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17th Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20006

AUDIO/VISUAL PROGRAM

FRANCISCO OLLER  
A REALIST IMPRESSIONIST 1833-1917  
PUERTO RICO

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SETS: <sup>227</sup> 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234.

"The artist, like the writer, has the obligation to be useful; his painting must be a book that teaches, that serves to improve the condition of mankind, that castigates evil, that exalts virtue...We need paintings that represent our customs, that will correct our defects and extol our good deeds."

Those words were written by Francisco Oller y Cestero, who was to become recognized as one of the greatest Puerto Rican painters of the 19th century. Oller was an enormously talented artist who not only captured his homeland's essence in the light and color of the brilliant tropical sun but also defined the idiosyncrasies of the Caribbean in a subtle transcendent of his insular realities. His Spanish experiences were to combine with his participation in the French avant-garde movement in his painting, leading experts to describe Oller as a "Realist-Impressionist".

It is difficult to categorize the work of Oller; the loss of a significant number of his works coupled with the relentless Puerto Rican climate have left all too few of his paintings for the world to savor. It was the Spanish art historian, Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, whose writing in 1962, stimulated new interest in the works of Oller. The Ponce Museum of Art, intrigued by his works, organized a show of his extant paintings in 1983 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of his birth. The following year the exhibit toured the U.S. introducing the wonderful paintings of this heretofore unknown artist to America.

Francisco Oller was born on June 17, 1833, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. His parents, Cayetano Oller and Maria del Carmen Cestero were descendents of Puerto Rico's creole elite. The young Francisco, affectionately called Frasquito, grew up amid prosperous circumstances in which his artistic talents could be encouraged. By the age of twelve, he had begun to collaborate on the painting of the island's churches with his first teacher, Juan Cleto Noa. In 1851, at the age of eighteen he made his first trip to Spain. There he enrolled at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid, studying under the skilled portraitist, Federico de Madrazo. Madrazo was official painter of the Court and the Director of the Prado Museum. Under his instruction, Oller studied the renown Spanish masters, Velazques and Goya; both of whom greatly influenced his emerging style.

Oller returned to Puerto Rico in 1853, due to the illness of his father. He continued to paint, developing his career as an artist. He won a number of prizes, including the silver medal in the art exhibition of the first Fair of San Juan. In 1858, at the age of twenty-five, Oller traveled once more to Europe. This time to Paris, the very heart of the new art scene where he enrolled in the studio of Thomas Couture. Couture was an inspired mentor, who based his fundamental



instruction on the importance of drawing, the study of classical proportions and a knowledge of anatomy, all the while stressing a concern for the effects of light and the corresponding need to preserve the spontaneity of preliminary studies in the final work.

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Oller also enrolled at the famous studio of Gleyre, where he studied along with Monet, Bazille and Sisley. Some of the most important French painters of the 19th century were trained in this studio.

Camille Pissarro was one of the first artists who Oller met in Paris and perhaps due to their common Caribbean background, the two young artists became inseparable friends. When Couture's studio closed, Oller enrolled in evening courses at the Ecole Impériale et Spécial de Dessin and during the morning hours attended the Académie Suisse. At the Suisse, he worked with Antoine Guillemet, Armand Guillaumin and Paul Cezanne. Oller recognized Cezanne's talent and introduced him to Pissarro. Oller and his friends frequented the Café Guerbois and the Brasserie Andler, known as the "Realist Sanctuary" the favorite resort of novelist Charles Baudelaire and the rebel artist Gustave Courbét.

Oller and his companions embraced the teachings of Courbet and were converted to his Realist philosophy. It was Courbet's belief that, "one must be of one's own time" challenging Classicism and Romanticism alike with his large canvases depicting simple scenes from daily life, unadorned and unidealized. To him, an artist must be able to translate the customs, ideas, and appearances of his own time as he sees them, in "a word, to create a living art...".

At the same time the Realists were rejecting Romantic subject matter in order to represent what they saw around them, the Impressionists were raising the question whether what they saw was not ultimately a matter of how they saw it. Furthering the precepts of Realism lead to a personalized vision of the world; no longer was there a fixed order but the world was becoming a source of sensations of light and color.

Under the leadership of Pissarro and Monet, the Impressionists sought to advance realistic painting beyond description per se into a broader approach to nature. Their major break with tradition lay in their manner of painting. With a spontaneous application of color to the canvas, juxtaposing primary hues to create secondary colors, the Impressionists achieved remarkably brilliant effects. With their characteristically short choppy brush strokes they accurately caught the vibrating quality of light.

Amidst this activity, Oller had his first painting accepted by the prestigious Paris Salon, "The Castle in the Vicinity of Saint-Michel" in 1864. The next year two more paintings, "Darkness" (Les Tenebres) and a drawing of his father, "Cayetano Oller" were also accepted.

1865 was a crucial year in Oller's career. Should he stay in Paris as a member of this group of avant-garde artists and participate in the evolution of Impressionism or should he return to his country?

Oller returned to Puerto Rico where he remained for the next eight years. This was an enormously creative decade for the artist. By 1868, he had organized his first major exhibition. (Of the 45 works exhibited only one has survived, the portrait, "Manuel Sicardo y Osuna"). After this successful exhibit, Oller opened his first Academy of Drawing and Painting. As a guide to his pupils in 1869, Oller published a book on perspective, "Conocimientos necesarios para dibujar de la Naturaleza: Elementos de perspectiva al alcance de todos". During this period he also executed a steady flow of paintings, one of them, the portrait of "General Baldrich", the governor of Puerto Rico had special meaning for Oller. He much admired Baldrich because the governor attempted to make several liberal reforms, including freedom of the press, the expansion of public education and art appreciation.

Oller's liberal position is perhaps most striking and articulate in his works dealing with the issues of slavery and abolition. Among his paintings of social criticism, "The Flogged Negro" and "The School of Rafael Cordero" were perceived by a critique of the time as, "eloquent testimony in favor of abolitionist propaganda".

Durning this period Oller began a family. In 1868 he married Isabel Tinajero de la Excalera with whom he had two daughters, Georgina and Mercedes.

In 1870, for his work as an art teacher, he was named "Caballero de la Real Orden de Carlos III" and in 1872, King Amadeo I appointed him "Painter-in-Ordinary to the King".

In order to survive Oller was dependent on commissions derived from portraits of well-known men of Puerto Rican society. However, his desire to create and art unique to his island home resulted in Oller's magnificent still lifes which depicted indigenous tropical fruits in all degrees of ripeness elaborate with details of individual aspects. The subtle use of color combined with the faithful rendition of the intricate design of the subject underscore the artist's extraordinary talent.

The lure of the European art world grew stronger and by 1873, Oller set sail once more this time representing Puerto Rico in the Universal Exhibit in Vienna. Instead of returning home after the exhibit, Oller went on to Paris, renewing his friendships with Pissarro and Cezanne. Under their influence he created several wonderful impressionistic paintings. A new light bathed his canvases, pigment was applied in thick dabs, directly, in multiple layers, using rapid brushstrokes. One of the paintings completed at that time, "The Student" hangs today in the Louvre Museum.

In 1877, Oller travelled to Spain, where he established a studio in Madrid. He was immediately received by the Spanish public and press as "one of the greatest painters of the century". According to Gaya Nuño, Oller was "the introducer of Impressionism to Spain". During these years, he executed some remarkable paintings. "The Spanish Landscape" and "The Study of Horse and Rider" were completed while still under the strong influence of the French Impressionists. Later the enormous impact of Spanish school is evidenced in "The Begger" and the sumptuous interior of the "Palace of Alcañices".

Once again caught in the dual lure that seemed to mark most of his adult life, Oller at the age of 51, eleven years after having left for Vienna, returned to San Juan. After the momentous triumph in Spain, Puerto Rico lacked all artistic incentive. The next ten years were very difficult for Oller, his Academy closed and the few commissions he received were for portraits that allowed him little creative freedom. He spent long periods of time in the interior where he studied the local landscape, its intense light and colors, recording the life and customs of the people. In 1889, after an attempt to open another school failed, he moved to the Hacienda Santa Barbara. It was there he completed his masterpiece, "The Wake". In the words of Oller, this painting was, "the object of all my love as an artist". "The Wake" did in fact represent the most complex and complete development of Oller's art. It was the best example of his realist vision, embodying his definition of art as a social political, and religious act that makes a statement about his own people, in his own time, in his native environment.

In 1893, after winning the Gold Medal at the Exhibition of Puerto Rico, Oller sailed for France. This was his final trip to Europe. Under the guidance of Pissarro, whose paintings "dazzled" Oller with their light and air, he created several wonderful Impressionistic works; "French Landscape I and II", "Garden", and "Landscape with Washerwoman".

Oller returned to Puerto Rico in 1896, with a new strength and a totally renewed palette which he never lost. One of the first paintings executed upon his return was "Landscape with Royal Palm Trees". He poured forth into this painting all the knowledge of color, light and perspective he had learned in France. The turn of the century marked by setbacks and calamities. The American government was in control of Puerto Rico and imposed a situation of

rigid isolation on the island, characterized by a lack of interest in the arts. Oller's petition to open an art museum was denied as was his attempt to open another art school for the youth of San Juan. After taking part in the great European artistic and cultural movements, all of this must have been extremely frustrating. Oller found himself unable to improve not only his own personal situation but also that of his people. His last years were spent in Cataño, in a small house, facing the harbor of San Juan. Due to lack of funds he painted on any surface available; broken doors, cigar boxes, and royal palm fronds. These late paintings were among his best.

Oller is recognized as the first painter to represent the reality of Puerto Rico in so doing he laid the foundation for the development of a "boricua" art of quality and excellence. On May 17, 1917, one month short of his 84th birthday, Oller died in relative obscurity and alone in the Municipal Hospital in Santurce. His works remain as his statement of life - as he saw and met the responsibility to "correct our defects and extol our good deeds".

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Text compiled by Nicole Ober

Photographs by Angel Hurtado

Note: Since Oller rarely dated his canvas, all dates are tentative and may not be accurate. There is much controversy among the critics who specialize in Oller's work about the dates.



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AUDIO/VISUAL PROGRAM

Set 227  
PUERTO RICO - Francisco Oller

PORTRAITS AND FIGURES

- 227 A Lady Bullfighter on a Horse c. 1851-52  
Capeadora a caballo  
11 x 8 1/4" - oil  
The woman dressed as an amazon, skirts the bull, who with a Spanish flag on his back, is attacking the horse. The foreshortening of the horse and the bull are well executed. Although the theme is Spanish, pointing to the influence of Goya, who frequently depicted bullfights, the landscape is Puerto Rican.
- 227 B The Inheritance Lawsuit c.1854-56  
El pleito de la herencia  
17 1/4 x 24 1/2" - oil  
The humorous theme of the two men fighting over the cow, while the lawyers are taking turns milking it, suggests that this is an early work. In both this painting and the "Lady Bullfighter on a Horse" (237 A), the landscapes are sketchy, not painted from observation but from memory or even formula. The main interest is in the representation of the figures.
- 227 C Study of Horse and Rider 1879  
Estudio de jinete y caballo  
9 1/2 x 12 3/4" - oil  
This work has the spontaneity of a sketch with free, rapid brush strokes. The general outline of the horse serves as a framework for the patches of color, with simple strokes of white paint, shadowed in blue, achieving the impression of the animal's volume and anatomy.
- 227 D The School of Rafael Cordero c.1890-92  
La escuela del maestro Rafael  
39 1/2 x 63" - oil  
A strong diagonal light from the background focuses attention on the interior. This scene takes place in the interior of the workshop where Rafael Cordero, a tobacco worker, gave free schooling to children of San Juan, during the years of slavery. The gestures and arrangement of the bodies of the children make a complex network of curves and diagonals in movement throughout the painting, which culminate in the face of Rafael Cordero.



## Set 227

- 227 E The Student c.1874  
El estudiante (L'étudiant)  
25 1/2 x 21 1/4" - oil  
In this painting, Oller lightens his palette and applies paint in short firm strokes. With these patches of color he captures the play of light. This interest in the effect of light is accompanied by the use of traditional perspective and displays a marked harmony of color.
- 227 F Detail of 227 E.  
The mirror reflects the young man's head as well as the image of another mirror on the opposite wall.
- 227 G Fray Iñigo Abbad y Lasierra c.1854-56  
45 x 36 7/8" - oil  
This portrait of the Benedictine monk and historian is based on the traditional prototype of a man of letters. A certain lack of depth and an excess of detail tend to overwhelm the triangular composition executed in predominately grey and green tones.
- 227 H Carmen Alonso c.1884  
24 x 18 1/2" - oil  
The slightly turned position of the figure lends movement to this traditional type of composition. The expression of firmness displayed by this elegant creole woman together with the emphasis on the lace and other details of the dress balance the triangular format of this painting. Notable here is the use of chiaroscuro.
- 227 I Doña Angelina Serracante  
25 3/4 x 19 3/4" - oil on wood  
In this portrait, though in poor condition, the artistic interest lies in the delicacy of the silk dress and the beautiful bouquet of flowers.
- 227 J Detail of 227 I.  
Influenced by the Impressionists, Oller, transforms these flowers into a bouquet of color and light.

Text by Nicole Ober after the catalogue, Francisco Oller, A Realist-Impressionist.  
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AUDIO/VISUAL PROGRAM

Slide Set 228  
PUERTO RICO - Francisco Oller

PORTRAITS

- 228 A Manuel Sicardó y Osuna c. 1866-68  
43 x 35 1/2" - oil on canvas  
This portrait was commissioned after the death of architect Manuel Sicardó y Osuna (1803-1864), fellow teacher of Oller and Master of Fortifications and Architect of the City of San Juan. Like other portraits painted from memory, it is unsigned. The pictorial principles learned in the studio of Gustave Courbet in Paris are seen in this work; the brush was saturated with pigment and strongly applied. The face was modeled with bravura. Here Oller used for the first time, short curved brushstrokes that became characteristic of his style.
- 228 B Detail of 228 A.  
The background scene is bathed in light, even though dark tones predominate with Sicardo's coat and the blackboard behind him. Oller captured and conveyed the character of this man with a "searching and restless look" as a critique of the time observed..
- 228 C Unemployed Man c. 1882  
El cesante  
31 3/4 x 26"- oil on canvas  
In this painting, Oller communicates the complex inner life of a person whom misfortune has not deprived of innate dignity. The impact of the Spanish school is evidenced both in subject matter and technique. The rounded silhouette in dark dress is projected against a lighter background. The range of color is limited, applied with a thick bold brush stroke. Behind the beautifully rendered head, light casts the effect of a halo. But it is the expressive face and eyes through which Oller allows us to delve into the character of this old man.
- 228 D José Gautier Benítez c. 1885-86  
38 7/8 x 28 1/4" - oil on canvas  
José Gautier Benítez and Oller had been friends prior to his early death at the age of 29. This young, romantic converted the natural beauty of the Puerto Rican countryside of which his poems sang, into symbols of the growing conscience of creole nationalism. In this portrait, the poet and his poem have become one as Oller places him in an impressionistic landscape of the Puerto Rico he loved. The grey clouds, the leafless branches behind the poet and the thistle with its yellow flowers in the foreground, all lend a sense of melancholy and grief.



- 228 E General W. Davis 1900  
54 x 34 1/2" - oil on canvas  
General Davis was the third and last American military governor of Puerto Rico (May 1899- April 1900). Oller depicts him in this fine portrait, with an austere stance and clenched hands, one grasping his sword. His arrogant pose, face slightly turned towards the right, and ferrety eyes with their calculating look complete the characterization of this hard American professional soldier.
  
- 228 F Coronel Francisco Enrique Contreras 1880  
59 x 41" - oil on canvas  
This portrait has the air of a proud military career man, fresh from a successful campaign. Though the impact of the Spanish school is evidenced in this painting the landscape was rendered in impressionistic style; color is applied directly to the canvas in loose thick brushstrokes. Yet Contreras is treated more traditionally with a smoother finish and barely visible brushstrokes.
  
- 228 G General Baldrich f. 1870-71  
41 7/8 x 54 3/16" - oil on canvas  
General Baldrich was the best remembered of all the Spanish governors of Puerto Rico; a soldier and at the same time a man of culture, a liberal, who promoted education and the arts. Oller conveys his character with a gentle yet scrutinizing look. The subtle tonalities of the face, the quality of the gaze and the slightly open mouth derive from a profound study of the general's personality and physical appearance.
  
- 228 H William H. Hunt f. 1901  
53 5/8 x 33 1/4" - oil on canvas  
William H. Hunt was named by President McKinley as the second Civil Governor of Puerto Rico after the Spanish-American War. Oller has created an almost two dimensional quality by placing Hunt's dark silhouette against a light background bereft of shadows. His expression is almost totally lacking emotion.
  
- 228 I Self-Portrait 1880  
23 1/2 x 19 5/8" - oil on canvas  
This self-portrait was painted in Madrid during a period of great success in Oller's career. Our attention is focused on his penetrating eyes that convey a depth of character and a man of sensitive intellect who has learned the injustice and sadness of the world in which he lived. To emphasize further, the serious nature of this self-portrait, Oller broke with his earlier style to use a tenebrists approach. Framed in a dark brown and black background, the light is directed to the artist's complex expression just catching a touch of the silk neckerchief.
  
- 228 J Self-Portrait c. 1889-92  
23 5/8 x 17 1/2" - oil on wood  
This ascetic and austere self-portrait conveys a very different impression from the earlier portrait from Madrid. The artist has aged rapidly during these difficult years in Puerto Rico. Here the background is lighter; illuminated with a harsh light that casts a shadow to the right. The dominant color is the red of the simple tunic. His expression, although mournful, communicates an inner strength and determination not present in the painting from Spain.

Text by Nicole Ober after the catalogue: Francisco Oller, A Realist-Impressionist.

Photographs by Angel Hurtado





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AUDIO/VISUAL PROGRAM

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PUERTO RICO - Francisco Oller

STILL LIFE

Oller created a series of still lifes in which he represents the typical fruit of his beloved Puerto Rico. He depicts guavas, mangos, mammees, cashews and plantains in various stages of ripeness. In some cases he shows the inside of the fruit as well as the different uses of the fruit.

The still lifes are difficult to date with certainty, since Oller almost never dated his paintings. There are differences in style between the earlier ones 1869-70, and those painted at the end of the 1880's and those painted upon his return from his last voyage to France which may show the influence of Impressionism in the detail of the fruit bowl and the renewed use of impasto in the brushstroke.

In spite of the analogies between these still lifes and those of the Impressionists Oller's are very different. Not only does he present a compositional and formal study, but he also dissects the fruit. The fruit itself as well as the composition are of interest to the artist. They are also more realistic.

- 229 A Still life with Bananas, Jug and Cashews c. 1869-70  
Bodegón con guineos, jarra y pajuiles  
18 1/2 x 22" - oil  
The interest appears to be in the representation of space. The play of diagonals with the placement of the table and the fold in the corner of the tablecloth help convey the illusion of perspective.
- 229 B Detail of 229 A.  
The light sparkles on the glass pitcher. The bananas are an unusual variety of dwarf bananas known in Puerto Rico as guineos niños.
- 229 C Still life with Wine, Pineapple, and Mangoes c. 1869-70  
Bodegón con vino, piña, y mangós  
18 x 22" - oil  
In this simple still life the table is at an angle in relation to the plane of the canvas. The fold of the tablecloth helps to create a feeling of depth, accentuated also by the diagonal of the fork. The rays of light on the glass and the color effects of the wine are particularly well executed.



## Slide Set 229

## 229 D Detail of 229 C.

The circles of the slices of pineapple inside the round rim of the glass dish are balanced by the strong diagonal of the ivory handled fork in a beautiful design of lines and colors.

229 E Still life with Jug, Mango, and Mamees c. 1869-70  
Bodegón con jarra, mangó y mamey  
18 x 22" - oil

This composition is based on a subtle interplay of curves, in which the undulating line of the pitcher stands out, repeated in the shadow. The flat blue-grey background and the whiteness of the tablecloth help to enhance the harmony of the orange and ochre tones of the various fruits, accentuated in the ripe mangoe by black spots.

## 229 F Detail of 229 E.

The form, color and texture of the mamey has been revealed by the light. Captured, also, are the various aspects of the fruit, how they are peeled and the way they are used.

229 G Guavas c. 1901-03  
Guayabas

15 1/2 x 26 7/8" - oil on wood

The guavas are in various stages of maturity, ranging from the green to the ripe ones with their yellow skin, opened up to show a lovely rose tone of the inside. In spite of the strong brushwork that accentuates the rounded outlines of the guavas and the impasto that gives the sense of volume, reminiscent of Impressionism, the approach is realistic.

Painted on panels taken from a wooden structure, a nail which was in the board is used as a detail on the leg of the table.

229 H Pineapples c. 1912-14  
Piñas

21 1/4 x 34 1/4" - oil on wood

These pineapples colored in warm tones are arranged at different angles to each other. In the center several pineapples form a pyramid, which is repeated to the left. To the right, the inclination of the fruit and the diagonal of the knife lead attention back to the center. The folds of the tablecloth are more complex and are projected into space towards the plane of the spectator.

229 I Still life c. 1890-91  
Bodegón  
17 3/8 X 25 1/8" - oil

This is a more complex composition reminiscent of the classical "Bodegones" (still life) of the Spanish School. A triangle is insinuated between the cork of the bottle, the pimento at the table's edge, and following the direction of the spoon, the third angle of the triangle is in the folds of the dishcloth.

## 229 J Detail of 229 I.

The bunch of dwarf bananas appears inverted, creating a compact volume of descending curves.



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SLIDE

17th Street and Constitution Avenue, NW Washington, D.C. 20006

AUDIO/VISUAL PROGRAM

Slide Set 230  
PUERTO RICO - Francisco Oller

STILL LIFE II

Oller created a series of still lifes in which he represents the typical fruit of his beloved Puerto Rico. He depicts guavas, mangos, mamees, cashews and plantains in various stages of ripeness. In some cases he shows the inside of the fruit as well as the different uses of the fruit.

The still lifes are difficult to date with certainty, since Oller almost never dated his paintings. There are differences in style between the earlier ones 1869-70, and those painted at the end of the 1880's, and those painted upon his return from his last voyage to France which may show the influence of Impressionism in the detail of the fruit bowl and the renewed use of impasto in the brushstroke.

In spite of the analogies between these still lifes and those of the Impressionists Oller's are very different. Not only does he present a compositional and formal study, but he also dissects the fruit. The fruit itself as well as the composition are of interest to the artist. They are also more realistic with emphasis on detail.

230 A Ripe Plantains

Platanos amarillos c.1892-93  
32 5/8 x 20 1/4" - oil on wood

In this extraordinary still life, the artist studied the varying forms and colors of the stalk suspended dramatically in front of the pinkish grey background. The long curves of the plantains are projected in different directions, creating a circular movement of ascending and descending curves. Austere in composition, and free of extraneous details, in this work Oller managed to monumentalize this simple fruit of the earth, which was the main staple of the Caribbean diet.

230 B Detail of 230 A.

A sensitive rendering of the ripening plantains. The long brushstrokes follow the form of the fruit where use of light and color have created patterns rich in variations.

230 C Gourds c.1912-14

Higueras  
16 1/2 x 42" - oil on wood

The higuera, a tree native to the Antilles, bears a fruit that was used by the Indians of Puerto Rico to fashion eating utensils such as plates (ditas), cups or spoons. In this composition, painted



Set 230  
STILL LIFE II

- 230 C (continued)  
on a piece of wood, the objects are closely crowded together and crowded against the background wall. The straight forms enclose the curves and also harmonize with them. The range of colors is restricted, the effect being almost monochromatic.
- 230 D Detail of 230 C.  
The oval form of the cut fruit occupies the center of the composition capturing the light in the color of its lush meat.
- 230 E Mamees c.1901-03  
Mameys  
17 1/4 x 31 5/8" - oil on wood  
The chromatic scheme is limited to earth colors against the white of the tablecloth. The fruit is presented in all its forms. The diagonals of the knife, of the cut fruit, and of the tablecloth establish lines of movement that weave in and out of space.
- 230 F Detail of 230 E.  
The halfsphere of the cut fruit, the semi-circular slices, and the skin are rendered in warm tones, harmonizing with the round rim of the plate.
- 230 G Green Plantains c.1892-93  
Plátanos verdes  
28 3/8 x 32 3/4" - oil on wood  
In this composition the stiff stalk of green fruit appears to rest on a table, its form traces a beautiful diagonal to the right, and the curve of the stalk initiates an ascending movement to the left. The long curves disposed in various directions, the limited chromatic scale along with the extreme simplicity of the scheme create the dynamics of the composition; from the rhythm of the curves the stalk acquires a movement like that of a walking animal.
- 230 H Coconuts II  
18 x 30" - oil  
The vines of the coconuts appear like a large spider walking over the fruit. Oller introduces movement with curving lines, adding dynamics to the static motif.
- 230 I Palm Tree Fruit c.1912-14  
Palmillo  
16 3/4 x 38" - oil on wood  
This richly colored composition, was painted on part of a door or window. The green seed, the dry branch, the tigüero, and the cut palmillo are closely crowded together, depicting the uses and aspects of the plant. The top palm pod gives the impression of being seen from above as if the back wall were the surface on which it rests.
- 230 J Detail of 230 I.  
The white heart of the palmillo provides an accent with a corresponding balance of curves and straight lines meeting a diagonal line that gives graceful stability to the composition.

Text by Nicole Ober after the catalogue:  
Francisco Oller, A Realist-Impressionist.  
Photographs by Angel Hurtado.



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AUDIO/VISUAL PROGRAM

Slide Set 231

PUERTO RICO - Francisco Oller

PUERTO RICAN LANDSCAPES I

- 231 A Hacienda Aurora c.1889-99  
12 1/2 x 22" - oil on wood  
This beautiful landscape is bathed in bright sunshine, capturing the sky and atmosphere of the tropics. The representation of the structures, the sugar mill, the areas of cane, and the misty Sierra de Luquillo mountains are deftly achieved. Each one of these areas is a landscape in itself. Through a masterly use of color, balance, and perspective, the three scenes have been integrated harmoniously.
- 231 B Detail of 231 A.  
In this closer view of the abandoned sugar mill; the horizontal lines of the landscape are broken by the wooden fence posts and even more dramatically by the rose colored chimney of the mill. A curved path rising on a slight diagonal along which a woman is walking gives the composition movement.
- 231 C Detail of 231 A.  
A wonderful balance between the lines of the mountain and the roof of the large house is achieved with the curved lines and variations of color.
- 231 D Plot of Land c.1888-90  
Conuco  
12 x 18 1/4" - oil on canvas  
This representation of a primitive sugar mill documents together with "Hacienda Aurora"(231 A), the stages of production of sugar in Puerto Rico. Covered by a thatched roof the mill was operated by animal power. The chimney of the boiler to the right, is where the juice extracted from the cane was boiled until converted to molasses. The conical form of the roof dominates the painting. The darker area in the foreground and the line of the mountain on the high horizon soften the diagonals in the center. The vertical accents of the beams, of the chimney, and the verticals and horizontals on the boards of the shed, balance and stabilize the composition.



- 231 E Guaragual c.1897  
13 3/4 x 11 1/4" - oil on cardboard  
The trunk of the tree in the foreground frames a vista of the valley of the River Guaraguao and the mountains that surround it. The tree is boldly painted, with multiple touches of color which create a dense pictorial surface. The treatment of the mountains is more abstract, their forms more angular and geometrical.
- 231 F Hatillo  
10 5/8 x 13 3/4" - oil on wood  
This small landscape depicting a street of that town is rendered in a high key. The abundance of light, almost white in color, is reminiscent of the hazy atmosphere impregnated with salt air. The road that crosses the foreground forms a diagonal that recedes in the form of a curve.
- 231 G Landscape with Thatched Hut c.1898-99  
8 7/8 x 12 3/4" - oil on wood  
This landscape depicts the bohío, the typical living quarters of the Puerto Rican farmer. Strong sunlight illuminates the composition, where a succession of diagonals take the eye towards the undulating lines of the mountains on the horizon. The varied greens of the vegetation help create the illusion of spatial recession.
- 231 H Guaraguao Farmhouse c.1890-92  
22 1/2 x 11 5/8" - oil on wood  
This simple and elegant form of the house with the irregular stilts of wood, the cloth hanging out of the window, and the figure of the girl leaning over the plant-filled porch, give the scene a familiar domestic air.
- 231 I Hacienda Santa Bárbara c.1891-92  
20 1/8 x 30" - oil on wood  
Oller painted his most famous work, *The Wake*, in this house. The curved line of the small hill is present in many of his landscapes. The color scheme is dominated by the subdued tones of the green of the foliage, counterbalanced by the reds of the flamboyant tree and the white of the wooden house. The branches of the trees and the bluish-grey clouds break the chromatic monotony of the sky. The tranquility of this scene communicates the almost organic relationship between the earth and the structures that arise from it. The Impressionist style of the brushstroke is very evident here.
- 231 J The Ponce Silk-Cotton Tree c.1887-88  
La Ceiba de Ponce  
19 x 27 1/4" - oil on canvas  
This is the oldest known of Oller's landscapes of Puerto Rico. The Silk-Cotton tree of Ponce, a millenary tree venerated as sacred by the Indians, is the main element in this landscape which also depicts the activity that used to take place along the banks of the River Portugues. With a light palette, the green and rose colored reflections in the river are captured with small dabs of color in successive layers of paint.

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Photographs by Angel Hurtado





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AUDIO/VISUAL PROGRAM

Slide Set 232

PUERTO RICO - Francisco Oller

PUERTO RICAN LANDSCAPES II

232 A Marina

9 x 12" - oil

This landscape dominated by the wide cove and the grey sky gives a feeling of a muggy tropical atmosphere. In Oller's skies we often find this use of gray, generally in a high key. This manner of depicting the sky, which is to be found in Impressionistic painting and which Oller used from the time of his early French landscapes, suggests a profound study of the changing light of the tropics.

232 B Seashore I 1908

9 x 12" - oil

In this landscape, the repetition of dark and light tones establish a progression of space. Sunlight vibrates from the lush tropical vegetation on the cliff to the right. Even the sea reflects the greens and yellows of Oller's palette.

232 C Hacienda Plazuela 1908

In this work, Oller wishes to show us the process of the cultivation of sugar-cane. The horizon is our main point of reference. The foreground is divided into a wide area that has been recently sown and another stretch of land in which various workers are preparing the ground for planting. The dark fertile earth is contrasted with the brilliant green of the sprouting cane. The sugar mill can only be glimpsed in the background. The entire composition is bathed in the bright light of the island sun.

232 D Vista Campestre I

12 x 18" - oil

The soft undulating lines of the topography and the green tones of the hills are shown in a diffused light, the tranquility of the scene only broken by the strong vertical line of the slender palm tree in the foreground.

232 E Vista Campestre II

12 X 18" - oil

The dark vegetation in the foreground contrasts with the ochre of the road, the pink of the roof tiles, and the white sky. The curve in the road gives movement as it counterbalances the slope of the hill and suggests a diagonal that recedes into space.



232 F Hacienda Carmelita Luguillo c.1888-90  
10 1/2 x 13 3/4" - oil on wood  
The soft hill topped with the white house of the hacienda dominates this vista and descends gently toward the stream. The touches of green and pink are mixed throughout. The paint is thick with areas of impasto, the brushstroke, short and quick. The colors are laid one on top of the other in successive layers that again characterize 'plein air' painting. This composition is given a vibrant rhythm by the white vertical lines of the trunks of the coconut trees.

232 G Puerto Rican Landscape c.1910-12  
22 3/4 x 13 3/4" - oil on wood  
The ascending perspective culminates in the high line of the horizon. The foreground is of a lighter color due to the rose tones of the soil forming the banks of the rivulet whose waters reflect the greens of the vegetation. In the center of the composition the palette darkens, then lightens again in the area of the the sky.

232 H Hacienda Aurora c. 1888-90 (View of the River)  
12 1/2 x 13 3/4" - oil on canvas  
In this panoramic view of the valley, a line of bluish mountains enfold the composition with its high horizon. On the bank of the river the descending curve marked by the shape of the trees and the curve of the river, returns the movement towards the center of the composition and counterbalances the lines of the hills on the right; creating a complex series of ascending and descending curves.

232 I Mountainous Landscape 1904  
6 7/8 x 5" - oil on cardboard  
This and its companion piece, "Landscape with Three Figures" (232 J), were painted on either side of a cigar box. Oller's difficult financial situation restricted him severely from buying adequate materials. From the beginning of the century, he painted on any surface available. Because the nature of this work is so totally alien to Oller's concept of landscape, it is believed to be the product of imagination.

232 J Landscape with Three Figures 1904  
7 1/4 x 5" - oil on cardboard  
This landscape painted on the bottom of the same box as "Mountainous Landscape" (232 I), is like the other, imaginary. The application of paint is thick, the brushstroke rapid, the color applied in several directions with areas of impasto reminiscent of the Impressionists.

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AUDIO/VISUAL PROGRAM

Slide Set 233  
PUERTO RICO - Francisco Oller

EUROPEAN PAINTING

Oller made four trips to Europe during his lifetime. Each stay had a marked influence on his painting, each enriched his style with new techniques and new visions.

- 1851-53 Enrolled in the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid. Studied under Federico de Madrazo, skilled portraitist. Studied paintings of Valasquez and Goya in the Prado Museum.
- 1858-65 Paris, the center of the new art scene. Enrolled in the studios of Thomas Coutoure and Gustave Courbet (the Realist). Became close friends with Pissarro and Cezanne.
- 1873-84 Vienna, representing Puerto Rico in the Universal Exhibition of 1873. 1874 settled in Paris, renewed contact with the Impressionists. 1876 traveled to Spain, established a studio in Madrid.
- 1893-96 Final trip to Europe. Worked along side Pissarro, renewing techniques used by the Impressionists.

Slides Set 233

- 233 A The Basilica of Lourdes c. 1876-77  
Basílica de Lourdes  
9 1/2 x 12" - oil on canvas  
This painting believed to have been completed during a visit to Lourdes, seems to shimmer with light. The colors create varying tonal values through the multiple layers of pigment. The progression of horizontal planes and curve of the river, lead the eye to the spire on the Basilica.
- 233 B The Grotto of Lourdes c. 1876-77  
Grutta de Lourdes  
9 1/2 x 13 1/4" - oil on canvas  
In this work, companion to the Basilica of Lourdes (233 A), Oller seeks to capture the haze and darkness of the grotto where the apparition of the Virgin to Bernadette Soubirous is venerated. The figures of the pilgrims are barely touches of pigment lightly and rapidly applied. The The effigy of the Virgin is rendered in two or three thick brushstrokes of white with a touch of blue.



- 233 C The Windmill 1875  
 Molino (Moulin)  
 18 1/4 x 24" - oil on canvas  
 Oller has captured the varied tones of this impressionistic landscape through the application of colors, one on top of the other in successive stages; greens are laid on ochres and browns of the sparse vegetation of the foreground, while a grey tone is laid on the green of the foliage of the trees. The broken vanes of the windmill indicate the encroachment of the city into the countryside and the disappearance of the rustic life before the pressing industrialization of Paris.
- 233 D Spanish Landscape c. 1879  
 Paisaje español  
 9 1/2 x 12 3/4" - oil on canvas  
 Oller has captured the impression of the arid and monotonous landscape of Spain, bathed in a harsh light reminiscent of the scorching sun of Castille. The patches of brilliant color and rapid, loaded brushstrokes provide movement and variety to the composition. From a distance the eye merges these patches, which assume the forms of the broken terrain and reveal the multiple variations in the rugged countryside.
- 233 E Palace of Alcañices 1883  
 25 1/2 x 21" - oil on canvas  
 This small interior, rich in color and texture, was one of Oller's favorite paintings. Its sumptuous interior, executed with all the details of a miniature has a decidedly Spanish color scheme and decoration. The traditional order is inverted with light entering the room at the rear, making the background brighter than the foreground.
- 233 F Detail of 233 E.  
 The colors seem to have been applied in transparent glazes, only the little dog and the carpet were rendered with dabs of pigment added later. Although the palette is dark, the golden rays of light catch the rich texture of the draperies, and the velvet and the gilt of the furnishings in a profusion of details.
- 233 G Landscape with Washerwoman c. 1895-96  
 Paisaje con lavandera  
 25 3/4 x 21 1/2" - oil on canvas  
 A soft light light baths the whole scene, in which the interplay of colors is achieved with small delicate touches of paint. The curve of the path and the curve of the red tile roof counterbalance the vertical line of the wall on the right.
- 233 H Garden c. 1895-96  
 Jardin  
 9 1/2 x 13 3/8" - oil on canvas  
 A beautiful harmony is created through the undulating curves of the vegetation and the controlled curves of the garden's border. Bathed in a bright light, the sun is captured in the dabs of yellows and greens in the foliage of the trees, that shade the solitary white chair, inviting the observer a respite from the the heat of the day.

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233 I French Landscape I c. 1895-96  
Paisaje francés I  
36 1/2 x 28 1/2" - oil on canvas  
The curve of the hill is accentuated with the diagonal path of light that leads the eye to the woman with her geese, creating a sense of depth. This scene is bathed in a soft light which is captured in small, meticulous dots and dabs of color, reminiscent of Pissarro's style in the 1890's.

233 J French Landscape II c. 1895-96  
Paisaje francés II  
25 3/4 x 36 1/4" - oil on canvas  
The lovely impression of a summer afternoon in the French countryside has been masterfully rendered here. The light, with its luminescent effect, filters through the trees as they seem to sway gently with the breeze. Rhythmic alternation of areas of brightness and shadow create a sense of spatial recession.

Note: Since Oller rarely dated his canvas, all dates are tentative and may not be accurate. There is much controversy among the critics who specialize in Oller's work about the dates.

Text by Nicole Ober after the catalogue: Francisco Oller, A Realist- Impressionist.

Photographs by Angel Hurtado



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AUDIO/VISUAL PROGRAM

Slide Set 234

PUERTO RICO - Francisco Oller

THE WAKE 1893

El Velorio

Francisco Oller's masterpiece, completed in 1893, after ten years of work, is an excellent example of his Realist vision. According to the critique, Albert Boime, "This painting embodies Oller's definition of art as a social, political, and religious act and at the same time makes a serious statement about his own people, in his own time and his own native environment".

The best description of "The Wake" was made by the artist, himself:

"Astonishing criticism of a custom that still exists in Puerto Rico among country people and which has been propagated by the priests. On this day the family and friends have kept vigil all night over the dead child, extended on a table with flowers and laces. The mother is holding back her grief, on her head she wears a white turban; she does not weep for fear her tears might wet the wings of this little angel on his flight to heaven. She laughs and offers a drink to the priest, who with eager eyes gazes up at the roast pig whose entry is awaited with enthusiasm. Inside this room of indigenous structure children play, dogs romp, lovers embrace and the musicians get drunk. This is an orgy of brutish appetites under the guise of coarse superstition."

This celebration, "baquine" or the "wake of little angels" was a ritual upon the death of a child. It was believed that a child free from sin, would go directly to heaven. Oller strongly criticized this barbaric practice, as being a satanic ritual.

In her penetrating study of this painting, Haydee Venegas comments, "The Wake encompasses all the pictorial genres that Oller practiced. There are portraits, landscapes still lifes, and animals, all integrated into a single great genre scene. To impart movement, balance, and emphasis to so many figures and objects and merge them into one harmonious composition ...required all of Oller's artistic know-how." Every detail was carefully rendered; the expressions of the characters, the colors, the light, the perspective and texture were thoroughly experimented in preliminary sketches before unifying them into one composition.



"The Wake" was shown for the first time in the Exhibition of Puerto Rico, 1893, in which Oller was awarded a gold medal. As Oller said, "The artist has an obligation to stand for something; his picture must be a book that instructs, that serves to ameliorate the human condition, that corrects our faults and exalts the good".

- 234 A The Wake 1893  
El Velorio  
96 x 156 1/2" - oil on canvas
- 234 B Detail of "The Wake"  
This landscape is seen through the open door at the left of the composition. A beautiful impressionistic rendering of the Puerto Rican countryside. Light vibrates from the trees and grass, giving a feeling of freshness in nature, contrasted with the dark interior.
- 234 C Men Study for "The Wake" c.1892-93  
Hombres-Estudio para "El Velorio"  
27 x 48" - oil on canvas  
All the figures except the study of the head are found almost identical in their final version. Notable is Oller's careful study of the shadows, his success in creating volume and the capturing the gestures of the figures that run from the old man's composure and the drinker's stiff gate to the expressive movement of the third figure, with its detailed study of the hand holding the rope.
- 234 D Detail of 234 C.  
The steady gaze and serious expression of the full length figure appears almost identical in the final composition. He makes a striking contrast to all but one of the other characters in the scene.
- 234 E Black boy with "güiro" - Study for "The Wake" c. 1892-93  
Niño Negro con Güiro - Estudio para "El Velorio"  
17 3/4 x 13 3/4" - oil on canvas  
The güiro is a musical instrument used in the Caribbean. A small wooden stick is rubbed against the grooves to produce a sharp sound. Oller painted this work "alla prima" directly on the unprimed canvas. This together with the light background enhances the boy's overdeveloped muscles, a result of working in the fields.
- 234 F Final version of 234 E, Black boy with "güiro".
- 234 G Dog-Study for "The Wake" c. 1892-93  
Perro-Estudio para "El Velorio"  
11 5/8 x 15 7/8" - oil on canvas  
This pleasant sketch, the model of which was "Toto" the lap dog of the Oller family, is done in a looser style than the other studies. The background treatment, made up of different colors, lightly applied adds to the overall illusion of movement.
- 234 H Final version of the Dog.  
Oller described the dog's excitement as "the dog's romp" as he captured him in a leap forward.

234 I Women-Study for "The Wake" c. 1892-93

Mujerer-Estudio para "El Velorio"

25 x 30" - oil on canvas

Contemporary sources relate that Oller used farm workers, servants and members of the Elzaburu family, on whose estate he painted the finished work as models. In this work, the figure of the mother, glass in hand, appears very much as she does in the final version. To the right is an excellent study of a black woman. Oller experimented with different studies for the background. The fine face which appears in the lower left was not used in the final version.

234 J Final version of the Mother.

The mother's forced smile sets the irreverent tone of this very complex painting. The unnatural expression on her face reflects the mixed emotions with which she has to cope: to participate with the gaiety at the orgy and at the same time endure the loss of her child.

Text and Research: Nicole Ober after the Catalogue Francisco Oller, A Realist Impressionist.

Photographs: Angel Hurtado