‘Impressionism and the Caribbean: Francisco Oller and His Transatlantic World’ Review

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Francisco Oller put a French movement at the service of island patriotism.
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If you don’t know the Puerto Rican painter Francisco Oller (1833-1917), get ready to meet a man whose work bridges two centuries, several artistic styles (Realism, Naturalism, Impressionism), genres (still life, portraiture, landscape, history) and, most stunningly, the Atlantic Ocean.

“Impressionism and the Caribbean: Francisco Oller and His Transatlantic World” (at the University of Texas’ Blanton Museum of Art through Sept. 6) is curated by Richard Aste of the Brooklyn Museum (where it will appear from Oct. 2 to Jan. 3, 2016) and Edward Sullivan of New York University. It intersperses 40 of Oller’s pictures with an equal number of works by other painters, including Americans like Winslow Homer and Frederic Edwin Church (who made Jamaica look like a golden Hudson River Valley landscape but with palm trees) and, more prominently, the French masters whom Oller knew or learned from (Corot, Courbet, Pissarro, Cézanne, Monet, Caillebotte and Sisley).

The exhibit has three intersecting parts. First, it is a miniretrospective of Oller himself. Second, it puts him in the context of European painting, which he studied during four visits (amounting to 20 years in a long life) to France and Spain. This is what the title refers to. Oller absorbed Courbet’s realism; he adapted Corot’s gentle haze; most of all, he gravitated to the techniques of his Impressionist colleagues. Third, more tangentially, the exhibit shows how earlier artists saw Caribbean culture, people and landscapes.

The didactic contextualizing implicitly asks viewers to perform a series of “compare and contrast” exercises. This doesn’t always work to Oller’s advantage. Sometimes he is Pissarro’s equal, sometimes not. He painted Cézanne at work “en plein air.” That charming small portrait hangs beside Cézanne’s 1885-86 “The Village of Gardanne” whose new geometry and spatial arrangements point to where post-Impressionist painting was heading, but without Oller. So do the
instantly recognizable palette and technique of Monet’s “Vernon in the Sun” (1894).

Oller’s achievement lay not so much in radical style as in how he put technique at the service of an innate patriotism. He created art at once international and indigenously Puerto Rican. He painted the Caribbean, not the Mediterranean; not delicate European deciduous trees (except in his French landscapes) but palms; not apples, but guavas and coconuts; not bathers, but plantation workers. Even his earliest picture here, “Woman Bullfighter on a Horse” (c. 1851-52), a tiny oil that suggests the apprentice artist may have seen Goya’s “corrida” paintings at the Prado, has a Caribbean, not an Iberian setting. Puerto Rico never left Oller’s imagination, even when he was away from home.

In a self-portrait from 1889-92, Oller has a lean, handsome face, a hawklike nose, closely cropped hair, a full, graying beard. Most of all, he has a calm, vigilant demeanor. Where his landscapes often have an Impressionist imprecision, his portraits, of which the exhibit has several excellent examples, are academic in the best sense. His sitters—soldier, teacher, novelist, even American President William McKinley, holding a map of his country’s newest territory after we “liberated” it from Spain—share their painter’s warm attentiveness.

Oller’s 1893 masterpiece, “The Wake” (“El Velorio,” 8 by 13.5 feet), did not travel from Puerto Rico for the exhibition. An Oller show without the painting—a teeming, raucous, realistic depiction of a baby’s home funeral—is like a Velásquez blockbuster without “Las Meninas,” or a staging of “Hamlet” with the Prince of Denmark left out. A full-scale reproduction occupies one wall. We can see his genius even in it. Oller arranges a large number of people in a confined space, and comments on issues of race and class, of life and death. To one side here, two small preliminary studies indicate how he turned what might have been a modest genre picture into something heroic.

Other paintings also show how Oller could balance individuals with, or within,
groups. “The Battle of Treviño” (1879), about an episode in Spain’s Carlist wars of the mid-19th century, captures in an Impressionist blur the mysterious confusion of war. Only a few small faces are distinct. The smoke of gunfire matches gray clouds on the upper right. Daubs of white in the soldiers’ sabers, guns and uniforms echo the white clouds on the upper left. Haziness competes with precise points of jeweled color. Looked at quickly, the picture might bring to mind Jackson Pollock and action painting.

Oller spent his last 33 years (aside from a seven-month French visit in 1895-96) back home. His diametrical opposite was Pissarro, whom he knew in France, a St. Thomas native who moved to Paris in 1855 and never returned to the Caribbean. In Puerto Rico Oller opened a School of Arts and Crafts, and a School of Drawing and Painting for women. He painted local subjects. Two marvelous pictures—part of a projected, unfinished series of five—of sugar plantations movingly attest to his elegiac temperament. “Hacienda La Fortuna” and “Hacienda La Serrano” (both 1885) depict the sorry state of the island’s sugar industry, in decline partly as a result of the abolition of slavery in 1873. The second, with a darker palette and fewer people than the former, presents a sad, post-harvest illustration of failure and emptiness. These are georgic pictures—related to work—rather than pastoral landscapes.

Even Oller’s still lifes often have a melancholy that Cezanne’s vibrantly luminous apples lack. By definition, still life (“dead nature”) commemorates what vanishes. All flesh, all fruit is as grass. But many 17th-century Dutch still lifes, and those of Luis Melendez, the great 18th-century Spanish painter, also suggest epicurean accumulation, wealth and lavish self-advertising. By contrast, Oller’s fruits are coarser, less delicate. In the circa 1893 “Still Life With Coconuts,” the fruit fills virtually an entire claustrophobic canvas, and spidery, broken branches lend a note of creepy, sinister menace. The 1901-03 “Mameys” (oil on wood panel) uses a deep orange and brown palette for the fruit, set on a white tablecloth and a brown table. This picture is rich and sad at the same time.
In 1872 the Spanish King Amadeo I named Oller his official court painter. Decades later he hoped for a similar commission from President McKinley, which never materialized. It is no wonder that this artist should project mixed emotions in his work as Puerto Rico passed from the control of one country to that of another.

—Mr. Spiegelman writes about the arts for the Journal.