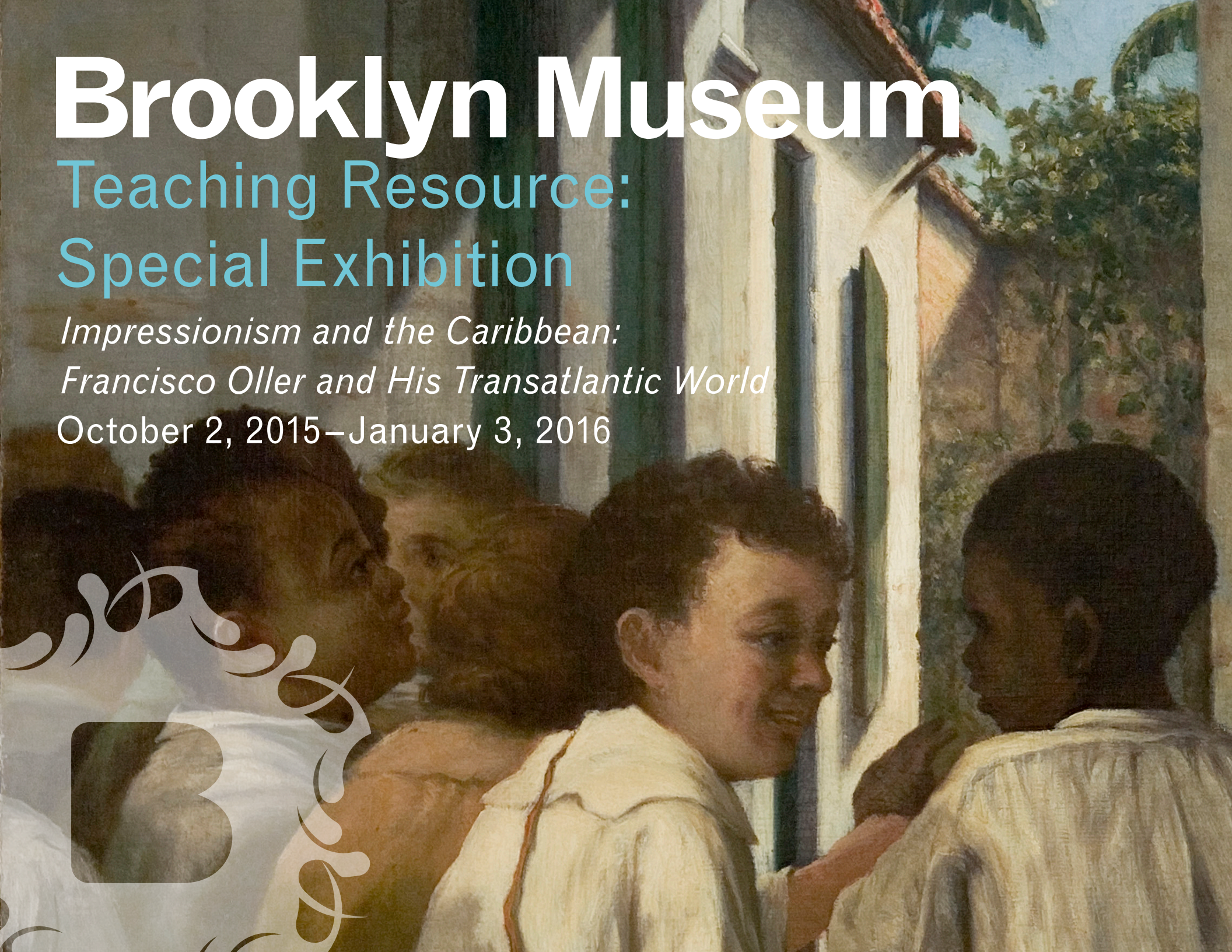


Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

*Impressionism and the Caribbean:
Francisco Oller and His Transatlantic World*
October 2, 2015–January 3, 2016





ABOUT THE ARTIST

The Puerto Rican painter Francisco Oller (1833–1917) is among the most renowned Caribbean artists of the nineteenth century.¹ He is unique not only because of his direct involvement in the artistic movements emerging in Europe during his lifetime but also because of his work's socially engaged reading of Caribbean life.

Oller was born into a white upper-middle-class family of Spanish descent. Beginning at age eighteen, he traveled to Europe for extensive periods of study and artistic development. During the twenty years he spent in Madrid and Paris, he participated in the pioneering movements of Realism (which embraced subjects from the external world rather than idealized motifs), Impressionism (which sought to capture visual impressions and effects of light through daubs of color), and Naturalism (which aimed for realistic and precise portrayals), and developed mutually influential relationships with such artists as Camille Pissarro and Gustave Courbet. Oller reinterpreted these influences to create his own style and unique vision of his native Puerto Rico.²

His paintings reflect the multiple worlds to which he belonged. They include French landscapes, depictions of political conflicts emerging in Spain, and Caribbean subjects such as landscapes and still lifes highlighting the region's flora and fauna, images of sugar plantations and their enslaved workers, and portraits of

Puerto Rican intellectuals and leaders. While there is no evidence that Oller participated directly in abolitionist movements, his work reflects an interest in black agency and the positive role of individuals of African heritage in shaping the future of Puerto Rico.

Oller's legacy encompasses not only his work as an artist but also his ardent efforts as an educator. During his lifetime he founded ten schools and art academies serving both elite and nonelite populations, including women and previously enslaved people.³ His artistic and pedagogical contribution was decisive in the formation of a Puerto Rican school of painting. As the late professor and curator Haydée Venegas noted, "Francisco Oller was the first painter to ponder deeply on the meaning of Puerto Rico."⁴

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Impressionism and the Caribbean: Francisco Oller and His Transatlantic World situates Oller within a broad artistic context, focusing on the exchange between Europe and the Caribbean from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. Through eighty-five paintings, drawings, and prints, the exhibition celebrates Oller's important contributions to both the Paris avant-garde and the Puerto Rican school of painting. This is the first U.S. exhibition to present Oller's work within both New and Old World contexts.



DESCRIPTION OF THE ARTWORK

An elderly black man sits in a Windsor chair toward the right of the painting, in a room that opens out to a small hallway leading to an outside area on the left. Through this passage, light streams into the room. In the distance we can see the tops of palm trees and other tropical foliage. The seated man is surrounded by young children of various skin tones and hair types. He wears a white pleated shirt and white pants. On his head he wears a white knotted head wrap. He looks out at the viewer.

Facing him are nine seated children fully or partially visible, dressed in light colors. Most prominent among them is a pair of children, who face each other in the middle of the composition. A light-skinned child with short, curly brown hair sits on the left, smiling at a dark-skinned child on the right with dark, Afro-textured hair, who has turned his head toward his paler companion.

Flanking the elderly man are two additional lighter-skinned children with light-colored, wavy hair. In his right hand, the man holds a pad or piece of paper, which the child to his left studies intently. The child to his right rubs his eyes and seems to be crying. His shirt is partially unbuttoned.

The room's walls are painted white, and several cracks expose the brick foundation. Four framed paintings, including two depicting the Madonna and Child, decorate the walls. In addition, the lower portion of a crucifix can be seen, and a whip hangs from a nail. To the elderly man's left, there is a wooden desk on which rest five rolled cigars, a book, and a knife. Directly in front of the desk is a barrel with several tobacco leaves hanging over the edge.





ABOUT THE ARTWORK

Oller was commissioned to paint *Maestro Cordero's School* by the Ateneo Puertorriqueño, one of Puerto Rico's chief cultural institutions, to be placed in its hall of notable citizens of the nation (the Galeria de Puertorriqueños Ilustres). Oller also painted a number of other portraits for the same collection, all representing white male intellectuals or political figures.

Maestro Cordero's School shows a simple classroom located within the teacher's house. Rafael Cordero was the founder of the first school in Puerto Rico for formerly enslaved people and for the sons of enslaved persons. By the late 1820s, the school eventually admitted male children of all races and socioeconomic strata. As the school's sole instructor, Cordero was responsible for the primary education of a number of men who figured prominently within the ranks of the political and literary elite of Puerto Rico in the later nineteenth century. Aside from his responsibilities as a teacher, Cordero was also a manual laborer who manufactured cigars and cigarettes in his workshop, which also served as the site for his pedagogical activities.⁵

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING

What's happening in this painting? How can you tell?

What do you notice about this particular classroom? How is it similar to or different from the classrooms you've been a part of?

Zoom in on the two children sitting on the bench in the middle of the composition who seem to be in dialogue with each other. What similarities and differences do you notice between them? What do you think they are talking about? What do you see that makes you say that?

This is a portrait of a famous Puerto Rican educator, Rafael Cordero, whose parents were born into slavery and who founded the first school for freed slaves (although eventually it became open to all). How is this portrait similar to and different from others you've seen of famous historical figures?

Zoom in on the figure of Rafael Cordero. What kind of a teacher do you think he was? What do you imagine his teaching style might have been like? Try to find details in the painting to back up your opinion.

Take a closer look at Cordero's students. What clues does the painting give us about each student's social class? What similarities and differences do you notice among the students? What do you think their interaction with one another might be like outside of school? What evidence in the painting makes you think that?

ACTIVITIES

English Language Arts

Poetry

Read the poem "Theme for English B," by Langston Hughes, available at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/177397>.

Using Oller's painting and "Theme for English B" as inspiration, write a poem. As the instructor in Hughes's poem says, "Let that page come out of you"! Explore who you are (including your cultural, ethnic, and racial identity) in relation to others in your class, to your teacher, and to others in your school, in your neighborhood, and in your city. What do you "feel, see, and hear" (to quote Hughes)? How is this similar to or different from what others feel, see, and hear? When does difference matter, and when does it not? Include examples of how you feel connected to others and how you feel unique.

Educational Autobiography

Most of us spend more time in school than we do at home with our parents! Often the official lessons we learn in school are not the ones that stick with us. Rather, what we often remember most are the "unofficial lessons" gained from informal interactions with teachers and peers. Write an educational autobiography where you recall the various schools you've attended and describe the most significant experiences you've had in school so far. What do you remember about the physical layout of your classrooms? How were the walls decorated? What were some of each classroom's daily rituals? What kind of games or interactions did students have during recess or in the playground? Who were the teachers who had the greatest impact on your life (for better or worse), and why? Beyond the curriculum you were being taught, what were the most important life lessons you learned in each of these spaces?

Social Studies

Education and Resistance

Enslaved people were strictly prohibited from reading and writing, for fear that they would use these skills to revolt. Since that time black populations throughout the Americas have struggled to gain access to education. Research and describe two examples of how enslaved people or their descendants in the Americas used education as a tool of resistance. Some possible examples are Rafael Cordero's school in Puerto Rico, the 1835 Malê Slave Revolt in Brazil, Phillis Wheatley's poetry, and the Freedom Schools in the southern United States.

Researching Slavery in the Americas

The transatlantic slave trade profoundly influenced the development of nations in the so-called New World. Some historians have argued that the North American form of slavery was more restrictive than that of the Spanish Caribbean and Spanish Latin America because it prohibited any form of self-expression or agency. For them, Oller's *Maestro Cordero's School*, with its depiction of a black teacher in a position of authority in relation to black and white children, "is a testament to the differences between the Spanish and American approaches to slavery."⁶ Do you agree with this statement? Research some of the similarities and differences between the institutions of slavery in the United States and in Latin America and write an essay in which you explore this statement. Be sure to back up your opinion with historical evidence. Check the Resources for Teachers section of this resource for tips on where to look.

NOTES

1. Serafín Méndez-Méndez and Ronald Fernandez, *Puerto Rico Past and Present: An Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2015), 319.
2. Edward J. Sullivan, *From San Juan to Paris and Back: Francisco Oller and Caribbean Art in the Era of Impressionism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014), 2–3.
3. *Ibid.*, 60–64.
4. Quoted in Marimar Benítez, ed., *Francisco Oller: A Realist-Impressionist* (Ponce: Museo de Arte de Ponce, 1983), as cited in <http://biography.yourdictionary.com/francisco-manuel-oller>, retrieved July 2, 2015.
5. Sullivan, *From San Juan to Paris and Back*, 91–92.
6. Albert Boime, quoted in Sullivan, *From San Juan to Paris and Back*, 95.

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

Freeman, Kassie, and Ethan Johnson, eds. *Education in the Black Diaspora: Perspectives, Challenges, and Prospects*. London: Routledge, 2011.

This volume gathers scholars from around the world in a comparative approach to the various educational struggles of people of African descent.

Sullivan, Edward J. *From San Juan to Paris and Back: Francisco Oller and Caribbean Art in the Era of Impressionism*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014.

The companion book to *Impressionism and the Caribbean: Francisco Oller and His Transatlantic World* explores Oller's significance and the intellectuals and personalities, including Rafael Cordero, who informed his life and work.

<http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/origins-slavery/resources/american-slavery-comparative-perspective>

This article published by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History compares slavery in British and Latin America and dismantles common myths.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/teachers/lesson1.html>

This K–12 Learning portion of PBS's *Slavery and the Making of America* was developed in close collaboration with teachers of American history and social studies.

http://www.poetryfoundation.org/downloads/BHM_Elementary.pdf

Developed in partnership with Maya Angelou, this tool kit for elementary school teachers is designed to support classroom diversity by helping students explore the works of important African American poets.

This packet was written by Adjoa Jones de Almeida, Senior Museum Educator, with assistance from Rachel Ropeik, Interim School Programs Manager, Radiah Harper, Vice Director for Education and Program Development, and Richard Aste, Curator of European Art.

Impressionism and the Caribbean: Francisco Oller and His Transatlantic World is organized by Richard Aste, Curator of European Art, Brooklyn Museum, and Edward J. Sullivan, Helen Gould Sheppard Professor of the History of Art, New York University.

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Pages 1 and 4 (details), 3, and 8: Francisco Oller (Puerto Rican, 1833–1917). *Maestro Cordero's School*, circa 1890. Oil on canvas, 39 x 62 1/2 in. (99.1 x 158.8 cm). Ateneo Puertorriqueño, San Juan, Puerto Rico

Page 2: Francisco Oller (Puerto Rican, 1833–1917). *Self-Portrait*, circa 1889–92. Oil on wood panel, 23 5/8 x 17 5/8 in. (60 x 44.8 cm). Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte, Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras, Gift of Amparo Fernández Náter

Page 2: Francisco Oller (Puerto Rican, 1833–1917). *Still Life with Coconuts (Naturaleza muerta con cocos)*, circa 1893. Oil on canvas, 27 3/4 x 44 1/4 in. (70.5 x 112.4 cm), framed. Private collection, New Jersey

