

Josefina Oliver

- writer and unknown photographer from
the end of the 19th century in Buenos Aires -

by Patricia Viaña

It was only in October 2006, that the conditions were ripe to discover the overwhelming oeuvre of porteña*, born in 1875: Josefina Oliver

Daughter of parents from Mallorca, Spain, at the age of fourteen she has to stop attending school to be in charge of her home, due to the marriage of her half-sister, and in replacement of her mother - Juana Rebas, affected by mental problems -.

Family and social ties impose this decision upon her and she accepts it.

'[...] In the year 1889 it was decided at home that I shouldn't attend school any more since Mercedes was getting married - Catalina attended school a year more¹ - [...]

However, with personal curiosities supported by her father, Pedro J. Oliver – loving and liberal in his manner with his daughters -, Josefina doesn't wait too long and seeks self instruction, according to different interests: calligraphy, photography, languages, piano, stenography, together with readings of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Samuel Smiles; Jean Michelet and Concepción Arenal.

His personal library – 200 volumes in 1900² – is interesting because of the wide range of titles for a young girl at that time.

In 1892 she starts a Diary, which she writes all along her life, until her death eve in 1956. She composes – in 8,500 pages - a Collection of 20 volumes.

To bring relevance to it, she exercises with a calligraphy treaty, attaining a harmonious handwriting which exalts it. In the structure, she follows the mould of the weekly newspapers she reads: *Blanco y Negro* or *La Ilustración Artística*, with different sections and inserted photos, to modernise the texts.

Josefina always writes down a vast number of details: shoppings, meals, markets and shops, theatres, later cinema, radio and television, everyday, party and mourning clothing. She has descriptions and delicious memories of Buenos Aires, and its inhabitants, from both the provinces and abroad.

'[...] Neighbours from Venezuela St., from '84 to '90 – When we moved, in the house next door on the right lived Mrs Lucía Belvis – later President of the Republic's mother-in-law: Victorino de la Plaza – A very old lady with a lot of elder children, creole in the old way with a lot of servants, a chapel, lottery in the winter with chocolate – granny was a very close friend of hers -. [...] On the other side of the house there was a tenement house with some French ironers, etc- Next to them a midwife, Matilde Paruolo – then a married couple Aceval (deluxe) on the corner the shoemaker Rimoldi. Opposite the Peña family related to the Paraguayan Presidency - 5 or 6 children - haughty – The Gils – The Araozs, a battalion –³[...]

She makes records of the streets; water in the houses; electricity; horse and electrical tramways; clubs and their social activities:

'[...] In Zeballos St [from '80 to '84], water was brought to us in cubes by the water carrier and it was kept in a jar - In Venezuela St we had a cistern – Running waters and sewers were installed in 1890⁴ - [...]

In 1896 she gets close to photography stimulated by her father, friends and neighbours; with all of them she learns techniques. She writes down on her Diary all kinds of data: ways of developing photos; material purchases; supply and repair stores; staging preparations for her photographic takes.

In all her notebooks she spreads out her photos, with a dual objective: a memory of her best time as a photographer – from 1899 to 1906 –, and a window or gallery for readers or spectators who were always sensed by her.

Perhaps she is the only photographer at that time, who develops her perspective with a dual record: a visual crossing where she details through writing her photographic works and, at the same time, illustrates those pages with her images.

She describes in 1899: ***'[...] We went to Lepage's to buy plates and then to the Grau's. There I posed as a 'manola' with Amelia, and in profile and in a low hairdo. Later Amelia, Fissas and I shut ourselves in the darkroom and we were working for nearly two hours in developing 18 plates⁵ [...]***

Her main interest is single and group portraiture. She works on daily spaces, promoting relaxed attitudes in her characters. Very intuitive, her lens equally captures shots of children, domestic staff, her sister Catalina, friends or even herself. Her naturalness to solve shots can be attributed to her lack of formal instruction, which gives her great freshness.

In 1899 she writes: ***'[...] Emma and Celma Castells came to be portrayed. We spent the whole day distracted with this matter⁶'. [...]*** And in 1904: ***'[...] Pastora came in the morning. We were still in bed. She had lunch with us. Then, I took portraits of la Nena, of her, of Cat. and at last a self portrait. [...] I developed the photographs at night⁷ [...]***

It is also remarkable the way she communicates through images the atmosphere, the air in open spaces, even to think about the cinema as a suitable format to show her nowadays.

She takes photos and makes records of different carnivals with masks and costumes, even dressed in a rigorous male suit and ... a moustache. In the particular space she generates, she gets to an exercise of multiple senses, where – through the ludic she is able to get 'more faces', setting up different Josefinas towards an inquiry of how many more she could really be. She 'opens the door to go play' displacing the suffocating horizon of women at that time.

She also expresses this concern in a series of 100 self-portraits – 18 with a mirror; some of them with an eyemask – and reclaims it in her diary with the epigraph *'T'*. An unusual feature in a time when the woman – for not being a question addressee – devotes little or no time to self-analysis.



Photo 1: Oliver, Josefina, 'T', Diary 3 photo_031, 9 x 12 cms, albumin hand-coloured by the author, Buenos Aires, 1904, Josefina Oliver Archive.

As a corollary of that absence of female's own life spaces, and in spite of the social expansion of photography towards the end of the 19th century, the works found in archives today have always been taken by male hands; in black and white or sepia.

According to the photography historian Abel Alexander, in spite of the restricted education for women at that time: *'Josefina Oliver wants to be her own protagonist in the darkroom; and develops, copies and when the technique says: 'you can go on no more', she trespasses that limit hand-colouring: a woman ahead of her age who breaks the mould*⁸.

Her palette, avant-garde and daring in colour and in the periods she synchronises – going from a pseudo pointillism to pop in the 60s – runs away from the formal canons of her time; and marks the difference with the pastel illumination of her sister Catalina, who follows the traditional way.

Josefina stands out illuminating, in the small 9x12 format, with an amazing meticulousness and steady hand, from the embroideries in a bedspread to the squares on a chessboard. A handmade work that seems modest nowadays, almost irrelevant, in a world in series overwhelmed with fluorescent colours and giant prints.

In a new facet as an artist, she creates postcards, which she works out with her photos by sticking them on a basis of her own design, originating a personal cosmos when writing the text. In another variation, she buys postcards which she recreates by adding colour and making small collages on them.

The totality of her written, photographic, plastic and editorial work comprises:

1. Writing:

- a. **The complete Collection of 20 volumes of her personal Diary (1892 – 1956):** 8400 pages; illustrated with her own photos: 1230; illuminated by her: 600. It contains photos by professionals: 322; she adds loose newspaper cuttings, stamps, menus, postcards, sketches.
- b. **Letters: 170 and postcards written by her: 210** (postcards with her own photos: 120).
- c. **Short poems: 6.**

2. Photography:

Own photos: 2610, divided in:

- loose photos: 127
- edited photos by her in 10 albums: 1137
- edited photos by her in her Diary: 1230
- photos on postcards designed by her: 120

250 original photos by professional photographers and by other different authors.

3. Plastic:

- Illumination of her own photos: 1.050
- Design and postcards lay out with her own photos: 120.
- Collages in Albums and Diaries: 200.
- Collages in the Book of Curiosities and in Postcards.

4. Edition:

- a. A unique edition of a single work of the Collection of her Diary in 20 volumes.
 - b. Edition of 7 albums with her own photographs.
 - c. 6 books, between 1948 y 1952, of '**blotches**', as she called her collages.
- The **Book of Curiosities**, the only one existing nowadays, assembled according to different topics of interest.

The five lost ones are:

- '**Collected prints**'; '**The life of Martin Fierro** (200 pages).
- '**Small Album with coloured photos of models**'.
- '**New book with Vogue colour portraits**' (200 pages.); '**Interiors Album**'.

In her time, the post – the axis of communication – made possible the obsession of postcard delivery. Photos exchange between friends and relatives was a habit. All this - together with Josefina's sociability and creativity -, makes it possible to think about a production much bigger than the one found along these years:

'When the fury of collecting postcards, when my correspondents around the world, who were many, asked me for my portrait, I used to send them this picture⁹ – 1900 to 1904 - I collected over 5 thousand postcards'.

Josefina marries her first cousin, José Salas Oliver, in 1907. They have four children and eight grandchildren. Since 1922, while living in Mallorca - and due to a retinal detachment -, she stops taking photos. She only continues illuminating and making collages with her old copies and some new ones – from her original negatives – enlarged by her husband.

In March 1940, her little four-month old grandson suddenly dies. Thereupon, Juana, the boy's mother and Josefina's second daughter, commits suicide. Josefina is devastated. Five months later, Pepe, her husband and companion dies. She stops her writing on the diary then, and replaces it with a heartfelt Via Crucis made with photos of ***'She!!' or 'They!!'*** as she calls them, together with letters from that time of devastating pain.

In spite of this, a Phoenix, she arises from inside her, giving a new meaning to her whole written work, which she edits between 1943 and 1952 and has it bound in fifteen volumes, in an ***'exclusive edition of a single copy¹⁰'***, outlines the photography researcher Abel Alexander.

In the background analysis of this author, her female condition and her implications always pulse. She lives immersed in a society that considers the woman as a decorative object to accompany men; never a self-thinking or acting being.

Bearing in mind this atmosphere, it is coherent that, in spite of the magnitude of her oeuvre, Josefina only showed her works to relatives and friends, omitting its publication. It is probable that the female annihilation at that time has influenced the election of a personal diary, a gender accepted for young girls. And also, even further, in a lack of considerations to visualise her skills and live them in fullness; ultimately, to remove the corset imposed by her family and her social surroundings.

The lack of diffusion of this material, unknown until these last years, doesn't diminish its value; it has only delayed its consideration.

This investigation, from 2006 to the end of 2009, has been supported by specialists devoted to historical photography: Abel Alexander, Florencia Blanco, Luis Priamo, Patricia Gola and Alejandra Niedermaier, who presented Josefina Oliver in her book *The Woman and the Photography*¹¹. Coinciding with them, Alejandro Castellanos, director of the Centre of the Image in Mexico City evaluated her work as: ***'a complete corpus; a very important archive for Photography in Latin America¹²'***.

I found her work scattered in different cities: in Argentina, in the city of Buenos Aires and Rosario, province of Santa Fe; and in Italy, in Udine, in the Friuli area. It was waiting in bookshelves, storage rooms, boxes and drawers of her grandchildren, great nephews and her great

granddaughter. In perfect conditions, taking into account time, generations, trips, readings and its handling since its creation.

Unfortunately, there is only one 9x12 glass negative; the rest is probably lost among countries or moves; though I still hope on their appearance, out of the tacit family mandate, that has preserved all this memory.

A hundred and thirteen years after her first images, and almost a hundred and twenty years after the beginning of her Diary, Josefina Oliver shows herself as a photography precursor in Argentina; and as a writer, with her daily record of the world, which she leaves us 'in notes' in the thousands of pages of her Diary.



Photo 2: Oliver, Josefina, "ELVIRA – CATALINA – I", Diary 02 photo_048, photo 9 x 12 cm., albumin illuminated copy by J. Oliver, San Vicente, Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1901, Josefina Oliver Archive.

Acknowledgments

To Josefina Oliver de Salas's grandchildren, my cousins: Isabel Balaguer de Pollitzer, Pepita Balaguer de Lagomarsino, Diego Salas Oliver and to her great granddaughter María Pollitzer Balaguer.

To Catalina Oliver de García's grandchildren, my cousins: Mecha Toyos de Caride and Raúl Caride, Inés Toyos de Astorga and Jorge Astorga, Jorge Toyos and Virginia Ahumada de Toyos; and to my brother Julián Viaña and Cecilia Ecke de Viaña.

The generosity, patience and oral memories of each of them – together with the ninety per cent of the material they provided me with -, were the axes of this compilation and investigation.

To Abel Alexander, Florencia Blanco, Luis Priamo, Alejandro Castellanos, Patricia Gola, Inés Ulanovsky, for their great valuable opinions and the time they devoted – in a splendid manner - to the analysis of this work.

To Angeles Cornejo, for her creative and incomparable work, at the astonished beginning.

To Florencia Sapir in the following stage. To Carolina Ciacciulli with her inventive, at the present time. To Alejandro Almaraz for his advice in digital media.

To the Authorities, librarians and archivists of our country, consulted along this investigation: from National General Archive, Prof. Graciela Swiderski; from El Casal de Cataluña, Lic. Paula Zambelli; from

the Spanish Club, Mr. José López; from Casa Balear, Mr. Miguel Vanrell and Mr. José Puig; from the Moyano Hospital - former Hospice for alienated women -, Dr. Dario Rojas and Dr. Catalina Gimeno Maza; from the Historical Institute of the City of Buenos Aires, Mrs. Ana María Peroni; from the Civil Registry Museum, Mrs. Eva; from the Immigration Museum, Architect. Sergio San Pedro and Mr. Martin Verlini and Daniel; from the Costume Museum, Ms. Bárbara Brizzi; from the Cinema Museum, Mr. Andrés; from the churches from Monserrat; la Piedad; Balvanera; from Normal School N°1, Mrs. Gladys Urso and Mr. Guillermo Desi; from School N° 3 District 3 “María Sánchez de Thompson”, Mr. Guillermo Martínez; from School N° 14 District 3 “Necochea”, Mrs. Arcel Barcia; from School N° 21, Mrs. Ana Ma. Vangeli.

To Mrs. Stella Pértile de Poggi, calligraphic expert at the Judicial Power of the Nation, for her valuable help. To Mr. José María Buitrago President of the Public Calligraphers School from Buenos Aires.

To Mrs. Silvia Gattafoni, librarian at National Institute of Anthropology, guide for the digital rearrangement. To Mr. Mario Sánchez Proaño, digital image specialist.

To Mr. Juan José Altieri, Mr. Jorge Calvo; Mr. José Ramón García Menéndez, from our country and Mr. James McKeown from the United States, specialists and collectors of old photographic cameras. To “Foto Internacional Rivadavia”, who facilitated the material for this investigation.

Abroad: to Mr. Fabián Montojo – Creator of the Blog ‘Alta Mar’ - Palma de Mallorca, Spain; Mrs. Marie-Pierre Bonastre from the Lloyd's Register World Trade Center, Barcelona, Spain; Mrs. Joana M^a Bibiloni Antich del Arxiu from Regne de Mallorca, Spain.

To my grandchildren, to whom I dedicated less time *‘of playing which is the best’* (according to *‘Osías’* song by Ma. Elena Walsh); wishing they accept this text – which I dedicate to them – since it is my history and part of theirs.

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Notes

* Person from Buenos Aires.

1 Oliver, Josefina, *‘I’* in *Diary 16, Volume XVI, 1948-1950*; p. 164

2 Oliver, Josefina, *‘My library in the year 1.900’* in *Diary 2, Volume II, 1899-1902*, pp. 344-351

3 Oliver Josefina, *‘I’* Op. cit., p.161

4 Oliver Josefina, *‘I’* Op. cit., p.162

5 Oliver, Josefina, *Diary 02, Volume II, 1899-1902*, 29 July 1899, p.73

6 Oliver, Josefina, *Diary 02, Volume II, 1899-1902*, 7 December 1899, p. 122

7 Oliver, Josefina, *Diary 03, Volume III, 1902-1905*, 18 February 1904, pp. 343-344

8 Alexander, Abel, conversation 26 December 2006

9 Oliver Josefina, *Diary Notebook 41A ph_018*, Photo postcard based on a copy of photo n° 1 in this paper

10 Alexander, Abel, idem

- 11 Niedermaier, Alejandra, *The Woman and the Photography*, Buenos Aires, ed. Leviatán, 2008, pp. 74-75 y 209-210
- 12 Castellano, Alejandro, Festival of Light Portfolio revision, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 15th August, 2008.