

A ROOM WITH A LANDSCAPE:

Vedute from the Palace of the Privileged Company of Trieste and Rijeka

Fokus Grupa



Vedute Salon
by Egon Hreljanović,
circa 1988.

Courtesy of
the Museum
of the City of Rijeka.

A building under reconstruction, located across from the Rijeka main train station, was expected to open its doors in 2020 as the headquarters of the Museum of the City of Rijeka.¹ It was built as the administrative seat of the Trieste-Rijeka Privileged Company, which had the monopoly over industrial sugar processing and trade in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The company was established in 1750 at the initiative of the Habsburg crown, and it was run by Dutch merchants.

Rijeka, a port town on the East Adriatic coast, has been part of different empires over the course of modernity. Here we are looking at the end of the 18th century, the time of Rijeka's rapid industrial development and its cosmopolitan immersion into global trade as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The starting point for this reflection, and our chosen case study, is several late-18th-century landscape paintings housed in one of the rooms of the aforementioned building, which contain a rarity for this region—references to slave labor and colonialism.



The Development of Sugar Refinement in Rijeka

In the first half of the 18th century, a series of events enabled the rapid capitalist development of Rijeka. As part of his mercantile policy in 1717, Charles VI proclaimed the Adriatic Sea open to shipping and, in 1719, declared Rijeka and Trieste free ports under the direct auspices of the capital, Vienna. The same year, the first Oriental Company, which preceded the Privileged Company of Trieste and Rijeka, opened in Vienna, and in 1722 a *lazaretto* for the boats coming from “risky” ports was built in Rijeka.² After being established in 1750, the Privileged Company of Trieste and Rijeka had a long-lasting monopoly on sugar production and was in charge of many other production and mercantile activities. It was run by Proli & Arnold, an Antwerp-based Dutch company that was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its shareholders were Dutch, Flemish, and Austro-Hungarian nobility, among them the Empress Maria Theresa.³

Room with Landscapes

On the second floor of the late-Baroque classicist palace (the headquarters of the sugar refinery), in the Vedute Salon, there are four large and eight smaller wall paintings. These wall paintings, called *Vedute ideate*, (the

Company's building on the Rijeka map—1843 (detail).

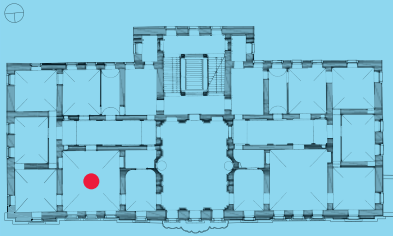
Courtesy of the State Archives in Rijeka.

1. The building is being renovated in the framework of the European Capital of Culture, Rijeka 2020. The last circulated opening date was in September, but this is uncertain now because of the COVID-19 epidemic. While all programming events

of the ECOOP are on hold, the infrastructure construction is still ongoing. The restoration of the paintings has been on hold.

2. Igor Žic, “*Rafinerija šećera u Rijeci (1750–1828)*,” *Sušačka revija*, no. 24 (1998): 31. Emphasis added.

3. Irvin Lukežić, “Nizozemci u Rijeci,” *Sušačka revija*, no. 41 (2003): 82, taken from Rudolf Bičanić, *Doba manufakture u Hrvatskoj i Slavoniji: (1750–1860)* (Zagreb: Izdavački zavod Jugoslavenske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti, 1951), 237.



Sugar Refinery, second-floor plan, prepress Anka Čurić.

Courtesy of Croatian Conservation Institute.

last dated to 1789),⁴ were made after the great fire of 1785, during the mandate of the Privileged

Company of Trieste and Rijeka's director Peter de Vierendeels (1777–1803). The paintings, reflecting the taste and the ambitions of their client, feature imaginary, idealized cities with *sce-nographic* public squares filled with monuments and buildings that testify to the company's global reach. Some paintings show in the background maritime landscapes with sailing ships displaying Austrian flags. In the genre scenes, filled with characters dressed according to the 18th-century European fashion,⁵ merchants are engaged in heated debates, couples are strolling, and individual characters walk, fish, or smoke. Some figures look like military personnel carrying weapons, others like members of the clergy. Some merchants depicted with turbans presumably portray people from the Middle East. People in plain clothes look like street vendors or workers. There are children scattered around, engaged in play. A beggar

is addressing a well-dressed couple passing by. On the north wall of the Salon, in the image on the right, a man with a conical sage hat carrying a load looks like a worker from the Far East. In the painting on the left, a group of schematic figures depicted as Chinese,⁶ with bound hands, bare feet, and bent backs, are moving around under the surveillance of armed *gendarmes*. Introduced as just another genre scene, this painting nonchalantly exposes slavery as part of the economic development of the mercantilist city space. Not even a detailed study conducted between 2003 and 2007, made in preparation for the restoration of the building, made the origin of these paintings clearer. According to Ervin Dubrović, the director of the Museum of the City of Rijeka, they are made *al secco* on the dried plaster, and their artists could have been Venetians affiliated with Piranesi and Canaletto. Some of the panoramas may have been based on templates from an unknown graphic.⁷

The *Vedute ideate* are rare depictions of the racialized slave labor that was barely visible in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, at the edge of colonial Europe, far away from the main colonial super-powers. Austria-Hungary did not have its own colonies in the 18th century. Raw sugar was acquired from London, Venice, and Marseilles, where it had been imported from the Caribbean rather than the Far East.⁸ But the paintings contain evidence that links the Austro-Hungarian Empire, together

4. Krasanka Mayerand and Petar Puhmajer, *The Palace of the Sugar Refinery in Rijeka* (Rijeka: City of Rijeka in Cooperation with the Croatian Conservation Institute, 2008), 38.

5. Mayerand and Puhmajer, *Palace of the Sugar Refinery in Rijeka*, 109.

6. *Doba modernizacije more, Rijeka, Srednja Europa*, ed. Ervin Dubrović (Rijeka: Muzej Grada Rijeke, 2006), 53.

8. Iukežić, "Nizozemci u Rijeci," 52.

7. *Ibid.*, 51.

with the peripheral port town of Rijeka, to the global flow of capital and the history of colonialism. If a blind eye is cast on the fact that the refinery was producing sugar—a form of exquisite colonial merchandise linked directly to the history of transatlantic slavery and African slaves—it is indisputable that during the 18th century the Austro-Hungarian Empire opened several companies trading with the Far East,⁹ while in the Austrian Netherlands the private Ostend Company¹⁰ was trading with both the Far East and the West Indies.

Slave Labor Depicted

The representation of slaves in the paintings is acknowledged in some of the literature on the palace, but there is no critical account of the link between slavery and Rijeka's industrial expansion. There is a casual account of the presence of slaves in the captions for the painting in the *Doba modernizacije*:

The monument and the great triumphal arch in the foreground allow glimpses of a forest of masts and fortresses and steep hills in the background. The attention is caught by the images of soldiers with guns and handcuffed slaves—obviously Chinese. Beyond the “internationalist” and exotic atmosphere of the painting, which reminds us of the Far Eastern colonies that regularly supply the Old World,

the idyllic scenes of decorative borders also recall the fashion of chinoiserie, of the taste of the 18th century that fancied Far Eastern motifs. Indeed, the Company did not directly communicate with the Far East, but it had branches in both Americas.¹¹

There is an unsettling account of the use of slave labor as rational (not concerning the paintings themselves) in the article written by William Klinger in the same book:

The harvesting and processing of sugar cane must be carefully planned and meticulously conducted because any delay can destroy several years of effort. The system, therefore, does not allow for variability and inconsistency in labor and energy supply. The production and harvesting of sugar cane depend on the discipline and coordination of the harvesters and are, therefore, more fitting to a slave-based economy than to a free labor force.¹²

In the book *The Palace of the Sugar Refinery in Rijeka*, there is no mention of slaves in the paintings or of the slave-based economy of sugar production:

Above the marble-imitating parapet, there are views of imagi-

9. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_Privileged_Oriental_Company, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austrian_East_India_Company, accessed on December 22, 2019.

10. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ostend_Company, accessed on December 22, 2019.

11. *Doba modernizacije More, Rijeka, Srednja Europa*, 53.

12. Tilliam Klinger, “Povijest šećera” in Dubrović, *Doba modernizacije*, 24. Translated by Fokus Grupa.

nary cities with antique monuments, squares, ships, ruins, and people dressed in 18th-century clothes.¹³

Race and Class

The *Vedute ideate* are not showing black African slave labor, which was the basis for the global sugar trade and the prosperity of the Rijeka sugar industry. The slaves in the images are from Eastern Asia, and their enslavement is not the subject matter of the images. As we mentioned earlier, there are sparse accounts of the depiction of slaves in images such as these. What we find symptomatic of the (nonexistent) discourse about race in the ex-Yugoslav region is the fact that the East Asian slaves' presence seems unworthy of analysis in the local accounts. Catherine Baker analyzes this racial blindness in her book *Race and the Yugoslav Region* (2018), one of the first studies on the issue, in which she looks at the peculiar racial constellations in the territories of ex-Yugoslavia that are themselves racialized as the European other.¹⁴

In most of the accounts of the history of the refinery, a clear analogy is drawn between the types of work performed (or class), on the one hand, and the workers' ethnicity, on the other. In general, while omitting slave labor, these accounts do show that the closer the workers were to home, the lower was their position in the company.

Foreign workers from the Netherlands and Hamburg worked in the most expert and best-paid positions in the refinery. In order to attract them to Rijeka and Croatia, they were offered salaries twice as high as in their countries of origin. In 1768, the company employed 704 workers and employees, 49 of whom were foreigners (from the Netherlands, Hamburg, France), 316 were from Austrian countries (Istria, Kranj, Primorje, Austria), and 339 were *paesani*, i.e. locals. In the refinery itself, a total of six masters were employed, all of them foreigners. Following them in the labor qualification came *raffineurs* (expert skilled workers), 34 of whom were foreigners, while 18 were Croats. The refinery pottery workshop employed artisans from Croatia, and the boiler room employed artisans from Prussia. Low-skilled workers were mainly Croats. Wage workers and cabmen were also mostly local people, Croats, Slovenians (from Kranj and Koruska). It is rather symptomatic that all company directors were generally from Antwerp/Anvers in Belgium.¹⁵

Some of the accounts make a poignant critique of class relations whereby the local southeastern Europeans were treated as a lower class.¹⁶ Many of the contemporary accounts,

13. Mayerand and Puhmajer, *Palace of the Sugar Refinery in Rijeka*, 109.

14. Catherine Baker, *Race and the Yugoslav Region: Postsocialist, Post-conflict, Postcolonial?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

15. Ričanić, *Doba manufakture*, 321. Quoted in Lukežić, "Nizozemci u Rijeci," 52. The data accounts for the year 1768, the time before the paintings were made.

16. Mijo Mirković, *Ekonomska historija Jugoslavije* (Rijeka: Rentro di ricerche storiche, 1985), 308–32, and Ričanić, *Doba manufakture*, 321.

on the other hand, show a petty bourgeois admiration for the industrialists,¹⁷ pronounce eulogies to the introduction of Protestant ethics,¹⁸ and praise the rapid development of this backwater part of the world. At the same time, they express resentment about class divisions that cut across ethnic lines. But neither the Marxist nor the petty-bourgeois critique accounts for the absence of representation of the slave labor that was the invisible basis for this industrial growth.

Colonial Imaginaries

The racialized other was present in the European territory of the big colonial powers and in their large overseas territories, but racism also spread through cultural forms and commodities to less central players in the colonization project, such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire. With the slight lag that is a characteristic of the periphery, the colonial imaginary was introduced into the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Rijeka itself being on the periphery of that empire) through what Anne McClintock calls “commodity racism.” Catherine Baker defines the concept of commodity racism in this way:

[T]he mass production of racialized narratives/visualizations of modernity and primitivism around commodities extracted from colonized land, permeated as a transnational, implicitly

“European” mode of representation far beyond the largest metropolises into smaller northern European countries like Switzerland and Iceland. Inner Austria, indeed, is already within the scope of studies of German advertising, race and empire, since Austrian firms manufactured and designed for both German and Habsburg markets within a cross-border consumer culture.¹⁹

This might account for the presence of slave labor in the *Vedute ideate*, but in Rijeka there was also an earlier contact with the racialized other. In a rereading of Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*, Baker coins the term “Black Adriatic,” taking us back to the Mediterranean trade routes (at least from the time

of the Ottoman Empire) that made this contact possible. A witness to this other contact zone is the very popular blackface figure of

Company’s palace on a watercolor by Christian von Mayr, 1832.

Courtesy of the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral.



17. Lukežić, “Nizozemci u Rijeci”

18. Irvin Lukežić, “Riječka kapitalistička oaza,” *Sušačka revija* (2010), www.klubsusacana.hr/revija/clanak.asp?Num=72&C=19.

19. Baker, *Race and the Yugoslav Region*, 98.

the *morčić*²⁰ that has been used on jewelry and carnival masks, a tradition imported to Rijeka and its surroundings from Venice, where it continues to exist unchallenged, as far as we know.

A Memorial to Colonial Extractivism

The distant landscapes painted on the walls of the Vedute Salon could not have surpassed the idyllic view that would open through the three windows facing the sea. Before the reclamation of the soil and the construction of the railroad and the port in front of the palace, the Vedute Salon overlooked the beautiful Kvarner Bay with a view toward the islands of Krk and Cres, the Velebit mountain to the east, and the Učka mountain to the west. A small pier just in front of the palace's main entrance, with the crane to unload cargo depicted in contemporary accounts of the palace, is testimony to the fact that the primary means of transporting goods in the 18th century was by sea. Today the Palace overlooks the main train station, the dilapidated *cul de sac* of the once-principal inland transportation route connecting Rijeka to Vienna and Budapest. In the framework of the "European Capital of Culture, Rijeka 2020—Port of Diversity" project, and with the help of European Union funds for industrial heritage restoration, several of the extant buildings of the former sugar refinery,²¹ among them the Palace of the Sugar Refinery,

were meant to be turned into a cultural quarter. In our view, the *Vedute ideate*, which will be displayed to the public when the Museum of the City of Rijeka opens its doors in the new location, circuitously points to the history of colonialism as a constituent part of Rijeka's industrialization and development, while they highlight Europe's industrial heritage as also a colonial heritage.

As Chiara De Cesari writes in "Museums of Europe: Tangles of Memory, Borders, and Race," European memory politics, which is built around the memory of the Holocaust and has recently incorporated the revisionist concept of totalitarianism, has not acknowledged colonial guilt.²² The material and nonmaterial traces of colonization traditionally framed as a national and today as a European heritage, together with the colonial mentality, are to different degrees present both in locations that were central to colonial empires and in the peripheries, including present-day Croatia. In Rijeka, a rare depiction of what seems to be slave trade in the *Vedute ideate* paintings reminds us of the fact that the development of urban centers in the European peripheries is in fact linked to the history of colonialism.

20. Tourist Office of the City of Rijeka, www.visitrijeka.eu/All_about_Rijeka/Tales_from_Rijeka/Morcic, accessed March 31, 2020, states that "Morčić" is the original jewelry from Rijeka, Kvarner, and the Croatian Littoral.

"Earrings with the bust of a black man with turban are worn even today by 70% of women from the region, regardless of their social status and national identity, in a multi-ethnic Rijeka that has as many as 22 ethnic minorities."

21. The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art moved to a building connected to the palace in 2017, and the Public Library, an Art Cinema, and a multipurpose Children's House will all be housed in the vicinity of the former palace of the Privileged

Company of Trieste and Rijeka after the renovation is complete.

22. Chiara De Cesari, "Museums of Europe: Tangles of Memory, Borders, and Race," *Museum Anthropology* 40, no. 1 (2017): 19–37, <https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/42051859/muan.12128.pdf>.



East Wall



South Wall



West Wall





North Wall





A Room with a Landscape: *Vedute* from the Palace of the
Privileged Company of Trieste and Rijeka
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Vedute Salon photographs
— Ivan Vranjić

Thanks to
— Ivana Golob Mihić, Ivana Lucić, Toni Šaina, Slaven Tolj,
What How and for Whom, City of Rijeka, Croatian Conservation