First Steps from the Periphery:
The Work of Jean Charlot as a Source for Picasso’s *First Steps*

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources and Context: Jean Charlot</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources and Context: Pablo Picasso</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships Between the Center and the Periphery</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Model of Cultural Transfer</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compositional Comparisons</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Translation of Meaning</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement within the Oeuvre</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dates of Creation</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routes of Transfer</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

In 1936, Jean Charlot, an artist of Mexican and French heritage living in New York City, produced a lithograph entitled First Steps. This print depicts a monumental mother figure bent over her child, hands resting on either side of his face as the infant contemplates his first step forward (fig. 1). The infant’s face betrays fear and apprehension; his wide eyes, raised brow, and parted lips above his rounded chin anxiously evaluate the seemingly impossible task ahead. Yet the mother models for her child the effort he must make, stepping decisively and solidly forward with her right foot, creating a protective boundary within which her child may attempt to copy her. Both figures are clothed in styles indigenous to Mexico, the country in which the artist began his most urgent artistic work and from which he drew a wealth of inspiration.

In 1992, John Charlot, son of the artist, argued that his father’s 1936 lithograph was the source of Pablo Picasso’s 1943 oil painting, also named First Steps. The oil painting, currently in the Yale University Art Gallery’s collection, depicts the same pivotal moment in early childhood as Charlot’s print, in which a child takes his first steps guided by his mother (fig. 2). John Charlot highlights several compositional elements in the painting that echo the earlier print, positing that to identify the sources of Picasso’s works “enables us to recognize which works impressed him and how he was able to use them in his own creations.”\(^1\) Certainly, isolating which works artists used as sources of inspiration can tell us more about artist-specific methods and work processes. However, more than this, establishing source relationships between works can add nuance to how we understand artistic influence.

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Previously, models employed to explain the ways artistic ideas spread have relied on center-periphery models, in which ideas move from an innovator at one pole to an imitator at another. This essay seeks to determine whether this unidirectional view of art history can be challenged by instances of artistic cultural transfer and adapted to more accurately define the way centers and peripheries interact. If John Charlot’s claim that Jean Charlot’s lithograph is the source of Picasso’s *First Steps* is accurate, what does this mean for the way we understand the circulation and reinterpretation of images? Can Charlot’s lithograph be considered a cultural transfer, reimagined by Picasso in his oil painting? In order to answer this question, this essay will first introduce the artistic players and set them in the context of the cultural zones they inhabited and the sources from which they drew. Then, the essay will analyze the previously relied upon center-periphery model to see if it can be recast or substituted for a more appropriate and dynamic model. The print and painting must also be compared formally, to observe similarities which could indicate that the print was indeed the source of the oil. Finally, there must be some plausible route through which the lithograph could have been transferred, in order for Picasso to encounter it before the creation of his painting. Using this specific example as a case study, the essay will explore the cultural transfer of artistic ideas as a more dynamic and accurate model for the transmission of artistic ideas.

**Sources and Context: Jean Charlot**

Jean Charlot was born in Paris in 1898 to a French-Russian father and a Mexican-Spanish mother. Both his maternal grandfather, a French-Indian mestizo, and great uncle
also lived in Paris, both having moved from Mexico City.\(^2\) Thanks to his great uncle, Eugene Goupil, a collector of pre-Hispanic Mexican antiquities and artworks, Charlot grew up surrounded by the art of his Mexican ancestors, even beginning to teach himself the Aztec language Nahuatl as a teenager.\(^3\) After studying briefly at École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Charlot joined a group of Catholic mural artists, before joining the military in 1917 to fight in World War One after the death of his father.\(^4\) He first travelled to Mexico three years later, and moved there permanently with his mother Anna Goupil in 1921.\(^5\)

His first visit to Mexico in 1920 marked a moment in which Charlot began to embrace his Mexican heritage artistically and to innovate on behalf of the Mexican mural movement. Charlot described the “Indian idols, the squatty masked heroes of Mexican cosmogony” and his “Aztec ancestors” as “part of [his] patrimony,” noting that for “these ingrown exotic elements, Mexico furnished an outlet.”\(^6\) In 1922, Charlot assisted Diego Rivera with his *Creation* mural at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City; within a month Charlot had started his own mural, working with a Mexican master mason Luis Escobar to become the first Mexican muralist to paint in *buon fresco*.\(^7\) In contrast to painting on dry plaster, as in the less permanent *fresco secco* which was used up until Charlot’s *Massacre in the Main Temple*, in *buon fresco* pigments suspended in water are

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\(^3\) Thompson “Jean Charlot: Artist and Scholar.” 6.


painted on freshly applied wet plaster, melding with the plaster as it dries and becoming part of the wall. Charlot was soon commissioned to create murals alongside Rivera at the Ministry of Education, becoming pivotal in the exchange of knowledge and techniques for fresco murals. Charlot expanded artistically throughout the 1920s, becoming art editor for *Mexican Folkways*, creating woodcut illustrations for books by Anita Brenner and the Stridentist *Irradiador*, and befriending photographer Edward Weston.

In the late 1920s, Charlot joined a Carnegie Institution expedition at Chichén Itzá, recording finds for the printed catalogue as a staff artist, following the archaeologically-minded footsteps of his great-grandfather Victor Goupil. Charlot and his mother then moved to New York, where she died of pneumonia in 1929. The death of his mother affected Charlot profoundly. He wrote to his friend Edward Weston, about the death of his mother: “as we had been so closely united all those last years, all my life is upset for the moment.”

Despite this period being a dark one in Charlot’s personal life after the loss of his mother, his artistic work was gaining recognition, being shown in a number of group exhibitions of Mexican artists in New York, including the 1928 government-sponsored show at the Art Center. Charlot returned several times to Mexico, drawing on pre-Columbian art to develop motifs and themes that would reverberate across his work, inspired by objects he encountered in his youth, at Chichén Itzá, and in Mexico as an

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8 Thompson “Jean Charlot: Artist and Scholar.” 13, 32.
9 John Charlot. “Jean Charlot's First Fresco: The Massacre in the Main Temple.”
12 Thompson “Jean Charlot: Artist and Scholar.” 17.
adult. In this period, he contributed to a book about Edward Weston published by Erhard Weyhe, founder of the Weyhe Gallery in New York, and began to produce a number of lithographs on stone. Many of these prints bore the motif of Mexican mothers tenderly caring for, supporting, and teaching their young children. In 1936, he produced the *First Steps* lithograph, depicting a mother aiding her child in his first attempt to walk alone. The following year it was published by Carl Zigrosser of the Weyhe Gallery, in his work *Six Centuries of Fine Prints*.

**Sources and Context: Pablo Picasso**

Pablo Ruiz Picasso was born in 1881 in Malaga, Spain, and was trained in drawing and painting by his father. Picasso moved to Paris, France, in 1900, after developing his technique in Madrid and Barcelona. These years were hard for Picasso, as expressed by his Blue period works; he sold very few pieces and barely survived due to cold and hunger. Yet the sale of a work entitled *Maternité* for 200 francs in 1903 signaled brighter days, in which Picasso met a lover and developed into his more accessible and profitable Rose period. In 1907, he created *Les demoiselles d’Avignon*, a work that shocked those who saw it for its abandonment of artistic norms. *Les Demoiselles* prompted Georges Braque to visit Picasso’s studio, and the pair became close friends, questioning the rules and conventions of art together and “inventing”

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16 O’Brian, *Pablo Ruiz Picasso*. 82.
Cubism. The pair were inseparable until Braque went to fight in World War One, the start of which tore apart Picasso’s world in Paris, where he became an outsider and a foreigner as his French contemporaries were called up to fight.

Over the next twenty years, Picasso experimented with painting, drawing, printing, engraving, and sculpture, establishing himself as an artist while traveling widely in Europe. In 1936, German planes bombed the town of Guernica in Spain: Picasso reacted instantly and furiously, creating his seminal work *Guernica* under the gaze of his new lover Dora Maar. By June of 1939 the Germans were in Paris, which had emptied of many who were able to leave. Picasso, though undeniably a Spaniard, was also a Parisian. He remained in occupied Paris throughout the war, despite the cold oppression of the city which he reflected in his work.

In 1943, Picasso produced his *First Steps* painting, using a dark palette to depict a mother holding the hands of her child as he takes his first step.

**Relationships Between the Center and the Periphery**

Art historians have long discussed and debated the movement of artistic ideas between artists, countries, and cultures. Pablo Picasso painted *Les demoiselles d’Avignon* in 1907, in which he abandoned the established rules of form, perspective, and representation that governed the European artistic sphere. In this painting, Picasso began

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to develop Cubism, depicting five nude women with angular, flattened faces reminiscent of African masks. Picasso denied being aware of African art at the time of his painting, declaring “L’art negre? Connais pas!” in 1920. However, in a 1937 interview with André Malraux, Picasso acknowledged the source from which Les demoiselles d’Avignon had been born – from his visit to the Musee d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro, where he saw “masks, dolls made by redskins, dusty manikins. Les demoiselles d’Avignon must have come to me that very day.”

Some art critics, including Christian Zervos, who compiled Picasso’s catalogue raisonné, denied the idea that African art could have had any influence on Picasso and the birth of cubism, claiming that when Picasso painted “demoiselles d’Avignon, he was unaware of the art of black Africa.” This claim sits well with the center-periphery model of artistic influence. In this framework, European influence is depicted as a force spreading from the center to the peripheries, carrying with it artistic innovation and influencing distant artists to copy or emulate the work of the artists in the center. In this model, artistic work at the periphery is often imitative of that which is developed at the center and does not in turn influence the work of center-based artists.

Of course, academics have questioned this simplistic model. In the case of Picasso, most critics today do credit the African art at the Trocadéro as the inspiration for Picasso’s painting, but many still disagree as to the extent, or what this means. For some, like Arthur J. Miller, African art was only one of a plethora of influences Picasso drew from to create the painting, with its conceptual quality only depicting an applied example

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of the true scientific, mathematical, and technological roots of the work. In Miller’s view, the center determines chronology by innovating, and thus ‘resetting the clock’ as it were – creating a new art historical period or movement. This implies that the periphery stands still, incapable of innovating and merely providing the "raw material for creative appropriation" – and in Miller’s view, only a fraction of the raw material at that.

In contrast, upon the opening of an exhibition entitled Picasso and Africa in Johannesburg, Sandile Memela, the Head of Communications at the South African Department of Arts and Culture claimed that “Picasso would not have been the renowned creative genius he was if he did not steal and re-adapt the work of 'anonymous [African] artists'. In Memela’s view, Picasso deserves little credit for the birth of Cubism, as his use of African art as inspiration material brands him a thief, dismantling his title as a “creative genius” and placing the credit for cubism entirely with the African artists responsible for the works on display at the Trocadéro. However, this inversion of the center-periphery model, highlighting the influence artists working at the periphery had upon those in the center, only fortifies the model; this inversion reinforces the idea that a peripheral artist is important only through their relation with the center.

It is my belief that these contradictions between viewers and critics as to the scope of and meaning behind Picasso’s inspiration from African art or other, so-called peripheral sources, stem from a view of art history as a unidirectional system of

influence. Depending on the leanings of the writer, this single-direction is either from center to periphery - where the ‘great’ artists influence the static peripheries, or from periphery to center, where those same ‘great’ artists steal the intellectual works and artistic innovation of overlooked peripheral artists. On one side of this continuum, some critics, like Zervos, believe that as an artist of the center, Picasso could not have been influenced by the African works, and thus neither could Charlot’s *First Steps* from the US and Mexico be a source for Picasso’s oil painting. For Miller, it seems that the African works did play some role in Picasso’s creation of cubism, but simply by making clear the Einsteinian mathematics and geometry Picasso was already distilling on his own. From this perspective, Charlot’s lithograph could have aided Picasso’s creation of the work, but as an inferior work used as a lens through which Picasso could perceive his own vision.

At the other end of the spectrum, Memela declares the works of African art used by Picasso as stolen – claiming that they entirely influenced Picasso from the periphery: meaning that if Charlot’s print was a source for *First Steps*, Picasso’s work is the lesser, imitative work.

It seems that the idea that artistic influence from one location always exerts influence over another in a unidirectional manner, and that the other becomes subservient to this influence, is not necessarily the most effective framework to understand the way artistic ideas are transferred. A more dynamic model, in which neither object or artist is disempowered, and artistic ideas can move in a multitude of directions is required to effectively understand this process.

A more nuanced perspective exists in Anne Cheng’s book *Second Skin* – *Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*, which flags the visit to the Trocadéro as the
moment in which Picasso learns a way of seeing that understands “seeing not as a mastery of surface, but as its agent.” Cheng argues that we “do not master by seeing; we ourselves are altered when we look.” In this summation, Cheng enables the action to move in both directions: “Alongside taking in the objects, Picasso was taken in by the objects.” Neither Picasso nor the African objects he drew inspiration from are static, nor relegated to a secondary role. Both transfer some of their power and innovation to the other – and both have a power that should be recognized in the birth of Cubism. This model is far more dynamic and allows the objects to retain their power when reimagined by Picasso in a way that the center-periphery model does not. Through Cheng’s theory, Charlot’s lithograph is not made lesser by Picasso’s use of it as a source: both it and Picasso are able to retain their power.

**The Model of Cultural Transfer**

Perhaps then, the view of ‘influence’ being exerted on artists either from the center into the periphery, or vice-versa, is an unhelpful model through which to understand how artistic ideas circulate and develop. While Anne Cheng’s discussion of preserved power does better understand the moment in which artists encounter ideas, one way it may be furthered is by a more direct discussion of how these ideas are then translated in their new contexts as new artworks.

In the 1980s, Michele Espagne coined the term ‘cultural transfer’ to better describe the circulation of knowledge transnationally and the way ideas are translated.

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into new contexts. Espagne’s work developed with a view to translations of texts primarily, but can be helpfully reframed to conceptualize the “global mobility of words, concepts, images, persons, animals, commodities, money, weapons, and other things.”

Cultural transfer is the process by which these things move to a new place, or cultural zone, and thus the thing takes on new meanings by moving into this new context.

Espagne asserts that the circulation of these cultural artefacts is not simply the movement of these objects to new places. It is also fundamentally the “relentless reinterpretation, rethinking, and resignification” of these objects once they are transplanted. Importantly, in the framework of cultural transfer, we must understand that “translation takes the form of a circulation…rather than that of a unidirectional movement from origin to target normally associated with the term ‘transfer’.”

Thus, for artists, as their images, ideas, and innovations move from place to place, they are interpreted differently: they take on new and equally valid meanings as they are remade and reimagined by other artists.

Espagne argues that there is an “equiprimordiality of the original and its translation,” agreeing with Cheng that neither work must be seen as inferior in the encounter, as both can retain their power.

Within this framework, we can re-evaluate our understanding of centers and peripheries and the relationships between them. Like Cheng, Espagne makes clear that

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32 Yakushenko, “What Is Cultural Transfer?”
33 Yakushenko, “What Is Cultural Transfer?”
35 Yakushenko, “What Is Cultural Transfer?”
there is no simple, one-sided exertion of ‘influence’. Instead, cultural transfer captures
the importance of viewing the circulation of images, and the results of this circulation, as
a “two-sided and creative process.” It can be argued that the objects in the Trocadéro
that Picasso encountered before creating Les demoiselles d’Avignon are cultural transfers,
which took on new meanings when moved to a Parisian context. Thus, the episode
constitutes an instance of artistic cultural transfer: both the objects themselves and
Picasso are vital to the creation of Les Demoiselles, as Cheng posits, yet Espagne’s theory
goes further to state that Picasso’s subsequent reinterpretation—Les Demoiselles itself—is a
translation of the form and significance of these works, which holds equally valid, if
different, meanings. If Charlot’s lithograph can be proven as a source of Picasso’s
painting, Espagne’s theory of cultural transfer would empower both artists, Charlot’s
work, and Picasso’s translation of the print’s meaning in his painting. None is relegated
to the periphery, nor are they perceived as inferior based on the date of their creation.

**Compositional Comparisons**

Compositionally, the lithograph and the painting bear a striking resemblance, both
depicting the moment of a child’s first step under the watchful eye of his mother. In both
images, the mother creates a rounded, bent over frame within which the child stands, with
the mother’s face bowed and directed towards her infant’s. The child in both images
stares directly out towards the viewer, wide eyed and open mouthed.

Parallels between the images can be observed by focusing on the feet of the
figures in the painting and lithograph. In Picasso’s painting, the left foot of the child is
depicted in the action of taking a step, simplified to a triangular block outlined in black,

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36 Yakushenko, “What Is Cultural Transfer?”
blunted on the end closest to the little toe (fig 3). A preparatory study of this element exists, an oil sketch on a sheet of newspaper, sketching out the angular shape of the child’s foot (fig. 4). In the painting, this foot creates a forward motion in the composition, lighter grey and slight hints of warmer yellows being used to highlight the sole of the left foot in contrast to the darker greys and colder blues emphasizing the shadows obscuring the right (fig. 5).

In Charlot’s lithograph, the child’s feet remain planted on the ground. Instead of the child stepping forward and creating dynamic motion of the piece, the mother in Charlot’s composition takes the first decisive step, demonstrating the action for her child. Her right foot is articulated as a softly rounded triangular shape, breaking free of her white robe as she moves forward (fig. 6). This foot contrasts with her left, which is obscured in dark shadows, creating a similar contrast between the moving and stationary feet as in Picasso’s child (fig. 7). In both images, the forward motion is articulated by this contrast between the stationary, depicted in darkened shadow, and motion, depicted in light. Furthermore, the triangular shape of the feet is strikingly similar, especially considering the alteration Picasso makes from the study to the canvas. In the study, the foot terminates in a downward facing point. In Charlot’s print, at first glance it seems that the triangular foot is a pointed triangle, also with a downward facing point. However, on closer inspection, the drape of the robe and the shadow between the robe and the foot creates this pointed tip. The actual foot terminates in a softer, rounded shape of the little toe (see fig. 6). In the final canvas, Picasso painted over the pointed tip of the child’s foot with grey paint, softening the edge and removing the point, making the foot resemble more closely the one in Charlot’s print (see fig. 3).
Similarities are also evident in the facial construction of both children. The face of Charlot’s child appears to be modelled on his longtime model Luz Jiménez. Luz, who used her first name as her professional name, became Charlot’s model around 1921, when he moved to Mexico, and she began to teach him Nahautl.\textsuperscript{37} Charlot noted the role she played in his art making: “She’s been a great influence on my art. She’s been a great influence in introducing me to what I could call my ancestors, that is, the Aztec Indians, because I am part Indian.”\textsuperscript{38} Charlot created many sketches of Luz, including one in 1924 (fig. 8). Clear parallels can be seen in Charlot’s depiction of the child in his lithograph and his sketches of Luz, particularly in the exaggerated ‘M’ shape of the upper lip, but also in the rounded, widened snub nose, and the round, wide face and chin (fig. 9). The child’s face is portrayed frontally, the Luz-esque lips parted and eyes widened.

In both the lithograph and Picasso’s oil painting, the parted lips and wide eyes betray the fear that underscores the moment at hand. For the child in Charlot’s lithograph, the coupling of this expression of fear and the largeness of the mother seem to capture the fear of the artist after the traumatic loss of his own mother. The rounded cheeks, nose, and jutting bottom lip are highlighted as child’s face emerges slowly from the shadow of its mother’s body, fearfully contemplating a life outside of her protection. The mother’s hands remain cupped around the infant’s face, seeming to promise a continued connection even after the first steps towards a life without her are made.

For Picasso’s child, the same uncertainty clouds the features, pushing the mouth open and raising the brows. The green-grey shadow along the edge of the nose

\textsuperscript{38} John Charlot. “Jean Charlot and Luz Jiménez.”
connecting to the brow and the furrows in the forehead, painted thinly in brown, demonstrate the eyebrows being pulled up into an anxious frown, while the rounded lines under the left eye and the fully visible roundness of the irises make clear the fearful openness of the eyes. Picasso does not employ the shadows used by Charlot to metaphorically represent the transition of the child from part of the mother to independent, autonomous being, but the shapes the shadows cast on the face of Charlot’s child are paralleled in Picasso’s painting. The rounded cheek of Charlot’s child is mirrored in the grey sweep under Picasso’s child’s right eye, which is fleshed out by a rounded pink highlight. This grey line curves down into the nose before branching back around past the corner of the lip to form the apple of the cheek (fig. 10). Charlot’s lithograph employs the same pattern (see fig. 9): the right corners of both children’s mouths are dragged downwards into anxious, open-mouthed pouts by the shaded cheeks. These points of contact in the compositions could indicate that Charlot’s print is indeed a source for Picasso’s painting.

**The Translation of Meaning**

Of course, there are differences in the composition, perhaps most notably the scale in which the child is depicted. In Charlot’s rendering of the scene, the monumental mother dwarfs the child, providing a solid, unyielding mass from which her much smaller child emerges. In Picasso’s painting, the child takes up the majority of the visual space, pushing his mother to the edges of the canvas and dominating the frame. Though both artists depict the same developmental moment of the first step, in the transfer of the work from Charlot’s cultural context to Picasso’s, the imagery is translated, and takes on a vastly different meaning.
In Jean Charlot’s lithograph, the mother guiding the child is a rounded, intensely solid mass bending over her child. The roundness is emphasized by the circular shape of the head, depicted from the top; it is made spherical and three-dimensional by the addition of a central highlight. The shoulders and arms frame the head, forming a concentric circle around it, further stressing its roundness and volume. The legs of the mother are columnar, providing a stable base for the upper body as it leans forward over the form of the child. The child is depicted with a similar solidity and dimensionality, yet is far smaller, emerging from the mass of the mother.

In Picasso’s painting, the child is far larger and more two dimensional than the child of Charlot’s lithograph. However, the mother retains the curved density of Charlot’s mother, yet this density works quite differently in the painting. A preparatory study of this element of the painting exists, in which Picasso appears to model this weight and density, as well as the overall curved shape of the bending mother on the left-hand side of the page (fig. 11). The curved back of the mother appears in both print and painting, and Picasso captures the unrealistic arched shape of the back and neck in the study. Picasso also attends to volume in this sketch, with rough graphite lines modelling the interaction of light on the curved body shape to convey a three-dimensional weight, indicating that the depiction of mass in Charlot’s lithograph particularly interested Picasso.

While the volume of the maternal figure has a colossal feel in the print, this mass becomes cumbersome and depicts a certain clumsiness in the painting. This ungainly bulkiness contrasts starkly with the paper-light, two-dimensional fragmentation of the child the mother guides, unlike the mirrored nature of the mother and child in the print. The mother of the painting appears too large for the canvas, her bent neck seeming to be
an attempt to squeeze into the frame, rather than the dignified attentiveness of the mother of Charlot’s lithograph.

It appears that Picasso is holding onto the solidity of the mother in the Charlot print, but by contrasting it with a radically different style of depicting the child, is employing the same technique to attain a rather different outcome. In Charlot’s print, the graceful and balanced mass of the mother appears to depict a comforting stability for her child, who mirrors her in density, if not in scale. Contrastingly the preservation of this density, but its depiction as unbalanced and uneven, perhaps represents a heavy past in Picasso’s painting—the mother is not a stabilizing anchor like Charlot’s, but a dead weight. The lightness of the child’s portrayal, achieved through its two-dimensionality and lighter color palette accentuates the contrast, seeming to be made of a different substance entirely. Rather than depicting a tender moment between a mother and child as they contemplate the step they must make together; Picasso’s image perhaps depicts a moment of leaving behind the heavy weights of the past.

The war has often been cited as a thematic subtext to the painting, with analysis often commenting on an “evocation of hope in the face of precarious circumstances.” However, the violence of the pose, in which the child forces the mother to the edges of the canvas, combined with the clumsy weight of the mother’s form, perhaps indicate that this hopeful movement forwards is not a joint action. The lack of balance between the two figures in Picasso’s painting could suggest that the child must take his first steps away from the burden of his past, represented by the cumbersome and darkly rendered mother, just as Europe must move away from the dark period of violence that has

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consumed it. The child begins this process in the image, stepping forwards towards an independent future. In this way, Jean Charlot’s *First Steps* print is an example of cultural transfer. The transfer of the print to France essentially changes it, by placing it within a new context of German Occupied Paris, with an increased proximity to the Second World War and its atrocities. Thus, Picasso’s painting of the same moment is a reimagining of the print, in which the dark past of the Nazi occupation must be left behind as Europe takes its first steps towards the future.

The theory of cultural transfer also maintains a reciprocity in the transfer of ideas, meaning that artistic ideas do not get translated exclusively from one context to the other, but move in both directions. We can see a similar translation of imagery and meaning as that from Charlot to Picasso in the opposite direction, by exploring Charlot’s early cubist works. In 1920 or 1921, Charlot created the cubist painting *Bullet*. In this gouache work, Charlot depicts the experience of being shot at during his time in the military through a fragmentation of the picture plane. A skull, a German helmet, and various geometric shapes are shattered together, all merging to a single point of contact – the bullseye – in the center of the canvas (fig. 12).

Charlot explicitly noted Picasso’s works depicting “exploded” bottles as a source of inspiration for this work. These images took on new meaning for Charlot when transferred to his own context of military service. These artworks depicting bottles, possibly the 1912 *Bottle of Pernod (Table in a Café)* (fig. 13) or *Bottles and Glasses* (fig. 14) of the same year, were created by Picasso in Paris before the war began in 1914. However, as Espagne makes clear, cultural transfers are constantly reimagined and

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40 John Charlot, “Jean Charlot's First Fresco: The Massacre in the Main Temple.”
reinterpreted by new contexts, and their new meanings are as important as their initial meanings. After Charlot’s military service, these images by Picasso took on a new meaning. Charlot saw them as “really the bottle exploded” and went on to use Cubism as a way to represent the “disappearance of the units of the body into multiples, into fragments” during warfare, in the same way that Picasso saw the density and weight of Charlot’s mother and child relationship in *First Steps* as a way to represent the movement beyond World War Two.

**Placement within the Oeuvre**

As discussed, the lithograph and the painting both depict the same pivotal moment of a child taking its first step under the guidance of the mother, a featured motif in the work of Jean Charlot that reappears again and again across his oeuvre. Charlot’s depiction of the mother and child often draws on the pre-Columbian art objects that Charlot encountered throughout his life. Examination of the range of these prints shows ethnographic variation in the facial features of the mothers and children which indicates a history of cultural transfer even outside of the Charlot–Picasso interaction.

For example, Charlot’s 1936 print, the focus of this essay, appears to draw on Olmec masks (fig. 15). The faces in these masks had characteristic grimaces, employing the same ‘M’ shaped lip formation as Charlot uses in the face of the child and his depictions of Luz (see fig. 9 and 8), as well as the more rounded features which are transferred to Charlot’s lithograph. Other *First Steps* images produced by Charlot

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41 Yakushenko, “What Is Cultural Transfer?”
42 John Charlot, “Jean Charlot's First Fresco: The Massacre in the Main Temple.”
translate the forms of other Mexican art works which Charlot came into contact with. A 1946 lithograph also entitled *First Steps*, also depicts a monumental mother teaching a child to walk. However, the soft roundness of the 1936 mother is gone, replaced by a statuesque woman who seems to be carved from solid rock (fig. 16). The features of this mother are angular and serene, completely opposite to the rounded, grimacing child of the 1936 print. This print appears to be the result of a transfer of different Mexican works: either Teotihuacán masks which are known for their serene and unaffected styles\(^{44}\) (fig. 17), or the angular profile reliefs Charlot encountered at Chichén Itzá as a staff artist (fig. 18). Throughout his career, Charlot engaged in a cultural transfer of artistic ideas form Mexican cultures which he translated into a vast series of mothers and children with varied features and sources all learning to take their first steps.

For Picasso however, this highly specific moment is unique in its appearance in 1943. Plenty of images in his works depict mothers with children: children being cradled or rocked to sleep (fig 19), infants sitting on their mother’s laps (fig. 20), and countless representations of newborns being breastfed, spanning his career (figs. 21, 22, and 23). Yet the moment in which the child makes its first move towards independence, a moment so frequently represented by Charlot, appears only in 1943 in this oil painting.

The only other instance in which Picasso depicts a moment in close temporal proximity to a child’s first step is in a sketch from 1943, *Femmes et enfants*. In this sketch, the mother appears to be in the moment of placing the child on the ground in preparation for the first walking attempt (fig. 24). Bending to place the child on the floor, the mother’s back is rounded and head bowed obscuring her features, just as in both the

\(^{44}\) "Mesoamerican Masks." Museo Chileno De Arte Precolombino.
Charlot print and the Picasso painting. In this drawing, the scale of the mother and child mirrors that of Charlot’s print remarkably closely, with the large, solid mother dwarfing her tiny child. In this image, the first step is yet to come, as the child appears to urinate – perhaps from fear – as his mother places him onto the ground. The emotional theme of this sketch seems more in line with Charlot’s 1936 depiction of the scene, which the child urinating in fear of being separated from the mother and curling its legs up away from the floor, in a symbolic show of dependence. In the same way, Charlot’s child is frozen in its depiction, fists clenched, hesitating before its first step toward detachment from the mother. The child in Picasso’s painting does show fear, but is in the forward motion of the first step – the moment a minute or two after the child in his line drawing, and a mere split second after Charlot’s child. The line drawing is dated September of 1943, indicating that the pivotal moment of the first step and its immediate precursor held Picasso’s attention for most of that year.

**Dates of Creation**

The dating of Picasso’s canvas has been a somewhat contentious subject due to the conflicting evidence available but is vital to understanding whether he could have used Charlot's work as a source. The back of the canvas is dated in Picasso’s hand “21 Mai 43,” leading to the work initially being dated May 21st 1943 (fig. 25). However, Picasso’s painted the study of the child’s feet onto a full page of the *Paris-Soir* newspaper, a page that can be dated to June 2nd 1943 (see fig. 4). Furthermore, the study for *First Steps* that depicts the curved shape of the mother’s back and her overall form is dated August 17th 1943 (see fig. 11). Of course, these later dates from the summer of 1943 conflict with the date inscribed on the canvas and so close observation of the
painting is required to understand why studies exist from months after the painting is dated.

Diagonal lines running through the upper corners of the painting are visible under the paint layer in raking light (fig. 26). These are the first hint that a previous composition exists beneath the surface of Picasso’s *First Steps*. The line on the right of the figures is steeply drawn, stemming from the upper right corner of the canvas and terminating at the corner of the child's right eye. To the left of the figures, the line follows a less dramatic incline from the upper left corner, skimming the significantly raised left eyebrow of the child. A web of other lines spread out in the upper corners of the canvas and move down into the rest of the painting (fig. 27). These lines can be seen under raking light due to the thick impasto used to apply them before they were painted over.

By considering another of Picasso's depictions of children from 1943, we can explore one possible explanation for these lines. In *Child with Doves*, a deep diagonal line and a shallower one, each originating from the upper corners of the canvas, intersect to delineate the ceiling of the room within which the child is seated (fig. 28). These lines cross over with several other lines which form a square box or shelf in the upper corner of the canvas. In this composition, the ceiling framing the image created by the intersecting lines serves to make the child seem smaller. The young boy is relegated to the lower right corner of the painting, a large chair and its looming shadow seeming to press the boy further into his quarter of the canvas. The receding ceiling demonstrates the depth of the room behind the child, which disappears into a clouded dark recess.

In *First Steps*, if the lines were also intended to create a ceiling as in *Child with Doves*, the perspectival point at which they connect is hidden behind the head of the
monumental child, serving quite the opposite purpose. Rather than being forced into a subsection of the canvas, the child in the *First Steps* painting dominates the space, filling the room within which he may have been originally set.

Susan Greenberg Fisher, former associate curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Yale University Art Gallery, suggested alternative explanation for these lines. In her book *Picasso and the Allure of Language*, Greenberg Fisher proposes that the diagonal lines indicate the back of a large, throne-like chair, indicating that in an earlier composition, the child was depicted alone, standing or seated.45 This chair would encompass the mess of under-painted lines visible beneath the surface layer of paint near the child's wrists: Greenberg Fisher suggests that these were armrests which were adapted into the hands and arms of the mother when she was added later.46 Several sources support the idea that the mother was added later to the composition, including Brassai, who saw the painting in October of 1943. Brassai claimed that Picasso stated that the child didn’t know how to walk yet and would have “fallen over” unless Picasso added the mother.47 This does oppose the idea that Picasso added the mother due to a transfer of Charlot's print. However, it is worth bearing in mind the contradictory statements often made by Picasso when discussing the sources of his work, such as his rejection and later admission of having used African artworks to create *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*.

Indeed, whether the diagonal lines represent the edges of the ceiling or the outline of a large chair, either explanation would support the idea that Picasso added the mother to the composition later. In either scenario, the main alteration that occurs with the

removal of the chair or the ceiling is a change in focus. Both the ceiling and chair would have provided external context other than the figure presented. Without either, the focus of the viewer is planted firmly in the moment of the first step, not distracted by the architecture of the room or furniture. Instead, the viewer engages directly with the child as he moves forwards in an undefined space: there is no indication of how far or quickly he is moving. Only the motion itself is important, rather than the context of the motion.

Charlot’s print is also devoid of external context: it simply depicts the mother and the child. This also places the focus of the viewer solely on the moment at hand, and the relationship between the mother and child, rather than the relationship between the figures and their environment. It could be argued that Picasso eliminating the background or furniture and introducing the mother indicates that he had devised the child struggling with his first steps without Charlot’s print and that the mother was a natural addition that came as he explored the composition, rather than as a transfer from the lithograph. However, the feet and face of the child, and the shape of the mother, are all from studies in the later months of the year, seemingly being added together. Therefore, it seems more likely that Picasso developed these elements, all of which bear some resemblance to the Charlot print, simultaneously.

This leaves us to seek another explanation for the alterations to the canvas. One possibility is that Picasso had painted a child either seated in a chair or standing in a room, without the conceit of the first step, by May of 1943. This is supported by a pair of eyes which can be seen in raking light under the current face of the child, suggesting that the child’s face was not always as it appears now (fig. 29). The following month, Picasso introduced the pivotal moment of the first step, as evidenced by the June studies of the
child’s feet. In August, he sketched out the new face of the child, and devised the curved shape of the mother who would support his newly unstable child. If this is the correct timeline, then it seems appropriate to believe that something inspired this thematic shift in the summer of 1943, precipitating Picasso’s choices to depict the first step, alter the child’s face, and add the mother figure. Based on the analysis of the similarities between these features in the print and the painting, it seems fair to offer the print as the source for this shift. Thus, I propose that Picasso encountered this print sometime in the summer of 1943 and subsequently remodeled his portrait of a child in response to the lithograph.

**Routes of Transfer**

Of course, the claim that Charlot’s *First Steps* was the source material of Picasso’s painting does require some exploration of ways in which Picasso could have encountered the print. Without viable routes of circulation, arguments concerning the reciprocal and multidirectional nature of artistic cultural transfer are insubstantial and ultimately unhelpful, as we cannot call the print a ‘transfer.’ The print, or at least a version of the composition depicting the parallel elements outlined in the above formal analysis, must have been transplanted from its initial cultural context and been available to Picasso before the finalization of the oil painting in 1943.

In *The Source of Picasso’s First Steps: Jean Charlot’s First Steps*, John Charlot notes that the Charlot lithograph was produced cheaply and in large quantities by the American Artists Group. Jean Charlot was well known for his preference for producing prints in unlimited editions and shunning limited runs or including signatures on his prints. In his book, *Popular Art, The Example of Jean Charlot*, Peter Morse summarizes

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Charlot’s stance on the "fine points of authenticity, such as signatures, editions, numbers and states.” Morse states that Charlot dismissed these types of authenticators as “fungus,” intended to “reduce the number of prints and raise prices.”49 Not only does this stance mark Charlot as a “popular” artist as Morse points out, but it also increases the paths through which his print was transferred to other artists and viewers and, possibly, to Picasso, given the sheer number of prints that were produced, and how cheaply they were sold, they could be transferred widely.

In 1937, the year after Charlot produced the lithograph in question, Carl Zigrosser of the Weyhe Gallery in New York City published his catalogue, *Six Centuries of Fine Prints*. That Charlot’s *First Steps* was included in this catalogue provided another definite route through which this specific print was circulated and another possibility for Picasso to see the print. Zigrosser also published Picasso’s own etching, the artist’s first major attempt at printmaking *Le Repas Frugal*, 1904, on the following page of this catalogue.50 Charlot and Zigrosser’s paths crossed many times during the course of their lives, and particularly in the period before the printing of the *First Steps* lithograph and up to the creation of Picasso’s painting. In 1930, Charlot advised his friend, the photographer Edward Weston, that Zigrosser had the better taste of those in the New York Gallery business and so to show his photographs in the Weyhe, if possible.51 Between 1934 and 1939 Lynton Kistler, a longtime collaborator with Jean Charlot, exchanged letters with Zigrosser. In these letters, the pair discussed exhibiting Charlot’s lithographs at Zigrosser’s gallery and Zigrosser did buy and sell Charlot’s prints, publishing *First Steps*

in his 1937 book. Furthermore, Charlot contributed essays to the *Magazine of Art*, for which Zigrosser was on the Editorial Board.

As a collector of fine prints, Zigrosser also had several links to Picasso, buying and selling his works at the Weyhe – and even granting permission for Charlot to reproduce one of the Picasso etchings owned by the Weyhe in his book *Art from the Mayans to Disney*. In 1958, Zigrosser wrote an essay that was included in the exhibition catalogue of a loan exhibition of Picasso’s paintings, drawings, sculpture, ceramics, prints, and illustrated books, which was shown at the MoMA, the Chicago Institute of Art, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Zigrosser’s essay, *Picasso as a Graphic Artist*, specifically introduced the artist’s work in printmaking. Indeed, while Picasso never visited the United States, Carl Zigrosser’s longtime involvement in the artistic lives of both Jean Charlot and Pablo Picasso does provide a link between the pair, through which their work could easily have been transferred.

An alternate way in which Picasso could have come into contact with at least some version of the print is through a catalogue of Jean Charlot’s prints, published by the artist and Albert Carman in 1936. In this book, Charlot sketched onto plates and subsequently printed copies of the lithographs he had produced, annotating each with its name, date and location of production, publisher, medium, and any other points of interest. On page 32, an iteration of the *First Steps* lithograph appears, clearly depicting

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the print, including the notable features that appear in Picasso’s later painting and reiterating the unlimited nature of this edition in a note to the reader (fig. 30). This sketch of the print includes each of the formal similarities between the pieces noted previously, including the rounded back of the bowed mother, the rounded facial features of the child, and the rounded off, triangular foot moving forwards.

This catalogue, which could be a sales catalogue or an exhibition catalogue, could easily have been transferred from New York to Europe and found its way to Picasso. In the article *Exhibition Catalogues in the globalization of Art: A Source for Social and Spatial Art History*, Beatrice Joyeux-Prunel and Olivier Marcel discuss the ways in which catalogues like this one can be used to trace the spread of art, as they were often picked up by collectors, agents, and artists and thus made artistic cultural transfer possible. Electronic correspondence with Joyeux-Prunel confirmed that these catalogues enabled the transfer of artistic ideas from place to place contemporaneously, facilitating the globalization of art as it was produced, exhibited, and sold.

**Conclusions**

Certainly, it seems possible that Charlot’s print could have been the source for Picasso’s later oil painting, as striking points of contact in the formal qualities of the artworks exist, as well as several routes through which Picasso could have encountered Charlot’s lithograph. But what does this mean for our understanding of artistic interaction and the ways ideas spread and develop? It does not seem to indicate that some artists are

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58 Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, email message to author, March 5, 2018.
purely influencers – innovators who create and spread influence, while others are purely influenced, as the conversations around the center-periphery model have previously asserted. A different, and I would argue a better model would see these relationships of exchange as multidirectional and reciprocal, in which works of art are transferred into new cultural zones and contexts, retaining their initial meanings while also taking on new ones as they are constantly reinterpreted.

Moreover, it is not simply art objects that can be understood as cultural transfers. Charlot himself could also be considered a cultural transfer, as a person who actively spread and reimagined cultural ideas. Charlot moved from France, to Mexico, to New York, and then throughout the United States, eventually settling in Hawai‘i after periods spent living in Georgia and California. Charlot’s work as an artist was insistently multidirectional, and as he moved, he picked up and deposited artistic ideas around the globe, transferring ideas between artists. His French mural background was a fundamental influence in introducing the Mexican muralists to *buon fresco* techniques. In turn, he drew much of his influence from Mexican art, culture, and people, developing motifs that would stay with him throughout his life. In moving to the United States, he transferred this Mexican style and content to a new geographical region, producing prints of Mexican subjects, and also murals comparing the histories of Mexico and the US in his Mexican style in Athens, Georgia (figs. 31 and 32).

Yet there is something poignant about the *First Steps* works in particular forming a case study for artistic cultural transfer. These images capture in their very subject matter a single moment of transfer between two individuals. The child draws on his

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59 John Charlot, “Jean Charlot's First Fresco: The Massacre in the Main Temple.”
mother’s steps for reference, but does not grow to become a reproduction of the mother, nor is he superior for having created his independence from her initial demonstration. Rather, by replicating the step modeled by his mother, the child grows into something else entirely: an individual, completely different and separate from his mother, and yet equally valid and meaningful. Perhaps the elements in Picasso’s painting that are comparable to the print are like these first steps. Through them we can trace Picasso’s new direction; a direction that results in a wholly new entity, the First Steps painting.

Picasso using Charlot’s print as a source for his First Steps supports the understanding of a web of artistic cultural transfer, in which ideas, techniques, and innovations are passed back and forth between creators, being adapted, rethought, and expanded upon. Neither artist must be relegated to the role of ‘imitator’ and neither elevated to the pedestal of singular ‘genius’ as some critics are so eager to do. Rather, both artists – and the unnamed others whose ideas were transferred to them, and to whom they transferred other ideas – play an important and equal role in the creation and transfer of artistic ideas.
### Figures

| Fig. 1 | Jean Charlot, *First Steps*. 1936. 44.8 x 31 cm, lithograph on Stone. Metropolitan Museum of Art. |

![Image of Jean Charlot's *First Steps*](image-url)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig. 2</th>
<th>Pablo Picasso, <em>First Steps</em>. 1943. 130.2 x 97.1 cm, oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 3</td>
<td>Pablo Picasso, detail of <em>First Steps</em>. 1943. 130.2 x 97.1 cm, oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 4</td>
<td>Pablo Picasso, <em>Study of Feet</em>. June 1943. 60 x 43.5 cm, oil on newsprint from Paris-Soir, 06/02/1943. Private collection. Image provided by Enrique Mallen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 5</td>
<td>Pablo Picasso, detail of <em>First Steps</em>. 1943. 130.2 x 97.1 cm, oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 6</td>
<td>Jean Charlot, detail of <em>First Steps</em>. 1936. 44.8 x 31 cm, lithograph on Stone. Metropolitan Museum of Art.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 7</td>
<td>Jean Charlot, detail of <em>First Steps</em>. 1936. 44.8 x 31 cm, lithograph on Stone. Metropolitan Museum of Art.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig. 8</th>
<th>Jean Charlot, <em>Sketch of Luz Jiménez</em>. 1924, paper and pencil. Jean Charlot Collection.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Fig. 9  Jean Charlot, detail of *First Steps*. 1936. 44.8 x 31 cm, lithograph on Stone. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. 10  Pablo Picasso, detail of *First Steps*. 1943. 130.2 x 97.1 cm, oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig. 11</th>
<th>Pablo Picasso, <em>First Steps (Study)</em>. 22 x 14 cm, graphite on paper. Private collection. Image provided by Enrique Mallen.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 12</td>
<td>Jean Charlot, <em>Bullet</em>. 1920 or 1921. 17.8 x 23.5 cm, gouache, mounted on gold paper, with plain paper as backing. University of Hawai‘i.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 13</td>
<td>Pablo Picasso, <em>Table in a Café (Bottle of Pernod).</em> 1912. 45.5 x 32.5 cm, oil on Canvas. Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 14</td>
<td>Pablo Picasso, <em>Bottles and Glasses.</em> 1911–12. 64.4 x 49.5 cm, oil on paper, mounted on canvas. Guggenheim Museum.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 15  Olmec mask (Olmec-style mask). c. 1200 - 400 B.C.E., 10.6 x 8.6 x 3.2 cm, jadeite. Found in offering 20, buried c. 1470 C.E. at the Aztec Templo Mayor. Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City.

Fig. 16  Jean Charlot, *First Steps*. 1946. 24.8 x 13.0 cm, lithograph. Yale University Art Gallery.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig. 17</th>
<th>Teotihuacan mask (Teotihuacan-style mask). 3rd – 7th century. 23.7 x 24.8 x 10.8 cm, stone-sculpture. Metropolitan Museum of Art.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 18</td>
<td>Detail from the relief sculpture along the Ball Court Walls. 95 x 8 m, carved stone. Chichén Itzá. Photograph provided by Rachel Tavel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 19</td>
<td>Pablo Picasso, <em>Motherhood and Man Sitting at Table</em>. 1898. 23.1 x 33.6 cm, brush and blue ink on paper. Private collection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 20</td>
<td>Pablo Picasso, <em>Mother and Child</em>. 1922. 81 x 100 cm, oil on canvas. Baltimore Museum of Art.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 21  Pablo Picasso, *Mother and Child*. 1905. 9.9 x 15.6 cm, print glued onto board. Private collection.

Fig. 22  Pablo Picasso, *Mother and Child*. 1943. 37 x 30.7 cm, ink and ink wash on paper. Christie’s collection.

Fig. 23  Pablo Picasso, *Mother and Child*. 1959. Pencil on paper. Private collection. Image provided by Enrique Mallen.
Fig. 24 Pablo Picasso, *Women and Children*. 1943. 14 x 22 cm, pencil on paper. Private collection. Image provided by Enrique Mallen.

Fig. 25 Pablo Picasso, Obverse of *First Steps* canvas. 1943. Yale University Art Gallery. Photograph provided by Ian McClure, New Haven.

Fig. 26 Pablo Picasso, detail of *First Steps*. 1943. 130.2 x 97.1 cm, oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery. Photograph provided by Ian McClure, New Haven.
Fig. 27  Pablo Picasso, detail of *First Steps*. 1943. 130.2 x 97.1 cm, oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery. Photograph provided by Ian McClure, New Haven.

Fig. 28  Pablo Picasso, *Child with Doves*. 1943. 162 x 130 cm, oil on canvas. Musée Picasso.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig. 29</th>
<th>Pablo Picasso, detail of <em>First Steps</em>. 1943. 130.2 x 97.1 cm, oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery. Photograph provided by Ian McClure, New Haven.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 30</td>
<td>Jean Charlot, Illustration from <em>Catalogue of Prints</em>, 1936. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Scan provided by Art Institute of Chicago.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 31  Jean Charlot, *Paratroopers Land in Sicily from Time Discloseth All Things; Cortez Lands in Mexico; Paratroopers Land in Sicily*. January 3–February 29, 1944. Fresco. 20.1 × 3.3 m. Corridor, Journalism Building, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia. Photograph provided by Jean Charlot Foundation.

Fig. 32  Jean Charlot, *Cortez Lands in Mexico from Time Discloseth All Things; Cortez Lands in Mexico; Paratroopers Land in Sicily*. January 3–February 29, 1944. Fresco. 20.1 × 3.3 m. Corridor, Journalism Building, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia. Photograph provided by Jean Charlot Foundation.
Bibliography


