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El Velorio

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FRANCISCO OLLER AND HIS PAINTING EL VELORIO

By

Dolly Marie Hernández

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

FRANCISCO OLLER AND HIS PAINTING EL VELORIO

By

Dolly Marie Hernández

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the importance of the painting El velorio (1892) to the Puerto Rican painter Francisco Oller (1833-1917). The thesis will argue that the political and cultural development of Puerto Rico had a great impact on the artist. Therefore, this painting is a reflection of the artist's political and cultural opinion, and an expression of Puerto Rican nationality. The study explores the island's political, social, and cultural background in relation to the painting. The study will also provide background information of Oller's artistic career, and a discussion of the painting.

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1995

To Lizo Escamilla and Sue Morris,
for reminding me of mis raíces.
To my mom,
for your support y paciencia.
To my grandparents,
this one is for you.

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INTRODUCTION

Many scholars claim Francisco Oller y Cestero (1833-1917) to be one of the greatest artists in the history of Puerto Rico. Yet, for many more he is in fact unknown. In recent years scholars have increased their interest in Oller.¹ Unfortunately these publications are limited, and do not reach the public at large. Puerto Rican scholars face another obstacle: how to make the public accept art as a valid form of history that adds to the rich culture, and the sense of individual and national identity. Some scholars proclaim Oller the father of Spanish Impressionism, and yet, he is rarely mentioned in books on Impressionism, and general art books do not mention him at all. This is ironic and leaves one wondering: why has his art evaded recognition in the world of art history at large? Not much documentary material is readily available, and this makes researches into his art and life somewhat difficult. Those scholars who recognize his importance to Puerto Rican art, constantly lament his decision to return and remain in Puerto Rico. Oller's friend, Paul Cézanne, wrote to Camille Pissarro:

I am very upset that Oller, as Guillemet told me, will be unable to return to Paris, for he would probably be very bored in Puerto Rico and, too, without paints available, it must be very difficult

¹ Please refer to bibliography.

to paint.²

Paris was the unquestioned center of the art world in the nineteenth century. Oller lived in Paris for two prolonged periods, yet, in the end, he preferred Puerto Rico over it.³ Indeed the questions are what made him stay?, and what was he trying to accomplish? Questions such as these point to the heart of the puzzle that Oller's career presents. To understand his decision, it is necessary to know Oller, and to understand his art and artistic goals. To accomplished this, it is necessary to place him within the historical, social, and cultural background of the island.

The thesis will focus on Oller and his painting El velorio (c. 1893). Oller declared El velorio his greatest achievement. He kept this painting as part of his collection until 1903 when he gave it to the Escuela Normal, (a school which later became the University of Puerto Rico). The iconography and context of this painting will be discussed to establish how the painting is a political statement, and an exaltation and representation of the true Puerto Rican. The purpose is to gain insight into Oller's view of the socio-political situation of the island, and the artistic motivation for the representation of this subject. This introduction will give a political background, as well as important

² Paul Cézanne, Paul Cézanne Letters, ed. John Rewald, trans. Seymour Hacker (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1984), 119.

³ Refer to Appendix A.

information on the formation of Oller as an artist and a free thinker. The subsequent chapters will discuss in detail the painting and the possible meaning it had for Oller.

The nineteenth century was a period of great change for the Latin American countries. What had started as a struggle for economic and political autonomy evolved into wars of independence, and by the mid 1820s all that remained of the Spanish Empire were the islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico.⁴ This is not to say that Puerto Rico lacked a desire for independence, but there were several factors impeding a strong movement towards independence.

According to Adalberto López, Puerto Ricans were reluctant to take a radical step towards independence because they were psychologically attached to Spain, although this did not prohibited them from wanting reform.⁵ There were also settlers from Haiti and other Spanish-American colonies who moved to Puerto Rico, and cautioned against giving power to the masses. These new settlers would argue that the interest

⁴ Adalberto López, "Birth of a Nation," Puerto Ricans: Their History, Culture, and Society, ed. Adalberto López (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1980), 51.

⁵ He stated: "Many of its members still had a strong psychological and sentimental attachment to the mother country, which did not prevent them from desiring changes and reforms but certainly kept them from taking the radical step of desiring independence. Even among those who were psychological prepared for the complete break with Spain there was a realization that for Puerto Rico to make a successful bid for independence the island's masses would have to be mobilized, something which they saw as difficult to do and which, in any case, most of them were reluctant to try" (51).

of the masses was to ultimately acquire total control of the island.⁶ The number of Spanish troops increased in the island, as they lost their battles in the mainland colonies. After 1814, Ferdinand VII ordered more troops to the island to try to hinder any problems that might arise.⁷ Ferdinand also created the Cédulas de Gracias, which were meant to produce internal economic growth in the island, and invited new Catholic immigrants to settle by exempting them from taxes and offering them land, and also to appease the demands of the Puerto Rican creole.⁸ All of these initiatives did not prevent the Puerto Rican elite from continuing their search for political representation and the right to political autonomy.

The reformist movement continued to develop throughout the nineteenth century. It was eventually divided into three groups that perceived differently the way to solve the problems in the island. Two of the groups sought reform, within the colonial system, and the third group concluded that the only solution to achieve the necessary reforms was independence. The asimilistas or assimilists sought to have Puerto Rico declared an integral part of Spain, in a sense,

⁶ *ibid.*, 52. By 1804 the black slaves in Haiti had rebelled against the creole elites, and had succeeded in acquiring control over the island. Many of the French who escaped Haiti moved to Puerto Rico, bringing with them a fear of the masses' potential power.

⁷ *ibid.*, 51-52.

⁸ *ibid.*, 55.

denying their Puerto Rican identity. They enjoyed some support, but remained a relative minority on the island.⁹

The autonomistas or autonomists, which by the later part of the nineteenth century were the most important reformist party, were able to accomplish some of their goals. They desired representation in the Spanish administration, and municipal autonomy as well as a greater role in the administration of the island.¹⁰ The other group within the reformist movement were the independentistas or advocates for independence. By the 1850s its greatest spokesman was Ramon Emeterio Betances. He was the organizer of the Grito de Lares (23 September 1868), which was a failed attempt to achieve the independence of Puerto Rico. The Grito de Lares was precipitated by the arrest of Manuel María González who had in his possession documents that eventually led to further arrests. These events propelled Manuel Rojas, in Lares, to call the independence conspirators to action. The result of this unsuccessful attempt at independence caused concern in Spain which subsequently became more repressive. In a way it

⁹ *ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 77. López also mentions that: "...the pro-independence sentiment became more marked among the members of professional and intellectual elite in the course of the nineteenth century... however, many of these saw independence as an impossible dream and decided to concentrate their efforts on the struggle for autonomy, which they saw as a step towards independence" (78). Also: Albert Boime, "Oller and 19th Century Puerto Rican Nationalism," Francisco Oller a Realist Impressionist (Ponce, Puerto Rico: Museo de Ponce, 1983), 46.

strengthened the belief among the professional and intellectual elites that to achieve the independence of the island was impossible.¹¹ Despite the failure of this rebellion, it is seen as an important event in the national identity of the island.¹²

Within the reformist movement there were those who supported the abolition of slavery. The slave population in Puerto Rico was always relatively small compared to any of the other colonies (Spanish or non-Spanish).¹³ Spain kept slavery mainly because Cuban slave owners argued its abolition would cause problems in the economy of Cuba. Yet, in Puerto Rico, the slaves had little impact in the economic balance, a fact which abolitionists carefully emphasized. The abolitionists also emphasized the immorality and cruelty of the institution. Finally, on 23 March 1873, they accomplished their goal, and the abolition of the institution

¹¹ López, 78-81.

¹² Juan Antonio Corretjer, "The Day Puerto Rico Became a Nation," The Puerto Ricans: A Documentary History, ed. Kal Wagenheim and Olga Jiménez de Wagenheim (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 65. The source was originally published in the San Juan Star Sunday Magazine on 22 September 1968.

¹³ Philip D. Curtin, The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1969), 46. This book provides an interesting insight to the slave trade of the American continent. This information becomes increasingly interesting when compared with the information provided by Adalberto López.

was declared on Puerto Rico, but was not granted to Cuba.¹⁴ There were strings attached to this abolition, the freed slaves had to work for a minimum of three years of forced labor to satisfy the demands of the slave owners.¹⁵

During the nineteenth century there was an increase in national pride. Pride for the island was reflected primarily among the professionals and intellectuals. They recognized and accepted their differences with Spain. Thus, they took an increasing interest in the uniqueness of the island, its culture and history.¹⁶ It is in this century, and amid all of these changes that Oller finds himself working and developing his art. Oller was definitely influenced by the events and ideas that developed on the island. The growth of national pride in particular was to be a significant factor in determining the form his painting El velorio will take.

This summary gives a sense of the tensions that existed in Puerto Rico in the nineteenth century. The issue then is: where and how does Oller fit into this summary? Oller was a creole elite, but also friends with some of the members who held and promoted revolutionary ideals. In 1868, he

¹⁴ López, 82. Also: María Teresa Babín, The Puerto Ricans' Spirit: Their History, life, and Culture, trans. Barry Luby (New York: Collier Books, 1971), 44-45.

¹⁵ Luis M. Díaz Soler, La esclavitud negra en Puerto Rico (San Juan, P.R.: ICA, 1957), 18.

¹⁶ This is further emphasized by the books of historical nature of Alejandro Tapia y Rivera, and Salvador Brau (López, 74).

participated in the Fiestas de San Juan, and received permission from Governor Machessi to open an academy of Drawing and Painting. On the surface, this would imply that Oller belonged with the conservative elite who wanted to remain associated with Spain to insure more stability to the island. Yet, this does not explain why Oller chose to remain in Puerto Rico, nor why his art focused on the objects that identify the island: its fruits, landscapes, and people. Why would Oller return to the jíbaro figure or the struggle of the black slaves if he was not sympathetic to their cause? Perhaps the question is at what point was Oller able to understand the situation of the island. To this end it is important to know Oller's life and career as an artist to see Oller's development as a free thinker.

Oller's family played an important role in the development of the island. His grandfather was a physician who pioneered the use of vaccines in the island. "Oller grew up amid prosperous and cultured circumstances where his musical and artistic gifts could be recognized and encouraged."¹⁷ He was able to start his art studies at the age of twelve with Juan Cleto Noa. After only nine months, Cleto Noa sent Oller back to the family because he had nothing else to teach Oller. Finally, in 1851, Oller was able to leave for Spain, where he enrolled in the Academy of San

¹⁷ Albert Boime, "Oller and 19th-Century Puerto Rican Nationalism," Francisco Oller a Realist-Impressionist (Ponce, P.R.: Museo de Ponce, 1983), 38.

Fernando, in Madrid. His teacher was Federico de Madrazo y Kuntz, an artist of academic persuasion and a follower of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. In Madrid, Oller was introduced to the art of Spanish masters such as Diego Velazquez, and Francisco Goya y Lucientes. He studied art for two years and then returned to Puerto Rico in 1853. Oller continued his artistic development in Puerto Rico, and five years later -- after his father's death -- he returned to Europe, this time to France. There is little doubt that Madrazo y Kuntz, impressed the Parisian art world on the minds of his students. Another possible reason to travel to France might be that France was playing an influential role in the development of the Spanish American colonies, Puerto Rico inclusive.¹⁸

Upon Oller's arrival in Paris in 1858, he enrolled first in the studio of Thomas Couture, and subsequently switched to the atelier of Gleyre. In the latter atelier Oller befriended Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Claude Monet, and other fellow students who would later be known as the Impressionists. By 1859, Oller had also befriended Pissarro, who shared his Caribbean background, and who would play an important role in the development of Impressionism. During this eight year period in France (1858-65) Oller, like his friends, familiarized himself with the style and doctrines of the realist painter Gustave Courbet. Oller must have also seen the works of his

¹⁸ López, 80.

friend Edouard Manet, which were to scandalize the Parisian world.¹⁹ During this period Oller expanded his artistic abilities, and gained a new outlook on the events that occurred around him. The ramifications of this new outlook will also be reflected in El velorio, since Oller, as an expatriot, will start to consider his position as well as his connections with time and place.

Oller frequented the Café Guerbois (a favorite haven for Manet and his circle) and the Brasserie Andler (where Courbet was the main figure.) In these cafes he could converse with Edgar Degas, Pissarro, and Emile Zola. These social gatherings at the cafes often provided opportunities to discuss various contemporary topics, including politics, literature, and art. These gatherings and the variety of ideas explored there, were a vital part of artistic life and must have influenced the young artist. The names of Oller's friends and some of the places he frequented are known, yet this period in his life remains somewhat obscure. These years place Oller in the center of a developing avant-garde style, and represent the formation of his own ideals. This milieu was far different from his previous experience in Puerto Rico or Spain. Although cultural life was not lacking in Puerto Rico, it was far from the swirl of Parisian life. Also, Puerto Rico could not provide Oller with an artistic circle

¹⁹ For a complete discussion see: John Rewald, The History of Impressionism (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961).

since it was lacking in the field of art. This is not to say he was the only artist, but the concerns and artistic development of these other artists never developed as did those of Oller. During this first period in France, Oller was able to communicate his thoughts and explore the value of the ideas that flowed through the ateliers, cafes, and soirees.

Oller considered himself to be a follower of Courbet, and often referred to himself as such. Although Oller did not belong to the group that enrolled for a short time to study with Courbet, he was a frequent participant of the gatherings at the Brasserie Andler, whose presiding figure was Courbet.²⁰ Courbet was a domineering personality who pressed his ideas upon those listening. In a letter Courbet wrote on 25 December 1861, which was later published in the Courrier du dimanche of 29 December 1861, he eloquently expressed his ideas on art.²¹ Courbet stated in this letter: "...because I maintain that art is entirely individual and is, for each artist, simply the ability that issues from his own inspiration and his own studies of tradition."²²

Courbet's influence is not immediately seen in Oller's

²⁰ Osiris Delgado Mercado, "Oller y Courbet," Revista del Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña 3 (July-September 1961): 33.

²¹ The ideas presented in this letter are based on those of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. There is also the possibility the letter was actually written by Jules Castagny [Gustave Courbet, Letters of Gustave Courbet, ed. Petra ten-Doeschate Chu (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 203-205].

²² Courbet, 203.

works. It takes Oller several years before he comprehends and applies Courbet's observations. Oller was experimenting with European artistic traditions, and thus denying his Puerto Rican heritage. It will be much later in Oller's life when Courbet's notions of "tradition" and "popular culture" will have profound meaning to the artist. By the time Oller created El velorio it is clear he understood Courbet's message for in it he explores the traditions of his country, examines his own ideals, and thus creates a unique work that is entirely individualistic in subject and inspiration.

Oller returned to Puerto Rico in 1865, where he stayed until 1873. The return to Puerto Rico was perhaps precipitated by financial need, as Pissarro seems to point in his letter: "Nous avons fait toutes espèces de conjecture sur ta disparition subite,... mais tu es à Porto Rico! tant mieux si tu peux arriver à mettre de monacos dans tes poches..."²³ This letter also points to the close relationship Oller and Pissarro shared.

Back in Puerto Rico, Oller engaged in enriching his capabilities as a painter. He was able to open his Academy of Drawing and Painting, later converted into a public school. Oller had an avant-garde perspective since he believed in the education of all members of the Puerto Rican community. He also acknowledged his affiliation to Spain by accepting the

²³ Camille Pissarro, Correspondance de Camille Pissarro, ed. Janine Bailly-Herzberg, vol. 3 (Paris: Editions du Valhermeil, 1980), 533.

title of Knight of the Real Order of Charles III. This is not surprising since Spain was still in control of the island. He was obligated to seek out the permission to open the school and apply to Spanish government for financial support. Surrounding him during these years on the island were events of political nature. The rebellion of 1868 mentioned earlier put new life into the movement for independence, and national identity in the minds of the Puerto Rican community. Although the artist was never directly involved in these events, they ultimately affected him despite his "public allegiance" to the Spanish rule.

Oller left the island again in 1873 to participate in the Universal Exhibition in Vienna. The following year he arrived in Paris and remained in Europe until 1884, dividing his stay mostly between France and Spain. The artist was already forty years old when he arrived, yet this period (1873-84) represents another important stage in Oller's artistic evolution. Some scholars agree that Oller's work El estudiante (The Student) belongs to this period.²⁴ They claim it was painted around 1874. While the figures depicted have not been identified, it has been suggested that the male

²⁴ See relevant information in the catalogue Francisco Oller a Realist-Impressionist, 163.

figure represents Don Ramón Emeterio Betances.²⁵ Betances was one of the most important figures in the nationalist movement of Puerto Rico, and greatly involved in the Grito de Lares. Regardless of who is represented, this painting demonstrates the influence of the Impressionist movement. Oller's relationship to this style is later expressed in other paintings, but this one alone deserves thoughtful interpretation and close study. He would later travel to Spain and introduce Spain to the Impressionist style.

Oller returned to Puerto Rico in 1884, bringing with him new ideas about art. His paintings show an understanding and development not seen in previous years which makes it clear he had reached his mature period. He continued to develop his own style in portraits, landscapes, and still lifes. Yet his genre paintings took on a new importance and meaning. The two most important of these works are La escuela del maestro Rafael (The School of Raphael), and El velorio (The Wake). These paintings are different in every way from all his previous known work. Although, it was not the first time Oller dealt with topics related to the situation in Puerto Rico, it will be the first time he addresses them with such a

²⁵ Please refer to the section of **OLLER AND PUERTO RICO**. It should also be mentioned that there are other suggestions in reference to the identity of the model who still remains unknown. The painting belonged to Dr. Gachet, an avid collector of art, and a friend of Cézanne and Pissarro. See the catalogue Francisco Oller a Realist Impressionist; "Exposición del cuadro El Estudiante, de Oller," Revista del Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña 7 (January-March 1964): 28-29.

critical eye. These topics not only criticize, but attempt to confront and question the divisions within the island.

After years abroad Oller finally commits himself to a purpose which is in essence nationalistic. Oller seems to finally capture the complete meaning of the letter Courbet published in 1861. Courbet expressed:

The true artists are those who pick up their age exactly at the point to which it has been carried by previous times. To go backward is to do nothing, to waste effort, to have neither understood nor profited from the lessons of the past...

I also maintain that painting is an essential concrete art form and can consist of the representation of real and existing things. It is an entirely physical language that is composed, by way of words, of all available objects... Imagination in art consists of knowing how to find the most complete expression of an existing thing, but never of inventing or creating the thing itself.²⁶

Oller learned from all of his teachers. He profited from French, Spanish, and Puerto Rican art. He used his understanding of culture to express through painting his own views on the social situation of Puerto Rico. In El velorio, Oller depicted a scene which addresses a particular "...custom that still exist in Puerto Rico among country people."²⁷ He criticizes the abuses perpetuated by the elite upon the poor creole. He manifested both his "costumbrismo" and socialism.

Once El velorio was completed, Oller once again left

²⁶ Courbet, 204.

²⁷ This statement was provided by Oller to the Salon of 1895. A complete reprint of the statement is available in Appendix B.

Puerto Rico. In 1895, he traveled to France with the purpose of exhibiting this particular painting. Although it was accepted by the Salon, El velorio received criticism from his friends in France, and critics in Puerto Rico. Pissarro wrote to his son Lucien about the arrival of Oller, and mentioned how surprised Oller was about the lightness of color in Pissarro's paintings. Pissarro also points to Lucien his own impression of El velorio: "Il faut des tableaux dont les motifs sont episodiques, comme le Nègre fouéte de chez Tanguy. La photographie de son tableau me parait mieux, certainement, me je crains que ce ne soit un peu banal."²⁸ This criticism is worth evaluating, because Pissarro seems to have misunderstood Oller's achievement. Pissarro was a supporter of anarchism, and often made comments about his views to his friend. In the book Francisco Oller y Cestero (1833-1917) Pintor de Puerto Rico, Osiris Delgado Mercado presents how anarchists have a firm sense of justice, and are sensible to their surroundings.²⁹ Oller's oeuvre does reflect those characteristics. Perhaps it was the realistic approach Oller used which affected Pissarro's opinion, for the latter had long ago rejected the anecdotal. Pissarro as an anarchist was always in touch with his surroundings, and believed in suggesting it through the means of the modernist

²⁸ Pissarro, ed. Bailly-Herzberg, vol. 4, 46.

²⁹ Osiris Delgado Mercado, Francisco Oller y Cestero (1833-1917) Pintor de Puerto Rico (San Juan, P.R.: Estudios Superiores de Puerto Rico y el Caribe, 1983) 177.

Impressionist style as opposed to a literal realism. In this case his criticism is purely based on the style Oller chose for the painting. Oller, as a sensible individual, tried to express his own political views through a painting, and defend the rights of the true Puerto Ricans.

Oller, having exhibited his painting in the Salon, returned to Puerto Rico in 1896. As it is evident in his subsequent paintings, Pissarro and the Impressionists once again had an impact on him.. Until his death in 1917, Oller continued to develop his art, further expanding and redefining his Spanish and French influences, but ultimately exploring the meaning of his identity and "nacionalidad" (nationhood).

Oller's life should be studied further, in particular the role of Puerto Rico and France in the development of his ideals. The importance of this would be to analyze how much the artist gained from these surroundings, and was able to successfully apply to his paintings. Oller clearly could dominate the Impressionist and the Realist styles. They represent two distinct artistic approaches and Oller's choice of style for specific subjects is worth re-evaluating. It will be important for this purpose to consider not only the French and Spanish influences, but also the Puerto Rican. A closer look will be given to the cultural, historical, and social development of the island. The purpose then is to analyze how Oller interpreted his learning experiences in El velorio to visually express the words of criticism and love

for the island on which he was born.

"EL BAQUINE"¹

Part of the fascination with El velorio is the confusion of messages it sends to the viewer [Figure 1]. The work, as its title suggests, is the representation of a wake. Usually wakes are thought of as quiet gatherings to mourn the loss of the person. Yet in this unusual kind of wake depicted by Oller, people drink, eat, dance, and sing. It becomes more complicated when one discovers it depicts a "wake of little angels," commonly known as baquín. To understand Francisco Oller's purpose with this oeuvre, the celebration itself has to be understood.

According to Emma Boehm-Oller, Oller often visited the crest of a hill in Puerto Rico, where he could take advantage of the surroundings, and continue his "search for nature."² On one such visit he was informed of and invited to the wake of a small child. She adds:

When he arrived he was amazed to find the house full of people, singing, drinking, and eating. The baby had been laid out on the table, surrounded by flowers, and of all the people there only the

¹ An explanation of this wake custom is difficult because of the lack of material available on the topic. Although it goes beyond the scope of this thesis the author feels it is essential to provide the reader with some information.

² Emma Boehm-Oller, "Francisco Oller, Puerto Rican Impressionist," Américas 19 (September 1967): 27. The author never mentions the location of this hill.



Figure 1

El velorio, c. 1892-93.

mother, seated beside the baby, was crying.³ She believes this visit was Oller's inspiration for El velorio. Even though this minimal description does not give us any information in relation to the baquiné, Oller's representation is commonly accepted as the true version. Indeed in the literature there is evidence authors looked at Oller's oeuvre to explain or elaborate on the ritual.⁴

Death fascinates Latin American culture. In Puerto Rico, as in many other areas of Latin America, there are different rituals involving death, including wakes. Jesús M. Vázquez explains some of the differences between a wake for a child and an adult. There is a feeling of solemnity in the wakes for adults. People gather to offer prayers and pay their last respects to the deceased. They pray for the eternal rest of the soul, and for the forgiveness of the deceased's sins. Such a wake includes small pauses to provide the mourners time to engage in small talk, and drink coffee (or any other beverage.) The mourners will gather once more the following morning to take the body to its final resting ground.

In the event of a child's death, the atmosphere of the wake is less rigorous since the child is free of sin. The mourners, as in the adult wakes, receive from the family small gifts and are supplied with coffee and snacks. Some families

³ *ibid.*, 27.

⁴ See: Miguel Meléndez Muñoz, "EL velorio," Cuentos del Cedro (Barcelona: Ediciones RVMBOS, 1967), 111-118. This will be discussed at a later point.

even hired or invited a story teller -- probably local -- to keep the company lively. These stories were often accompanied with music, and the interactive participation of mourners.⁵

The baquiné is not a common practice, and it is mainly reserved for the rural areas.⁶ It is also known as baquiní, florón, quinibán, or simply as "wake of little angels."⁷ The people who celebrate the baquiné believe that when a small child dies the soul goes directly to heaven, since the child is free of sin. Therefore there is no need to cry, instead, there should be a celebration. Crying could dampen the wings of the little angel and impede the travel of the soul to heaven.⁸

Although not much is documented on this ritual, some scholars have argued it is indigenous to rural Spain, and brought to Latin America by Spanish settlers. Most scholars though agree the baquiné was commonly practiced by blacks, although they quickly add the baquiné has no African roots. Other scholars disagree and argue the baquiné is completely indigenous to Africa. The arguments lack evidence, and are

⁵ Jesús M. Vázquez, "El velorio: drama que daba punto final a la vida," El Mundo (San Juan, Puerto Rico) 2 December 1979.

⁶ Although less frequent than in the nineteenth century, the baquine is still practiced today.

⁷ Francisco Oller a Realist-Impressionist (Ponce: Museo de Arte de Ponce, 1983), 193.

⁸ Marcelino J. Canino Salgado, El cantar folklórico de Puerto Rico (Río Piedras, PR: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1986), 216.

mostly subject to the biases of the authors. Yet, the diversity of the arguments demonstrates the confusion scholars have on this topic, even the origin of the word is subject to debate. Rubén del Rosario, in his book Selección de ensayos lingüísticos, discusses the possible origin of words used in Puerto Rico. He mentions that in his study of the word baquiné he found some scholars believe it is derived from the Yoruba word baquinikini, meaning "to salute with respect." He mentions that others assume the word to be derived from the Jamaican word báakini, which itself is derived from the Bantu word bakini meaning "dancers." In Jamaica the word báakini has several meanings. One of its meaning is: "a funerary meeting, usually characterized by a ring play."⁹ Rosario correctly concludes this definition has no connection with the meaning the word has in Puerto Rico. Therefore Rosario favors that the word is a corruption of the French verb badiner, meaning not to take things seriously. Then introduced to the island by immigrants (not necessarily slaves, and/or slaves descendants).¹⁰

The argument is weak, since Rosario rarely mentions his sources or logically explains how he arrived at his

⁹ Rubén del Rosario, Selección de ensayos lingüísticos (Madrid: Ediciones Partenon, 1985), 118-19.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 134. The author suggests caution with this argument by Rosario, since Rosario tends to link most of the Puerto Rican vocabulary to a French word, which is very unlikely. Also Rosario, like many other scholars, uses Oller's oeuvre to support his argument, without studying the baquiné itself.

conclusions. Yet, Rosario is correct when he associates the word baquiné with things not taken seriously, if one takes into account the painting by Oller. The word might reflect some influence from the word "bacchanal" which actually means "drunken orgy," therefore a gathering where no one behaves seriously.¹¹ Oller's oeuvre reflects disorder and chaos. No one seems aware of the dead child lying on the table, except for the old black man [Figure 1].

There is surviving oral tradition of the baquiné. At the wake people sing these songs, perhaps as a way to console the parents.

Angelito, vete
al cielo divino;
ruega por tus padres
y por tu padrino.

Cojan ese niño,
pónganlo en el suelo,
para que su madre
tenga algún consuelo.

Cojan ese niño,
vístanlo de blanco,
que el cura lo espera
en el camposanto.

Cojan ese niño
vístanlo de azul,
que el cura lo espera
con el ataúd.¹²

¹¹ Suggested by Dr. Raymond Silverman, Professor at Michigan State University.

¹² "Little angel, go// to holy heaven,// pray for your parents// and your god-father.// Pick-up that child// place him on the floor,// so that his mother// receives some consolation.// Pick-up that child,// dress him in white,// the priest awaits// on heavenly ground.// Pick-up that child,// dress him in blue,// the priest awaits// with the

These songs reflect the effort of the parents, particularly the mother, to save their children. They also reflect a combination of religious and superstitious beliefs, including the belief and fear of evil. Beyond that, they reveal something about the ceremony itself.

This particular song mentions colors as reference to the baquiné. Then it could be concluded colors held a particular meaning. In a recent book by João José Reis, the author mentions the color symbolism of Brazilian wakes of the nineteenth century. Since there are some similarities between the rituals of Brazil and those practiced in Puerto Rico, it is helpful to study the color scheme the author describes. According to Reis, the color white was often chosen for the funeral of whites, and adds it was the color of choice for the African (perhaps meaning of African descent) and Muslims. This color could express several things: purity, happiness in eternal life, order in nature, and the promised Resurrection. He also mentions that the color scheme for the deceased was also dependent on the age and gender of the individual.¹³

In reference to decorations, Reis mentions the symbols that were used to identify the houses where death had occurred. Blue and white were often used as colors for

coffin" (Canino, 216).

¹³ João José Reis, A morte e uma festa: ritos fúnebres e revolta popular no Brasil do século XIX (São Paulo, Brazil: Companhia das Letras, 1991), 118.

children.¹⁴ The hands were bond together holding a rosary -- a white rosary for children -- and a candle or perhaps a crucifix. Candles were lighted to guide the spirit to heaven.¹⁵

During the wake or after the funeral, food was commonly offered to the mourners. Reis suggests its meaning could be associated with keeping the evil away. It protected the soul from being tempted by evil forces, since the mourners were there to pray, and the soul had nourishment.¹⁶

From the oral tradition and Oller's oeuvre, it can be concluded that the baquiné required the mourners to remain with the family of the deceased until the next day, but if the child had no sin, why was it necessary? Reis' arguments present new meanings to the iconography of this wake tradition, yet the baquiné remains a mystery. Even Oller's contemporary critics found it difficult to understand the painting. Alejandro Infiesta often referred to the painting as a bacchanal, mostly because he had problems reconciling this custom with the more solemn European tradition. J. de Zequeira explains that the oeuvre will most likely confuse the viewer. He explains the confusion is caused either by the viewer's unfamiliarity with the island, or not having attended

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 128.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 130.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 131.

one of these "orgies."¹⁷

It is clear from this that the baquiné, as practiced in Puerto Rico, requires further investigation. The information to be gained from such researches is fundamental to the understanding of Oller's oeuvre. Interviews and documentation of funerary practices, especially those of rural areas, should be considered. It will also be revealing to discover whether the baquiné's origin is, in fact, a the blend of African and Christian beliefs. Normally the baquiné is associated with the "uncivilized," and non Christian beliefs which has probably resulted in a "conspiracy" of silence which has effectively obscured its original sources and the activities associated with it. The full meaning of Oller's El velorio depends on the understanding of this particular tradition, for the artist clearly considered it most important.

¹⁷ See the section on **Criticism** in the **ICONOGRAPHY** chapter.

ICONOGRAPHY OF EL VELORIO

Description

Oller worked on El velorio from 1892-93 [Figure 1]. Once finished, he exhibited the painting in the 1893 Exposicion de Puerto Rico, and as noted before, he took the painting to Paris, where it was exhibited in the Salon of 1895. This painting was obviously important to Oller. He claimed it was his best, although many critics, from his time and today, disagree with him. What was so special about this painting for Oller to regard it so highly? What meaning did it hold for Oller? What was Oller trying to accomplish in this painting? All aspects of the work must be examined to discover the relations created and the iconographical intent. To reach this point, the painting will be described in detail.

The setting Oller selected for El velorio is a campesino's house (country-man's house.) The viewer is only allowed to see part of the room, yet more than likely the whole dwelling is not much bigger. There are two doors and one window. Within this setting Oller created groups that cluster near each of these sources of light.

The crowd that dominates the painting engages in various activities including drinking, singing, or playing instruments. The majority of the figures are campesinos,

except for perhaps three figures: the old black man looking at the dead child, the priest, and his companion who might be the local boticario (apothecary). These figures in particular give a sense of the differences in the social strata of the island. The differences in clothing is the primary means to distinguish them as different from the campesinos.

Oller used hand gestures to lead the viewer into and through the painting. From the left the eye is led by figures engaged in a heated argument. Two lovers hold each other while an older man pours alcohol over their heads. The woman's hand, and the man's hat connect to the little black girl playing the maracas (a musical instrument made out of gourds with some pebbles or rice placed inside to create the sound.) Here the maracas lead towards the musician playing a cuatro¹, and a complex group of figures follows. These figures engage in different activities. A little black boy plays the güiro (another musical instrument made out of gourds, and hollow inside.) The woman who holds a guitar, might be talking to the man drinking or actually singing as she raises her head, and perhaps stares at a suspended roasted pig. Near her a man, probably totally drunk, sings with great passion. There are two men, only one drinks but both hold machetes, and appear to be preparing to leave the dwelling. In between them, a woman apparently tries to hold back the

¹ The cuatro was a four stringed guitar, it currently has five pairs of strings. The instrument is typical to Puerto Rico.

younger man who looks towards the other side of the room. Between this woman and the figure of the old black man, there is a small boy, who perhaps was playing with one of the dogs, but whose attention is now drawn to the small fight between three children taking place in the lower left of the painting. Then there is the quiet figure of the old black man who with time worn dignity and solemnity stares at the figure of the dead child.

From the right of the painting one enters with two campesinos involved in some talk, perhaps one of them represents the father of the dead child. The hand of one of them leads to the woman, whose sweeping arm gesture in turn connects with the priest. According to Oller's description, this woman is the mother of the dead child [Appendix B]. She alone makes contact with the viewer, grinning and inviting one into the "celebration." Behind the mother there is a man about to grab a machete that hangs on the wall. The priest, who appears to have been previously engaged in conversation, swings his head around to look -- perhaps disapprovingly -- at the entrance of the roasted pig into the dwelling, carried by a young boy. Behind this boy, and to the left, there is a woman just outside the door staring at the pig. To the boy's right stands a man only recognized by his torso and extending hat, perhaps also drunk or a new arrival to the gathering. Nearly all the gestures and movements created by Oller lead ultimately to the roasted pig that is suspended above the

crowd at the top center of the painting. The pole that supports the pig is what actually leads to the dead child who rests below it on the white laced tablecloth. The purpose of the gathering is clearly to attend to the wake of a small child, but the focus is drawn away from the child to the suspended pig. Clearly Oller is not simply depicting a local wake.

The dwelling is simple, made out of wood with a thatch roof, (probably coconut leaves), and supported by beams. Throughout the whole scene there is a sense of disarray with cut flowers, food, cards, and bottles laying all over the floor. All of this clutter gives the illusion that the crowd has been "celebrating" for a long time. The furniture of the room is simple, except for several objects that are out of place in such a modest dwelling. The chair on the right side of the painting seems to be too expensive for this particular place. Oller made it clear that this is a campesino's house, and such a chair would be beyond their means. The table on which the child rests appears to be a companion to this chair, and too the chair behind the priest. There is also the white cloth bordered with lace covering the table which Oller gives much emphasis. According to Osiris Delgado Mercado the cloth is modeled after Emma Boehm-Oller's baptismal cloth. Delgado Mercado also mentions that cloths similar to this were used

during the sacrifice in a mass.²

On the walls and the beams of this structure hang a variety of objects. At the far left are two baskets, a machete, and a stirrup, indicating that the occupation of its residents is related to agriculture. Above the door frame there is a cross, and a little branch from Palm Sunday. From the beams and framed by the two doorways, hangs a plantain branch, two coconut cups probably holding pitorro³, dried corn, and a cat that watches the gathering below from his perch. Also a candle holder hangs from the ceiling, and two other are fixed to the walls. Two of these are protected by glass, while the third is a free standing candle exposed to the elements (the wind). It is the latter alone that remains lighted.

Beyond the front porch visible from the left door, (which is probably the front door), there is a rising landscape suggesting the dwelling might be located in a valley. Beyond the fence there are two figures talking, a grazing cow, a hut, and a tree that appears to be a Flamboyán. From the door on the right there is also a rising landscape with another hut, some palm trees, and another cow. Above the window frame to the right there is a glass, a cup, and a bottle. The sky,

² Osiris Delgado Mercado, Francisco Oller y Cestero (1833-1917) Pintor de Puerto Rico (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Centro de Estudios Superiores de Puerto Rico y el Caribe, 1983), 97.

³ Pitorro is an alcoholic drink. It will be discussed at a later time in this chapter.

visible through all of these open spaces, is a clear blue, and its bright light outside covers the entire landscape.

The people involved in this wake seem to have forgotten the dead child, and it is almost as if they were celebrating something else that really is joyous rather than mournful. If this activity could be assumed to depict the last stages of a wake and the aftermath of much drinking in the preceding hours, then it is the state of drunkenness which dominates the scene. Still, this is a wake and not simply a scene of drunkenness. This is further made clear by the entrance of the pig which is drawing all of the attention, and is the focus of the painting. The opposition of the pig and the child, and the other tensions surrounding it, suggest a complex intent -- but what purpose does it have here?

There are three crosses found in this painting; one is the small crucifix over the main entrance, another hangs from a rosary strung upon a nail in the wall between the two doors, and the third, which is by far the largest, is the one formed by a roof beam and the pole holding the pig. Only one bears the image of the Christ. The cross one expects to find on the rosary is obscured by the extended arm of the singer. That leaves the cross at the top center of the composition that could be seen as simply a chance conjunction of the two elements, except for the pig that draws everyone's attention, is at the point of the juncture much as the Christ on the cross. Why would Oller choose to suggest the crucified Christ

as a pig? All of these "religious" symbols are found on the left side, the same side through which enters a kind of "divine light" that bathes the figure of the child and the old black man.

Oller seems to play a game with the viewer, perhaps to avoid offending some of his patrons, but most likely an intentional act. The whole painting is filled with dualities. The objects included in this painting can have multiple meanings. This mix of duality and juxtaposition of objects creates a puzzle out of the artist's intention. There is no question every object in this painting was selected and placed with a purpose.

Oller created a work that at first glance might appear almost simple, and can be understood as a depiction of Puerto Rican culture and traditions. It could also be interpreted as a social critique. In order to understand the whole purpose of this painting, the preparatory studies, symbolism, and criticism of the painting should be addressed.

Preparatory Studies

There are eight preparatory studies for El velorio known today: Cats, Doq, Black Boy with "Güiro", Two Women with a Head, Woman and Arm, Several Male Figures, Woman Seen from the Back, and a general study of El velorio [Figures 2-7]. These studies reflect an aspect of Oller attitudes towards his work, unfortunately only one of the overall studies survives today. The studies also give important insights into Oller's thoughts during the development of this painting, and reveal the importance this painting held for Oller.

Most of the sketches are of isolated figures, details depicted in the final composition of the painting. Some of these figures were already in Oller's mind as seen in the overall study: the small black boy who plays the guiro, a dog, and the man drinking and holding his machete (holding a bottle in the final composition). Other objects and figures seen in the study and the final composition are: the old black man, various figures depicted drinking and/or playing music, and the little bench near the table. The other figure studies were probably added at a later stage of the work. Although these details are beautifully depicted, they do not give any insight to the meaning of the final composition.

The fact that so many figures were not present in the overall study, demonstrates that this painting consumed much



Figure 2

Sketch for 'El velorio', c. 1891.

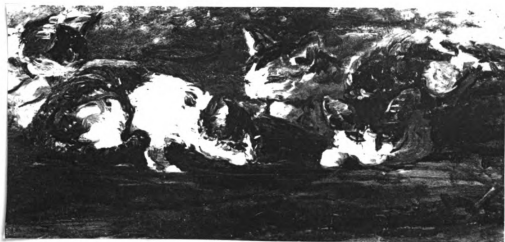


Figure 3

Cats-Study for 'El velorio', c. 1892-93.



Figure 4

Dog-Study for 'El velorio', c. 1892-93.



Figure 5

Black boy with güiro - Study for 'El velorio', c. 1892-93.



Figure 6

Women-Study for 'El velorio', c. 1892-93.

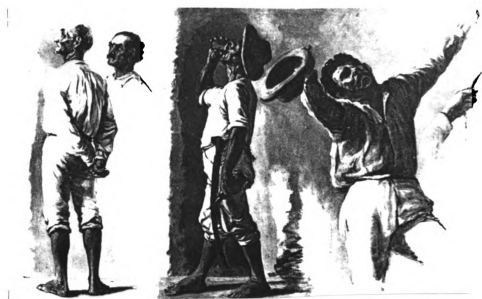


Figure 7

Men-Study for 'El velorio', c. 1892-93.

of Oller's time, as he confirmed in a letter to Amparo Fernández:

Mi cuadro, 'El Velorio', objeto hoy de mis amores de artista, y el cual quiero llevar a nuestra próxima Exposición, no está concluido aun, reclama todos mis esfuerzos, y desgraciadamente el tiempo de que dispongo es corto y mis energías desfallecen.⁴

All of Oller's energies were dedicated to the creation of this work. According to Emma Boehm-Oller:

[Oller] fue invitado al velorio de un recién nacido y fue así como de esta experiencia resulto El Velorio, el fascinante estudio lleno de detalles interesantes que muestra su comprensión de su tierra natal y su habilidad para agrupar los temas.⁵

If Oller did indeed attend this wake, the overall sketch then is of great importance since it might reflect some of the details from an actual wake. In other words, the painting is not a fancy of the artist, but reality depicted through an artist's point of view.

This particular study is considerably different from the final work. The study reflects almost a different intent. Although the study is unclear, because of the loose brushwork,

⁴ "My painting, 'El Velorio', object of my artistic devotion, and which I want to present at our next Exposition, is not yet finished. It consumes much of my efforts, and unfortunately the time I have left is not enough, and my energies are scarce." This letter was reprinted in Delgado Mercado, 223.

⁵ [Oller] was invited to a wake of a new born, and this experience resulted in the creation of El velorio, the fascinating study filled with interesting details that demonstrate his understanding of his native land and his ability to group subjects." Emma Boehm-Oller, "Un íntimo retrato de Oller," El Nuevo Día (San Juan, Puerto Rico) 14 June 1987.

it is clear that from the starting point, Oller worked on this painting for a long time and developed complex ideas that he carried into the final composition. In this study, the hut has three doorways, only one (towards the center of the sketch) gives access to the outside. This entrance along with the window nearby, are similarly placed in the final work.

If it could be assumed that the figure of the priest and the mother are located in the same place in the overall study as in the final composition, then the action Oller decided for these figures was quite different at the beginning than the one finally given. In the overall study the mother does not face the viewer nor does she wear a white turban. Instead the priest and the mother reach towards each other. This time they clearly exchange something.

In the overall study Oller made the old black man confront the viewer, while in the final composition he is sideways contemplating the dead child who is missing in this study. The focus of the study is clearly the old black man and the table with the cut flowers, emphasized by the white color used on the old black man and the tablecloth. Oller presents a juxtaposition between the figure of the old black man and the priest -- also reflected in the final composition. He also created a triangle formed by the priest, the old black man, and the object that enters through the door.

The reasoning for bringing the object to the wake remains a mystery for its lack of specificity makes it impossible to

read and therefore leaves it unimportant. Its role is similar to the roasted pig of the final composition, but it does not appear to be a pig in this study. The only figure to show any interest on this object is the female figure behind the old black man, who is present in the final composition. In both cases her presence directs attention towards the new entry, and away from the child.

Finally there is also the matter of the table with the cloth. Delgado Mercado notes that in the final composition:

Bien puede ser parte de la intención del pintor moralista el así exponer a la censura la familia pobre que mediante desproporcionados sacrificios adquiere valores que denotan presunción y vanidad, lo que propende a desmerecer las cualidades más valiosas de nuestra gente de campo. Pero también sabemos que cuando una familia adinerada solía sustituir los muebles viejos por los nuevos, repartía aquellos entre la familia de sus mayordomos y agregados mas consecuentes.⁶

Yet, what will be the purpose of depicting a family with more income, or to depict the "vanities" of the poor? In the overall study, the cloth and the furniture actually remain simple, even rustic. Delgado Mercado's explanation is vague, and avoids the central issue. He seems to suggest Oller is criticizing the poor rather than the creole elite, or the landed elite.

⁶ "It could be an intended part of the moralist painter to present for censure the poor family whom through exorbitant sacrifices obtain objects which denote presumption and vanity, this all pretends to discredit the most valuable qualities of our country people. But we also know that when a rich family changed their old furniture for the new ones, they would divide the old ones among the family of the butlers and their near relatives" (Delgado Mercado, 96).

Indeed there are many differences between this study and the final composition. Perhaps Delgado Mercado is correct in dating the study to 1891. If so, then the study is one of the earliest stages of this painting, and perhaps more accurate to the actual wake, which became more complex in its final form. Unfortunately this leaves a large gap between the two works, containing little to provide a sense of Oller's development towards the final masterpiece.

Iconographical Analysis

One of the major challenges this painting presents is to decipher the meaning of the different elements within it and how they work together. The arrangement of figures can be divided into three groups: the group which includes the priest, the figures near the old black man, and those cluttered by the door to the left. Almost all of these figures are involved in celebration. There is a sense of disorder, almost of a bacchanal, a jolgorio.⁷

One of the most often expressed interpretations about the group to the right (which includes the priest), is that the grieving mother is offering a drink to the priest who in turn reaches for it while looking hungrily over his shoulder at the

⁷ A "jolgorio" is a Puerto Rican slang to explain a celebration or party where there is plenty of people, music and food, and the ones involved are enjoying themselves.

roasted pig. Yet, the mother actually looks to be inebriated, not grieving. She faces the viewer, as if inviting the viewer to join this celebration, or perhaps offering a drink. She appears to offer a drink to the priest, but he does not seem to reach for it, instead he reaches for his brilliant red umbrella. The handle of this umbrella is not simple, instead it contains a complicated design. There is no particular need for the umbrella among the people gathered for they are accustomed to work out in the sun. On the other hand, the priest would need one to shade himself from the sun as he travelled to preside at the funeral. He is also wearing spurs indicating he travelled to get here. Behind the priest there is a chair, suggesting he was seated not long before. If indeed the priest wanted a drink, the good hostess would have taken it to him. Instead it seems mere accident, the priest reaches for his umbrella as the mother swings her glass towards him in drunkenness. He also seems in a hurry to leave, and the only apparent reason for his urgency is the arrival of the pig.

The identity of the figure next to the priest is a problematic one. Adolfo de Hostos suggested it could be the apothecary or even the local money lender.⁸ This figure leans conspiratorially towards the priest, his face in deep shadow. Interestingly this figure is similar to the portrayal of Peter

⁸ Adolfo de Hostos, "Francisco Oller (1833-1917)," Boletín de la Academia de artes y ciencias de Puerto Rico April-June (1969): 202.

in Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper though reversed. In Leonardo's painting Peter leans over Christ's favorite apostle, John, while holding a knife. As a whole, they, John and Peter, direct the attention toward the Christ. Similarly these figures of Oller's also lead the eye to the direction of a cross formation that is identified with the Christ.

Scholars have noted that the pig takes the role of a crucified Christ.⁹ What would be the purpose? Every indication is that this "festivity" has been going on for sometime. People are already drunk, and there is disarray throughout the whole hut. It is obvious that what is taking place here is in day light, yet wakes usually take place at night. In the morning after the wake, the dead body is carried to the cemetery. This sequence explains the presence of the priest. Any "celebration" would have taken place at night, not the next day, suggesting this wake has gone beyond usual limits. The arrival of a roasted pig, at this point in time when the funeral party in the company of the priest should be preparing to go the cemetery, does not seem appropriate. Félix Matos Bernier, one of Oller's critics, complained:

El cochino enastado no viene al caso: la hora no es de "lechón asado", ni lo es el suceso. El cochino y el que lo presenta, están de más en el

⁹ See: Haydee Venegas, "El velorio de angelitas, Francisco Oller, 1985," Arte Funerario 2 (1987): 243-52; and Osiris Delgado Mercado, Francisco Oller y Cestero (1833-1917) Pintor de Puerto Rico (San Juan, PR: Centro de Estudios Superiores de Puerto Rico y el Caribe, 1983)

cuadro, como tantas otras zarandajas.¹⁰

Both Haydee Venegas and Delgado Mercado point out that the pig could not possibly be roasted, it seems to be tied to the pole. In the case of a roasted pig the pole comes through the mouth, not through the head. In fact, the pig looks more in a state of decomposition, rather than roasted and ready for serving. Matos Bernier emphasized how the pig does not belong at the wake. Roasted pig is a traditional dish in Puerto Rico, often used in celebrations such as Christmas, but it is not part of the staple diet. Many Puerto Ricans do not eat pork meat because they see it as a symbol of dirt, and evil. The people who believe in the evil of the pig, refer to a passage from the New Testament when Jesus cast the evil spirits upon the nearby swine.¹¹

Venegas argues that the arrival of the dead pig into the scene indicated the presence of a diabolic cult, where the pig is the object of veneration. She further explains that:

Dos figuras masculinas hacen otra alusión al drama de la Pasión. A la izquierda del cuadro un hombre empuña su machete para salir a pelear afuera mientras su mujer trata de calmar sus ímpetus. Este hombre mira hacia su contrincante, representado a la derecha del cuadro en el acto de buscar su machete que cuelga de la pared. Por su posición respecto al "crucificado"

¹⁰ "We should not even bother with the pig on the pole: it is not the time for "roasted pig", nor for what goes on. The pig and the carrier are unnecessary in this painting, as well as many other extravagances." Félix Matos Bernier, "Frasquito Oller -- 'El Velorio'," Isla de Arte (San Juan, Puerto Rico: 1907): 99.

¹¹ For the whole story see Matthew 8: 28-34 or Mark 5:1-20.

nos recuerdan estos personajes al buen y el mal ladrón que acompañaron a Cristo a el monte Calvario.¹²

She refers to the table on which the child rests as the altar, and interprets the child as the actual sacrifice. Matos Bernier sees the child lacking a body, which would further accentuate the idea of a sacrifice.

The pig should be considered as an intentional statement by Oller. Oller was clearly opposed to the Church and its control over the inhabitants. The Church encouraged the submission of the inhabitants to Spanish rule. Therefore this depiction of the "Christ" could be interpreted as the hypocrisy of the Church, which instead of protecting the lower class, encourages its exploitation.

The child reminds the viewer of the reality of death, and the wake. But why so much celebration? Jesús Vázquez explains that in Puerto Rico the death of a child was

¹² "Two male figures make yet another allusion to the stages of the Cross. To the left of the painting a man carrying his machete gets ready to leave the hut and go out to fight, while his wife tries to control his impulses. This man looks at the challenger, represented to the right of the painting, in the process of searching for his machete that hangs from the wall. From his position in reference to the "crucified", these figures remind us of the good and the bad thief whom accompanied Christ to Mont Calvary," (Venegas, 250). It should be noted that the singer to the left of the painting looks more like a crucified person. Also the same role could be appointed to the old black man and the priest. Interestingly in the latter case the old black man is to the right of the "crucified", and the priest to the left. In many areas, including Puerto Rico, the right is associated with good, while the left is thought of as evil. One should wonder whether Oller meant to create such an analogy.

celebrated with less rigor than that of an adult.¹³ If one is to consider the similarities between other Latin American countries and Puerto Rico, then it will be helpful to look at these other countries as well, to find some explanation for this "celebration." A new study by João José Reis explores Brazilian wakes and other activities related to death, including those related to children of the nineteenth century. He mentions the importance and the symbolic value of clothing in the event of death. He argues that some of the symbols used for the wake of a child were sometimes related to fertility myths. Therefore children were dressed appropriately for their wakes, in essence to insure the survival of the other children in the family.¹⁴

Children, especially new born, are believed to be free of sin, therefore they are insured their entrance into heaven. They were decorated with heavily applied make-up, flowers and

¹³ Jesús M. Vázquez, "El velorio: Drama que daba punto final a la vida," El Mundo (San Juan, Puerto Rico) 2 December 1979.

¹⁴ João José Reis, A morte e uma festa: ritos fúnebres e revolta popular no Brasil do século XIX (São Paulo, Brazil: Companhia das Letras, 1991): 120-122. According to the author in Brazil it was common to dress girls as the Virgin of Conception, and boys as Saint John. He is not sure which Saint John but he argues for either case. In the case of John the Baptist, he was the son of a previously barren woman, therefore associated with fertility. His saint day is June 24, a day which is also related to the agricultural year. John the Evangelist was the favorite apostle of Christ, and was near Mary when Christ died. He is also responsible for one of the Gospels and the Apocalypse.

laces.¹⁵ The color of dress preferred for a child was white.¹⁶ The shoes of the deceased, child or adult, had to be clean to avoid reminding them of their family. Their hands were tied together, and made to hold a candle, and a rosary (white for children).¹⁷ Daniel Kidder mentions a similar practice, non-christian, among the Africans in Brazil:

...a negro was seen bearing on his head a wooden tray on which was the corpse of a child, covered with a white cloth, decorated with flowers, a bunch of them being fastened to its hands. Behind him, in a promiscuous throng, were about twenty negresses, and a number of children, adorned most of them with flaunting stripes of red, white, and yellow. They were all chanting some Ethiopian dirge, to which they kept time by a slow trot; the bearer of the deceased child pausing, once in one or two rods, and whirling around on his toes like a dancer.

Among the foremost, the mother was distinguished by her excessive gesticulation, although it could hardly be determined by her actions, whether emotions of grief or joy were predominant. Thus they passed to the church-yard, where the corpse was delivered up to the vigario and his sexton. The procession then returned, chanting and dancing, if possible, more wildly than when they came.¹⁸

This particular account is interesting because of its similarities to Oller's painting. The child in the painting is dressed in white, and holds within his tied hands a bouquet of flowers. The mother, as the mother in Kidder's account,

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 128.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 118.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 130.

¹⁸ Daniel Kidder, Sketches of Residence and Travels in Brazil, Embracing Historical and Geographical Notices of the Empire and its Several Provinces (Philadelphia: Sorin and Ball, 1845): 177. Kidder mentions he only saw this celebration in a particular region of Rio.

does not reveal her emotions. Perhaps then, Oller is offering a view into the paganism among Puerto Ricans, among the country-people. Yet, to say paganism as Kidder refers to the events in his account, is deceiving since it would be based on Christian biases towards other religions, a mistake often committed. These "heathen customs", as Kidder's calls them, are more likely different religion or a different perspective to an event, based in ideas of non-christian and christian characters. In the Puerto Rican case, in reference to El velorio, a blending of the Christian and African faith.

Wakes were almost like social rather than religious gatherings. Vázquez, although not to the scale of Oller's painting, mentions refreshments were offered to the mourners.¹⁹ Reis mentions that in rural Brazil meals were served to the mourners to help them keep watch over the deceased, since the deceased are easy prey to the devil.²⁰ Yet, in this painting, all the eating and drinking seems to have corrupted the people, and thus welcomes the presence of evil.

According to Reis, funerals were often arranged by a male

¹⁹ Vázquez, El Mundo, 2 December 1979.

²⁰ Reis, 131.

member of the family.²¹ Scholars point out the older man, to the right of the painting, might represent the father or grandfather of the child. He and his companion are similar to the priest and his companion for they are isolated and distant to the "festivity" developing in this place. Perhaps this figure might also be the organizer of this "festivity", yet he remains separate from all of this, he might be assuming the role of the host, and overseeing the development of events during the wake.

There are other elements of interest. There is one candle without any protection from the wind that remains lighted, in contrast to the two candles that are protected by glass covers and produce no light. A lighted candle is a traditional symbol of divine light in Christian art. There are two rays of light entering the dwelling through the cracks on the wall, framing the lighted candle, and landing in the old black man and the dead child respectively. This particular detail enforces the idea that ultimately the old black man and the dead child are the representations of good and innocence. The old black man is the only one in this painting who attends to the dead child.

Candles are common in wakes. They symbolize a life that

²¹ *ibid.*, 128. He also mentions that much money was involved in the organization of wakes, to make the wake remembered and give it importance (Reis, 129). Perhaps this was to in a way immortalize the deceased. One should remember that in Oller's painting there is obviously a great amount of money involved for this wake.

has ceased to exist, and to help illuminate the way to heaven and eternal life, therefore people kept them lighted to keep evil away.²² The child's soul in El velorio is saved, represented in this candle and the "divine light." There are other elements that are of interest. Venegas explains that the drink offered to the priest is pitorro, which she claims is the "wine" of the "mass", the plantains represent the "bread."²³ In Puerto Rico, pitorro is a banned alcoholic beverage due to the method of fermentation. Pitorro is made out of sugar cane, sometimes using the ones left behind in the field (which are not the best). The juice is extracted and then placed in a container for fermentation. Something, usually decomposed (such as a piece of meat), is added to the juice to speed the process. Sometimes it is fermented in cups formed by split coconuts, using the coconut to soften the strong taste -- [note the coconut cups hanging from the beams near the pig]. The result is a highly alcoholic beverage, that can cause drunkenness with a very small dose. This drink is high in alcoholic content, and can cause extreme

²² Reis, 130.

²³ Plantains are part of the staple diet of Puerto Ricans. This is also reflected in art as demonstrated by Ramón Frade in his painting Our Daily Bread (1909), where the bread is represented as a branch of plantains. [See the catalogue: La herencia artística de Puerto Rico: Epoca pre-colombina al presente (New York: Museo del Barrio, 1973).]

sickness -- even death -- because of the damage it causes to the liver.²⁴ In reference to this painting, this drink could in essence be a representation of evil. It could also be another means for Oller to express what he ultimately saw as Puerto Rican.

Delgado Mercado mentions:

Y hay más símbolos, símbolos de la fe vacía, de la impropiedad, de la superstición, como el as de oros muy significativamente colocado boca arriba en el piso entre el cura y la madre.²⁵

Venegas also says:

Recordemos también que en el momento de la crucifixión los soldados se jugaron al pie de la cruz las vestimentas de Cristo con dados. Creemos que Oller también hace alusión a este episodio con la inclusión de las barajas españolas al pie del altar.²⁶

These two views still support the idea of superstition. Venegas also uses it to defend the theory of a Satanic cult. It should be added that between the priest and the mother, the Spanish card that is most clear is the ace of spades, even more clear is the two of spades near the men in the corner.

²⁴ The information on this drink was obtained from several conversations with Susana Pérez. Mainly this information is part of the Puerto Rican culture, and known by many of its inhabitants.

²⁵ "And there are more symbols, symbols of empty faith, of impropriety, of superstition, like the ace of gold very significantly placed face up between the priest and the mother" (Delgado Mercado, 97).

²⁶ "We should also remember that during the crucifixion the soldiers divided Christ's clothes over a game of dice at the foot of his cross. We think that Oller makes reference to this by including Spanish cards at the foot of the altar" (Venegas, 250).

The ace of gold clearly placed between the priest and the old black man, under the table.

This contrast between the priest and the old black man is constantly emphasized. These two figures are obviously juxtaposed. In the surviving overall study this was more obviously enhanced by the clothing -- the old black man wearing white, and the priest in black. In both, the overall study and the final composition, the priest and the old black man create a sort of parenthesis surrounding the child. From the side of the priest all seems to be dark, almost superstitious. People drink, they ignore the dead child, and the "apothecary" whispers to the priest. The contrast created between the old black man and the priest is somewhat reminiscent of the darkness that engulf the area where Christ was crucified. Superstition claims this darkness is due to a fight between the Lord and the devil. This particular topic is not new to Oller since he depicted it in Las tinieblas, a painting he then gave to the San Jose Church (in San Juan), and currently lost. Therefore it could be possible that in creating this circle around the dead child, Oller is actually making allusion to this battle between good and evil.

On the window frame, there are several objects placed, mostly to promote good luck, sometimes to protect from evil. From the side closest to the old black man there are also symbols of evil or superstition as well. The cat from its perch on the beam looks down towards the pig and to the events

developing below; cats in Latin America culture are symbols of evil. The other two crosses in the painting lack the figure of the Christ, which Venegas uses to further her argument that this ceremony deals with the devil not with Christ.²⁷ Yet there are also mild reminders of Christianity, such as the lighted candle and the "divine light."

The contrast between "good" and "evil" is evident in this painting. To the left of the painting, there are symbols that remind one of Puerto Rico -- its music, its food, the land, and the Puerto Ricans ability for enjoyment. In essence, this side of the painting reminds the viewer of the importance of the true Puerto Rican. The right side of the painting, on the other hand, reminds the viewer of the oppressing forces of superstition, enforced by the Church and the government.

Oller clearly resorted to detail to convey a message. The extensive detail not only adds character to the painting, but it also provided information about culture, superstition, and religion of the Puerto Rican campesinos of the late nineteenth century. The criticism Oller received on this painting should be analyzed to understand the impact and the confusion it had on those viewers.

²⁷ Venegas, 249.

Criticism

The painting El velorio produces many sentiments within the viewer. Indeed it has caused much criticism within the art world. It is worth examining the criticism Oller received from his contemporaries to understand the richness and the history of this painting.

Oller's painting caused great commotion in the 1893 Exposición de Puerto Rico, and shortly after, Jose de Zequeira published an eleven-page pamphlet, giving a critical analysis of the painting. His study reveals an understanding of the artist not seen before or even today. He begins his commentary stating: "Es la representación de una orgía campestre; que tales son llamados en Puerto Rico Velorios de Angelitos."²⁸ He further emphasizes that it was not a fancy of the artist, but a criticism of a custom practiced in the island. Zequeira continues his argument by describing the painting and offering his own interpretation. He firmly supports throughout the whole pamphlet that Oller is presenting the reality of the Puerto Rican countryside. He states:

El cuadro de Oller, á quien cabe el honor de ser el

²⁸ "[El velorio] is the representation of a countryside orgy; called Wakes of Little Angels in Puerto Rico" (J. de Zequeira, El Velorio cuadro de costumbres puertorriqueñas por F. Oller. Estudio crítico, (Puerto Rico: La Cooperativa, 1894), 3).

primero que ofrece á la crítica ese repugnante episodio de la vida de Puerto-Rico, es insistimos en ello, una protesta contra la costumbre semi-salvaje que representa; y el pensamiento que la informa es de la mas grave transcendencia por que nada mas irritante y desconsolador que el realismo hace resaltar el pintor el olvido del más sublime de los amores, el amor materno; nada más repugnante que la degradación de aquel sacerdote que asiste a la fanática saturnal de sus feligreses.²⁹

Zequeira believes Oller used the medium of painting to present a criticism of a custom practiced in the rural areas of the island. He sees Oller as a "free thinker." His perception of Oller is of high esteem, since Oller was able to present a problem of the Puerto Rican lower class, one not corrected by those who had the ability -- the Puerto Rican elite, the ones in power or with authority. This is represented according to Zequeira, in the figure of the priest.

Alejandro Infiesta describes Oller in the following statement:

Se trata de la obra magna de un artista puertorriqueño, del primero y del único que goza fama fuera de su tierra natal, que forma escuela en esta provincia, porque cuenta discípulos que le siguen y le quieren, y cuyos lienzos palpita un sentimiento de profunda ironía, de alta intención moral y artística a su

²⁹ "Oller's painting, who had the honor of being the first to offer a critique of this repugnant occurrence in the life of Puerto Rico, is I insist, a protest against the semi-savage custom which [the painting] represents; and the message it carries is one of great transcendence because there is nothing more irritant and uncomfoting as the reality with which the painter points out the lack of the sublime of loves, the maternal love; nothing more repugnant than the degradation of the priest who attends to this fanatical orgy of his community" (ibid., 7).

juicio, que merece estudio especial.³⁰

Infiesta sustains the view that the artist uses painting as a mean of social criticism. Infiesta further claims the painting is more than a criticism, but a moral lesson to the Puerto Rican inhabitants. Infiesta states: "Es una sátira ruda de nuestras costumbres, no riendo como Cervantes, sino mordiendo como Voltaire."³¹ Although he appreciates what the artist tries to accomplish, he is confused with the artist's choices. He accepts that the painting represents a wake, but he does not believe it is a "traditional" wake. He does not agree with the artist's portrayal of the priest, and he questions the representation of the pig:

Nuestro sacerdocio no será modelo, pero no está tan denigrado que presencie esas bacanales sin protesta. El lechon asado no es materia de Velorio, porque se vela de noche y de noche no se come lechón. Podrá ser un almuerzo de una noche de vela; mas entonces no se come al

³⁰ "It is concerning the big painting of a Puerto Rican artist, the first and the only one to have fame outside his native land, whom created a school in this [Spanish] province because he has disciples who follow and love him, and in whose paintings there is a feeling of profound irony, to his judgement of high moral and artistic intention, deserving closer study" (Alejandro Infiesta, La exposición de Puerto Rico. Memoria redactada según acuerdo de la junta del centenario (Puerto Rico: Boletín Mercantil, 1895), 95).

³¹ "[It] is a rude satire of our customs, not funny like Cervantes, but morbid like Voltaire" (ibid., 97).

lado del muerto, sino en el campo.³²

In 1907, Félix Matos Bernier will once again exploit this notion. He finds the painting to be a total fancy of the artist, and definitely not a depiction of Puerto Rican life. Therefore he sees it as a failure. He claims the painting does not have a message, and that the artist lacks "common sense" and thus is unable to depict something that is Puerto Rican. Matos Bernier complains: "Oh! ninguna madre puertorriqueña se embriaga, ni se embriagó jamás, frente al cadáver de su hijo."³³ This is only one of his arguments to point out how the artist represented something that is not real. Artistically, Matos Bernier claims that Oller has no talent, and further points how El velorio is the culmination of all failures:

Quiso hacer un trazado de tradición y su fracaso es notorio. En su velorio no está la tradición puertorriqueña, porque es falsa su exposición: carece de verdad, carece de legitimidad. La exageración, en materias de Arte es el peor de los impulsos.... Resultando que "El Velorio" es un capricho del artista,

³² "Our priesthood might not be a role model, but it is not so denigrated as to watch without any protest these bacchanals. The roasted pig is not part of a Wake, because wakes take place at night, and pork is not eaten at night. It could be a lunch after a whole night wake; but then no one eats beside the deceased, but out in the countryside" (ibid, 98).

³³ "Oh! no Puerto Rican mother gets inebriated, nor has she ever, in front of her son's corpse" (Félix Matos Bernier, "Frasquito Oller -- El Velorio," Isla del Arte (San Juan, Puerto Rico: La Primavera, 1907), 98.)

muy amanerado, con amontonamiento monotomo de personajes y cosas, sin perspectiva, sin dibujo....³⁴

Matos Bernier believes that internationally the painting only shames the island, since these countries will not understand the difficulties the artist faces.³⁵

Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño finds El velorio to be a regression in the artistic development of Oller. He excuses the artist by affirming it is due to the environment of the artist, meaning Puerto Rico. Gaya Nuño argues that for Oller to obtain commissions from patrons he had to remain within an "older" style, namely the style of Courbet. The author firmly believes that Oller should have expressed his modernism through Impressionism. He finds Oller's paintings in this style to be of excellent quality. He wants Oller's art to be known, emphasizing those paintings of impressionistic style. Yet, Gaya Nuño is biased in his opinion, for he wants Oller in essence to be European, more specifically, a French painter. Gaya Nuño decides to affirm the glory of the impressionistic

³⁴ "[Oller] wanted to do a depiction of tradition, and his failure is obvious. His work lacks the Puerto Rican tradition, because his representation is not real: it lacks reality, and validity. Exaggeration in matters of Art is the worst kind of impulse.... Resulting that El Velorio is a fancy of the artist, very mannerist, with a monotonous accumulation of figures and objects, lacking in perspective and ability to draw..." (ibid., 101).

³⁵ ibid., 102. Matos Bernier believes these problems are related to the lack of Puerto Rico's appreciation of art, and of artistic support.

style, dismissing El velorio as an unfortunate error of the artist who tried to please his epoch.³⁶

The diverse amount of criticism makes it difficult to remember that Oller worked intensely on this painting, and he considered it his greatest achievement. As Sebastián González García mentions:

A Puerto Rico regresó Oller con El Velorio, siempre en la creencia, como en el día que pudo verlo concluido, que éste era su obra maestra, y que los críticos, de aquí y de allá, estaban ciegos por ignorancia y por prejuicios. Por ignorancia de los principios del arte y por prejuicios sociales en San Juan. Por ignorancia de la sociedad puertorriqueña y por prejuicios artísticos en París.³⁷

Oller believed this painting to be his best, and this is reaffirmed by some and denied by other critics. Perhaps the only critic to show deep understanding of Oller's achievement is Zequeira. These writers had many biases, they were influenced by their economic status, and their loyalty to their European heritage. They will rather deny the existence

³⁶ Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, "Dos paisajes franceses de Francisco Oller," Revista del Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña April-June (1962): 3.

³⁷ "To Puerto Rico returned Oller with El velorio, always believing, as in the day he saw it finished, that it was his masterpiece, and that the critics, from [Puerto Rico] and [Europe] were blinded by ignorance and prejudices. In San Juan, for its ignorance of the principles of art, and its social prejudice. In Paris, for its ignorance of the Puerto Rico's society, and its artistic prejudice" (Sebastián González García, "Oller y su obra El Velorio," Angela Luisa June (1967): 20.)

of the jíbaro and the mestizo, exactly the figures whom Oller exalted.³⁸ It is reasonable to believe Zequeira was aware of this funerary practice, and was a participant to at least one of them, as he seems to point out in one of his reflections on El velorio:

Los que no conozcan el país, los que jamás hayan asistido a esas orgías campestres, llamadas <<Velorios de angelitos>>, tan frecuentes en nuestros campos, al ver el cuadro de Oller, sentirán una extraña impresión y lo juzgarán a primera vista,... como una extravagancia del artista, como una excentricidad del genio....³⁹

Zequeira already understood the problem other critics and viewers will face when analyzing this painting. He reveals his connection to the country, since he criticized the ignorance of the elite rather than the one of the poor.

The problem with this criticism is that most of the critics had a personal attachment to the "Mother Country" Spain. The representation of the priest then, does not constitute only an attack on the Church, but also one on Spain. Finally, the critics reflect their own desire to always connect Oller to

³⁸ The jíbaro is a specific word to refer to the Puerto Rican country-person. Mestizo is the word used for those of mixed parentage.

³⁹ "Those who do not know this country, or that have never attended to one of these country-side orgies, called "Wakes of little angels," so frequent in our country-side, while looking at Oller's painting, will have a confused impression and will judge it at first glance,... as an artistic extravagance, as an eccentricity of the mind..." (Zequeira, 6).

the international artistic milieu, and connect his development to his experience abroad. The problem with this approach is that it ignores Oller's Puerto Rican background. Yet it is indeed this background which makes it possible for Oller to create El velorio. The painting was Oller's ultimate expression as an artist, a thinker, and a Puerto Rican.

OLLER AND PUERTO RICO

A Puerto Rican Background

The years Oller spent in France acquainted him with different approaches to art, and the new and radical political ideas that were often discussed within his circle of friends. These political ideas included anarchism and socialism, which will affect the development of artists such as Camille Pissarro and Gustave Courbet. Oller's experience in France gave him the perspective necessary to understand the situation of his native land, which was still a possession of the Spanish Empire.

According to Albert Boime:

Oller identified with the liberal position on reform.... His friends and sitters included the outstanding liberals of his age Julián E. Blanco, Manuel Sicardó y Osuna, Román Baldorioty de Castro, José Julián Acosta, and the poets José Guadalupe Padilla and José Gautier Benítez. Like most of them he advocated abolition, assumed an anti-clerical tone, and searched for an expression of national culture and identity.¹

It is clear Oller's position was refined during his years in Europe, more specifically in Paris. Camille Pissarro, a friend of Oller's and a very dominant figure within the artistic milieu, writes:

....mais toi que me blague sur les commandes officielles, gare à toi, tiens-toi.
Los Jesuites sont fous! Ils te materont bien

¹ Boime, 45-46.

vite, à la moindre concession de ta part ils ne douteront pas d'arriver à faire de toi un calotin.²

Pissarro was a firm believer of anarchism, which in nature is anticlerical.

That Oller can be considered a liberal is clearly demonstrated by the paintings he worked on after his return to Puerto Rico in 1884 -- such as El velorio and La escuela del maestro Rafael. During the nineteenth century intellectuals and professionals started to explore their Puerto Rican identity. Their involvement with the island helped in the growth of culture and of national pride.

José Gautier Benítez died in 1880 while Oller was still in Spain.³ When Oller returned in 1884, he did a posthumous drawing which might also be a study for a later painting. In the drawing he adds a few words that reveal the closeness of their friendship [Figure 8]. The catalogue Francisco Oller a Realist-Impressionist states about the painting: "The thistle with its yellow flower which appears in the foreground and the leafless branches of the bushes behind the poet undoubtedly symbolize the grief of Nature at the loss of her bard" [Figure 9].⁴ The painting then reflects on the romantic style

² This letter is dated 14 December 1865, when Oller was in Puerto Rico. Re-printed in: Camille Pissarro, Correspondance de Camille Pissarro, ed. Janine Bailly-Herzberg, vol 3 (Paris: Editions du Valhermeil, 1980), 533.

³ José Gautier Benítez (1851-80) is a Puerto Rican Romantic poet.

⁴ See: Francisco Oller a Realist-Impressionist, 175.



*¡Basta! En esas horas de tristeza, en esos instantes en
que el corazón se ahoga, en que y lloras, recuérdalo
pequeño de la alma. Con los ojos y se te vuelve
clara de amor y enciende que me haya senta en
dolor más profundo, pero basta. No pude
decirte mi secreto, cuánto volver a verte.
y cuánto, mi mano tembló para la
imagen. ¡Basta de Borrachos! Cuéntalo en la tumba
que todo el que aquí sea no lo olvida.*

J. Benítez.

Figure 8

José Gautier Benítez. Lithograph, c. 1884.

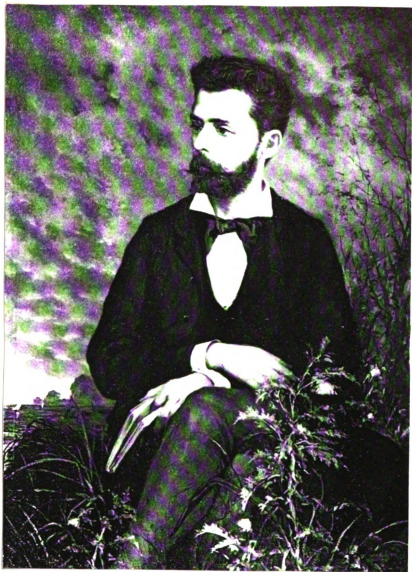


Figure 9

José Gautier Benítez. Painting, c. 1885-86.

characteristic of the poet.

The nationalist sentiments Gautier Benítez projected into his poems must have greatly affected Oller, who was also affirming and exploring his Puerto Rican identity. Two of the most important poems of Gautier Benítez are A Puerto Rico (Ausencia) or To Puerto Rico (Absence), and A Puerto Rico (Regreso) or To Puerto Rico (Return). In these poems Gautier Benítez reaffirms his loyalty and personal attachment to the island. He expressed in Return:

Para poder conocerla
es preciso compararla,
de lejos en sueños verla;
y para saber quererla
es necesario dejarla.⁵

When Oller finally returned to Puerto Rico in 1884, these words must have been particularly significant. He must have completely understood the feelings Gautier Benitez was sharing.

There are other paintings which indicate that Oller held in common with his reformist Puerto Rican friends. Oller was against the institution of slavery. The currently lost painting El negro flagelado (The Negro Flogged) clearly expresses Oller's feelings against the institution [Figure 10]. In Puerto Rico, as in any area where the institution existed, slavery provided the means for inventive ways of

⁵ "To be able to know her// one has to compare her, // to dream of her from afar; // and to know how to love her // one has to leave her" (Las cien mejores poesías líricas de Puerto Rico, ed. Jorge Luis Morales (Rio Piedras, PR: Editorial Edil, 1973), 42).



Figure 10

El negro flagelado (Negro Flogged). Painting, c. 1872.

torture, one of which is depicted in the painting. The painting clearly takes place in the Caribbean, as revealed by the palm trees and the sugar mill in the background. Although the painting reveals the reality of the institution in Puerto Rico, it can represent its reality in Cuba as well. The painting dates approximately from 1872, coinciding with the struggle of Puerto Rico and Cuba to abolish the institution. Then perhaps Oller's painting is meant to criticize the institution as practiced particularly in Puerto Rico and Cuba. Emancipation of slaves was a common topic during this period, and was granted in Puerto Rico in 1873.

There are clear parallels between Oller's painting and the 3 de Mayo 1808 by Francisco Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828). In Oller's painting a woman kneeling on the floor asks for the mercy of her owner, yet is surrounded by hopelessness. Similarly in Goya's painting a male figure extends his arms, reminiscent of the cross, waiting for his execution. In both paintings there is a sense of hopelessness and cruelty.

In the painting La escuela del maestro Rafael (The School of Raphael, c. 1890-92) Oller also expresses his continued support for the free slave [Figure 11]. Rafael Cordero (1760-1868) was a hero among the abolitionists. He provided free education to children, and can be considered one of the founders of public education in the island. Some of his students were Alejandro Tapia y Rivera (the greatest Puerto Rican dramatist), José Julián Acosta (historian and



Figure 11

La escuela del maestro Rafael. Painting, c. 1890-92.

scientist), and Manuel Elzaburu, all represented in this painting.⁶ Many art historians, as pointed out by Boime, agree that Rafael is depicted almost as a comical character who is losing control of his rowdy students. They argue Oller chose to depict him thus, to please the conservatives in the island, while also encouraging the liberal view. Rafael was a devout Catholic who taught his students the religious ideals of the Church. Therefore scholars argue the presence of all the religious symbols, (like the cross and the religious icons), hanging from the wall represent the Church, and Rafael's feelings towards it.⁷ Yet, if Oller wanted to simply present Rafael as a devout Catholic, why did he choose to cut the representation of the cross? During the nineteenth century, the Church in Puerto Rico was basically another branch of the Spanish government:

The Church authorities sought to convince the masses that it was God's will to accept passively Spanish rule.... In the schools run by the Church, children were taught to read and write, but they were also infused with the dogma of the Church and the unquestionable respect for the established authorities and for imperial "law and order."⁸

Given this, it is reasonable to conclude that these Christian objects stand for the oppressive power of the Catholic church and ultimately of the Spanish Empire. From the wall also hangs a whip, a reminder of the enslavement of Africans in the

⁶ Boime, 47.

⁷ *ibid*, 48.

⁸ López, 62.

island, and of the dominant control of the Spanish government over the Puerto Ricans. Then, this will be similar to the approach seen in El velorio where there is also an anti-clerical message.

The children Oller depicted are the future men who will take pride in their Puerto Rican heritage, and strive for the betterment of the island's condition, including the abolition of slavery. They are depicted as rowdy children because they represent the future voices of the island, important members of Puerto Rican history who will speak in favor of Puerto Rico and its inhabitants. They will explore their Puerto Rican identity, increase the national pride, and will themselves become symbols of national pride. Interestingly, Oller used models from the families of these men to depict most of the children. In the case of Rafael he based his portrayal on an earlier sketch he prepared before the teacher's death in 1868.⁹ Perhaps then the "comical expression" is more the representation of Rafael in his own unawareness as to what education was going to cause among the students. The rowdy children then are the immortalized voices of these figures, and the representation of the continuing progress of the island. This painting and El velorio present the importance of the Puerto Rican identity, a topic obviously important to the artist.

⁹ Osiris Delgado Mercado, Francisco Oller y Cestero (1833-1917) Pintor de Puerto Rico (San Juan, PR: Centro de Estudios Superiores de Puerto Rico y el Caribe, 1983), 105.

Cuba and Paris

Oller took his painting El velorio to Cuba and Paris after exhibiting it in the 1893 Exposición de Puerto Rico. It is interesting that Oller decided to exhibit his painting in those places, and indeed, the fact that he did so raises questions. Why would Oller choose to exhibit his painting in Cuba? And why would he consider it important to present the painting to the French?

In Cuba this painting received very good reviews. Haydee Venegas wrote: "For the Cubans, accustomed to the academy, the realist school to which El velorio belonged, was the "new school."¹⁰ What she neglects to mention is that the same can be said of other Latin American countries, where often during the course of the nineteenth century artists would use the realist style to protest against Spain, and/or make nationalistic statements. It was not the style itself which was "new", but the use to which it was put which made it in essence avant-garde.

Little information is available in Oller's stay in Cuba. As Venegas mentions the most reliable source for acquiring a sense of Oller's friends in Cuba is through the inventory of

¹⁰ Haydee Venegas, "Oller in Cuba," Horizontes 56 (April 1985): 89.

Oller's library.¹¹ René Taylor, who discusses this library, mentions that Oller's interests were wide ranging, covering such areas as medicine, mathematics, geography, astronomy, philosophy, and history. Among his history books there were a few on Puerto Rico, but there were also books on Cuba, most of which have a political and anti-Spanish character.¹² One might conclude from this evidence that Oller supported the Cuban struggle against Spain. If Oller, like many others -- including the Puerto Ricans Ramón Emeterio Betances, and Lola Rodríguez de Tió -- saw Cuba as sister to the Puerto Rican plight against Spain, then he can be seen to favor independence for these two colonies.¹³ Besides Oller's apparent support for independence, he might also be reflecting on the calls of Betances and Rodríguez de Tió, exercised at different periods from Cuba, calling Puerto Rico to join in the Cuban cause against the Spanish Empire. In this context, El velorio gains a political perspective and a deeper meaning than has heretofore been examined.

There is also little information concerning Oller's trip

¹¹ *ibid.*, 90.

¹² René Taylor, "La biblioteca de Francisco Oller," Horizontes 56 (April 1985): 85.

¹³ *ibid.*, 85. Lola Rodríguez de Tió knew Oller, and inspired by one of his paintings dedicated a poem to him (Osiris, 80). Rodríguez de Tió is an important figure of Puerto Rican history. As a poet, she constantly emphasized the need from independence, and called the Puerto Ricans to join Cuba in the struggle against the Empire. [See: Carlos N. Carreras, Hombres y mujeres de Puerto Rico (Mexico: Editorial Orion, 1974), 52-67.]

to France in 1895, indeed art historians cannot even agree whether Oller succeeded in exhibiting this painting at the Salon 1895. Most scholars argue that he did not show El velorio, but a different painting, El cesante (The Unemployed). Yet Venegas presents a compelling argument favoring this painting as the one Oller presented at the Salon, including Oller's entry form to the Salon.¹⁴

Conservatives in Puerto Rico are characterized by their attachment to the "Mother Country." Those who might have found this painting offensive, anti-clerical, and anti-Spanish, would very likely have wanted to dismiss it as nothing but a "gross" fancy of the artist. The Salon was an accepted place where the artists could display their work, and in essence receive the approval of the critics. Once the Salon accepted the painting, it basically forced those who disagreed with the painting to at least recognize it as a work of art. In essence, Oller proved to the doubting biased minds of those who did not approved of the painting in Puerto Rico, that the painting had artistic value by being recognized by the capital of art.

Pissarro wrote a letter to his son Lucien, expressing his opinion on the painting. He tells Lucien:

I was interrupted by the arrival of -- you'll never guess -- Francisco Oller, who came here from Puerto Rico to enter a very large painting, more than four

¹⁴ Venegas, 91-92. Also: idem, "Francisco Oller: A Catalogue Raisonne" (Unpublished Master's Thesis: Florida State University, 1978), Appendix B and C.

yards in size, in the exhibition. You should see how changed he is! It is twenty years since we saw each other. He has changed, aged in every respect, he is shrunken, and I am afraid his painting likewise; he looked at my works with bewilderment, he found them full of light and air. He makes paintings with anecdotal motifs, like the Negro Flogged at Tanguy's. The photograph of this painting seemed very much better to me, but I am afraid a little obvious.¹⁵

Pissarro believed art should be modern, he believed that: "The motif should be observed more for shape and color than for drawing. There is no need to tighten the form which can be obtained without that."¹⁶ This statement demonstrates the difference in approach that Pissarro had from Oller, and thus Pissarro's lack of appreciation of the painting. Pissarro used the modern styles of Impressionism and Pointillism to express his own anarchist convictions, and to express modernity. His criticism of Oller is based on his own development, in association with the changes of French art. Also Pissarro lived his life denying his Caribbean background, while Oller continued to explore it. In a way, Pissarro with his own artistic ideals, and his ignorance of the Caribbean situation made him an unlikely candidate to relate to this painting. In Latin America, Oller could be seen to an extent as "avant-garde" and radical with this painting particularly

¹⁵ This letter is dated 23 March 1895, reprinted in: Camille Pissarro, Camille Pissarro: Letters to his Son Lucien, ed. John Rewald (Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, 1981), 334-36.

¹⁶ John Rewald, The History of Impressionism (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), 456.

because of its subject. Oller used the Impressionist style often, but avoided its use in all of his paintings of socio-political theme such as La escuela del maestro Rafael, El negro flagelado, and El velorio. Even during the periods he was working on these paintings he continued to develop his Impressionistic brush, although he never explored the passion for light as Claude Monet did in his late stage. This then means his stylistic choice for these paintings is a conscious one based on what it will mean to the Latin American community, and specifically, to the Puerto Ricans.

It is also worth noticing an early drawing by Pissarro, completed while in Caracas in 1853 [Figure 12]. Whether Oller knew about the drawing or not remains unknown, but the similarities of the drawing and El velorio are clear.¹⁷ Perhaps then when Pissarro refers to El velorio as "obvious", he refers not only to the style, but what he considered a common subject in Latin America. This further supports the argument that by Pissarro denying his Caribbean background, he also failed to grasp the message Oller was trying to communicate.

¹⁷ Delgado, 97.



Figure 12

Camille Pissarro. Carnaval Dance. Drawing, c. 1853-54.

What is the message?

It is irrefutable that Oller was affected by the ideas he was introduced to by his French friends. But also irrefutable is the influence of the events and the ideas formulated in Puerto Rico. His experiences in both countries contributed to Oller's ideals and convictions, yet it is in Puerto Rico where he comes to complete what he considered his major achievement, El velorio.

Clearly El velorio is influenced by Gustave Courbet's doctrines. Courbet expressed in a letter published in the Courrier du dimanche of December 29, 1861:

I would add that, as I see it, art, or talent, should be to an artist no more than the means of applying his personal faculties to the ideas and the events of the times in which he lives.

The true artists are those who pick up their age exactly at the point to which it has been carried in previous times....

I also maintain that painting is essentially concrete art form and can consist only of the representation of real and existing things. It is entirely a physical language that is composed, by way of words, of all visible objects.¹⁸

These ideals are not just reflected in Oller's painting, but also in the speech he delivered at the Escuela Normal in 1903. He expressed: "El arte de nuestra época debe representar, o criticar, mejor dicho, nuestros propios actos para que su fin

¹⁸ Gustave Courbet, Letters of Gustave Courbet, trans. Petra ten-Doeschate Chu (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 203-04.

sea provechoso."¹⁹

Courbet's painting Funeral at Ornans (1849-50) is often seen as a major influence in the conception of El velorio. Courbet's painting depicts a group of residents of the small town of Ornans during the burial of an unknown member of the community. The painting was ambitious, choosing to represent the contemporary people on a grand scale. In a sense, his painting emphasized "the people", stressing the popular and that which was regional and folkloric. It is also revolutionary because of the scale of the painting which "merely" depicts a small town, a town which a center of art such as Paris would rather forget.²⁰

Another of Courbet's paintings often associated with Oller's is the Funeral Preparations, an incomplete work later overpainted and which with many alterations now represents the Bridal Preparations (c. 1865). Linda Nochlin claims: "...the subject was taken up by one of his disciples, his pupil in the late fifties and early sixties, the Puerto-Rican painter Francisco Oller."²¹ Whether Oller even knew about this painting is in fact unknown, but it is possible since Oller

¹⁹ "The art of our epoch must represent, or better said, criticize our own acts for its end to be productive." The speech was reprinted in the Francisco Oller a Realist-Impressionist, 229.

²⁰ Linda Nochlin, Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth Century Art and Society (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 20.

²¹ idem., Realism (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1971), 89.

considered himself a follower of Courbet and made it a point to visit places familiar to French painter. It is possible that Oller got the spark of an idea from Courbet's unfinished painting, but only a spark for in no real form is this painting a derivative. Oller made his painting insistently Puerto Rican.

One of the major differences between Courbet and Oller is on the subject of education. Courbet did not believe in formalizing art education, and although in 1862 he opened a studio for his disciples, there was no formal training offered. Oller, on the other hand, believed that artists had the obligation to teach through paintings, and help in the progress of the human condition. Artists should teach all that is part of the customs of their place, to help correct the problems, and praise all of its good things.²² For that purpose Oller opened in Puerto Rico schools dedicated to the training of artists, including female artists.²³

The reformist movement in Puerto Rico emphasized the need for reform in education. They believed that the educational system, which was basically non-existent in the island, needed support, and that the future progress of the island depended

²² Francisco Oller a Realist-Impressionist, 229.

²³ See: Haydee E. Venegas, "Francisco Oller: A Catalogue Raisonné," Unpublished Master's Thesis: Florida State University, 1978; Osiris Delgado Mercado, Francisco Oller y Cestero (1833-1917) Pintor de Puerto Rico (San Juan, P.R.: Centro de Estudios Superiores de Puerto Rico y el Caribe, 1983).

on the increase of this service for all. Thus, Oller's La escuela del maestro Rafael is not only a commentary on the abolitionists' hero Rafael and a political statement, but also a commentary on the need and importance of the education of the youth. López comments that the reformist movement often emphasized social reform, and argues that the failure of most of the reformist parties was for their lack of an economic-political guided plan.²⁴ Education, then in the nineteenth century, was not a separate branch, but an integral plan of the reformist political agenda.

As noted before the nineteenth century saw a growth in national pride, and this was often manifested in the literature of the time. It is at this time that the figure of the jíbaro emerges as a national symbol in some of these literary works. Although this jíbaro is not the pervasive figure that he will later become in the twentieth century, representing the true Puerto Rican and the national symbol, the roots of this character are from Oller's time. This figure starts to gain importance when Manuel Alonso, a Puerto Rican medical student, published a collection of essays under the title El jíbaro (1849). Although Alonso also "chastise[d] the social and cultural backwardness of his countrymen", his essays outline the Puerto Rican identity."²⁵

²⁴ López, 59.

²⁵ Aníbal González, "Puerto Rico," Handbook of Latin American Literature, ed. David William Foster, 2nd Edition (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 559.

Oller clearly appreciated the jíbaro more than did his Puerto Rican contemporaries. This is evidenced by the number of paintings he dedicated to the subject, and his association with the jíbaro [Figure 13]. Oller must have had a comfortable association with these country-people for Emma Boehm-Oller mentions that he was invited to a "wake of little angel", and he was often a visitor to their houses.²⁶ Perhaps then, Oller can be seen as part of a bridge, belonging to the members that caused the transition of the jíbaro from a common laborer who when a symbol was needed became the one most easily identifiably Puerto Rican national symbol, and today national symbol a national hero.

Oller expresses that El velorio depicts a "gross superstition" among the Puerto Rican country-people, encouraged by the priests. Osiris Delgado Mercado, like many other of the scholars, comments that Oller is criticizing the "vanities" and the attitudes of the poor.²⁷ What could be the purpose of criticizing the poor so severely? The painting was not going to be observed by the poor, so what could Oller gain? What is the message and to whom is it directed? It is clear Oller is criticizing the Church, represented in the figure of the priest. The Church represented a branch of the government, which allowed the poor to continue living in

²⁶ Emma Boehm-Oller, "Francisco Oller, a Puerto Rican Impressionist," Américas September (1967): 27.

²⁷ Delgado, 97.



Figure 13

La jíbara. Painting, c. 1884.

ignorance, and discouraged them from rising against the Spanish Empire.

The criticism also extends against the elites of the island, for they too preferred the jíbaros to continue living in ignorance, thus assuring their status in the island. While the creole elites searched for more rights from the Spanish government for their own purposes, their rights were often used to oppress the poor. The landed elite even pressed the Spanish government to create a method that would force the jíbaro to work their lands.²⁸

Oller also included a message about national pride, the culture and the heritage of the true Puerto Rican. The instruments displayed in the painting are symbols of heritage. By the nineteenth century little survived of the taíno or Arawak Indian of the island, but their presence is indicated by instruments such as the maracas and the güiro. The Spanish presence is represented through the guitar, part of its legacy to the island.²⁹

The people present in the painting also give a sense of the Puerto Rican heritage: the black, the indian, and the Spanish influence, all which form part of the jíbaro -- also depicted in this painting. The presence of the indian is physically depicted through the dujo, the small bench to the right in the painting. The inclusion of the old black man

²⁸ For further discussion see López, 69-73.

²⁹ Babin, 86.

does not only represent the African influence in the Puerto Rican culture, but is also a reminder of their freedom and ability to integrate into the general community.

Oller's message/purpose is filled with cultural and political overtones. He addresses the issue of who is the true Puerto Rican, and concludes that it is the jíbaro who truly represents the island. He educates the viewer on the aspects of Puerto Rican culture and heritage. His praise of the Puerto Rican also includes criticism. He criticized the Church and the Puerto Rican elites for their constant oppression of the poor, and for keeping them in ignorance to achieve their own goals. Oller does not approve of the ignorance which allows the country-people to live in a world of superstitions. He thus concludes that the progress of the island depends of the education of all, including the much feared masses, and the elimination of formalized institutions such as the Church.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of Francisco Oller and his painting El velorio is indeed very challenging. This one painting has caught the attention of many scholars and yet for all of it, it remains a little known work. For Oller this one painting was his greatest achievement, and as such remained in his possession until 1903 when he gave it to the Escuela Normal, currently the University of Puerto Rico. The scale and the amount of time Oller dedicated to this painting reassures the importance it had for the artist. Oller obviously risked much to create this work that would "speak" to his people. Thus, this thesis set out to find the message Oller tried to communicate. To that end, the thesis included a discussion of the iconography and of the criticism the painting received. It also included a discussion of the socio-political and cultural life of the island, in order to place the painting in a context. The author has sought to bring a different perspective to this painting and to the artist, by showing Oller to be a free thinker and a man interested in the welfare of the island and of the true Puerto Rican.

Oller traveled several times to Europe, often stopping for long periods of time in France. France was an ideal place, since it was the art capital of the world. There, Oller was able to befriend artists such as Claude Monet,

Camille Pissarro, Paul Cézanne who would come, in time, to be seen as the greatest of his time. Mostly he was able to engage in discussion with these and other revolutionaries on topics of art, politics, and literature. Stepping into such an environment from a provincial island would have clearly benefited him. His contact with Gustave Courbet also had a great impact on the young artist, and yet he will not draw upon the example of this politically active painter until he too decides to put his art in the service of a nationalistic cause.

Once back in Puerto Rico, he found his countrymen to be preoccupied with the political developments of the island. Issues of political autonomy and the abolition of slavery were ones of the moment and therefore it is not surprising that Oller became preoccupied with them as well. It is in El velorio that Oller chose to express his own political opinion. The choice the Puerto Ricans faced were threefold; 1) have Puerto Rico remain permanently attached to Spain, 2) seek political autonomy but to remain part of Spain, 3) seek outright independence for Puerto Rico. Unquestionably, these differences brought questions of identity to the Puerto Rican minds. Oller became aware of the complexity of the subject and chose to express it in El velorio. In it he chose to express a message of freedom. This freedom was embodied for him in the true Puerto Rican, a person who is a mixture of Spanish, African, and Arawak indian. These people or jíbaros

are the true Puerto Ricans for they are one with the land, and owe their survival to it. Oller chose to depict the jíbaros in a situation that allowed him to deal with their grief, their festive nature, their superstitions, their faith, those who exploit them, and the heroic gesture of leaving all of this to go to work the land.

While exalting the jíbaro, he criticized the Church, and the government. He depicted the Church in the figure of the priest, expressing the oppression of the Church, and thus the government, upon the poor. This is a clear anti-clerical, and anti-Spanish stand. Oller was, in opposing the power of the government, giving power to the jíbaro as the embodiment of Puerto Rican strength -- the hero of the land. His message also includes a stand against the ignorance in which the jíbaros were kept. This is at the heart of the superstition inherent in the tradition of the baquíné, or the "wake for little angels."

Oller chose the Realist style to convey his complex message, and this decision might have also been influenced by the Latin American Art of the time. This connection is one which will have to be examined further at a later date. Perhaps he wanted to express his message as realistically as possible to avoid having his painting classified as a fancy of the artist. Clearly Impressionism would have been seen, if used in this case, as just that by his contemporaries on the island. On the other hand, had he found a way to do so his

friends in France may have welcomed the work and today it might be better known.

Some of the messages dealt with in this investigation were introduced, but not developed. Haydee Venegas has suggested that the work might possibly represent a black mass, where the offering is the small child. This seems extreme and before arriving at this conclusion it is essential that the the tradition of the "wake for little angels," and its impact to the Latin community of the nineteenth century be examined to the fullest.

Oller also made other attempts to explain and advocate the importance of education for all, and defended abolition. It is the combination of all of these messages that makes this painting difficult to analyze, and thus the failure of Oller. None-the-less, with this painting, Oller demonstrated his own commitment to a style and to Puerto Rico. For all the complications that make this painting what it is, what comes through it all is that this painting is a statement of national pride, and an exaltation of the true Puerto Rican.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

CHRONOLOGY

- 1833 Francisco Oller is born on June 17. His parents are Cayetano Juan Oller y Fromesta and María del Carmen Cestero Dávila.
- 1844 Oller studies art under the direction of Juan Cleto Noa. He makes copies of paintings by José Campeche.
- 1848 Oller works as a clerk at the Royal Treasury. He was dismissed from his post for making caricatures of the personnel while at work. Governor Juan Prim offers to send him to Rome to study. Oller's mother rejects the offer due to Oller's young age.
- 1849 Oller sings in the Philharmonic Society of Puerto Rico. The same year the Colegio de Santo Tomas is inaugurated, and Oller joins as staff member.
- 1851 Leaves to Spain. He enrolls in the Academy of San Fernando. He studies under Federico de Madrazo y Kuntz. He develops a curvilinear brushstroke that would become characteristic of his style.
- 1853 Returns to Puerto Rico.
- 1858 Travels to France. The decision was probably an influence of his previous teacher, Madrazo. Also

France was exerting a strong influence in Spanish America. In France, he joins Couture's atelier. He later enrolls in Gleyre's studio, where he meets Monet, Bazille, Sysley, and Renoir.

- 1859 Painting with Pissarro. He embraces Courbet's artistic ideas. Due to economic hardships, he supports himself singing.
- 1865 Returns to Puerto Rico.
- 1868 Exhibiting alone. First major exhibition in Las Fiestas de San Juan. He gets married. Governor Marchessi grants him permission to open his first Academy of Drawing and Painting.
- 1870 Named Knight of the Real Order of Charles III.
- 1873 In Vienna for the Universal Exhibition.
- 1874 In Paris, where some of Oller's friends were acquiring recognition as artists. Dr. Gachet and Georges Bellio acquired some paintings by Oller. Oller starts to show interest in the new Impressionist style.
- 1875 Oller uses a freer brushstroke in his paintings.
- 1877 Visits Madrid. He paints Colonel Contreras, although the style is more traditional, impressionistic influence is shown.
- 1884 Returns to Puerto Rico.
- 1887 Establishes Painting and Drawing School.
- 1891-92 Paints portraits of prominent Puerto Ricans. He

paints La escuela de Rafael. Starts the studies for El velorio.

- 1895 Travels to Paris to present in the Salon his painting El velorio. He is dazzled by the light and air shown in the paintings of his friends, especially Pissarro's. Stays with Cézanne, but shortly after they have a misunderstanding that destroys their friendship.
- 1896 Returns to Puerto Rico with several Impressionistic style paintings.
- 1902 He is the drawing professor at the Escuela Normal (which later became the University of Puerto Rico).
- 1904 Dismissed from the Escuela Normal.
- 1907 Appointed Drawing Master for the public schools in Bayamon.
- 1910-12 Oller is severely ill.
- 1917 Oller dies May 17.

APPENDIX B

THE WAKE

The following description of El velorio (The Wake) was submitted by Oller to the Paris Salon of 1895. It was reprinted in the catalogue Francisco Oller a Realist-Impressionist.

Astonishing criticism of a custom that still exist 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 to the roasted 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 an orgy of brutish appetites under the guise of a gross superstition. Two figures in the mist of the general disorder: the old countryman [] pants rolled up [] who comes to bid farewell to the dead child who is gone for ever.¹

¹ Francisco Oller a Realist-Impressionist, 193.

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