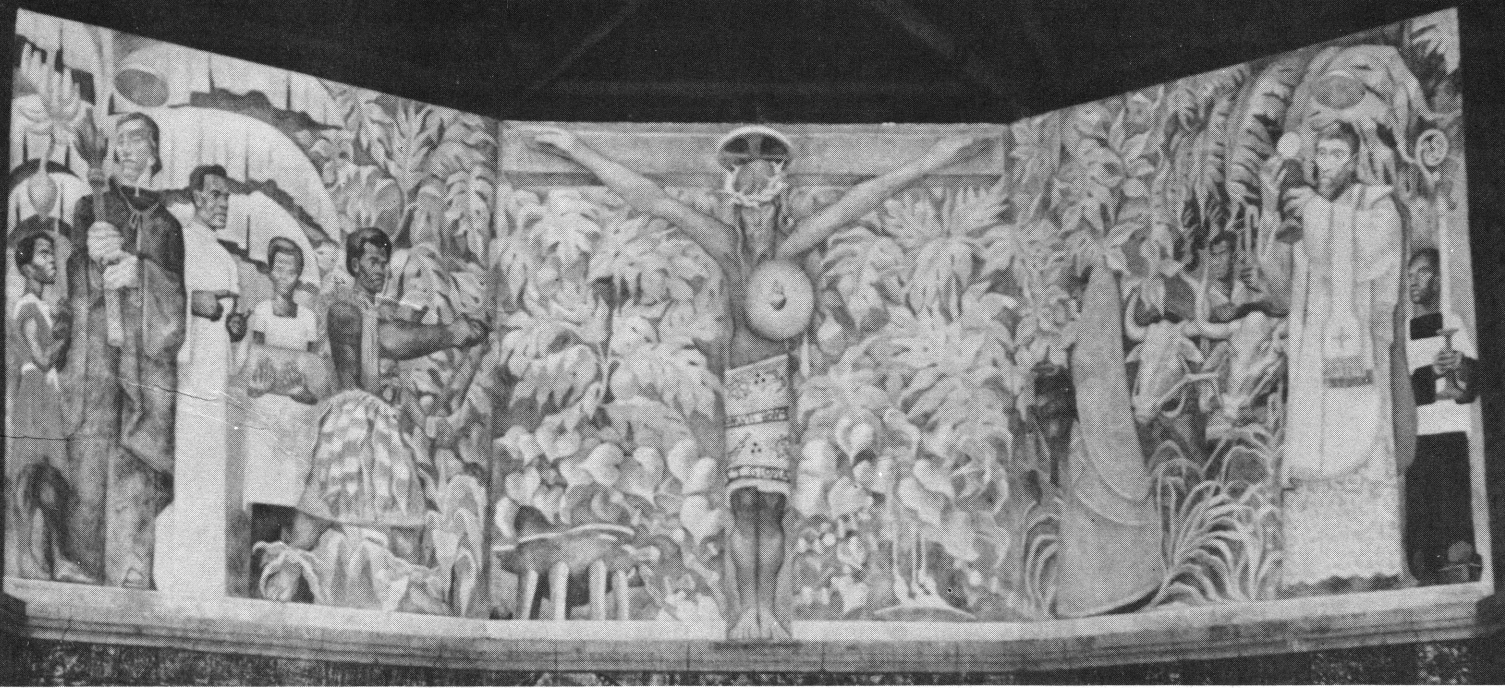
Next day, on the papered central panel, Jean drew the Corpus, Christ's arms gloriously outstretched to reach the upper corners, the feet on the ledge that juts over the altar. The loin cloth is of *masi*, the design taken from the *tapa* flapping on the wall of the rectory porch. With Fijian type lettering Jean inscribes "Omnis Honor et Gloria". The making of *tapa* is still a live art in Fiji.

Getting acquainted, Jean learns pencil in hand. He draws sennet, shells, pots, and the people who bring them. For the *tanoa* at the left of the feet of Christ, Jean draws the turtle-shaped bowl that is hung up with the horse saddles when not in use. The brass bowl to the right is from a model brought by a young Indian man named Peter who has a sugar cane field nearby. He borrowed it from his mother who is a pagan. We burn in it a piece of camphor for Jean to take notes on the blue-white flame. In the painting it also burns brightly, but is dimmed by the light from the Sacred Heart. *Yaqona* leaves and branches fill the background of this lower portion.

Franz Glinserer has charge of the farm, also the carpentry work, caring for the water supply, the maintenance of the generator that gives electricity three hours an evening. Now he must find time to be Jean's mason on the fresco job. Sand has to be dug out of the stream, washed and sifted. Quicklime has to be soaked, once a supply is located and a cane truck com-



Boy at the Mission



Final work: *The Black Christ of Naiserelagi*

mandeered to drop it off down on the King's Road.

Jean begins to paint—the first day task! Head and arms of Christ. There is much trouble with the mortar and he must go on working after evening prayers to finish painting before the mortar dries.

At recreation the children play ball on the field or *rara* in front of the church. Sometimes they leave their games to sit inside near Jean. What whispered excitement when they recognize a familiar object or person appearing on the wall at the tip of the brush.

The native nuns come softly on their bare feet to pray and watch. They are Jean's most faithful supporters. While he is working, face to wall, back to the world, he likes to listen to their murmurs. One says, "*E rairai vinaka ka uasivi*"—"It is lovely and more!".

The subject matter is so close to our life at the mission that describing the whole picture on the wall is like a story of our day by day living.

Far left, the girl in ragged bright blue school uniform, one of our dear little friends we see running to classes, sitting in church, coming to help wash dishes, playing on the *rara*. Her name is Theresia. I hope Jean has shown the beautiful proportions of her face and the devotion with which she prays to St. Peter Chanel, martyred saint of this part of the world.

Next to her stands the Saint himself, clasp the warclub that hit him on the head. The model for the club is of hard wood, the designs carved with stone tools. The club belonged to a great chief and is now treasured in the remote village where he died. It was brought to Jean as a loan 25 miles by horseback. We watched the arrival, the rider holding it proudly high in the air. *Mana* enables it to kill with one blow. Fijians say that without the *mana* death takes 19 blows!

The background of this section is a banana tree and blossoms, one of the many that grow in the bush—the thick bush that covers the hills.

"Matching Theresia on the other end of the wall is a little Indian altar boy in bright, bright red. He is one of, the few Indian children at the mission school and not a Catholic. How serious he is as he holds the taper beside St. Francis Xavier. Who knows whether he is saying Hindu prayers or conceiving new ideas.

As background there is a canopy of fern. Jean and I climbed up and down the steep mission hill examining individual plants before Jean decided he liked best the one so gracefully bent over the back steps of the rectory porch he has been using as a studio. He sits on the steps to draw his models, and at

the porch table covered with an old *lauhala* mat the colors are ground in readiness.

The unfolding fern looks like a crozier, and the halos shine against the fern and banana stems. Jean alternates left and right as he paints the side panels. At this stage, with just the top edge of both completed, we gather as usual at the end of the day to see what has been done. Monsignor says of the halos waiting for the heads, "I wonder if we all have halos floating somewhere waiting for us to fit into them?" Though Jean answered "Then there must be a lot of discarded halos," he paints people as if they give their best to Christ.

Father Mataca, dressed in shiny white, is beside black robed St. Peter Chanel. He is the first Melanesian secular priest, and this was his first mission. The very day Jean was needing him for a model he arrived back unexpectedly for a visit. He gave the Sunday preach gesturing with his hands in the same way that he is painted. He was talking about the Ecumenical Council, making a very Fijian point: "How is the Pope going to feed all those visiting Bishops?"

Feeding guests is the polite thing to do in Fiji but also a problem with food supply so close to immediate demand. Whether one eats

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Charlot

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depends on the stage of growth of taro or sago, or if an animal can be killed, or, for us, if Father Dutton has fished all night after working all day. When he is away 'in the bush' on one of his difficult trips as assistant pastor, we get a can of corned beef.

The nuns cook for the school children. The youngest of the sisters cooks for the priests and for us. She is a very cheerful young lady, and often assigns her job to a school girl who may then assign the preparing of the meal to an even younger school girl. Monsignor judges by the number of lumps in the oatmeal, on any given morning, which of the hierarchy did the cooking.

It was a big event when a lady parishioner from Suva sent Father Dutton a cake, which he shared with us, a city offering.

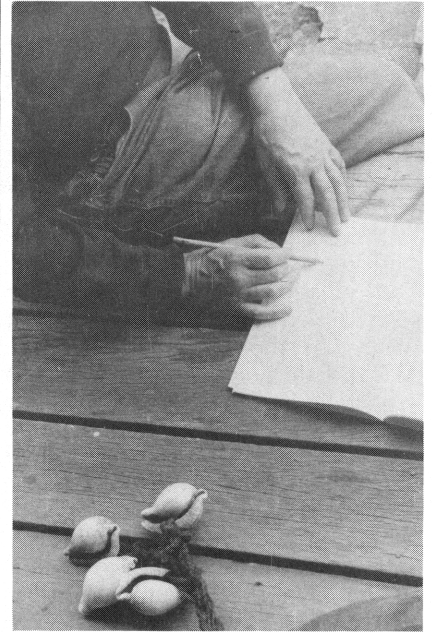
A village lady would present a mat, rolled and held across her arms. In the fresco such a one brings Our Lord her gift. She has woven it and now comes to offer it, walking slowly with stately grace. She is dressed in formal Fijian manner, a dress worn over a tailored *sulu* skirt. She is a young woman who lives with her little family in one of the grass houses of the mission. Her face has nobility combined with sweetness and a fervor of feeling, and her round crown of thick hair seems like a black halo.

The children are loving companions. They come walking with me hand in hand, saying so sweetly, without even having to ask where I am going, "May we show you the way." So we skip along the King's Road, climb the hills, or take the wet grassy path through the valley farm to visit and pray in the beautiful grotto of Our Lady of Ra.

Jean takes time from work to help amuse them. For First Communion Day we fold the red wrappings off the tracing paper rolls into candy boxes. From typing paper he cuts out decorative angels. The children are decorative that important morning, dressed in *tapu* with head wreathes of grass and flowers, each carrying a coconut cup with a wafer to the priest for consecration.

While the woman gives a mat,

important for making a Fijian home comfortable, and her own craft, the man presents the *tabua*, an ivory tooth hung on a woven hemp rope, the finest gift of Fiji. The *tabua* is offered to show deepest respect, or to request a great favor: help in building a house, a daughter in marriage, the good will of a chief. If the *tabua* is accepted the request must be granted. Here in the picture it is offered to Christ on the Cross in the name of the Fijian people. Please pray for His blessing on this marvelous race.



Charlot Drawing Shells

The dynamic gift bearer, named Celestino, is a catechist who walks the trails of Fiji to teach and pray. We first saw him at Sunday mass striding into church dressed in sulu, white shirt, sandals, and a large crucifix hanging around his neck. The difficulty was to persuade him to come and pose. He lives in a village towards Suva, a village where in olden times the seer had told the people to wait and accept religion from men in black. So they were ready to join when the cassocked missionaries arrived.

Now the Catholic 'grandson' is to be represented in church in the Fijian pleated leaf skirt, grass armlets, anklets of leaves, the brightly colored *lei*.

The foliage of breadfruit joins the center panel to each side. To the right in contrast with the strength and vigor of the Fijian man is an Indian woman, dressed

in a *sari*, looking as if she had come from an illuminated page of a giant Persian manuscript. With feminine dignity she holds out a garland of flowers to Christ.

Peter, the farmer, is here with his yoke of bullocks. Sketching oxen wasn't a job for the back step studio, but meant a trip to the fields with Monsignor driving us in his Volkswagen. Peter's little brother held the rope that held the oxen while Jean sat down in the grass under their noses to get the correct perspective. While he sketched, three other pairs of oxen driven by their small Indian guides came on the scene. Circled close around Jean were eight oxen, nudging him as if they were interested in art, the curious boys quite invisible, lost among their huge charges.

Only a small plant of sugar cane is shown, a detail of the mural, yet I have only to look at these graceful blades to be again in the Volkswagen journeying along the dirt road looking for a cane field with the right age of growth. Jean must sit in the hot sun to make his drawing, while Monsignor and I could look for shade under a great spreading tree.

The mural is nearing completion. It has been a hard job for Jean to work in the dim light of the church and paint delicate tones by lamp-light. The humid weather makes problematic the drying of the mortar. He feels the pressure of time as soon he must be back to his teaching in Honolulu.

For Monsignor it must have been quite an experience to live with the muralists, and the mural in the making. Certainly a shared venture which Jean acknowledged signing "Jean Charlot, Pictor" on the left painted ledge, and opposite, in Monsignor's handwriting, "Francisco Wasner, Rector". Above Monsignor's signature is his biretta—not the one he uses every day with a lopsided purple pompon, but his best one, loaned for a model, and propped on my clothes shelf until it was needed for this last piece of painting.

The chiefs of the villages of the farflung parish plan a feast as a thank you, neatly timed for the last day of school before Christmas vacation. The picture is all but done and it is the time for parents

to gather their children for the long walk home, down along the seashore or over the hills, trails deep and slippery with mud.

People come drifting into the mission and without seeming to plan or fuss, soon the men have a charming bamboo house built on the *rara*, with a roof of banana leaves and walls of fringed palm branches, with mats on the grass; and the *bullamakau* slaughtered, and the women busy with the cooking. The men and I gather around the *kava* bowl. The drink is served. I even begin to like the taste. Next the feast, and the women come bearing mats just like in the mural, piling them up in front of Jean.

At the *meke*, the women dance with slow sober gestures. The men, led by Celestino, dance wildly, their feet pounding the earth, their warclubs striking the sky.

In the evening was the graduation and a school play, text by Henri Gheon! Jean, who knew Gheon, wished the playwright himself could have been present to see the tropical setting and the beautiful Fijian children as actors, carrying high the Star of Bethlehem. With the play over, the children came forward to receive diplomas and prizes, kneeling and bowing most formally and kissing the hand of the priest.

Jean says that the Fijian people gave him many presents in exchange for the pictures he has given them. He has seen them making mats, building houses, and singing and dancing. He'll take away with him the memory of those things and the memory of these people. As strangers to their land and habits we found much to learn from the Fijian people filled with natural virtue and wisdom.

The work completed, we have only one day left to get to Suva and the sailing of the ship, the flying away of the plane. A good-bye lunch, stopping for informal servings of *yaqona* on the way down the mission road and in Celestino's village. Goodbye.

The village seer dreams of the eventual bus loads of people who will come to see the pictures. One doesn't have to be a seer to imagine wanting to come to Naiserelagi, for it is good to be in this happy place, where the day begins for all the world, and where the children begin the day with prayers and song.