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36 ASAMBLEA GENERAL**

OLLER, A CARIBBEAN REALIST

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## ART

### OLLER, A CARIBBEAN REALIST

By: Samuel B. Cherson

Here we find a Caribbean painter who was in the very center of the Parisian intellectual effervescence which gave birth to Impressionism, a close friend of legendary figures like Camille Pissarro and Paul Cezanne, who worked in the same studio as Rencir, Monet and Sisley, and possibly, participant of the stimulating gatherings in the Parisian coffee houses, together with Manet, Degas and Emile Zola. An artist whose work was accepted on five occasions by the exclusive National Hall of French Painting, (in 1865, in such illustrious company as the famous Olympia by Manet), and who, in 1875, showed seven of his works in the no less famous Hall of the Rejected, bastion of the avantgarde Parisian painters. A creator who has two of his works in the fabulous Impressionist collection of the Louvre Museum, hanging in the Jeu de Paume.

This painter is no other than the Porto Rican Francisco Oller (1833-1917), who during a long life of untiring artistic activity was able to accrue an impressive international curriculum. In spite of this, instead of occupying a distinguished position in the history of the most important aesthetic movement of the XIX Century, his name has been relegated in time to a mere footnote in the History of Art.

This historical indifference is what the Ponce Museum is now attempting to make up for with the exhibition entitled "Francisco Oller, A Realist of Impressionism", to celebrate the 150th anniversary of his birth. It was inaugurated on the 17th of June, the same day as his birthday, and it will remain on show in Ponce until year end, and then next year, it will be shown in the "Museo del Barrio de Nueva York", in the Museum of the Organization of American States in Washington, the Museum of Art of Springfield, Massachusetts and the Museum of the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras.

It is one of the most important and serious efforts of aesthetic activity, without precedent in Puerto Rico. Having moved heaven and earth to locate all of the existing works of Oller, housed in public and private collections, in the Island, as well as abroad, the organizers selected, among the 120 works available, a total



of 72 works, the largest number ever collected under the same roof after the exhibition in the "Palacio de la Correspondencia" in Madrid, exactly a century ago. Among them we find the two works of the Louvre Museum, sent to Puerto Rico by messenger to eliminate any risks. The hanging of this exhibition, designed with a simple spatial logic by the architect, Jaime Suarez, obeys a chronological sequence, emphasizing particularly the grouping of the paintings according to the geographic location of their inspiration: the important sojourns in Spain and in France, alternating with long periods in his native land.

There are significant gaps in this geographic-chronological sequence, because we cannot find any painting from the time of his first trip to Paris, when he established a close friendship with the cream of French creative circles. We cannot show either, and admire, many of the important paintings shown in Europe and Puerto Rico during his life time. However, this is not due to the lack of diligence of the curators of this exhibition, but rather to the apathy and indifference of so many myopic institutional or private owners, who failed to preserve his works for the benefit of future generations, and permitted the deterioration and even, the total destruction of these works. Even one of the daughters of the artist let a group of paintings, inherited from her father, rot away in an abandoned house. A similar tragic loss occurred with the painting "Las Tinieblas" (The Darkness), accepted in the National Hall of Paris in 1865 and which disappeared from the Church of Saint Joseph in San Juan after 1961. Human indifference, together with humidity, termites and other natural scourges of the tropics, have taken on the task of preventing most of works of Oller from a just and fair evaluation in our times. According to the artist he painted between 600 and 800 paintings.

And as to what has survived, the Ponce Museum, with a view to this exhibition, undertook the herculean task of rescue, with the assistance of the laboratory resources, giving new life and splendour to the works which had been lost in time, and sometimes, lost by the unconscious "touching-up" of improvised restorers. Works such as "Portrait of General Baldrich", now with its vivid and flourishing chromatics, was completely impossible to recognize before. To prevent the recurrence of the irreparable errors and losses of the past, the Oller collectors might well consider the possibility of entrusting his works, in the form of a loan, to an institution like the Ponce Museum, in order to insure the preservation of the collection, as part of our cultural heritage.



This show is different, not only because of the tenacity and work placed in gathering and in restoring the work of Oller, but also because of the the most complete and erudite catalogue on an artist ever seen in Puerto Rico. It is filled with biographic data, fascinating letters and papers, a detailed description of each and every one of the paintings shown, as well as substantial essays by experts, national as well as foreign, (among them, the valuable introduction by René Raylor, Director Emmeritus of the Ponce Museum, an extensive profile of the artist by Haydee Venegas, who had the idea and who is curator of this exhibition, an enlightened monography of Pissarro and Oller by Cristopher Lloyd, from the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, and who organized the great exhibition of Pissarro in 1980, and works by professors Albert Boime, from UCLA, and Petra t-D-Chu, from Setton Hall University, experts in 19th Century French Realism. Others who collaborated were Edward Sullivan, Jose Emilio Gonzalez and Marimar Benitez, making this beyond a shadow of a doubt, the final document on Oller to which all students of his works will have to refer. The economic funding by the National Trust of the Arts (The Federal N.E.A.), the Administration of Economic Development, the Legislature of Puerto Rico, and the City Council of Ponce have contributed to defray the many expenditures (almost \$300,000, including \$90,000 for the catalogue) resulting from this magnificent cultural initiative.

The figure of Oller reemerges from this impressive effort made by the Ponce Museum, as an artist with extraordinary pictoric skills, and who can be compared to the most demanding technical challengers of his profession, even at the very high level of competence which exist in Paris and in Madrid of his times. On the other hand, we find an Oller, an artist imbued in the fundamental dilemma of any other painter of his time and regional origins: the alternatives posed between the Realism of conservative roots, and the avantgarde struggle of Impressionism, in the field of international aesthetic trends; between an unlimited Universalism without ties and a confining "Criollism" (Regionalism) in the ambit of the social and national commitments of his art. It is our belief, that in spite of the evident ethical and philosophical rectitude of his stance in the face of these dualities, in the last instance, he chose the most harmful alternatives, in his time, harmful to his development as a painter of international stature.

The Realist tendency observed by Oller, rooted initially in his study period in Spain, when he was 18 years old, received new stimulæ when he arrived in Paris for the first time in 1858, where he continued his studies with the Academic painter, Thomas Couture, and absorbed the teachings, imbued with social significance, of Gustave



Courbet. Nevertheless, at the same time, he began a close relationship with the privileged group of painters of his generation, entrusted with the burden on their shoulders of fighting the aesthetic revolution of Impressionism during the remainder of the century. Had Oller kept company during the rest of his life, with this distinguished group, it is probable that he could have entered the Hall of Fame through the front door, as occurred to his very close Spanish speaking friend, Camille Pissarro, also born and raised under the Caribbean sun (in the neighboring island of Saint Thomas). Instead, and different from Pissarro, Oller decided suddenly to return to his Antillean soil in 1865, leaving behind the more fertile fields of plastic experimentation of the world. ("To be far from Paris, is not good. New ideas emerge continuously.", wrote his painter friend, Armand Buillemet to Oller in a letter in 1866). This he exchanged for an uncertain fortune in the very unstimulating artistic environment of his native island. A costly error to his development as an artist. "What on earth do you wish to do in Puerto Rico? What would Pissarro do in Saint Thomas? What would I do in China", asks of him Guillemet with so much vividness in the same letter.

What Oller did in Puerto Rico was to paint furiously, portraits, still lifes and landscapes, and to open a Free School of drawing and painting, to publish a treaty on natural drawing and to wed (from which sprung two daughters very soon thereafter), burying his roots in this manner in the island. Nevertheless, very soon, and in spite of the relative public recognition received by his pictorial endeavors, as evidenced by his commissions to do portraits of Governors and of the members of society, the concession of high honorific titles by the Crown, as well as the flattering reception given to his first great exhibition, Oller felt the need to return to Europe. Remarking on this exhibition the critic, Federico Asenjo, stated, "the painter who reached the heights of my friend Oller has the right to aspire to glory; and this, unfortunately, cannot be provided by our poor society, where there is no trace to reveal the existence of the beaux arts. The only thing we can do here, and it is little in truth, is to recognize him as our best painter". The glory, worthy of Oller, could not be conquered in Europe.



When he returned to Paris in 1874, Oller found his old friends in the full fervor of Impressionism, setting up the first group exhibition, which gave the name to the movement. He also found that his style, as a result of remoteness and isolation, was distant from that of his Parisian painter friends. Nevertheless, it was not difficult for him to renew his old ties of friendship with some of them, (especially, Pissarro and Cezanne) and to adopt with relative success the Impressionist techniques, centered then on the depiction of fleeting atmospheric effects, the dissolution of forms and objects in a field of chromatic vibrations and other purely aesthetic searches, remote from any social realism intention.

Nevertheless, this last area became one of the most solid postulates of his pictorial endeavors - slavery and its abuses are the constant themes of his paintings after his first trip to France, and following a few years of flirting with Impressionism, he returned to Madrid and to the conservative tradition of Spanish Realism, with its solid modeling and finished stroke, Oller remained a realist during his second sojourn in Madrid which lasted until 1884, and this continued when he returned to Puerto Rico. And when he returned to Paris for a third and last time in 1895, to exhibit "El Velorio" (The Wake) in the Official Hall of the conservative painters that year, there were light years of distance from his style and that of Cezanne and Pissarro, his close friends of the past. The latter remarked with sadness in a letter to his son, on Oller and his great painting: "He has changed, he has aged in every way; he has shrunk, and I fear that so has his painting. He seems lost looking at my paintings, he finds them full of light and air. He paints pictures with episodic motives.... His painting looked so much better in the photograph, but I fear that it is somewhat trivial". The meeting between Oller and Cezanne was even more unfortunate, and with an incident, still unravelled altogether, which ended once and for all with their friendship, and this, according to Osiris Delgado, might be the result of some indiscreet observation made by Oller of the advanced plastic theories considered the precursors of Cubism - of the bad tempered and genial French painter, to whom Guillemet had referred, back in 1866, as a "student" of Oller. Although Oller made a last attempt to reenter the victorious phalanx of the Impressionist forefront, with a series of landscapes which, according to Fernandez Juncos, found very little acceptance by the public when he returned to Puerto Rico, the fate in history had been laid: Pissarro and Cezanne, enshrined at the head of plastic modernity, Oller, following Realism, headed in the opposite direction, as a painter of regional and local importance.



In view of his belief in the ethical function of art, there really existed no other alternative open to Oller than to prefer the path of social Realism, over the misunderstood and esthetizing Impressionism, at least by the Puerto Rican community where he decided to remain and work. Oller himself expressed it clearly in an address he gave in 1904: "The art of our times must represent, or criticize, better express, our own actions in order that it have a profitable objective. The artist, like the man of letters, is obliged to be useful for something; his painting should be the book which instructs, which serves to improve the human condition, and punishes evil, and praises good...."

Oller, in the last days of his life, left on doubts of his intense regional spirit, his "criollismo", when he expressed in the same address that, "the artist... must belong to the time in which he lives, he must belong to his country, to his legion, if he wishes to be truthful and genuine. We need paintings to represent our customs, to correct our defects and exalt our good deeds". It is this feeling of an obligation to his society and his native land which is one of the determinant factors in his final settling down in Puerto Rico, deliberately sacrificing the international projections of his art.

Albeit his stylistic dithering and his loyalties to his motherland frustrated his admittance to the international Hall of Fame, there are no doubts of his imponent stature in the Caribbean plastic movement of his time. And nothing illustrates better the happy coming together of a vivid and bold realistic brush stroke and the formal essences of the region than his extraordinary series of still lifes with tropical fruits (pineapples, mangoes, guavas, mammees, etc.) painted throughout his career. When he returned from his first trip to France, Oller painted a group of paintings with a certain academic air in blue-gray tones, where he combined the fruits of the region with crystal bowls, skillfully modeled with all kinds of sparkles, of which the "Bodegon de Guineo, Jarra y Pajules" is an outstanding example. (Still life of a banana, a vase and cashew fruit). Years later, whilst he worked on "The Wake", Oller produced in "Platanos amarillos" (Yellow bananas) one of the images with the strongest impact of his career: a simple cluster of fruit, so common in our local diet, is isolated from its surroundings and hung dramatically from a string against a flat grayish background, turning it into a strange and hypnotic symbol (of a humble life for some, of the oppression of slavery for others, whilst others still see in the companion tableau "Green Bananas", a dog or dragon-like outline). Lastly, as proof of his consistency in this genre, in the last years of his life he developed a brilliant composition of his country in "Palmillo" (Palm tree) that,



besides its strong Zurbaran-like qualities, is a complete cultural compendium on this tree, representative of the region, which is the royal palm. With his magnificent still lifes, Oller has created a complete iconography of the Caribbean.

If his still lifes are of a realistis cut, his landscapes, especially those he painted in France, represent his best approach to the Impressionist style. Paintings such as "Bankside of the Seine River" (Orillas del Sena) from the Louvre collection, and "Lourdes Basilica", belong to this second French trip, and reveal the loose brush stroke, in his treatment of water and of vegetation, the vivid color applied directly to the surface and the diffuse and luminous atmosphere, which characterize the movement. Although the date is under discussion (some place it during the second visit to France, others during the third), his "French Landscape II" reveals without any doubt the influence of Pissarro. The Puerto Rican landscapes tend to have a more realistic sign to them and they are not always of a consistent sign, outstanding among them are those including structures fabricated into the composition. Of these, the "Trapiche meladero" (the sugar mill) with its symphony of geometric forms cut against the sky, is the most outstanding, not only from the aesthetic point of view, but also as a native version of the industrial scenes so fashionable in Europe. "Hacienda Aurora" (the Aurora farmstead) also holds a great attraction, with its manufacturing and domestic groups of constructs, located in opposing poles of the long painting, but unified by the blue mountains outlined on the background and the curving road in front.

Another constant genre in the production of Oller is the portrait, of this we have evidence from his very first painting, a copy he painted at the early age of 14, the portrait of his grandfather painted by his distinguished predecessor, Jose Campeche. Many of these works, as is well known in these cases, serve to flatter the vanity of his clientele with the high aesthetic pronouncements. Among the personalities shown here, the Architect and Professor of Mathematics, Manuel Sicardo, the poet, Jose Gautier Benitez and the Governor, William Hunt, painted in Puerto Rico, following each one of his Parisian trips, respectively. The first one represents a personality (a friend, recently passed away of the painter) of authority and with a scrutinizing gaze in the context of a class room, and the presence of students completes the well attained atmosphere (in a gesture of silencing them). The second portrait, also posthumous, is that of the pale poet (consumed by tuberculosis) in a gray romantic aura. The latter is outstanding for its elegant



gesture of a figure enveloped in a sparsely detailed overcoat, concentrating attention on the face and hands, the figure outlined against the beautiful background of delicate blues.

Nevertheless, none of the former paintings even comes close to the intense psychological insight of the Self-Portrait, painted in Madrid in 1880, a majestic work which reveals a face surrounded by the somber tones of . . . clothing and of the background, with all of the sadness hidden in the soul of the painter, and of which he spoke to his disciples in 1901: "My life was filled with unhappiness, I always hid my sadness, and have shown the world only my smile, and the world believed me happy". From the same time of the Self-Portrait are "El Cesante" (the Unemployed) and "El Mendigo" (The Beggar), notable portraits of popular figures projecting simultaneously a social message.

His ethical and social concerns are represented as well in the famous painting, "The Wake", a gigantic and complex work of unclear composition hierarchy, described by Oller himself as "an orgy of brutal appetites under the veil of a coarse superstition". It is most interesting because of the looseness and spontaneity of the stroke, the unity of the composition and the vivid line and color, in contrast to the finished work, is the sketch which accompanies it. Another outstanding work of this genre, revealing the concerns of Oller about integrated education and the lives of the freed slaves, is "The school of Teacher Rafael" (La Escuela del Maestro Rafael).

Oller showed great skill in the treatment of interior spaces, and to this genre belongs the painting, "The Student", the most famous of his works, because it is on show in the permanent exhibition of the Jeu de Paume of the Louvre Museum. Originally purchased by Dr. Paul Gachet (known from the portrait painted by Van Gogh), is a delicate and luminous picture of domestic serenity, full of minute detail and reflections, which bear slight relation to the Impressionist spirit; the identity of the personalities constitutes a great enigma, and conjectures vary from the marriage of Pissarro, to unknown students of medicine. Another interior complex with planes and objects lighted from the background (the same solution used in "The School of Teacher Rafael") is that of the Palace of Alcañices, a painting of opulent textures and shadings, painted in Spain for the Madrid Exhibition of a century ago.

In the face of these still lifes, landscapes, portraits, and genre and interior scenes, restored to their original splendor and viewed from a different light, a re-assessment is imperative of the painter, not in terms of his occasional approaches to Impressionism, that he was never fully able to absorb, nor felt in his innermost heart, but more as an exponent of one of the most genuine visions of the Caribbean world. It is impossible to change the course of History, attempting to place him as one of the great creators of the French avantgarde movement, this he never was, although he could have been; but it is possible to recognize him for what he was, an outstanding realistic painter who finally decided to join his fate to that of his people and of his motherland, reflecting them in his works. And if this was a life resigned to not receiving the potential recognition of the world, today, after so many years, it may set the grounds for a renewed claim to fame. After all, from then to now, our American people have learnt that, contrary to the imitation of the European of the last centuries, the legitimate path to aspire to universal recognition is following the decanting and restatement of the autochthonous essence. In this respect, rather than to consider Oller, "a realist of the Impressionism", we should project him as "a realist of the Caribbean", certainly he is the most solid Antillean painter of his time, and thus expect the new verdict of History.