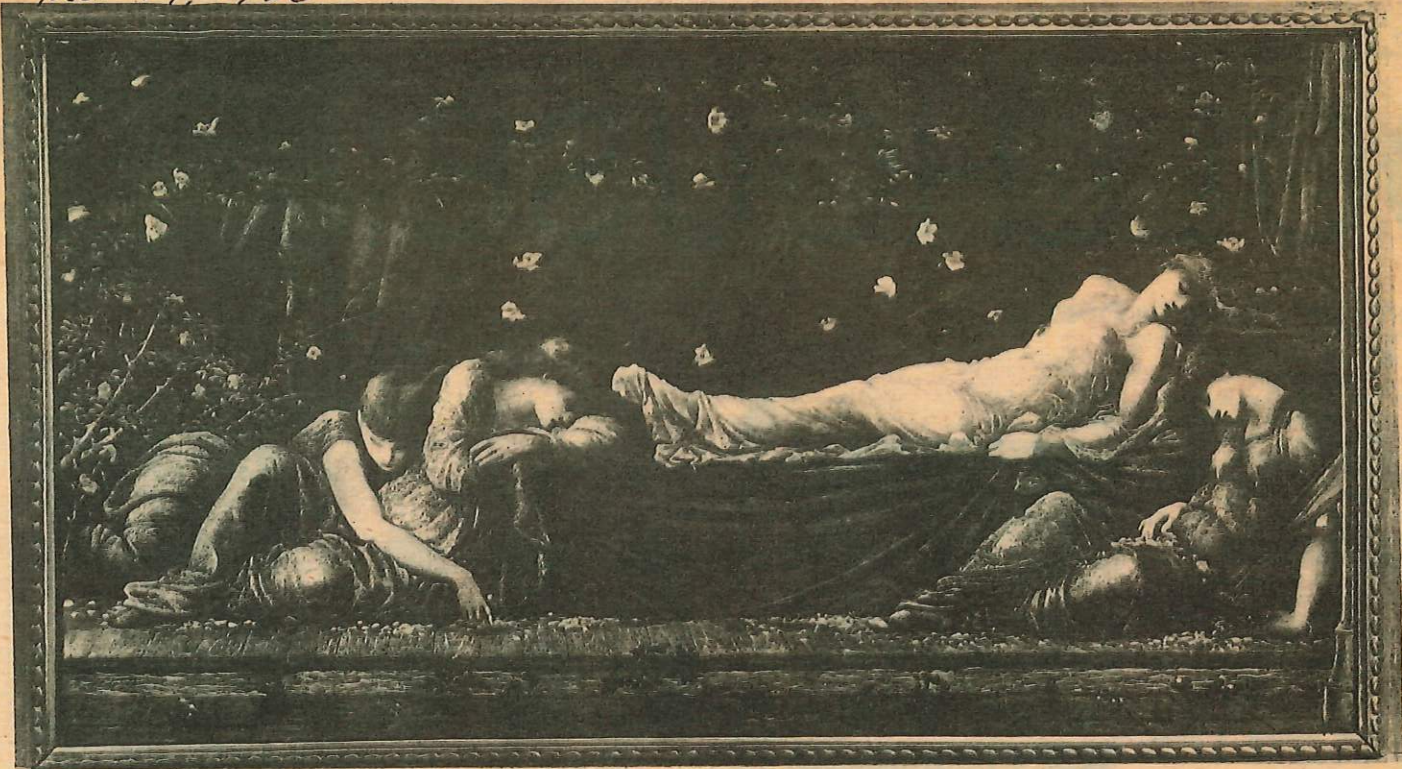




"The Sleeping Beauty" by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones

The PONCE Museum Revisited

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special to the STAR

With holiday time on their hands, students and others should make a visit or a re-visit to the Ponce Art Museum which is the best in Puerto Rico, with all due "carino" for Ricardo Alegria's 14 "museums" in San Juan. No comparison.

I wish more businessmen in Puerto Rico could learn the Ferre art of investing income tax monies in favorite projects like art foundations and museums. Cuba's Martinez Canas, now of Puerto Rico, who also has the art as witnessed by his Martinez Canas Art Foundation" with its nice Latin American art collection, is surprised that more of his colleagues don't follow Luis Ferre's shining example. It is fun. Do it! The Puerto Rico government approves, imagine. It is a good investment. Towns adopt you.

The Ponce Art Museum compares favorably with many "famous little museums" you feel compelled to visit in Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Eng-

land, Latin America and the states. It is better than many I studied.

Of course, its works by the first-rate artists of the Western world are third rate. If Ferre had insisted on buying only first rate works by first rate artists, we would have only two or three paintings to look at in Puerto Rico.

Instead we have the hundreds and hundreds of paintings of useful quality available for study and enjoyment in first rate accommodations in an easily accessible town. There are many excellent second and third rate artists represented by quite good, even definitive works. Witness Zuloaga, Sorolla, Gutierrez Solana and Arteta of the Spanish school; the English portrait school; the Pre-Raphaelites; the French Realists like Emile Jacques; Impressionists like Lebasque; the French Pompiers, winners of salon prizes and the contemporary Puerto Ricans and Latin Americans.

Each school is not methodically



"St. Matthew" (unfinished) by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones



"Fishing Boats" by Joaquin Sorolla



"Frederick Augustus, Duke of York" by Sir Thomas Lawrence



"The Dream of King Arthur in Avalon" by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones

represented including the Puerto Rican, since the museum started only about a dozen years ago. Also don Luis is kind of helter-skelter in his selections, since his moves are decided by what's available on the market. Who can pursue a particularly known figure in the world art nowadays?

For example, in Puerto Rican art, Bart Mayol told me don Luis used to keep up with all the art openings on our island, especially if he was sent an invitation by the artist. He would show up ahead of the crowd on inauguration night, look around, then point out his selections and say (without glancing at or knowing the prices): "I want that (or those) but the price is high. You'll have to lower it a little for me." Something the artists could certainly comply with.

Sometimes a provincial collection is better than Prado or Louvre masterworks for learning purposes. So is visiting any great museum's storage rooms. You learn composition by find-

ing out why certain works are away while others are displayed.

I envy the easy access Catholic University art students and professors have to the Ponce Museum, just across the street. Do they visit often? Or do they believe modern painting is loose brush-work only? In the collection, choice examples can be found of painterly quality to illustrate most painting techniques and even most spirits of formal construction or style. Paint is paint is paint, modern or old, dear students.

The solid English portrait school, nicely presented in Ponce, is contrasted by the Museum's agile central stairways. Then, surrounding study tables and cases holding some 2,000 good art books, are the English Pre-Raphaelites. "The million-dollar wall," it is proudly and reasonably called by the museum curator, Rene Taylor.

Reigning among the Pre-Raphaelites is Burne Jones's "Dream of King Arthur" which in the early '60's cost Ferre \$7,000, including preliminary

sketches and drawings. Now, 14 yrs. later, it's worth almost 20 times as much. When I left England some artists in London said that the English Armada should be sent to take over Ponce. But tactician Ferre lent the work for exhibition to a university in Kansas and the British gave up. They are still masters of the sea as shown by those lonely crossers-of-oceans who shine now and then to remind us of English history. But Kansas seemed way-out, even for them. So now we have the first-rate Pre-Raphaelites all to ourselves. Let's knock on wood.

Two of my students, Rafael Colon Morales and Anibal Matos, made me review my impressions of the Pre-Raphaelites in the late '60's. "You can't dismiss them just like that," said Rafael, otherwise no relation. I had been pontificating about how the Pre-Raphaelites were an effete throwback, pre-Raphael, born in a forward-looking epoch and out of tune with it. But look at their painterly and cre-

dible tactile qualities, my students pointed out, they were intensely committed artists. I was properly called down by my students, who were then into texturological very tactile experiments influenced by the Informalist Tapiés. Rafael and Anibal, modern artists, typify those who assayed the Pre-Raphaelites into their present market status.

Rene Taylor is a proper Englishman who by now shows a "mancha de platano" as anybody does who settles in the proper center of the universe, Ponce. Ferre was lucky to import him and to hold onto him Taylor was a member of the British Institute in Madrid until World War II.

Ferre was lucky also with the British, French, Spanish and American "Pompier" painters who having won all the salon prizes last century, were then downgraded by modern art. They are enjoying a revival nowadays maybe because Europe's great homes are being dismantled but also due to their choice bits of painterly quality.



"Procession" by Jose Gutierrez Salona



"Young Girl in a Forest" by Henry Lebasque



"Caring for the Flock" by Charles Emile Jacque