

Edward J. Sullivan

From San Juan to Paris and Back: Francisco Oller and Caribbean Art in the Era of Impressionism. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014. ix + 198 pp. (Cloth, US\$ 60.00)

Francisco Oller (1833–1917) was a Puerto Rican artist born into a “white upper-middle-class family of intellectuals and medical professionals” (p. 12), whose life work was deeply marked by relationships with Impressionist artists and extended sojourns in European capitals, especially Madrid and Paris. Edward Sullivan looks at the ways in which Oller combined the influences of his experiences abroad with an “intense attachment to the specifics of Puerto Rican geography, light, flora, and the customs of its inhabitants” (p. 3). Tacking between art historical and social/political analysis, he attempts to tease out Oller’s positions (abolitionist sympathies, anticlericalism, etc.) in the details of particular paintings.

Chapter 1 runs through Caribbean scenes by American and European artists such as Winslow Homer and Frederic Church, arguing that Oller’s art fits the mold of works by these foreign travelers in spite of the fact that he was a native son. The next five chapters give special attention to particular paintings, using each to launch discussion of related topics in art history—Postmortem photography, Naturalist painting in France, nineteenth-century history painting in Spain, the recent renewal of interest in still-life art, etc. Chapter 2 analyzes *El Velorio*, described by Cuban art historian Yolanda Wood as “the most important painting for the turn-of-the-century Caribbean.” (It also inspired a stunning homage to Oller by Puerto Rican artist Antonio Martorell—see *NWIG* 85 [2011]:90.) Sullivan interprets *El Velorio* as “both allegorical and realistic [and] a mordant critique of both working-class society and the clergy” (pp. 77, 80).

Chapter 3 analyzes a painting depicting Rafael Cordero, the son of free persons of color who founded Puerto Rico’s first school for the children of slaves. Chapter 4 focuses on *The Battle of Treviño*, a tumultuous scene realized at the end of Oller’s 1873–84 trip to Europe. Sullivan points out that Oller’s only battle painting depicts a scene from the history of Spain, and he contrasts the absence of war imagery in art of nineteenth-century Puerto Rico (and the Caribbean more generally) with its presence in contemporaneous art of postindependence Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. Chapter 5 returns to the Caribbean and Oller’s famous still lifes of Caribbean fruits, relating them to early European precedents—both Spanish still lifes and the depiction of Brazilian fruits by seventeenth-century Dutch artist Albert Eckhout.

The final chapter is a reading of Oller’s portrait of William McKinley, made as a gift to the U.S. president at the end of the Spanish-American War. Executed

on the basis of a photograph, it shows McKinley holding a map of Puerto Rico. Sullivan sets this painting in the context of others that Oller had done of Spanish military figures and Spanish governors of Puerto Rico, but also suggests a number of cross-cutting inspirations for portraying McKinley, including the fact that Oller “proactively—and successfully—sought out the patronage of colonial officials” (p. 166). Indeed, the painting was accompanied by Oller’s request to be included in the U.S. delegation to the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris (a detail that Sullivan relegates to an endnote). As Martorell has pointed out (email of July 3, 2015), this portrait, like others of colonial governors by both Oller and Ramón Frade, “responds to the ambiguous and difficult relationship between artists and representatives of imperial power. Painting the portrait of a president overseas on the basis of a photograph was a common practice in order to ingratiate the artist in the noble undertaking of establishing an academy of fine arts, obtaining a scholarship to study abroad, or accessing an international fair.”

Like Lowery Stokes Sims’s 2002 book about Wifredo Lam’s relationship to the avant-garde movement, Sullivan’s book is aimed at placing an important figure of Caribbean art history in the context of both regional and international movements. Had it been written by a Puerto Rican (or even Caribbean) art historian, one suspects that the balance between the two would have shifted, giving more attention to Oller’s immense cultural/political/identitarian significance for Puerto Ricans.¹ As it is, this is a book penned very much in art historical prose (e.g., “The viewer’s eye darts back and forth across the picture, trying to capture the myriad details” [p. 121]), alternating among detailed description of paintings, historical narrative, artistic influences to and from other artists, discussion of preliminary studies made for important works, and commentary on technical matters such as brushstrokes. The book is particularly valuable for its excellent color illustrations.

Sally Price

Anse Chaudière, 97217 Anses d’Arlet, Martinique
sallyprice123@gmail.com; www.richandsally.net

1 Martorell has argued that Oller’s concerns about the challenges facing Puerto Rican society at the turn of the twentieth century continue to have direct relevance for the Island at the dawn of the twenty-first (“Prólogo a *El Velorio*: velo, desvelo y relevo de la lengua,” 2008); see also Gervasio García, “Contestación de un desvelado por *El Velorio* de Martorell,” *Boletín de la Academia Puertorriqueña de la Lengua Española* 2010:111–22.