

The art of an INVESTIGATIVE CURATOR

In a bookstore in Madrid, Haydee Venegas found, proof in a catalog that Oller had exhibited his famous "El Velorio" in the Paris Salon of 1895.



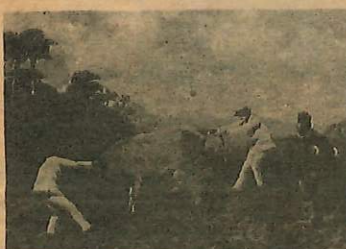
Haydee Venegas



1847, "Dr. Francisco Oller" (detail) Oller painted this portrait of his father, a copy, when he was only 14 years old.



1870-71, "General Baldrich" (detail)



1854-56?, "The Inheritance Lawsuit," Oller painted this in his youth. He was soon to lose the humorous vein shown here.



1891-92, "Hacienda Santa Barbara"



1893-94, "Study for Landscape with Thatched Hut"



1895-96, "French Landscape 2"

By **CONNIE UNDERHILL**
magazine editor

Imagine Haydee Venegas' surprise. There it was, right in front of her eyes, proof of what she had always suspected: Francisco Oller had exhibited in the Salon de Paris in 1895. The red-covered book she held in her hands was newly bound in a standard textbook binding, but it was one of the catalogs for the 19th century show nevertheless — and it was just a matter of luck that she ran across it in a used bookstore in Madrid. She could hardly believe her eyes, and the price was only the equivalent of about \$12.

And there in black and white was the reason for the confusion about whether or not Oller had exhibited in the prestigious show. There had never been any doubt about whether his painting, "El Velorio," had been accepted, but over the years it had generally come to be believed in Puerto Rico that he and his painting had arrived in Paris too late for the painting to be hung.

His name leaped out at her from the precious book: Francisco Oller de Brazil. De Brazil? And the name of the painting? "Mis a pied." No wonder there had been confusion!

Haydee Venegas was in Europe searching for paintings by Oller that he might have done and left there during his long years of work and study on the continent. At last it was definite, the Ponce Museum was going to do a show on Oller, she was the curator and about to fulfill a lifetime dream.

It was more than 10 years ago, in March or April of 1973 that Haydee Venegas began to dream about mounting a show of Francisco Oller's paintings that would do the impressionist painter justice. Still in school, taking a class in 19th century French painting as part of the required courses for a masters degree in art at Florida State University, she presented a paper on Oller which her professor found so interesting that he suggested she expand it for her master's thesis. It would be a wonderful topic, he said, since Oller was relatively unknown.

She produced "Francisco Oller, a Catalogue Raisonné," a listing of all of Oller's known works, and, although she didn't

realize it at the time, it was just the beginning of her scholastic detective work into the life and work of Francisco Oller.

In 1976, Miss Venegas returned to Puerto Rico and became director of the tiny Archeological, Anthropological and Historical Museum in Old San Juan. Suddenly the small museum became the center of San Juan's art world. And not just for the cognoscenti. The young curator had put her ideas about living museums into practice.

She captured the sophisticates first with her exhibition on the history of the Tapia Theater which coincided with the theaters restoration and reopening. Next she did a show on disposable toys that brought in the children of the city: they made the toys, then they played with them in the museum and then the toys were distributed to poor children. The show titled Fakes and Reproductions came next, consisting of forged and real pre-Columbian art, and then the Egyptian exhibition which Miss Venegas put on at the time of the Tutankhamen craze. For that one, she rolled out the small museum's own grass green carpet to accommodate more comfortably the lines that formed outside, a la the lines at the Metropolitan's Tutankhamen exhibition in New York. Meanwhile, the Archeological Museum's usual roster of visitors rose from 36 a day to 500.

At the end of 1979, Miss Venegas was offered the job of assistant director at the Ponce Museum, a position she was somewhat reluctant to take until somebody mentioned to her that this was her chance to do the Oller show she had been dreaming about.

At the museum she was joined by Marimar Benítez who, in another of life's coincidences, had been one of Miss Venegas's main sources for her Oller thesis. Miss Benítez had had the same idea in the early '60s, and had gathered a wealth of information on Oller. In 1972 she opened the Oller Gallery in Caparra.

Haydee Venegas started at the Ponce Museum in January of 1980 and by March had made the first application for an National Endowment of the Arts planning grant for an exhibition of the work of Francisco Oller. Fourteen months later,

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1893, *El Velorio*

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the museum was set to go on the Oller exhibition with money in hand from the NEA, Fomento, the Puerto Rican Legislature, the City of Ponce and the Ponce Museum of Art to the tune of nearly \$300,000.

The show opened on June 17, 1983, the 150th anniversary of Oller's birth, with 71 of Francisco Oller's paintings, the most that have ever been gathered in one place at one time. It has been hailed as the first major attempt to collect and analyze the paintings of Oller, who was important in Puerto Rico but had never been given what many experts consider his rightful place in art history.

The exhibition is accompanied by a 236-page catalog edited by Miss Benítez and containing 100 reproductions in black and white and 18 in color of Oller's work. In it, essays on Oller by four internationally known art experts mark the first step in Oller's acknowledgement as an important international artist. Although Oller was a major figure in the impressionist movement who worked alongside and was friendly with such famous painters as Camille Pissarro and Paul Cézanne, his work has heretofore been neglected by art historians. The current show places Oller's work and contribution to the impressionist movement in its proper perspective.

Haydee Venegas went to Europe in 1982 to see if she could unearth any hitherto unknown paintings by Oller for the Ponce show. She advertised in the Madrid and Paris newspapers and a call she received in Madrid led her to a painting that was dated 1891 and raised another mystery. She knew that in 1891 Oller had been in Puerto Rico working on *El Velorio* sketches. The writing on the back of the painting said that it was the first painting Oller had done in school in Barcelona. As far as she knew he had never gone to school in Barcelona and the work was unlike anything she had so far seen in an Oller painting. Could there have been two Francisco Ollers?

If there are those who believe that museum curators spend their time in dusty archives never seeing the light of day, let them imagine Haydee Venegas, pert, pretty and fashionable as well as intelligent and determined, on her way to Barcelona to solve the mystery of the two Francisco Ollers. As indeed there turned out to have been two: Francisco Oller y Cestero of San Juan, Puerto Rico and Francisco Galofre Oller of Barcelona, Spain.

In Paris the search continued and there the young art sleuth took a chance. Oller's application for the salon had given his Paris address. On the offhand chance that his residence was still standing, Haydee

as painted by Oller, it could have been named for the vibrant tropical dawn. As Miss Venegas says in the catalog, "The larger part of the painting consists of sky. The scene is bathed in bright sunshine and signals Oller's concern with capturing the sky and atmosphere of the tropics." Against these brilliant blues and greens, the central's chimney rises in vivid pink.

Yet, but for a coincidence, this painting might never have been included in the show.

The right person was, of course, Miss Venegas, the right place was Madrid and the right direction and time was her 1982 search for Ollers. While in Madrid, Haydee Venegas looked up an old friend and

bad," says Miss Venegas.

There were even two Ollers done on plates with ceramic lovebirds hovering over them. One monumental-sized portrait was dug out of a closet where it had been put because a grandson kept running his tricycle into it. Some came from homes that were almost palaces with 24-hour air conditioning and others from cottages where they will eventually be ruined by environmental conditions when they are returned.

They all, Miss Venegas said, even when the owners were obviously pressed for cash, came from people who were of genteel background. All in all the ads brought forth about 20 unknown paintings.

Once the Ollers were collected, more detective work had to be done. One of the biggest problems in putting the show together was arranging the paintings in chronological order, since most of the dates were lost in time. Photos helped. Curators now have to be photographers as well as detectives — to examine the details of brushstrokes and signatures which change, sometimes minutely, over the years.

In one of Oller's first paintings, his signature was almost hidden in the curve of a hat, then he began to sign them on the lower right side. Later on he added a slight flourish under his signature which he then began to put in the lower left hand corner of the painting. In the 1870s, he left out his first initial and in the 1880s, he added one and began to sign "F.M. Oller" and in 1983, the Misses Venegas and Benítez with Ponce Museum Curator René Taylor had the job of using these guidelines to place the show in chronological order.

The exhibition which opened last week has been a huge success but the end of a dream for Haydee Venegas. And what next? Miss Venegas is revising an old wish for a Latin American Art Museum in San Juan. Squinting her eyes and gazing into the future, she mulled dreamingly, "I'm beginning to see it, in a brand new building, in Luis Muñoz Marín Park."

And then there was the painting signed by Oller in Madrid in 1891, a year he was known to have been in Puerto Rico. Haydee Venegas' investigation unearthed another Francisco Oller. Another Francisco Oller?

Venegas went to take a look at it. And there was the answer to the second mystery: the Hotel Franklin du Brazil, where Oller had been staying when he filed his application for acceptance at the salon. Some careless clerk at the Louvre had confused the hotel name with his name which had somehow emerged as Francisco Oller de Brazil and given rise to the rumor that Oller had never exhibited in the show. The same clerk may have been responsible for calling *El Velorio*, the *Mis a Pied*.

In the end, the European search produced only two paintings that were used in the show, "*El mendigo*" and the well-known "*El Estudiante*." But ironically, it did turn up one of Oller's best paintings in Puerto Rico, "*Hacienda Aurora*," the typically brilliant painting which was chosen for the cover of the catalog of the Ponce Museum show.

"*Hacienda Aurora*," home of the Saldaña family in what is now Carolina, was probably named for a Saldaña relative, but

fellow-UPR student, Mercedes Saldaña, who was living there. Soon after, Miss Saldaña had to return to Puerto Rico where her mother was undergoing an operation. In the hospital she met her aunt, Sra. Dolores Forteza vda. de Saldaña, and while they were talking Mrs. Saldaña mentioned that she had an Oller painting that she would like to donate to a museum. Of course, Mercedes Saldaña immediately thought of Haydee Venegas, and talked her aunt into giving the painting to the Ponce Museum in time for the exhibition. The painting, donated in the memory of her late husband, Victor Saldaña, had never been exhibited before.

The advertisements for Ollers in Puerto Rico brought four or five calls each time they appeared. For each person who called, Miss Venegas figured she made an average of five telephone calls and three visits to see the paintings. And there were some that took 50 calls and nine visits. And "Some were Ollers and some weren't and some were good and others were