

Tribute to Dr. Jose R. Oliver

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special To The STAR

Puerto Rico is a better place because certain men have lived in it. One such is Dr. Jose R. Oliver, still alive and painting but with, his public life behind him. He had a conscience for service to his land and his people over and beyond his duty to himself as a painter.

Oliver's service has been fittingly recognized as the central event of the recently decreed "Semana de las Artes." A retrospective exhibit of his paintings can be seen until May 8 in La Fortaleza's patio gallery. You don't need a helicopter to get in, I've been assured by its Cultural Affairs Office. Test it out.

How does the younger generation evaluate Oliver's contributions?

I respect the magazine "Frente" when it does its duty to its specialist readership, the "modern" plastic artists, and attacks Ismael D'Alzina as a painter. But to deny that Puerto Rico is a better place because D'Alzina's Bellos Oficios (The Extension Division) is thriving at the University of Puerto Rico and his "Graphic History of Puerto Rico" is being read in our public schools and the Puerto Rican seal is better known, is to forget something about life. This same life now renders tribute to Oliver.

The aristocracy of Oliver as an all-around serviceable Puerto Rican is beyond question. But how has he done as an artist?

The answer, as in D'Alzina's case, is that when you officiate in the service of the mass it is very hard to

ring bells too. Oliver's services as administrator of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture Plastic Arts School and the public mural painting program, as professor at U.P.R. and curator of the institute's collections, consistently interfered with his development as a painter.

He could have been a very good one to judge by his painterly, small and atmospherically attractive prize winning "Vendedor de naranjas" at the Ateneo which is needed in the La Fortaleza show. Its color is very good with excellent painterly greys as transitions for his "liberated impressionist" palette. The subject is anecdotal as in too many "Puerto Rican" art works.

It was first exhibited in early 1950 and I remember its impact. I had come back to Puerto Rico after 19 years and was exploring "potentialities." This painter bears watching, I told myself, I can grow by competing against such opposition, especially his color.

I don't know why Oliver's color died a little after that year... Somehow I could not question him about it; he was always so talkative about everything else.

Born in 1901 in Arecibo, Oliver started to study painting formally there in 1910 and then, in 1911, in Barcelona. Such an early vocation so propitiated by his parents may have been harmful. He took art for granted because it was an easily captured territory, which it really isn't. It's never really captured.

Too many promising young artists peter out as painters when "tougher" fields open up for them, especially lately, when different arts have opened up very ecumenically. We need more real full-time painters, which Oliver was not.

From Barcelona he went to Madrid, then Paris where he painted, sculpted and did fired enamels. By 1928 he was back in Barcelona and accepted as a member of the "Galerias Layetanas" group of exhibiting artists. (He used to regale me with anecdotes about prominent Barcelona artists and the bohemianism of the cafe-bar "Aux Quatre Chats" which Picasso frequented.) His parents and family interests — Arecibo's Puerto Rico Distillers — however prevailed and he finished his Barcelona studies as a chemist.

The Spanish Civil War in 1936 ended his studies and he came back to Puerto Rico out of duty to family. Duty to society too: witnessed "Tuberculosis" (1937) in this show, with its dominant greys relieved by touches of red and ochre. Tuberculosis was a killer here when Oliver came back from Barcelona. His 1941

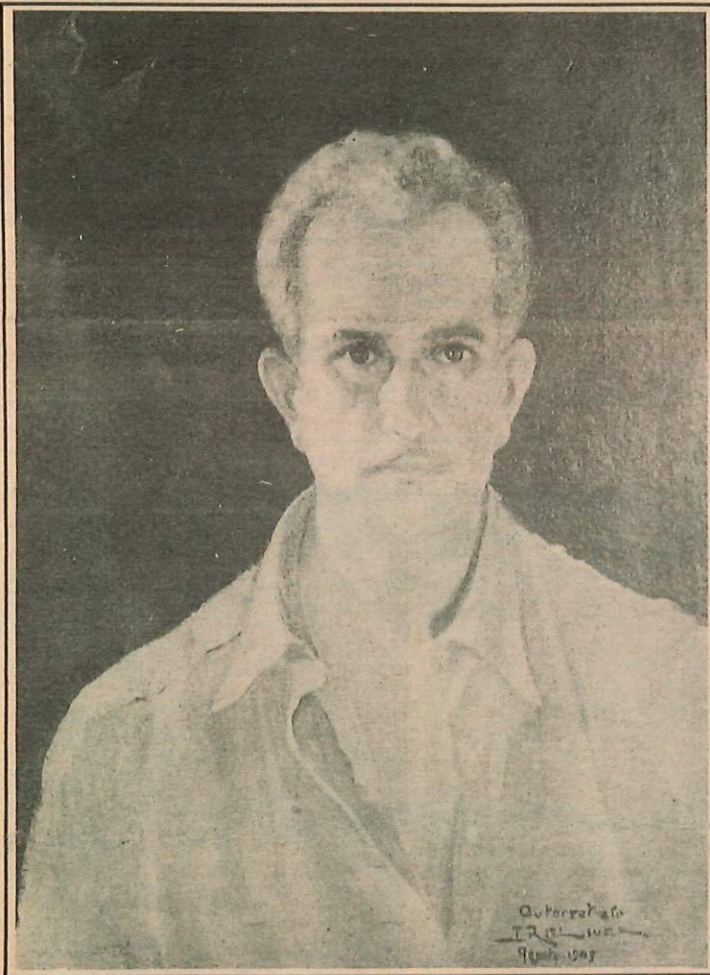
"Revolucion" in this show was also a rebellious cry then.

His Self-Portrait (1949) was a personal re-affirmation on his 48th birthday. He started painting more often, as witnessed by the Ateneo piece already mentioned and such small works as the "Caserio La Perla," (1952) and the baroque sketch, "Crucifixion," (1952) each painted in a different style, as if he were trying to get his own measure as a painter.

His "Barriada Martin Pena" (1956) with its many little houses flying flags at election time — now with the UPR collection — suggests future geometrical inroads in his work. Its color is resolved tonally, not chromatically. The cubic house shapes moved the artist more than the color. The "Cena Fria" of 1957 looks at the downtrodden from above. Is the painter asserting himself over the social advocate?

Oliver's color is austere in "La Pieta" (1960). Seven thousand dollars have been offered for this painting but dona Elvira Roses de Oliver hangs on to it as she should. It's probably Oliver's best serious composition in the Catalan style. Geometry is quite present in it already, not as represented shapes but as visual directories to the represented stylized figures.

His mural painting tendencies begin to assert themselves in such sketches as "Batalla del clavijo" (1962) and "Rapto de las Araucas."



"Self-Portrait"



"Las Tres"

GALLERIES

CARNEGIE EXHIBITION HALL

Carnegie Library Ponce de Leon Ave. Stop 1. Puerta de Tierra. 724-1046. Open Mon. to Fri. 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sat. 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

GALERIA BOTELLO

208 Cristo St. 723-9987 Prints, painting and sculpture, mostly by Puerto Rican Artists.

EL TRAPICHE GALLERY

200 Cristo St. San Juan, Open Mon. to Sat. 10 to 12 and 1 to 4 Sunday 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Current Show: Poligraphy by Joaquin Reyes.

CASA DEL LIBRO

255 Calle del Cristo 723-0354. Open Mon. to Fri. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sat. 2 to 5 p.m. The Art of the Calendar."

EDUCATION DEPT. GALLERY

Central offices corner Cesar Gonzalez and Kalaf Sts. Urb. Las Monjitas. Mon to Fri. 8 to 1:24. Current show works by students of all public schools.

GALERIA COABEY

101 San Sebastian St., Old San Juan

GALERIA CONDADO

Convention Center. Open 11-7 every day. 723-6090. Ext 1632 Exhibition of work by local artists. Current show: "La hora de diseno," works with watch parts by Jaime Perez.

GALERIA FOTOGRAFIA PL 900

Ponce de Leon 900, Santurce 725-2617 open 9-5 daily except Tuesday and Wednesday.

GALERIA W. LABIOSA

415 Sol St. San Juan 724-6393 Open Mon to Fri 1:30-5:30 p.m. Sat 9:50-3 p.m. Watercolors and other works by Labiosa.

GALERIA LA CALETA

70 Caleta de San Juan. Old San Juan. 723-8627. Paintings and prints by proprietor Luis Cajigas, ceramica, graphics and sculpture.

GALERIA MARIA RECHANY

Magdalena 1363. Open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mon. to Sat. 725-4828. Paintings, and prints by Puerto Rican artists.

GALERIA MUNICIPIO

City Hall, Old San Juan. Old photos from collections of Antonio Molinas and others.

GALERIA RAQUEL

San Jose 257, Old San Juan, Mon. to Sat. 10-6; Sundays 1-6. Mostly oils by European artists.

(1960). Geometry is useful for controlling large walls.

Scenes such as "Monte Arriba, Serrania", (1957) "Familia de No Gervasio", (1961), "Brillo" and "Agua Limpia" (1962), continued to occupy him as nice Sunday paintings. He was busy at the institute and the university then.

"Trombo" (1963) was painted after he had his first thrombosis. In it many diagonals depend on an upright vertical tree as if he were holding on to that tree for sheer sanity.

Many of the subsequent landscapes here from the late 60's and early 70's have to do with Munoz Rivera Park, El Morro, el Yunque, La Fortaleza gardens, Cayey and the copper hills, ending with orchids in 1976. It is as if he is trying to capture the beauty of his island to keep forever.

He seems to be at peace now although his "Cruxifixion" of 1977 shows a Christ not quite at peace, almost falling away from His disciples' hands. But the other 1977 works show vigor of mind and hand and a looseness of pigment which might have made his previous paintings more "painterly."

His last work in the show has a firm signature. It shows an ancestral two-story house with arches, a wide stairway such as his parents knew, a blue violet tree, green hills and warm clays.



"Cano Martin Pena"



"Culturas"



"Desendimiento"



"Pieta"

GALERIA OLLER

Calle Escorial 366 Caparra Hts. 782-3171. Open Tues to Thurs. 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Fri. 2-9 Sat. 9-2. Paintings and Graphics by Puerto Rican artists.

Current show: Paintings by Isaura Mergal

GALERIA RAQUEL

San Jose 257, Old San Juan. Mon. to Sat. 10-6; Sundays 1-6. Mostly oils by European artists.

HISTORICAN MUSEUM OF PUERTO RICO

1396 Georgetti, Santurce, Mon to Fri. 9 to 4 A summary of history of P.R. in antique objects.

LA FORTALEZA

End of Fortaleza St., Old San Juan. Open only during business hours. Show: Collective exhibit in tribute to Dr. Jose R. Oliver.

MANOS

Convention Center, Condado. Contemporary ceramics by the Caparra Studio.

MUSEO DE LA ESCUELA DE ARTES PLASTICAS

El Morro Grounds Mon. to Fri. 8 to 5, Sat. 2 to 5. current Show. Works by Graphic arts students of Profs. Jose Alicea and Susana Herrero.

MUSEO DE LA FUNDACION

Behind Tapia Theater, Plaza Colon 725-5962. Open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed Mon Indian Artifacts and sculpture.

MUSEO DEL GRABADO LATINOAMERICANO

Casa de los Contrafuertes, 101 San Sebastian St., Plaza San Jose second floor. Open every day from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Current show: Portfolios

MUSEO DEL CONVENTO DE SANTO DOMINGO

Instituto de Cultura. Open every day 8:30 a.m.

to 5 p.m. Corner Cristo and Norzagary. Plaza San Jose. 724-0700.

Current show: Paintings and watercolor by Epifanio Inzaray

PONCE MUSEUM OF ART

Las Americas Ave. 842-6215 Open Wed to Sat. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sun 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mon. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Current Show: Retrospective exhibition by Lorenzo Homar.

UPR MUSEUM

764-0000. Ext. 2452 or 2456. Open daily from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. weekdays. 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday and Sundays, 10 to 5.