

# HENRI CHARLIER

## SCULPTOR AND PAINTER (1883 – 1975)

### CHRONOLOGY

18 april 1883 — Birth of Henri Charlier in Paris, quarter Montmartre, from burgundian parents. His father, a Freemason, is strongly anticatholic. Thus Henri is not baptized and is raised with no concern for religion. He makes his secondary education at the Lycée Janson of Sully. During his infancy and adolescence, because he finds life stifling in Paris, he takes all his summer holidays with his grand-parents of his mother's side, – who are wine-grower in Cheny (Yonne). There, his greatest pleasure consists in harvesting the crop or to gather in the grapes with his grand-father.

1891 — At the age of 7, Henri Charlier accompanies his mother for a visit at the Exhibition of the Industry center, where he discovers a painting which impresses him and that he will, later on, recognize as the "*Ave Picardia nutrix*" of Puvis de Chavannes : « one of the less literary, of the most modelled works, of the most decorative from its author » he will affirm afterwards, when pointing out to this discovery, that it has been the first step in his artistic vocation.

1892 — Henri Charlier begins to study the piano as early as at the age of 8. Music held an important place in his life as an artist, especially because of the analogy between the plastic arts' language (the art of the line) and the musical language (free rhythm, use of musical modes), and also because of the similitudes which he perceived between the reform of the plastic arts sought by Rodin, Van Gogh and Gauguin, and the reform in music inaugurated by Erik Satie and Claude Debussy.

1897 or 1898 — Realizes his first drawing of nature : "*The Mill of Cheny*".

1899 — Is admitted to the first part of bachelorship. Realizes his first oil-painting that same year.

1901 — Achieves one year of study of the Law in order to follow his father's wish, but does not have an interest in the least with this subject matter. He considers becoming an historian, but also begins to think about Fine-Arts.

1902 — At 19 years old, Henri Charlier enters into the workshop of Jean-Paul Laurens, an artist then considered as the natural opponent of the School of Fine-Arts (that which Charlier ignores). He stays only a single year in that workshop, « where I had the blues » he would write afterwards.

He proceeds with the study of painting at the Colarossi Academy. Until the age of 30 (1913) he goes on with a career of painter.

1904 — When aged 21, he is called to be a substitute teacher of drawing (certificated of State) in the schools of the City of Paris, employment which he will occupy until 1914. Moreover he studies by himself in the Academies of Montparnasse and in his workshop of La Ruche, in Vaugirard, owned by sculptor Alfred Boucher. At that time Henri Charlier meets with Rodin, Matisse and Bourdelle. The exhibition of the French Primitives deeply impresses Henri Charlier. Later he himself will say about that exhibition : « It is there that appeared for the first time the *Pietà of Avignon* and the *Coronation of the Virgin* of Enguerrand Quarton, until then hidden at the Villeneuve-lès-Avignon's Charterhouse. The problem stated by those masterpieces was this : how to retrieve these qualities of form and colour in the life, without imitation or pastiche. The problem was already resolved in the main by Van Gogh and Gauguin, but those artists were unknown by the artistic youth. »

Death of Gauguin in the Marqueses Islands.

1906 — Death of Cézanne. A little later, an exposition of Cézanne's works, which Henri Charlier visits.

On 25 august, Charlier gets married (civilian marriage) with Émilie Boudard (known as Claude Franchet in literature).

1910 — Henri Charlier sees for the first time some works from Gauguin at the house of an old friend of that artist. In his relation of that visit, Charlier did not reveal his identity but it would be Durrio, where he returned in 1930. Henri Charlier set then his art towards the great reformers : Van Gogh, Rodin, Cézanne, Gauguin, and Puvis de Chavannes, the initiator of the grand decorative painting.

From 1905 to 1910 : realization of the "*Chaste Susannah*", oil for canvas large size (95 x 140 cm) which, after only eight years of experiments in modelling already shows a genuine mastery of form, colour and composition. Henri Charlier, during that period, is between 22 and 27 years old.

1911 — Exhibits at the Exhibition of the Independent Artists : "*The wounded child*" (oil on wood). This exhibition is the first known up to date. But Charlier had probably exposed before at the same exhibition. It has been followed by many others, among which some are mentioned in this chronology.

1913 — Conversion, after a long reflection, and the observation of the greatness of Middle-Ages Christian Art. Baptism and religious wedding on the same day.

During these years preceding World War I, he is introduced to Mrs. Favre, the mother of the

philosopher and convert Jacques Maritain, through the lying between of Emilie Charlier, who is a friend of Mrs. Jeanne Garnier, Maritain's sister.

In that manner he was introduced to Charles Péguy, Jacques Maritain, and Ernest Psichari. Just like all those new converts, he frequents assiduously the benedictine nuns' monastery of the Monsieur Street (in Paris), at the same time their chaplain, Dom Besse. It is he that would have reveal to Charlier the monastery of Dom André Emmanuel at Mesnil-Saint-Loup (Aube), from whom he received his benedictine oblation.

Project of painting in fresco for Rodin, on the farther end of the Seminary's chapel, Place Saint-Sulpice in Paris. That project, still kept in Rodin's archives, did not succeed because of the war, and Rodin fell sick. But Charlier painted some pieces of this fresco, which are preserved at the Rodin Museum in Paris.

The same year : intuition of the analogy between drawing and rhythm, and first attempt of sculpture by the direct carving of stone.

1914 — In the beginning of January, while returning from some holidays with the family in Burgundy, the couple Charlier finds in the mailbox the issue of the *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* including Péguy's *Ève* (28 décembre 1913) – a huge poem formed with two thousand quatrains. Having read that masterpiece, and been enraptured by it, Henri Charlier goes to the Sorbonne's street in order to congratulate Péguy. He addresses him this compliment : « When someone did such a great work, he may die. » According to Jeanne Maritain, and to Madame Favre where he hasten at once to share the fact, Péguy saw in it a formal warning from above, and was upset about it. Three months later, facing a flop of *Ève* in the literary sphere of that time, Péguy confessed to Emilie Charlier : « Do you know how many you have been to write me after the reception of *Ève* ? You have been three : Lotte, your husband and you. » Then Péguy proposed to Henri Charlier to make with him the pilgrimage of Chartres that same year, proposal which could not be realized by reason of Péguy's enrolment on active service

During the summer of 1914, the Charlier went to Jeanne Maritain's house of Bussières, in Burgundy. On August 2, they are informed of the general enlisting, along with the villagers gathered together on the common place. The War will keep all three in Bussières until October. It is at the same place that, on September 17, they received the news of Péguy's death, killed on the 5th during the first day of the battle of the Marne. Jeanne went immediately to mourn him at the foot of an oratory installed in her house, while Emilie Charlier ran to village's church. There she did the way of the Cross, during which she received at one blow, the grace of faith. « Such had been the first effect known of Péguy's sacrifice » would write Henri some sixty years later in his relation of Emilie's life. Charlier will sculpt a cross of stone for Péguy's grave in Villeroy. It was asked by Father Paul Doncoeur, s.j. Then Henri Charlier enrolls himself as a volunteer for the War (he had been invalided). He is enlist as infirmian. After his service obligations, he is moved to a quarter at Épernay. There, while his companions play cards, Henri Charlier arrange himself a shop in any sort of corner. He finds derelict stones in a cemetery and carves them : confirms his tries of 1913.

1915 — Visit to Rodin sick.

1916 — In march, Henri Charlier is appointed to the sixth section of nurses of the mixed Refuge of Commercy (Meuse). The same year, he exhibits a painted bas-relief at the Exhibition of the Mobilized Independent Artists of the pavilion of Marsan (exposition on liturgical arts). The architect Maurice Storez buys that bas-relief and offers Henri Charlier a place as founder member of the Arche, a society of christian artists and architects which had among its members Dom Bellot (monk of Solesmes), Droz (architect of Saint Louis of Vincennes), Fernand Py (who will collaborate with Henri Charlier), Charles Jacob, his student, Valentine Reyre and Sabine Desvallières. However Storez engages Henri Charlier as sculptor, that which would decide of his future career. At that time, he frequents Maurice Denis and Georges Desvallières.

1917 — Death of Rodin.

1918 — End of World War I.

1919 — Henri Charlier makes the Paris-Chartres pilgrimage, in two days, barefoot. He moves to Cheny (Yonne) in the house of his grands-parents, where he works by the direct carving of stone.

From 1922 to 1926 — Sculpture of the great war memorials by the direct carving of stone : the *"Mourner"* of Onesse-Laharie (Landes), the *"Apocalyps' Angel"* of Acy (Aisne), the *"Saint Louis"* of the pyramid of Uza (Landes).

1922 — Henri Charlier exhibits at the Fall Exhibition his first *"Saint Joan of Arc"* (statue of stone polychromed, direct carving). This Charlier's work having found an enthusiastic greeting in the public opinion, its author is appointed as associate of the Fall Exhibition. He would continue to exhibit there, whenever the circumstances would allow it. Thus about the *"Mourner"* of the War memorial of Onesse-Laharie which was exposed there before its moving in the Landes (South Western France).

1923 — After the return of the monks of Solesmes from their exile in the Island of Wight, Henri Charlier becomes intimate with Dom Henri de Laborde who then conducts the sacred art workshop of the Abbey. Later, he will sculpt by the direct carving of stone the cloister's Madona of the Abbey of Solesmes (1927), and afterwards the recumbent of Dom Guéranger in the Abbey's crypt (1933).

1924 — Exhibits at the Tuileries' Exhibition : the *"Apocalyps' Angel"* of Acy.

1925 — Exhibits at the Fall Exhibition (the Exposition of Modern Religious Arts). That year, Henri Charlier definitively retires with his wife at the Mesnil-Saint-Loup, a village where Father Emmanuel had founded the benedictine Olivetan monastery of Holy Hope, « in hopes to convert myself » he will explain afterwards.

He devotes himself to the sculpture by the direct carving (stone and wood). He teaches to many students among whom Roland Coignard, Raymond Dubois, Edgard Delvaux, and Jacques

Sergeff, sculptors, to the painter Bernard Bouts – with whom Charlier settles at the Mesnil a stained-glass window's shop –, and finally François Robert and Albert Gérard. During 1936-1937, he also had for his student Marius Plamondon, a French-Canadian artist sculptor. Besides his sculpture, painting and stained-glass window's shop, Henri Charlier establishes in the 1930's an embroidery shop aimed to make liturgical ornaments (chasubles, banners, etc.). Finally, he organizes an orchestra with the villagers of the Mesnil-Saint-Loup, to whom he will also give a daily gregorian chant class of half an hour, and this until the end of his life.

During the same time, he becomes intimate with the musician and composer Claude Duboscq. Henri Charlier would collaborate with him later on miscellaneous works : illustration of the "*Canticles to the winter saints*"; making the masks of the characters of the musical drama "*Little Colombe*" (Colombe la petite) in 1938. When Claude Duboscq died, Henri Charlier asks to his family that Duboscq be buried at the Mesnil-Saint-Loup, where it still reposes today, in the same tomb than Henri Charlier.

On July 1st, 1925 – Death of the composer Erik Satie. Henri Charlier wrote him a short time before : « You, the only musician since Rameau to whom greatness is natural, give us religious music for our time ».

1928 — Publication of the album *Henri Charlier, tailles directes* (Wépion).

At that time, Henri Charlier gives many conferences to the *Thomist Club*, at the request of Father Peillaube, dean of the Faculty of Philosophy of Paris. Thus, he enters upon diverse subjects: in 1928, *Theology of a romanesque church : Saint Magdalen of Vézelay* (published in french in an issue of *Les Cahiers de Racines*); in 1931, under the general title of *L'esthétique chrétienne de l'art contemporain* ("The Christian esthetic of Contemporary Arts"), he successively talks of *Dom Paul Bellot*, and then of the *Promesses de l'art musical : Claude Duboscq* ("Promises of the Musical Arts : Claude Duboscq").

Henri Charlier becomes intimate with the Baroness Cochin, who also organizes for her own part a conference club in Paris, on Babylone Street. She asks him his cooperation for some accounts on arts.

Winter 1928-1929 — Henri Charlier falls severely sick of a typhoid fever, that drives him to the gates of death. However he recovers, but his convalescence will be very long.

1929 — The government of the Province of Quebec grants a scholarship for Europe to Sylvia Daoust, graduate sculptor from the School of Fine Arts of Montreal. It gives her the opportunity to meet Henri Charlier. The Canadian journal *Le devoir*, in its obituary notice of Sylvia Daoust (27 July 2004), indicates what has been the influence of Charlier on that pioneer of the sculpture in Quebec : « In France, she is very much impressed by the work of Henri Charlier, sculptor at the Mesnil-Saint-Loup. Well-known as painter, poet and gregorianist musician, Charlier will become a friend of hers whose influence on the young artist will prove to be most important. » A woman sculptor of national renowned in French-Canada, by reason of her huge sculptures which decorate many public and religious monuments in Montreal, Sylvia Daoust became member of the Royal Canadian Academy. She will find Charlier again a few years later on the building site of the Saint-Joseph's Oratory of Montreal.

1930 — Henri Charlier visits the sculptor Durrio, an old friend of Gauguin and owner of some of his important works.

Carves the statue of saint Joseph with the Child (polychromed stone) for the cloister of the Abbey of La Pierre-qui-Vire. Concerning that statue, Paul Claudel wrote to André Charlier, younger brother of Henri : « Charlier is a great carver of images, one of those artists according to God's Heart of whom it is spoken of in the Books of Wisdom. His statue of saint Joseph at La Pierre-qui-Vire is magnificent and I exceedingly appreciated its polychromy. That is an excellent way.»

September 1930 — Publication of a “*Note on the Christian Esthetic*” in the periodical *La Vie intellectuelle* : first draft of *L'Art et la Pensée*. Charlier expresses for the first time the original idea that “art is a parable”, which will become afterwards one of the key ideas of his esthetical vision.

1934 — On 16 february, Henri Charlier is nominated as life associate of the Academic Society of the department of Aube. During that same year, he publishes in the *Bulletin des Missions* of the Abbey Saint- André of Lophem his opusculé : *Art et missions*, in which he treats of the eternal principles of arts through a comparative study of the syrian, aegyptian, chinese, greek, african, russian arts, and of the Middle Ages Europe until the Modern times. After he read that opusculé, Paul Claudel did not spare his congratulations : « The catholic arts may be proud of names such as Dom Bellot, as Cingria, as Charlier (who actually publishes with a skill which I do not have, in the *Bulletin des Missions* of Saint André of Lophem, some admirable articles), as Servaes.» (Paul Claudel, *Le goût du fade*, in *Positions et propositions*, oeuvres en prose complètes, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, p.117).

1937 — Henri Charlier travels to Canada with Dom Bellot, who works on the site of the Saint Joseph's Oratory of Montreal. Charlier paints a fresco for that Oratory (Death of saint Joseph), and gives some talks to diverse groups of people (diocesan seminarians, etc).

During that first trip, Charlier will be invited to meet the Canadian painter Horatio Walker in his workshop on the Island of Orléans, one year before the death of Walker, who used to be called the “Millet of America” by his contemporaries. He was indeed the most esteemable – and perhaps the most esteemed – artist of his generation in North America. Charlier and he had in common their refusal of revolutionary theories in arts extolled by the Cubism, the Dada school, and the others (see Paul Lavoie, “*Horatio Walker*”, in *Le Devoir*, 5 november 1938).

It is doubtless in the course of this first trip in Canada that was born the project of a monumental sculptures for the Oratory of Saint Joseph, which he will do after the Second World War.

During the years preceding the war, besides his very important task of artist, Henri Charlier collaborates to many publications (*L'Arche*, *La Vie intellectuelle*, *L'Artisan liturgique*...) and deepen his thought on plastic arts in general, and more particularly on christian art. He lives on friendly terms with the poetess Marie Noël, who hails from Burgundy like him, and also with the writer Henri Pourrat whom he sees regularly at the time of some holidays passed in Auvergne, firstly near the sanctuary of Notre-Dame de Vassivière in Besse-en-Chandesse, and then after in Longchaud, near Ambert (Henri Pourrat's place).

June 1940 — It is in that region, in Longchaud, that Charlier finds a refuge during the exod, brought forth by the collapse of the French armies. From that period will come the numerous “Aquarelles” and “Trees portraits”, painted for the most part on paper from Auvergne.

1941 — Death of the philosopher Henri Bergson. Jacques Chevalier had made him notice some review articles from Henri Charlier. And Charlier himself had the occasion to visit Bergson, through the medium of the Baronness Cochin. After Bergson’s death, he wrote in order to thank her for having manage him an interview with the philosopher : « This direct seizure we have of a great spirit is a real joy. »

1942 — Publication by Arthaud of his first book : *Culture, École, Métier* (“Culture, School, Craft”), devoted to the reform of education. That book is published only in the South zone of France, for the Germans prohibit it in the Northen zone.

During that time Henri Charlier sets himself to the decorate the church of La Bourboule (Puy-de-Dôme). So he begins the carving of the capitals and, after the War, will complete the altar and many statues. He is helped in his job by the sculptor Philippe Kaeppelin.

1943 — The Charlier spouses leave the region of Auvergne and reinstall themselves at home at the Mesnil-Saint-Loup.

In november, at the request of the Fustel de Coulanges Club, Henri Charlier gives a conference, presided over by Daniel Halévy, on his book *Culture, École, Métier*, at the amphitheatre Turgot of la Sorbonne.

1944 — First attempt of publishing his book *L’Art et la Pensée* (“Art and Thought”), by La Nouvelle Édition. The contract with the publisher was sign and seal, but in december a want of paper consecutive to the state of war hindered the publication.

1945 — Henri Charlier carves a Calvary for the cimetry of Ville Saint-Laurent (Canada). He sent a photograph of the Blessed Virgin of that Calvary to Marie Noël. She answered this note to Charlier : « What you sent me, how wonderful it is! Your “Our Lady”, first, what a magnificent hand! I am angry when I think that this “Our Lady” so humanly sorrowful went away on the other shore of the sea, throwing back France who did not know how to keep her. And one day, in a long while, the little children of the today’s Canadians will talk about the master of the Mesnil to some French who will not know what to say. Never mind, the work will have been made and done. »

1948 — After the coming out of Victor Fleming’s film *Joan of Arc*, Henri Charlier carves a wooden polychromed statue of the Saint to offer it to the actress Ingrid Bergman, who played the main part in that film. Once again, it is Father Doncoeur s.j. who ordered the work.

1950 — Toward the end of the year, after an uneasiness, reminding angina, he undergoes a fastidious surgery of the thyroid gland, operation of which he will recover quite well.

About at the same time, he completes the decoration of the church at La Bourboule : the

capitals and the tympanum done since 1945–46, he still had to make the decoration of the choir, the carving of the stone altar, the eucharistic closet, and also the statues in the stone of saint Joseph, of saint Therese of Lisieux, and of saint Joan of Arc.

Begins then the monumental sculptures for the Saint Joseph's Oratory of Montreal (Canada) the greatest sanctuary over the world dedicated to Saint Joseph. There, Charlier sculpted a high altar, representing Jesus-Christ into his Grave, his Resurrection, and the sacrifice of Abel and Isaac. This sculpture was presented as « the most beautiful altar in Christendom » during a TV show broadcasted worldwide. Behind this, Charlier executed a monumental Calvary on which the Virgin and Saint John are 8 feet high. On the sides, twelve apostles, wooden made, are 14 feet high.

1955 — Publication of *Jean-Philippe Rameau* (Eise editions).

1956 — Publication of *Le Martyre de l'Art* (Nouvelles Éditions Latines). The same year, beginning of Charlier's participation to the review *Itinéraires*, in which, besides presenting some articles on diverse matters (arts, politics, literature...), he has charge of a religious chronicle for the different times of the liturgical year, under the pseudonym of D. Minimus. Those meditations would be gathered up later in two volumes by the publisher Dominique Martin Morin under the title *Les propos de Minimus* (1994).

André Charlier tries for the second time to edit his brother's book, *L'Art et la Pensée*, at the Wittmann publications.

1963 — Publication of *François Couperin* (Eise).

1965 — Exhibits at the Fall Exhibition : "*Our Lady of Holy Hope*", sculpture by the direct carving of stone. That work took place as stele above the tombs of the Charlier family in the cemetery of the Mesnil-Saint-Loup, in the way that Henri Charlier willed and conceived it. It evokes the gaze man must unceasingly cast beyond the earthly life.

1967 — Henri Charlier is admitted as emeritus member of the *Academic Society of the department of Aube*.

1969 — Publication of *Le chant Grégorien* (Dominique Martin Morin), book written in collaboration with his brother André.

The last monumental work of Henri Charlier dates from those years : the decorating of the chapel of the mother house of the Congregation of the Oblate Sisters of Saint Francis of Sales in Troyes (Aube) : "*Our Lady of Light*". The choice of that vocable was justified by the future dedication of the place to the mystery of Our Lord's Transfiguration. In that chapel (where everything had to be done), for the first time in his life, Charlier could realize what was his dream : « to think » the decoration of a place for the cult, in all its details, from the triumphal arch above the choir, up to the drawing of the benches, without forgetting the statues (of "Our Lady of the Assumption", of the "Christ of the Transfiguration" above the altar, both in stone polychromed; and



also a Saint Joseph to the Child, a Saint Gaétan and a Saint Jude, all three in polychromed wood), many bas-reliefs, the monumental way of the Cross, and a fresco in the crypt.

1971 — On August 8th, death of his brother André. In October, Henri and Emilie Charlier sign the *Manifeste of the 100*, along with distinguished persons such as Professor Jérôme Lejeune, Jean Ousset, Ivan Gobry, Régine Pernould, Maria Winowska... That Manifest was promoted against the Bill project aiming at the legalization of the heinous crime of abortion in France. On October 14, Emilie Charlier dies for the first vespers of the feast of Saint Terese of Avila, her patroness of benedictine oblature.

Henceforth Henri Charlier would live alone in his house of the Mesnil-Saint-Loup for the last four years of his life, preserving until the end his faculties and clearness of mind.

1972 — Twenty-seven years after the first try of publication, his book *L'Art et la Pensée* (DMM) is finally published. It is the key work of Henri Charlier in the matter of aesthetic and of the philosophy of art. « In this book, does he write, there is no embellishment, but an analysis of the means in art which has never been undertaken with sufficient knowledge ; it is done, this time, by a practitioner who handled for more than sixty years the chisel, the pencil, the hammer or the brush. » In Charlier's design, that analysis of the means of art aims at explaining for the public, for the scholars and for the « philosophers who respect the thought » (p. 10), the deep meaning of the artistic reform undertaken by Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Rodin : « The reform inaugurated by those masters needs to be pursued... but it is necessary to understand it before. The artists must bethink of it first. » (p. 54)

In the same year 1972, at the age of 89, Henri Charlier delivers his last statue : a Sacred-Heart of the Child Jesus in polychromed wood.

24 december 1975 — Death of Henri Charlier, for the first Vespers of Christmas, after having answered the prayers for the dying and required the chant *Ubi caritas et amor*, sang on Maundy Thursday. Brother Henri was buried in his habit of an Olivetan oblate.

1976 — Publication of the album *Henri Charlier, statuaire et peintre* (DMM), for which Charlier himself had prepared the model (choice of photographs and a text written on *The Language of art*, during the last months preceding his death).

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« Your idea of successive revolutions in art is extremely childish ; I am not a revolutionary ; I wanted to make a reform of the arts in order to complete the one began by Gauguin, Rodin and Van Gogh, to put back again in their simplicity the eternal principles which made great art in all the great eras. If poverty had not prevented me, if I had had free time to do the trial paintings that should have been done, I would also have carried the reform through to the painting. I did it too, undoubtedly, but I never proved it to the public. »

(June, 23<sup>rd</sup> 1946, letter to Dom Angelico Surchamp)