

## The Jean Charlot Foundation

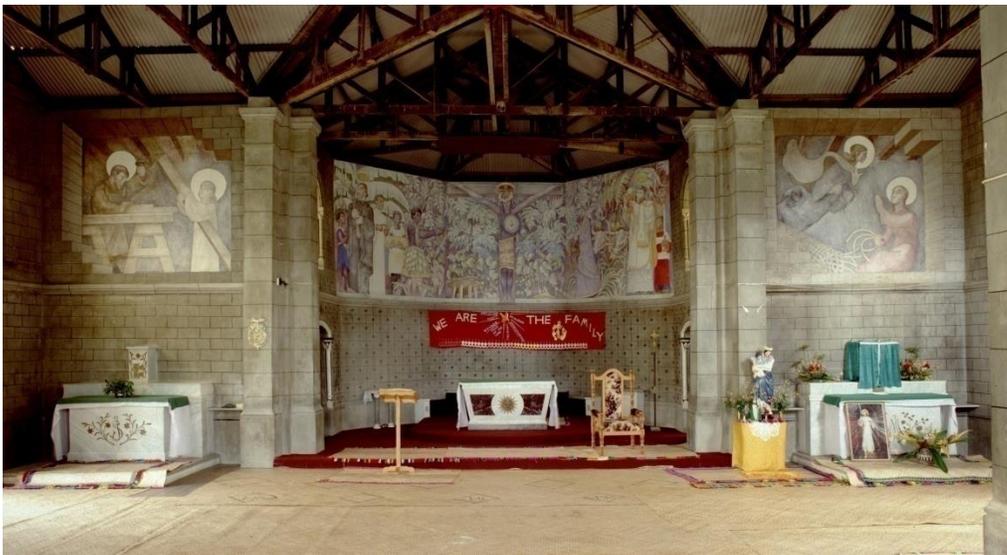
P.O. Box 11926, Honolulu, HI 96828

[www.jeancharlotfoundation.org](http://www.jeancharlotfoundation.org)

[jcf@jeancharlotfoundation.org](mailto:jcf@jeancharlotfoundation.org)

# JEAN CHARLOT'S FIJI FRESCOES AFTER CYCLONE WINSTON

Jean Charlot's five-panel fresco cycle in St. Francis Xavier Church, Naiseralagi, Province of Ra, Fiji, was painted in 1962-63. The three central panels show a Black Christ and Worshippers, and the two side panels depict St. Joseph's Workshop on the left, and The Annunciation on the right.



(See <http://www.jeancharlot.org/visualarts/supplementary/fiji/>) for additional photos.)

According to Dr. Caroline Klarr, who wrote her doctoral thesis on the murals, and worked with Jean Charlot's son Martin on a restoration of the frescoes in 2009-10:

Charlot's Fijian frescoes are of great historic significance and are unique for several reasons, including being valuable as permanent works of art. The frescoes represent the furthest Western extent of the international twentieth century mural movement and are the only outstanding example of monumental public art created by a French-American in the South Pacific Islands during the twentieth century. ... Additionally, the Fijian frescoes represent the only major treatment of Melanesians or Polynesians by any American artist in the twentieth century. It is quite likely the murals are the only examples of the fresco technique in the South Pacific Islands, partly because, in the words of Samoan muralist Mataumu Alisa, "Pacific Islanders have no walls." Besides their historic significance, the frescoes play a prominent role in the devotional and secular lives of the people of Ra District, as well as the international

community abroad. ... Regionally, they are one of the main tourist attractions for the area, generating revenue for the local church mission and businesses in the Ra District.

(Caroline Klarr, *Painting Paradise for a Post-Colonial Pacific: The Fijian Frescoes of Jean Charlot*, Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 2005, posted on the JCF website <http://www.jeancharlot.org/onJC/books/KLAR%20DISS/KLARRindex.htm>, at pp.1-2.)

An article from the *Fiji Times Online* speaks of what the frescoes mean to the local community:

It's more than just an ordinary painting of Jesus Christ on the Cross. [To] the villagers in the small settlement on the hill, the Black Christ was a symbol of Christian belief that Jesus Christ is for everyone regardless of colour and race. ... The entire setting of the mural is Fijian including natural resources like breadfruit, yaqona and banana plant patterns for the background. At the foot of cross are offerings from the two major races in Fiji - Fijian and Indian. ... The mural of the Black Christ is a proud heritage of the church and parishioners of St. Francis Xavier.

(Geraldine Panapasa, "Living with the Black Christ," *Fiji Times Online*, February 8, 2009.)

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This important work has been threatened by Tropical Cyclone Winston, which struck the Fiji Islands on February 20, 2016.

The *Fiji Times Online* characterized Cyclone Winston as "the strongest southern hemisphere storm in recorded history, as well as the deadliest cyclone in Fijian history with estimated maximum sustained winds of 180 mph." (Archbishop Peter Loy Chong, "God's Mercy in times of disaster," *Fiji Times Online*, March 10, 2016, at <http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?id=344907>.)

Cyclone Winston ripped off parts of the church roof and destroyed all of the windows and doors, putting Charlot's murals at great risk both from everyday weather and from the coming monsoon and storm season. Although the murals are "buon fresco" or "true fresco," painted on wet plaster, which is a relatively durable medium (as the many surviving frescos from the Renaissance and earlier indicate), they are nevertheless in danger.

According to JCF Vice President Kent Severson, Conservator, Doris Duke's Shangri-La:

The first order of business is to stop the water penetration into the building; tarps, gutters, etc. It is an airy space so I would recommend slow drying at its own pace, without fans or opening a lot of doors and windows. If there are soluble salts moving through the wall, they will only cause damage when the salt laden moisture dries. If the drying is slow, one can safely dab at the white material with a damp sponge and clear water (no detergent or other additives). If you dry fast you will get an explosion of white crystals that will tear the plaster apart.

The big threat is likely channeling in the plaster if there is repeated runoff down the face of the painting from the missing roof or a broken window. If these are not repaired, there will eventually be bacterial or fungal growth, followed by moss.

Larry Pace, another conservator who has worked with the JCF, agreed, and told us:

The only thing to add is that photo documentation of any damage would be valuable. These photos could be compared to earlier and later photos to determine if the mural is really stabilized or deterioration is still taking place.

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Dr. Klarr organized a preliminary rescue operation to protect the murals with tarps on a temporary basis, with a bridge grant of \$3,000 from the JCF. The following condensed excerpts from Dr. Klarr's reports to the JCF over the past several weeks show just how difficult this project has been (and how fortunate we are to have Dr. Klarr handling it):

**3/1/16:** After Cyclone Winston hit the islands, I have been trying to get word from Fiji about the church that houses the frescoes. I am very concerned about the people and the paintings there. As for the status of Ra, I understand from one friend at Rakiraki that the road is blocked on the north, confirmed by news reports from *Fiji Times*. No one has any roofs and pictures I have seen show the landscape stripped.

**3/3/16:** This link [to the Archdiocese of Suva's Cyclone Winston Appeal, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOthWfUGMVk>, which includes footage of the church and the murals] was forwarded to me by Teresia's son, Erami.



[The school girl in the blue dress featured in the frescoes is Teresia Tinai, currently residing in Lautoka, but originally from Naiseralagi.] I asked Erami to find out if the roof is damaged above the paintings; it looks like the wall is wet under the frescoes. The images brought tears to my eyes. Teresia went to Naiseralagi yesterday, so I asked Erami to contact Teresia to find out more information about the roof. I hope to hear from him and find out tomorrow. I will let you know. I am wiring monies to her early next week, as she lives in Lautoka and has been transporting food up to Naiseralagi.

**3/4/16:** I can no longer reach Rakiraki. People were charging phones on a single generator. I assume it ran out of gas and mobile phones are dead; electrical and hard line phones still down. I will keep trying to call. I need to write Erami, find out if he can acquire tarps, and give him a list

of things to do. I understand the road to the mission is washed out, another challenge. I'm not giving up.

**3/4/16:** The main problems are acquiring the tarps and securing them in place; the roads are blocked. I am wiring monies Monday to people in Lautoka. I am investigating now if tarps are available and how much they will cost to purchase. Teresia and her son will be headed to St. Francis Xavier's to take the tarps up, along with some supplies for the people. At the present, no one in the district of Ra can be contacted by phone or on the internet. Erami is investigating if he can help figure out what to do about all this. He and Teresia will take the tarps up (if available), and take additional photographs of the roof damage to forward to me. Transportation directly to the church is very difficult. Most things need to be walked in; there is no road from what I understand. Currently, this is what I know and all I can do from here. I am hoping to know more information next week.

**3/5/16:** Bad news is, I have lost all contact with Fiji right now. No word from Erami, all communications down. I don't have any idea about the budget at the moment; likely it will need to be a bit flexible. I think there are four important objectives:

1. To evaluate what is necessary to make repairs and the condition of the paintings.
2. To get a temporary fix ASAP to the roof, windows.
3. To get a permanent roof in place.
4. Restoration of paintings. This can occur anytime, at a later date, but the first three have to get taken care of soon. The monsoon season is coming and tarps on the roof won't last (weeks maybe), they will quickly shred with the wind and the rain will come right back in.

**3/6/16:** I got through to Etuate Katalau in Rakiraki, the foreman for the work we did in 1991-2001. He thinks he can go up to Naiseralagi to check, if nothing else works out. The Western Union is open in Rakiraki now, and he said there are tarps now available in the shops there. He is very trust worthy, knowledgeable, understands what to do to protect the paintings, build a scaffold, and so on. So, it's great Atu is willing to help. Best news ever!

**3/9/16:** News from Fiji good and not so good. Bad news is we cannot afford steel roof over any part of the church building right now; that will be very expensive, as I suspected. Good news: I spoke to Atu while he was in the Church! He will report more later with a better idea of the budget, but this is what he told me. There are eleven windows in the church, all broken. All our screens on the windows and doors we put in prior are gone and need to be replaced. Each window must be measured, some circular, some odd shapes there, so need custom made screens. Local villagers at Naiseralagi climbed the tree (very dangerous) to put back on damaged roofing, so paintings are not getting rained on. But roofing has damage, weakened by holes and such, that will allow water to come through and drip on paintings. The church is stuffed with birds taking refuge, all pooping on them. He does not think it is possible to build a scaffold; there are not enough local materials and it's not safe. The giant tree that fell is stuck IN the roof, over the paintings, and it's still there, and needs to be removed carefully.

**3/9/16:** News of the frescoes. Villagers did put up the damaged roofing already, so at least they are somewhat protected, not getting any downpours on them. He was not able to notice any visible gashes or holes in frescoes, or indications that paint has run. He said they are filthy, covered in bird poop and dirt from wind blowing in from storm. Bird poop more of a problem, as instead of a few coming in once in a while, flocks are taking refuge inside church right now.

Still, we know this can be cleaned and re-painted, we did it before. Atu said the frescoes look like they are drying out fine.

**3/29/16:** I do have good news about the work at the church, so I wanted to pass the information along. I am also including the photos that I have been sent already; I am hoping to get more photos next week.



The priest was given a traditional gift along with US100 to get to the doctor and fix his broken leg. Monies were used to buy and transport supplies to the church as well as to take these

photographs. Since the photos were taken, the large tree has been removed from off the church and out of the roof. The roof has been tarped over and the paintings are now temporarily protected from rain. The doors and windows have been measured and new ones are being constructed. The wooden doors will be replaced, as well as the screen doors with automatic hinges. All measurements for doors and windows have been completed. The construction work is now being done manually because there is again no electricity available. There was electricity long enough to get one door finished and put in place at the church, but electricity is needed to install the other two doors and eleven screens. The other doors are to be constructed this week. Three screens, out of eleven, have already been constructed. Monies have been used for materials including wood, screen and an extension ladder, as well as transportation and labor.

**3/30/16:** I am having to wait for additional images which involves locating someone with a phone, who can take pictures with the phone, and who lives closer to the mission. Next, we will need the photos to be taken to Rakiraki High School, the only place with internet access, a person who knows how to work the computer at Rakiraki high school to send the photos to me, and electricity to be repaired to get access to the internet.

**4/5/16:** There is another tropical storm in Fiji [Cyclone Zena], complete with major winds, rain and floods. This is only the beginning of the monsoon season there, looks like a harsh one! I haven't been able to get through on the phone, therefore no news to report. I am attaching a photo of the Nadi bus stop to give you an idea.



It seems the paintings are still again in danger as I am concerned the tarps are not handling the 80 mph winds the best. We will think good thoughts and I will let you know as I do.

**4/15/16:** The weather has just been so horrible in Fiji, that nothing has been able to get done. The monsoon season and Cyclone Zena have kept the area of Naiseralagi flooded, with no electricity or transportation. Yesterday was the first time in over one week that I was able to get through on the phone to Atu Katalau, the man in charge of the work on the church building. He is hoping that the roads will be open by Monday, weather permitting, and it will possible to transport the new front doors to the church. Electricity is needed to do the installations of the doors and windows, and that may be two months away before it is available to the area of Ra. He is going to see about alternatives, such as a generator. Monday will be the first time I will get a report on the paintings since the second storm hit the area. We are hoping the temporary roof held up. Atu is in charge of repairing the doors, wood and screen doors to be installed, and

screens to the eleven windows. Monies sent from the JCF have gone primarily to materials, transportation, and labor for these projects. I still have \$700 left of the \$3,000, to forward down to Fiji as necessary to complete the doors and windows. I am hoping this will be enough to complete the jobs.

**4/18/16:** I spoke with Atu moments ago and the news is as follows. The wooden front doors and screen doors have been constructed. The "team" was busy painting them when I phoned. The doors are in Rakiraki Koro and are planned to be transported to Naiseralagi tomorrow. I have requested photos of completed work, however, Atu has to find someone with a phone that he can pay to go with him to the Church and take the pictures; electricity must be restored to the school in Rakiraki, the only computer access in the area; and a person at the school must be located who knows how to download the photos off the phone and send them to me over Facebook, a Fijian favorite social media site. So, we will probably have to wait for a while before anymore photos are available. In the meantime, more money is needed to get to work on the screens for the windows. I intend to send down about \$500, maybe a little more, through a western union transfer later this week. I have also been requesting a list of expenses, which I have not received. I do know, however, that the postal service in the area only started working this week, so I asked again today to be sent a list of expenses.

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So far, the JCF has only been concerned with a temporary solution, but we hope in the longer term to be able to protect the murals on a more permanent basis. Installation of a steel roof and reinforced windows, as well as some conservation of the murals, will eventually be necessary. The JCF is seeking appropriate organizations to assist in this costly but essential project. We have contacted the emergency response arm of the American Institute for Conservation, National Heritage Response (<http://www.conservation-us.org/emergencies/national-heritage-responders#.Vw63JUdPXYk>), alerting them to the potential need for a conservator in Fiji.

The JCF is also accepting targeted donations for the purpose of preserving and protecting the frescos. If you would like to help, please send a check payable to The Jean Charlot Foundation (with "Fiji" indicated in the memo section of the check) to The Jean Charlot Foundation, P.O. Box 11926, Honolulu, HI 96828. Many thanks for your support!

For further information, please email us at [jcf@jeancharlotfoundation.org](mailto:jcf@jeancharlotfoundation.org) or call Laura Warfield at (808) 228-3629.

April 19, 2016