

S

U

N

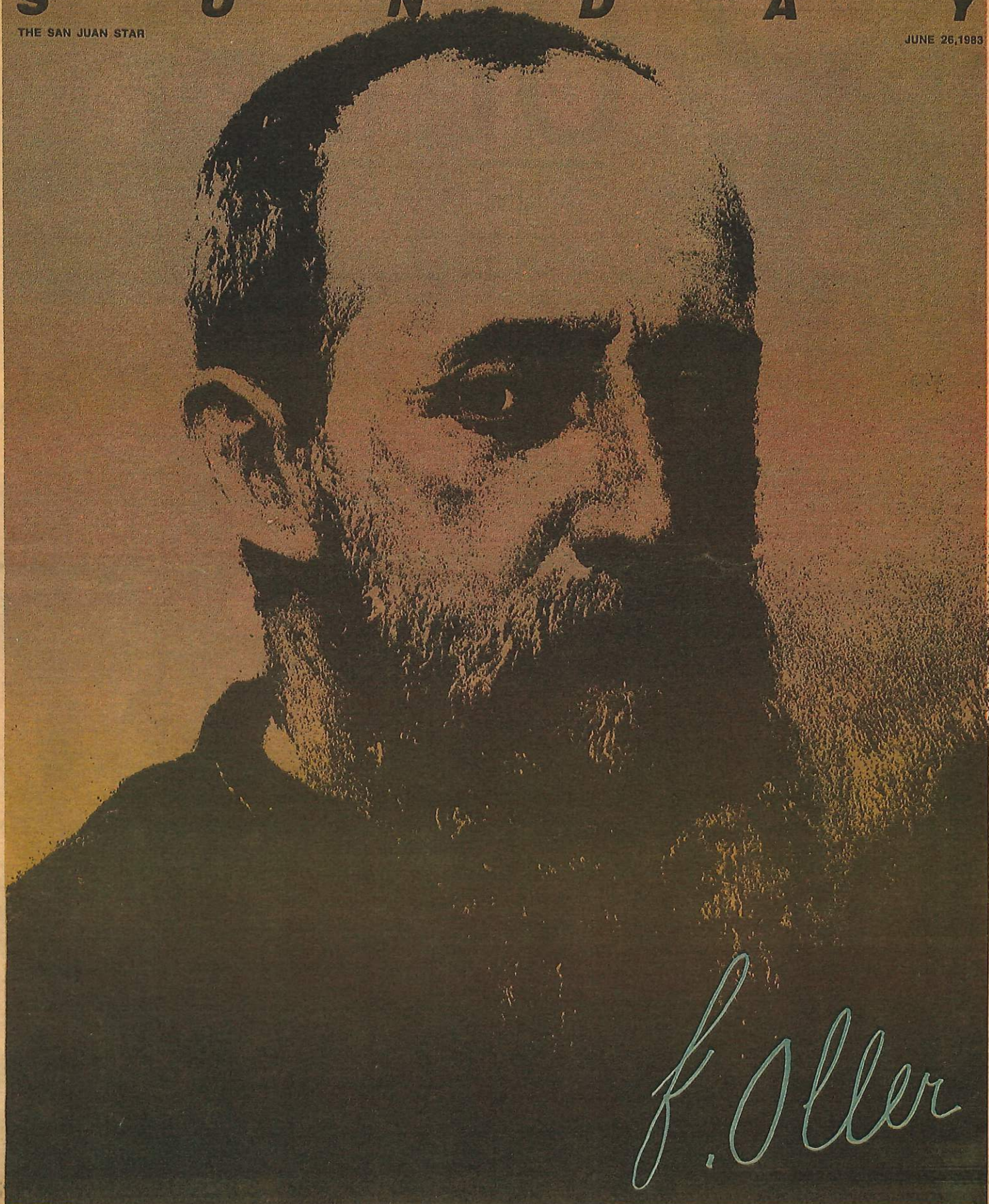
D

A

Y

THE SAN JUAN STAR

JUNE 26, 1983



F. Oller



1892-93, "Men, Study for El Velorio" (detail)

OLLER

A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD MASTER

Oller led a life of artistic and social concern. Not only was he a member of the impressionist movement in Europe and the first to bring impressionism to the New World, his best known painting, "El Velorio," is both a protest against injustice and a symbol of Puerto Rican culture. Oller is the master in the full sense of the word, and the schools he established almost a century ago, exist here and now.

By MYRNA RODRIGUEZ
Star Art Critic

One hundred and fifty years ago Francisco Oller, who was to become one of the greatest Puerto Rican artists, was born in San Juan. To celebrate the occasion, the Ponce Art Museum is holding the largest and most comprehensive exhibition of his work that has ever been gathered under one roof.

The show has been the museum's major project for the past year and will be for the next. It took tremendous time and effort to locate the works, collect, classify and finally mount them properly. After the exhibit is taken down from the museum in Ponce it will travel to New York where it will be exhibited at the Museo del Barrio, then to Washington where it will be shown at the Museum of Contemporary Latin American Art, then to the Museum of Fine Arts in Springfield, Mass., and finally it will come back to Puerto Rico to be exhibited at the UPR Art Museum in Rio Piedras.

This showing of Oller's paintings will hopefully fulfill the organizers' main purposes in organizing the exhibition, as expressed by René Taylor, acting director of the museum, in the catalog notes. He stated four main aspects: the quality of the paintings, the interesting and surprising events in Oller's life which were characterized by his mobility, the possibility that Oller introduced impressionism to Spain and, fourth, the fact that Oller was the first artist to bring the impressionist style to the New World.

I hope that institutions in other Latin American countries will also exhibit this important sample of the master's work.

Museum curator and assistant director Haydee Venegas and guest curator, art historian and critic Marimar Benítez were responsible to a great extent for gathering both the oils and the information about Oller. Their backgrounds served them well in their historical research into the formal analysis of the paintings as they tried to solve the main problem in the organization of the show: classifying the paintings. If locating the paintings was a difficult task (even after everything was completed, paintings attributed to Oller continued to appear), classifying the paintings according to the period when they were executed was the most delicate and tiresome task, according to Marimar Benítez.

Some of the works on exhibit were not

signed, so chronological placement had to be made based on stylistic analysis. Discrepancies did take place and probably will continue to. Whether to place a painting depicting a scene of France in the period of the artist's first trip or the second would seem easy for any critic or art historian for artists normally evolve in style over the years and the more years between paintings the more easily the era can be detected. But when the artist in consideration is Francisco Oller, an artist who made abrupt changes in style as a matter of course and showed stylistic differences in different paintings done at the same time in his life, then classification becomes a serious problem.

Doubts will probably remain about works for example, like "Paisaje con lavandera," which has been classified and mounted as done during artist's second

WHEN TO GO

The Oller exhibit will be at the Ponce Museum through December. The museum is closed Monday but open other weekdays from 10 a.m. to 12 noon and 1 p.m. to 4 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. It will be open all July holidays. Guides are available by calling 840-1510 and 842-6215.

trip to France (1895-96) when the impressionistic movement was in full bloom. Nonetheless there are certain characteristics in the painting which may induce authorities like Dr. Osiris Delgado to affirm that it was painted during Oller's first visit to France. Haydee Venegas' classification of this painting was based on compositional arrangement and technique, relating the work to his other two impressionistic oils of the period which possess a relationship to impressionistic paintings of the time. This is just an example of the difficulties of classification, and perhaps should greater accuracy be developed, it will add to the contribution of the event in Puerto Rican art history.

In spite of these possible doubts and difficulties the event is the most significant artistic activity taking place this year in Puerto Rican art, and merit can not be denied to those whose work made possible what started out as a dream for Haydee Venegas. A major contribution to the exhibition's success is the catalog, which together with the article by Osiris Delgado in the Plastic Arts Volume of La

Grán Enciclopedia de Puerto Rico, "Historia de la pintura en Puerto Rico," can be considered as the major sources of information on Oller and his artistic production. The publication, designed by Rafael Rivera Rosa, contains essays by the Misses Venegas and Benítez, René Taylor and Christopher Lloyd among others plus documents such as the letters between Camille Pissarro and Oller which are a primary source of data.

Restoration was also a major contribution to the exhibition since the majority of the works, according to Taylor, had fallen into the hands of amateur or self-proclaimed "restorers," leaving them covered with layers of paint very much different from that of the originals. Appreciation of the paintings for viewers now is nearer to that of spectators in the days when the artist painted the works — thanks to the efforts of experts like Edeltraud Bronold and Frank Winnicke working in the Ponce Museum's own laboratory. This aspect is of utmost importance since the essence of the exhibition is the paintings, and the cleaner and purer the work, the more intense the aesthetic experience.

Criticism of the works at this time is difficult almost a century away from the time that they were painted. Nonetheless, looking back now at the development that has taken place in modern art, and the great contribution of the impressionists — including Oller — to it, we now are able to better place his importance in Latin American art history.

After reading about the most significant events that took place in Oller's life and carefully observing his paintings, one can not escape from reflecting upon the very similar situations which affect Puerto Rican artists today. On one hand we find talented artists who need to, and are not able to, study abroad because of economic reasons. On the other hand, several of Puerto Rico's top artists live outside the island because of the lack of opportunities that would enable them to keep working here: Antonio Martorell, Natty Gutiérrez, Marcos Irizarry and Rafael Colón Morales, to name just a few. Neither the government nor private institutions are doing what should be done to promote, sponsor and motivate artistic creation. In this respect paradoxically, the situation remains the same as it was in Oller's time.

Francisco Oller y Cestero, Puerto Rico's great painter, died in 1917 at the Municipal Hospital, in poverty. After a life in which he was appointed "Pintor de la real cámara" of the king of Spain, had his works accepted at the Salon in Paris, been accepted as one of the group of impressionists, after having won several gold medals in Puerto Rico including one from the Ateneo Puertorriqueño, among many other recognitions of his talent, at the end he was denied a retirement pension from the U.S. government in Puerto Rico — even though he had served for many years as art instructor for the public schools.

All these facts in Oller's life contain similarities to the lives of some of today's top professional artists who are not fully recognized: Julio Rosado del Valle, Carlos Raquel Rivera, José A. Torres Martínó, to name just a few. Artists have to involve themselves in other tasks to enable them economically to produce, which takes time and energy away from their creativity.

Francisco Oller was an artist whose main concern revolved around social and political problems. Protests against slavery and other denigrations of human beings was a main topic of his works including "A Slave Mother," "La negresse mendicante," and "Un boca abajo" (a slave being punished) which was submitted to the Salon in 1869, and rejected (according to Delgado) for being offensive to Spain. Oller could not escape the effects of the political situation even in another country like France.

The similarity to today's Puerto Rican artists continues, especially to those whose main concern is and will be the social and political situation of the island. Fortunately, "El Velorio" has been considered by contemporary artists as an example of art and social concern, a protest against injustices and in many ways symbolic of Puerto Rican culture.

Even to artists whose style is significantly different from Oller's and reflects contemporary tendencies, the same perspective, not visual, but symbolic, prevails.

Oller is the master in the full sense of the word, and the schools that he established almost a century ago, in essence still exist, at least in the minds and principles of contemporary Puerto Rican artists.