



Faces of death: visualising history / edited by Andrea Petö and Klaartje Schrijvers. - Pisa: Plus-Pisa university press, c2009. - (Thematic work group. 4, Work, gender and society; 4) 704.949309 (21.)



I. Morte <iconografia> - Storia I. Petö, Andrea II. Schrijvers, Klaartje

CIP a cura del Sistema bibliotecario dell'Università di Pisa

This volume is published thanks to the support of the Directorate General for Research of the European Commission, by the Sixth Framework Network of Excellence CLIOHRES.net under the contract CIT3-CT-2005-006164. The volume is solely the responsibility of the Network and the authors; the European Community cannot be held responsible for its contents or for any use which may be made of it.

Cover: Klaartje Schrijvers, *Faces of Death* (2009), charcoal on paper.

© Klaartje Schrijvers 2009

© 2009 CLIOHRES.net

The materials published as part of the CLIOHRES Project are the property of the CLIOHRES.net Consortium. They are available for study and use, provided that the source is clearly acknowledged.
cliohres@cliohres.net - www.clioehres.net

Published by Edizioni Plus – Pisa University Press
Lungarno Pacinotti, 43
56126 Pisa
Tel. 050 2212056 – Fax 050 2212945
info.plus@adm.unipi.it
www.edizioniplus.it - Section “Biblioteca”

Member of



Association of American
University Presses

ISBN: 978-88-8492-651-7

Linguistic revision
Ralph Nisbet

Informatic editing
Răzvan Adrian Marinescu

Facing Death on the Sea. Ex-voto Paintings of Northern Adriatic Sailing Ships in the 19th Century

TEA MAYHEW

Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral, Rijeka

ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is investigate maritime votive, or 'ex-voto', paintings as a source for the history of mentality, creating a store of imagery inspired by death and mortal danger in specific conditions of life on the sea. We focus on 16 pictures of 19th-century sailing ships from the northern-east Adriatic. The paintings were from votive chapels: from the small village of Kraj on the eastern Istrian coast, Mali Lošinj on the island of Lošinj and the Franciscan monastery on Trsat (Rijeka). In addition, there are some paintings from the collection of the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral, Rijeka. Here we present the way in which they transmitted messages of everyday life and danger as experienced by sailors throughout the world's seas. The paintings are observed as a means of communication by sailors and their families on the coastland as well as presenting personal histories.

Smisao je ovog članka istražiti pomorske zavjetne slike ili ex-vota kao izvor za istraživanje povijesti mentaliteta, stvaranja mentalnih slika potaknutih smrću i smrtnom opasnošću u specifičnim uvjetima života na moru. Usredotočit ćemo se na 16 slika nastalih u 19. stoljeću, koje prikazuju jedrenjake sjeveroistočne obale Jadrana. Odabrane slike nalaze se u zavjetnim kapelama u malom selu kraj na istočnoj obali Istre, Malom Lošinju i u franjevačkom samostanu na Trsatu (Rijeka). Dodatno su razmatrane i slike iz zbirke Pomorskog i povijesnog muzeja Hrvatskog primorja Rijeka. Ovi vizualni povijesni izvori ovdje će biti predstavljeni kao sredstva prenošenja poruke svakodnevnog života i opasnosti koju su iskusili pomorci ploveći morima svijeta. Slike su razmatrane kao oblik komunikacije između mornara i njihovih obitelji na obali kao i sredstvo predstavljanja njihove osobne povijesti.

One of my vivid memories from school literature is the dramatic scene of a shipwreck described by a 19th-century Croatian writer Eugen Kumičić in his book *Začudeni sva-*

tovi [Wedding Astonishment]. He was inspired by an event which took place in the channel between his small hometown of Brseč and the island of Cres when a sailing ship was caught in a storm and smashed to pieces against the steep coastal cliffs with only a few members of the crew surviving thanks to the help of the local people. Later on in life I had to cross the same channel for work and pleasure between the island of Cres and the Istrian coastland known as *Vela Vrata* [Great Gate] as described in Eugen Kumičić's novel and I nearly always reflected upon his description of the shipwreck and storm when I looked at the gorgeous cliffs below Brseč. More memorable still, on a few of my sailings across Vela Vrata the ferry was caught in a storm. Even a person with the slightest religious feelings at that kind of moment with the ship going up and down, left and right, with the waves crashing overboard, threatening to pull the ship to the bottom, would be inspired to think that there must be some 'higher power' to save the ship and a tiny human life from the 'sea's jaws'.

In the villages on the eastern Istrian coast from Brseč to Lovran there are chapels with ex-voto paintings. The paintings show the ships on which local people served and faced death during rough weather or accidents. Thankful for their own survival and well aware how thin the line between life and death is for someone caught in a storm, they offered their stories to local painters, or painted them themselves, and gave rise to the paintings which decorate the modest coastal chapels. The intentions of these special offerings left on altars or hung on walls were usually prayers for the protection of a loved one on the sea or expressing gratitude for miraculous survival at sea. These two intentions twinned with a need for self presentation as well as decoration of the church interior¹. These chapels are usually of small dimensions, built on the seashore or on cliffs with sea views, dedicated to the Virgin Mary as the mother figure and protector of sailors or very often to St. Nicolas who is also a protector of sailors and travellers². The paintings have occasionally been studied by art historians and historians interested in the history of religious cults³. Being a part of popular culture, ex-voto paintings and other ex-voto items provide a rich source for the history of everyday life and perceptions of death, fear and belief as well as individual and collective identity⁴. Here we will only take into account paintings representing life and death on the sea in order to narrow the broad canvas of ex-voto phenomena. The ex-voto paintings of ships presented here come from the Chapel of Our Lady in the village of Kraj, the shrine of Our Lady of Trsat in Rijeka and the Church of Our Lady in Veli Lošinj on the island of Lošinj. Similar chapels can be found all around the Adriatic coast and the Mediterranean in general. In order to give a broader insight into the visual memories of sailing ships and their crews caught in different sorts of danger at sea, we have also used paintings preserved in the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral, Rijeka. The intention is to explore how this kind of visual material can be used as a primary historical source, and more precisely as a source for the history of collective and individual perceptions of death and survival from mortal danger as they arise in everyday life. In other words, from my

personal experience of danger on rough seas to observing the paintings on the chapels' walls, my aim is to scan the visual rhetoric of maritime ex-voto paintings as a means of identification, empathy with another through recognition of deep emotional experience, and transmission of experience from one generation to the next⁵.

Images always have a strong role in generating religious experience⁶ and act in two ways: first as the expression of a religious experience and second to (re)awaken religious feelings in the observer by investing a sensational event with explicit messages: this was what happened to me – believe it!⁷ The fact that ex-voto paintings are closely related to the promotion and maintenance of popular religion should not be ignored although they will not be deeply explored in this light here.

NAVIGARE NECESSE EST, VIVERE NON

Given the large number of maritime ex-voto paintings and their existence in so many different places, it was necessary here to set a historical and geographical framework: to concentrate only on a small area and a relatively short period of maritime history of the Northern Adriatic. I thus present only paintings of sailing ships, all from the 19th century, when these were still in widespread use in the northern Adriatic, enjoying a

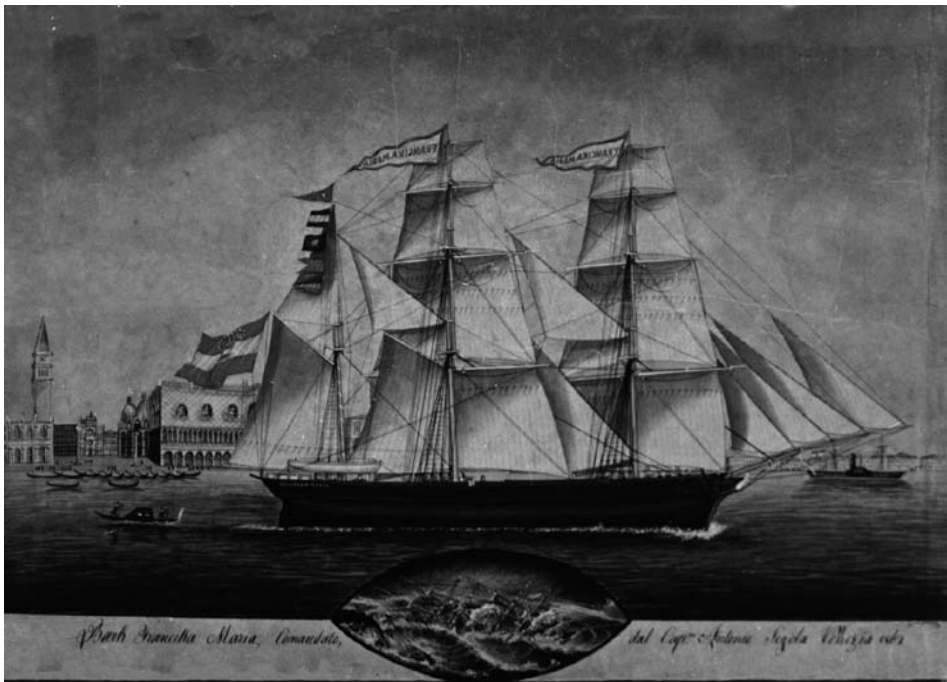


Fig. 1
The Austrian Barque *Maria Francika*.

short hour of glory before their demise with the development of the steamship⁸. The number of sailing ships reached a peak in the middle of the 19th century. The industrial revolution, trade and transport of goods and people took ships from Europe to all other continents. In our minds there is a romantic image of a sailing ship with the wind full in its sails, optimistically setting off on a trip round the world⁹.

The painting by Giovanni Luzzo in Venice 1862 represents the Austrian ship *Maria Francika* (port of origin Rijeka) sailing in front of the city of Venice (Fig. 1). This romantic vision of a happily sailing ship, which we can imagine on exciting trips from one port of the world to another, is interrupted in this painting by a smaller insert (lower middle) which shows the same barque *Maria Francika* during a storm, covered with huge waves, dangerously keeling over on its right side. Next to it can be seen another smaller vessel again engulfed in the waves. Unfortunately the text below the painting does not give any explanation of the danger, which the *Maria Francika* obviously survived though we do not know with how much damage. We can only conclude that for the person who ordered this painting it was necessary to emphasise that the ship survived a terrifying experience as shown in the little picture, which was probably perceived as a regular part of a sailor's life¹⁰. The insert serves the purpose of completing the presentation of sailors' everyday life: a small contribution to the social construction of reality.

Sailing ships depended on the wind and they used the usual corridors, which although well-known in the mid 19th century, always held some hidden dangers such as reefs, cliffs and storms. One of the most dangerous points where the passage of sailing ship was known to be a hazard was Cape Horn in South America. Amongst seamen Cape Horn is known as the most unsettled part of the Earth where warm and cold currents mix and the weather is almost completely unpredictable. Storms and high winds can smash a ship on the sharp cliffs of Tierra del Fuego. Alternatively, it may hit an iceberg or another ship, invisible in the mist – again enough to cause sinking. Although well aware of these dangers, some sailing ships of steel construction kept up a regular connection between Europe and the western coast of America before the Panama Canal was built. Those who survived the rounding of Cape Horn were deemed especially skilful seamen, not to say blessed¹¹. Some of their memories of terrifying experiences have also been preserved in paintings.

The Austro-Hungarian barque named *Marietta W.* (port of origin: Rijeka) can be seen in the painting again made by Giovanni Luzzo in Venice in 1869 (Fig. 2). The painting was ordered by the captain of the ship on behalf of the whole crew after they had successfully rounded Cape Horn on their way from Montevideo to Callao on 22 December 1869, as can be seen from the inscription underneath (*Nave Austriaca Marietta W. Commandata dal Capitano P. P. Potrata a Capo Horn 22. 12. 1869. da Montevideo per Callao.*) It is not known whether the painting was meant to be placed in a chapel as a votive offering for surviving the Cape Horn passage¹². But in any case, surviving Cape Horn was something that deserved to be shown in paintings as a common means of



Fig. 2
Austro-Hungarian sailing ship *Marietta W.*

communicating memories. In a culture of limited literacy this picture would provide more evidence¹³ than a captain's report or ship's diary.

The other most dangerous point for a sailing ship in the 19th century was the western coast of Australia. The seabed is full of hidden reefs in this area, which were not well-known by European mariners and were poorly described in their navigational charts. Thus they became the cause of numerous castaways¹⁴. In October 1875 the Austro-Hungarian sailing ship *Stefano* (port of origin: Rijeka) sailed from Cardiff to Hong Kong. The usual sailing route led north from the western Australian coast but every shipping route was mostly dictated by winds, which could bring a ship dangerously close to the coast. This is exactly what happened to the crew of the *Stefano*. They hit a reef near Point Cloates and the vessel sank in a very short time. However, ten members of the crew managed to reach the beach a few miles away where they began their fight for survival on the hostile Australian coastland. Most of them died of hunger and exhaustion¹⁵. Thanks to the help of a local aboriginal tribe the 16 year-old midshipman Miho Bačić and 19 year-old crewman Ivan Jurić were the only two who survived. The aborigines enabled them to get in contact with Captain Tucker who commanded the British cutter *Jessie* and helped them to return to civilisation, first to the European colony town of Fremantle and later back to Dalmatia. On their return to their homeland – Miho Bačić was from Dubrovnik and Ivan Jurić was from a village on the nearby

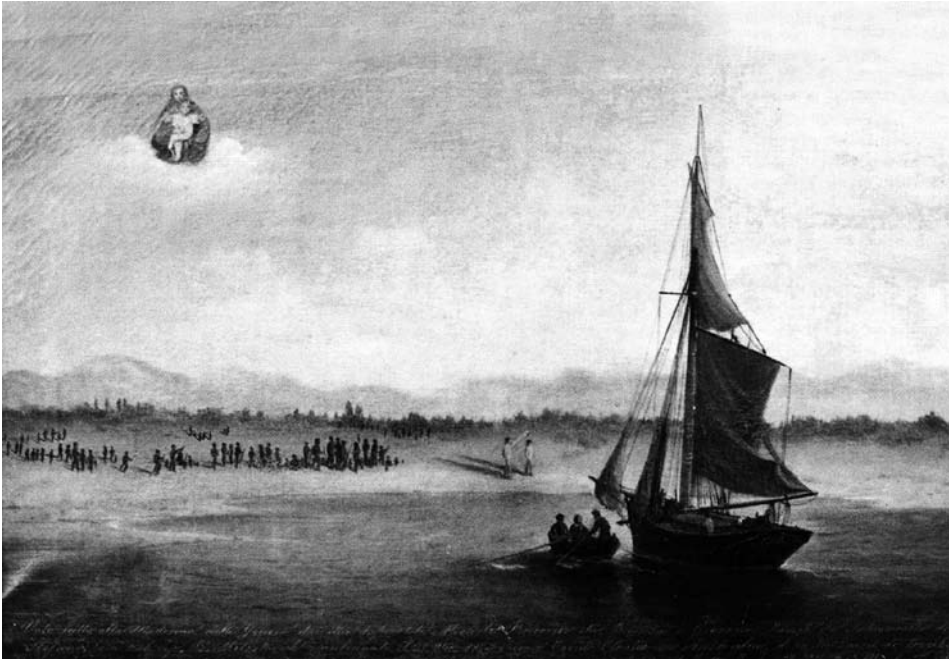


Fig. 3
The two survivors of the *Stefano*

peninsula of Pelješac – they recounted their dramatic story to a Dominican brother named Stjepo Skurla who wrote down their memoirs¹⁶. In addition, they ordered an ex-voto painting of their miraculous survival.

This painting does not represent their lost ship, the *Stefano*. In gratitude to the Aborigines and the Virgin Mary (shown in the upper left-hand corner of the picture) they commissioned a painting showing the beach scene where aboriginal tribes escorted them to the cutter *Jessie*¹⁷ (Fig. 3). Painted from their memory, the picture became a visual medium conveying the individual's personal history or history 'from below'¹⁸. Despite his terrifying experience on that first trip on the *Stefano*, Miho Bačić returned to his vocation as a seaman. Only three years after his salvation in Australia he became a captain and sailed on a ship belonging to his uncle Niko Bačić¹⁹.

Great oceans and unknown seas were not the only places where ships could suffer storms. Storms, great waves and cliffs were dangerous even in relatively shallow and peaceful seas such as the Adriatic.

The following painting shows the sailing ship *Sattor* near the islet of Susak, just a few miles from its home port on the island of Lošinj caught in a *fortunale* [sudden storm at

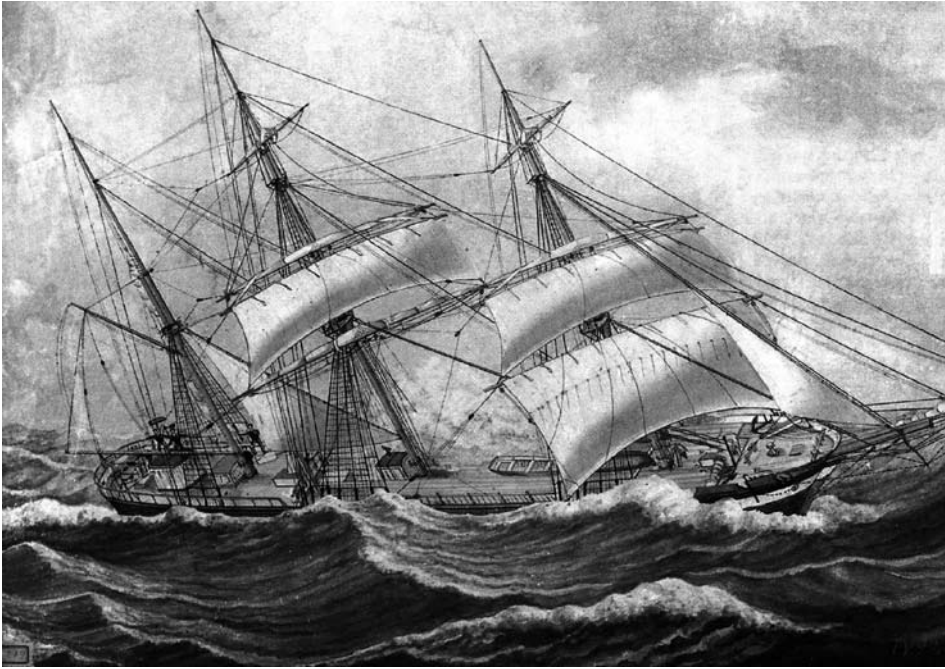


Fig. 4
The *Sattor*.

sea] (Fig. 4). According to the inscription below the painting, the ship was under the command of Captain Mate Perović when the event happened on 18 December 1892²⁰. Although the sky in the picture is relatively clear, it is obvious that the wind is lifting high waves and the vessel is about to be engulfed by sea coming in from the left while the right side is yawing dangerously. Three members of the crew are shown in the stern holding the rails. There is no more information about this *fortunale* or any damage to the *Sattor* or its crew, but some other written documents provide us with the information that this ship suffered various other accidents. In 1875 on its way from Odessa to Grimsby and Hull, the *Sattor* collided with a steamship sailing on the River Humber, which caused some damage to its sails. In 1887 on the way from Cagliari to Philadelphia the *Sattor* ran aground on the Schuykill but without incurring any major damage. In 1892 when on its way back from Algeria to Lošinj the *Sattor* survived a collision with the Italian schooner named *Maria R.* in which both ships were heavily damaged and the *Sattor* had to be towed to its homeport of Lošinj²¹.

Another Austrian vessel, the *Maria Andrina* (amongst whose owners was Marija Car, widow of Captain Srećko Vlašić, from the town of Bakar) suffered multiple sea damage. On its first trip in December 1879 from the Marmara Sea to Le Havre its captain

Celestin Katnić was caught in a powerful Atlantic storm. The ship suffered major damage, all the crew were lost and the ship limped into the shelter of the port of Lisbon. In 1883 the *Maria Andrina* was once again caught in a heavy storm on its way from Trieste to Bordeaux and lost all of its cargo (mostly wood). In 1885 the *Maria Andrina* became beached on the island of Cres (just opposite the city of Rijeka). The ship was actually stranded by a strong wind from the northeast known as the *bora*. The *Maria Andrina* ended her existence tragically near the port of Trieste on 26 December 1890. Arriving there full of wood and rum a day after Christmas, she was forced by port procedure to wait before entering the harbour and anchored a few miles offshore. During the night a strong wind pulled the ship from its anchor and waves forced it out to sea. The crew were aboard. In the meantime the wind and waves damaged the hull which sprang many leaks. After two days of fighting against the sea, the crew decided to save their lives by jumping into the sea and swimming to land. The steamship *Iris* rescued six of them, whilst another four (a deck officer from Rijeka, a black man from Mexico and two Frenchmen, the skipper and a kitchen assistant) were never found²².

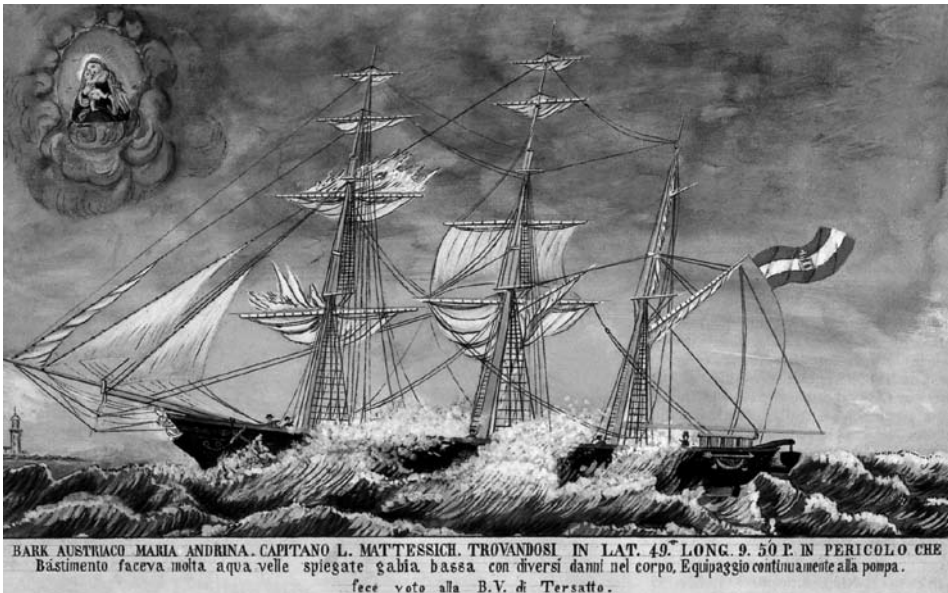


Fig. 5
The *Maria Andrina*.

The ex-voto painting of the *Maria Andrina* (Fig. 5) was made as a votive gift to the Virgin Mary of Trsat and was placed in the votive chapel of the Franciscan monastery at Trsat (Rijeka). The painting shows the vessel, under the command of Captain L. Mates-

sich, near the Lizard Point in the Atlantic Ocean during a tempest. In the far distance can be seen a lighthouse, lending hope of salvation. The inscription below the painting gives some explanation of the situation. The ship suffered damage to its hull and water was coming in, while the crew laboured to pump it out.

A storm might not cause any damage to a ship, but the loss of cargo and food supplies was dangerous enough for the crew. Loss of food and water supplies on board a ship in the middle of the ocean with no possibility of reaching the coast meant that their only hope would be if another ship passed by.



Fig. 6
The *Descovich A*.

This ex-voto painting (Fig. 6) represents the sailing ship *Descovich A*, almost completely covered with waves. The sails are damaged, some of the crew are at the stern and some of them are at the bow trying to save the situation. In the sea are parts of cargo: wood and barrels. The event happened on the stormy night of 27-28 January 1878 en route from Sardinia to the Balearic islands. The crew members who survived commissioned this votive painting as an offering to the Virgin Mary of Trsat (Rijeka). It is preserved in the votive chapel of the Franciscan Brothers of Trsat.

Life aboard ship itself included high risks such as those caused by specific cargos like oil and coal, cooking with open fires, having low hygiene standards and poor nutrition which caused various illnesses. Besides this, there was also the danger of being attacked

and/or kidnapped by pirates. These factors put a seamen's life at risk or to use the expression of Jean Piere Filippini, death was near them²³. According to an estimate made by Alberto Cosulich, one in every three ships was lost in the 18th and 19th centuries, while the other two survived some less dangerous hazards²⁴. This can also be reconstructed from maritime documents such as official ship's diaries or maritime shipping registers. Other written sources are the documents of inquiries by authorities following shipping accidents, including the testimony of survivors. But these are 'dry facts' which do not provide information about the subjective experience of life aboard ship. A seaman was usually a simple man who was most often illiterate or if capable of writing was rarely called upon to use it. To tell a skilful painter the story of their survival and challenges encountered on the sea was the only way to preserve the memory of the event. Painting was also the only way to tell their stories to others who were not used to reading. In this way seamen visualised their experiences through paintings and in doing so expressed their religious feelings, all of which helped them to continue their life at sea²⁵. These paintings formed a memory of them and their dearest left on the coast. Ex-voto paintings created a bridge between a chaotic and unpredictable life at sea, punctuated by storms and other fatal dangers, and survival as part of the intention of a higher divine power felt as a blessing, the blessing of being alive²⁶.

VISUAL MEMORY OF NEAR-DEATH AND SUFFERING

Ex-voto paintings have a long tradition in Christianity. They are actually a continuity of the oldest religious expression – offering of a gift to god(s). Votive paintings spread from the 14th century onwards as thanksgiving for an answered prayer and developed as a kind of popular culture, as opposed to elitist Renaissance and Baroque art²⁷. A votive painting did not need to be glamorous. The representation of a deadly dangerous situation was more important than questions of style and a painter was just a transmitter of information about such events. Thus this kind of painting was not influenced by the various art styles. It was related to the development of visual language as a specific means of communicating past events²⁸. Amongst the large number of anonymous creators of maritime ex-voto paintings on the Eastern Adriatic, those who made their painting a profession and who signed their paintings were Bazilije Baltazar Ivanković and Giovanni Luzzo. Baltazar Ivanković, who was a successful and educated painter, was also a captain who experienced life on ship. Nevertheless there are great numbers of paintings whose authors are unknown or without any artistic education²⁹. The absence of any signature on a painting denotes the importance of the event represented and not the artist.

This ex-voto painting, dominated by dark colours to emphasise the dramatic atmosphere, shows a ship which is just about to be engulfed by a huge wave (Fig. 7). In the distance is another ship in a similar plight. In the sky of the painting appears the figure of the Virgin Mary. From the inscription below, we learn that its captain, Eustachio

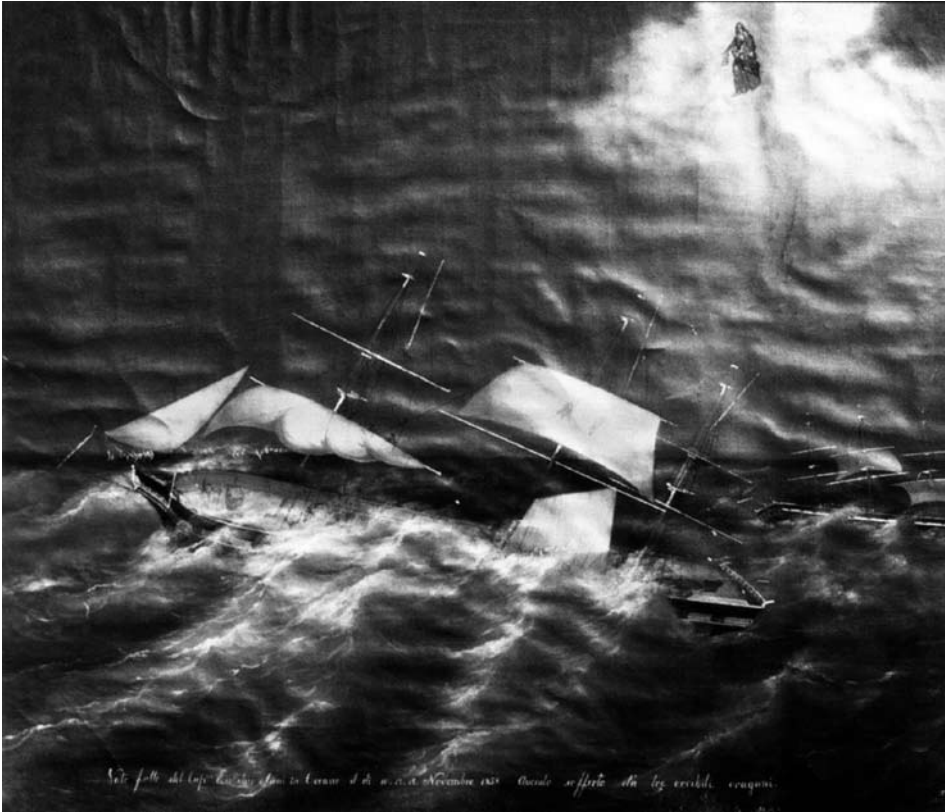


Fig. 7
Anonymous sailing ship.

Sieni, ordered this painting to be made after his ship was saved from three hurricanes in mid ocean in November 1858. The author of the painting is anonymous as is the name of the vessel³⁰. Again, the symbolical meaning of an ex-voto surpasses the need for realistic reconstruction or representation of the event. Its aim is to preserve and transmit the meaning of the event itself.

However, some customs were nearly always followed in ex-voto paintings. The votive painting usually represents the person who was blessed i.e. saved, the event and the saint who helped the person. The painting is very often followed by short writings about the event.

This painting by an anonymous author (Fig. 8), who to judge by the naïf presentation of a seaman on the ship and the figure of the Virgin Mary and child, both holding rosaries in their hands, was not an educated artist, can be taken as a typical ex-voto presenting



Fig. 8
Austrian *pileage* called *Cattone*.

all the features: the figure of a saint protector, emphasis on the scene of the sinking ship and pathos with the usage of dark colours, the people with unrecognisable faces and figures but depicted in movement which contributes to the dynamics of the event, and a written explanation of the event underneath the painting. From the inscription we learn that the ship – an Austrian *pileage* called *Cattone* under the command of its owner Giovanni Minach – was in immediate danger of sinking while sailing from Lido to Trieste against a very strong wind and mounting waves. The crew had to throw some cargo overboard in order to save their lives, and they also lost a lifeboat. The event happened on 10 January 1845. The painting was offered as a gift to the Virgin Mary and is still on the wall of the votive chapel in Trsat (Rijeka).

The presence of a protecting saint (most often the Virgin Mary) to whom prayers for salvation were dedicated is a common feature of ex-voto paintings. The meaning of this figurative presentation of a patron saint is undoubtedly to express gratitude for salvation, which is very common in popular Catholic belief³¹. Absence of a human figure as saint protector may be substituted, in more sophisticated paintings, by the appearance of a clear patch or a ray of light on a very dark stormy sky.



Fig. 9
The *Genio*.

The ex-voto painting of the sailing vessel *Genio* (Fig. 9) was painted in an artistic way, where the dramatic atmosphere is emphasised by very dark grey colours; the clear patch in the sky indicates the imaginary place from which the blessing came. This ship was saved from a storm while sailing near the Irish coast on its way from Alexandria to Cork. The grateful Captain Kuzma Randić ordered the painting on behalf of his crew who were saved in October 1867. Again we note that the symbolic meaning of an ex-voto is more important than realistic reconstruction or representation of the event³². The painting is preserved in the votive chapel of the monastery of Trsat.

A painting can become votive simply through the intention of the one who ordered it and placed it in a chapel as an offering and reminder to those who stayed at home of those who left for good. In this way the ex-voto acted as a symbolic communication between seamen and their families, as well as those who lost their lives in the depths of the sea.

This painting from the Chapel of the Virgin Mary in the fishing village of Kraj does not bear any record of the name of the ship or author and the inscription in the Croatian language at the top of the painting has faded (Fig. 10). It can only be understood that this was a ship caught in a heavy storm in the English Channel. The vessel was completely engulfed by waves, whilst a lifeboat can be seen leaving with the crew and further away can be seen a steamship which may possibly have helped in saving the crew³³.



Fig. 10
Painting from the village of Kraj.

In the composition of the picture the accent is on the details of the event. Painters often used colours to emphasise dramatic atmosphere. This was very often the case with maritime ex-voto paintings³⁴.

The following painting was made by Giovanni Petz from the town of Lovran on his own behalf and that of three survivors from the schooner *Ninfa* which was caught in a hurricane on 21 December 1855 (Fig. 11). During this event four of the people from the ship were lost in the sea. The survivors also mention their names on the painting: Captain Enrico Malconetti, clerk Giovanni Scomparini, *camarotto* Giovanni Thich and mariner Mattio Mitrovich. They also mention that one mariner died later in the hospital in Constantinople. The painting was dedicated to the Virgin Mary of Trsat to whom the mariners prayed during the drama.

AUTHENTICITY OF EX-VOTO PAINTINGS

The main intention of ex-voto paintings – to narrate dramatic events – has its full expression in representations of sea hazards. The expressive representation of a ship or castaway in a storm aims to give a vivid impression to an audience without any preconceptions³⁵. Ex-voto paintings often contain numerous visual details of the ship, position and activities of the crew and degree of damage to the ship.



Fig. 11
The Schooner *Ninfa*.

The next painting shows the sailing vessel *Spirito* (port of origin Rijeka) caught in a tempest (Fig. 12). The crew are trying to throw the cargo of wood overboard, while a wave tugs away the lifeboat from the mother ship. The author of the painting paid great attention to realistic depiction of the rough sea and stormy sky. Every part of the ship is also meticulously painted, including the movements of the crew³⁶.

Such paintings stress authenticity, and tend to be followed by a short script, usually at the bottom of the painting. This information often includes the geographical position of the ship, the name of the captain, the time and possibly the name of the saint to whom the offering was dedicated. It might include the shrine, and provide information about the origins of the crew. With their specific intention of realistically representing dramatic events, some ex-voto paintings of shipwrecks are the only preserved document of certain ships and people. It also needs to be borne in mind that, in the period before photography, painting was the only possible means of visual communication and broadcasting information. Indeed, ex-voto paintings are often the only information we have about maritime dangers, shipwrecks and accidents.



Fig. 12
The *Spirito*.



Fig. 13
The *Olga R.*

The following (Fig. 13) painting shows the *Olga R.*, which never returned from its maiden voyage to the town of Bakar, its home port. This ex-voto painting dedicated to the Virgin Mary of Trsat was ordered by its grateful captain, Juraj Mikuličić, and his crew who survived a storm on 31 October 1881. The blessing coming from the sky is represented by a clear patch of sky and specks of light falling onto the ship. The crew are barely visible at the stern of the ship.

Unlike other ex-voto paintings, those with maritime motifs do not put an individual's survival in the foreground. The accent is completely on the event; in some cases the people themselves are missing or they are presented in minimal and unrecognisable form.

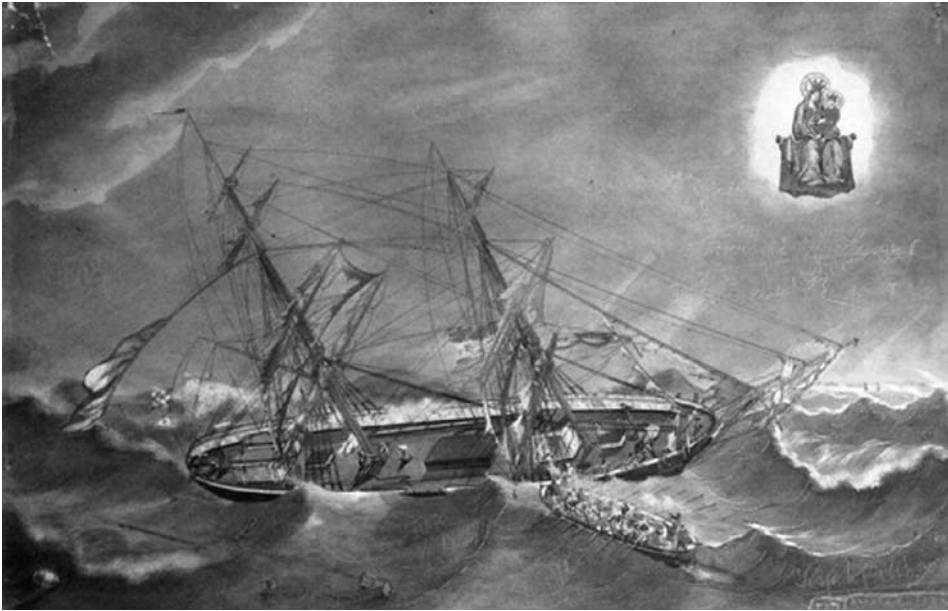


Fig. 14
The Brig *Filomena*.

In the painting above (Fig. 14) the brig *Filomena*, under the command of Captain M. Segota, is caught in a hurricane near Livorno on 23 February 1879. Thanks to the brave people of Livorno the crew were saved and in gratitude for their rescue they ordered an ex-voto painting for the Chapel of the Virgin Mary of Trsat (Rijeka).

Even when people are represented in a painting, they are just part of the whole scenery. The ship is a personification of the whole suffering crew. Here individuality is absent and the meaning is no longer private. The significance to the public of an ex-voto painting is additionally emphasised by public display in a church along with other ex-voto offerings³⁷.



Fig. 15
Chapel of the Virgin Mary in Trsat.

Above we see the ex-votos in the votive Chapel of the Virgin Mary in the Franciscan monastery of Trsat (Rijeka). Some paintings of ships can be seen upper right by the window alongside models of sailing ships, which were another type of ex-voto (Fig. 15).

There is another element to be taken into consideration and that is the way the situation is presented. As a historical source ex-voto paintings can be analysed as the representation simultaneously of survival or death and the way in which the survivors coped with the trauma of facing imminent death or maybe the loss of someone who is close to them.

One thing can be noted when analysing maritime ex-voto paintings: there is no obvious representation of death in any of the pictures reported in this chapter. In ex-voto paintings the accent is on the dramatic situation, which may have led to human casualties, but here it is the ship that personifies human beings and survives the danger. This can also be interpreted as awareness of how vulnerable and insignificant human life is when confronted with the force of nature, here shown as the unpredictable sea. From a maritime ex-voto painting we may not be able to conclude who died, or even

those who survived. It may only be an additional text that provides such information. Here again, the accent is on the situation, the transmission of the atmosphere and pathos of a horrible predicament, which without any additional information tells the viewer that human lives were or could have been lost, that those who survived saw the ‘face of death’.



Fig. 16
The Clipper *Royal Charter*.

The painting above shows a clipper sailing ship with an auxiliary steam engine, the *Royal Charter*, just before it sank in 1859 (Fig. 16). The text on the bottom of the painting is in English: “Loss of the *Royal Charter*”. The ship was beached on the coast of Wales on its way from Australia. 459 people drowned in this tragedy. In the painting people can be seen floating amid the wreckage of the ship, others still on its prow, and a lifeboat in the sea³⁸. It is interesting to mention here that the ship did not have a direct connection with the village of Kraj, but the painting of its last voyage, executed in Frankfurt am Main and set in a decorative frame, found its place in the little Chapel of the Virgin Mary in Kraj, alongside other votive paintings.

MARITIME EX-VOTOS AS A HISTORY SOURCE

Maritime ex-voto paintings have usually been studied as a specific popular or naïf form of painting, in cases where the author was anonymous and unschooled in art. Some votive paintings such as those made by the Croatian painter Baltazar Ivanković have been studied by art historians as works of art. Again, as previously mentioned, the authenticity and care for technical detail of the ship and the appended text, made ex-voto paintings an important source for the study of maritime history. This is something which can also be found in contemporary photographs of beached or wrecked sailing ships³⁹. Of course, photography shows the straight facts, the remains of a ship, something left after the real dramatic event and the emotional climax had passed – precisely the focus of the paintings. Nevertheless, votive paintings have not been studied as a history source for the perception of death, which was actually the hidden reason why the picture was created. Often facing death at sea, the seamen in these paintings placed the accent on their survival which, according to the statistics, was far from likely. Survival at sea during storms was completely out of the seamen's hands. There was little chance of finding refuge, other than prayer and a belief in a 'higher power', which comes across in the paintings. The paintings are a source for understanding people who did not leave many written words after them. It is thus a pity that so many ex-voto paintings have been lost or stolen from votive chapels on the Eastern Adriatic coast. Others which have remained in their original places have been exposed to damp and neglect as well as vandalism, without respect for the people to whom this may be the only memorial or legacy left behind.

NOTES

- ¹ D. Žitko, *Ex-voto. Votivne podobe pomorcev* [Ex-voto. Votive seamen images], Koper 1992, p. 8.
- ² For more about ex-voto painting on the Eastern Adriatic coast see A. Kisić, *Ex-voto Adriatico. Zavjetne slike hrvatskih pomoraca* [Votive paintings of Croatian mariners], Zagreb 2005. More on ex-voto paintings from the Slovenian coastland of Istria with some reproductions of the most typical paintings will be found in Žitko, *Ex-voto* cit.
- ³ The maritime ex-voto paintings of the Eastern Adriatic have been studied very poorly by Croatian and Slovenian art historians. They have been studied mostly as exhibition material and published in exhibition catalogues while the ex-votos of the other side of the Adriatic (Italy) have been more profoundly studied, for example in the work of A. Tripputi, *Ex-voto di Puglia. Cronache di vita quotidiana*, Bari 1999.
- ⁴ Ex-votos are presented as just such an important historiographical source in the book by B. Cousin, *Le Miracle et le Quotidien: Les ex-voto provençaux images d'une société*, Aix-en-Provence 1983.
- ⁵ D. Morgan, *Visual piety. A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*, Berkeley 1999, pp. 5-12. The author emphasises that religious images, which should also include ex-voto paintings, are forms of collective memory that afford the scholar primary documentation of the construction and transmission of everyday experience and a special ability to mediate the domains of imagery, language, intellect and matter.

- ⁶ For a short account of visual sources and understanding the holy and supernatural see P. Burke, *Eye-witnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*. For the purposes of this study I used a Croatian translation published in Zagreb 2003, pp. 47-59.
- ⁷ On sympathy and empathy in the visual expression of belief more will be found in D. Morgan, *Visual Piety* cit., pp. 58-60.
- ⁸ On the history of the last Northern Adriatic sailing ships see R.F. Barbalić, I. Marendić, *Onput, kad smo partili* [That time when we departed], Rijeka 2004.
- ⁹ R.F. Barbalić, *Rijeka*, Zagreb 1953, p. 106.
- ¹⁰ The painting is part of the collection of the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral, Rijeka. The text below the picture says: *Bark Francika Maria, comandato dal Capitano Antonio Segota Venezia 1862* [Barque "Francika Maria", commanded by Captain Antonio Segota Venice 1862].
- ¹¹ R.F. Barbalić, I. Jurković, *Oploviti Cape Horn* [Rounding Cape Horn], Rijeka 1975, pp. 17-46.
- ¹² Today the painting is a part of the art collection of the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral in Rijeka.
- ¹³ Burke, *Eye-witnessing* cit., p. 52, emphasised that in a culture of a limited literacy pictures are a richer evidence than any written material.
- ¹⁴ G. Henderson, K.-J. Henderson, *Unfinished Voyages. Western Australian Shipwrecks 1851-1880*, Netherlands, Western Australia 1988, pp. xiii-xviii.
- ¹⁵ Henderson, *Unfinished Voyages* cit., p. 177. The authors quote a part from the story written by Stjepo Skurla according to Miho Bačić's and Ivo Jurić's confessions: "Just over a week had passed since the natives left, when Bucich died. Baccich and Jurich realised the end was nearing – they must get food. Helping one another along they dragged themselves to their dead mate's body and began savagely to tear pieces of flesh from it, swallowing it like animals. 'You poor unfortunates, what are you doing!' gasped poor Dediol, and that was the last he spoke, possibly dying of shock as much as of starvation".
- ¹⁶ This document is preserved in the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral, Rijeka.
- ¹⁷ The painting was painted by Bazilije Bartol Ivanković in 1877.
- ¹⁸ About importance of visual sources for reconstruction of the 'history from below' see in Burke, *Eye-witnessing* cit., p. 52.
- ¹⁹ N. Mendeš, *Stari jedrenjaci* [Old sailing ships], Rijeka 2006, p. 25.
- ²⁰ The painting is part of the collection of the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral, Rijeka.
- ²¹ Barbalić, Marendić, *Onput* cit., p. 49.
- ²² *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.
- ²³ J.P. Filippini, *La pericolosità del mare e la religiosità del marinaio* [Danger of the sea and religious feelings of a seaman], in A. Cosulich, *I naufragi del '700 e del '800*, Venezia 1986, p. 122.
- ²⁴ Cosulich, *I naufragi* cit., p. 5.
- ²⁵ Morgan, *Visual Piety* cit., p. 17, the author states that the meaning and power of popular religious imagery lies in the everyday domain of visual and epistemological recipes that guide people through the day or narrow escape from crises which shape their lives.
- ²⁶ I. Rogić Nehajev, *Slike iz usporedne povijesti* [Pictures from a parallel history], in Barbalić, Marendić, *Onput* cit., pp. xii-xiii.
- ²⁷ R. Ivančević, *Leksikon ikonografije, liturgike i simbolike kršćanstva* [Lexicon of iconography, liturgy and symbols of Christianity], Zagreb 1990, p. 225.
- ²⁸ Kisić, *Ex voto* cit., p. 6.

- ²⁹ Žitko, *Ex-voto* cit., p. 6.
- ³⁰ The painting is a part of the collection of the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral.
- ³¹ Cosulich, *I naufragi* cit., p. 120.
- ³² Ivančević, *Leksikon* cit., p. 61, emphasised that if an event was comprehended as a manifestation of divine will, then only a symbolic presentation of the event would be enough to recall the feelings.
- ³³ The photograph of this painting was taken by Prof. Robert Mohović who also wrote more about this ship in the catalogue of the exhibition *Ex-voto* held in Mošćenice in 2006. I take this opportunity to thank Prof. Mohović for his help in my research.
- ³⁴ Kisić, *Ex voto* cit., pp. 6, 41.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- ³⁶ The painting forms part of the collection of the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral, Rijeka.
- ³⁷ Cosulich, *I naufragi* cit., p. 120.
- ³⁸ R. Mohović, *Ex-voto*, catalogue of the exhibition, Mošćenice 2006, p. 16.
- ³⁹ Cosulich mentioned that a large number of photographs of shipwrecks can be found in the National Maritime Museum of Greenwich (London). He also published some of them in his book *I Naufragi* cit., pp. 44, 49, 61-63, 65-66, 69-70, 73.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barbalić R.F., *Rijeka*, Zagreb 1953.
- Id., Jurković I., *Oploviti Cape Horn* [Rounding Cape Horn], Rijeka 1975.
- Id., Marendić I., *Onput, kad smo partili* [That time when we departed], Rijeka 2004.
- Burke P., *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, Zagreb 2003.
- Cosulich A., *I naufragi del '700 e del '800* [Shipwrecks of the 18th and 19th centuries], Venice 1986.
- Cousin B., *Le Miracle et le Quotidien: Les ex-voto provençaux: images d'une société*, Aix-en-Provence 1983.
- Filippini J.P., *La pericolosità del mare e la religiosità del marinaio* [Dangerousness of the sea and religiosity of seamen], in Cosulich A., *I naufragi del '700 e del '800* [Shipwrecks of the 18th and 19th centuries], Venice 1986.
- Henderson G., Henderson K.-J., *Unfinished Voyages. Western Australian Shipwrecks 1851-1880*, Nedlands, Western Australia 1988.
- Ivančević R., *Leksikon ikonografije, liturgike i simbolike kršćanstva* [Lexicon of iconography, liturgy and symbols of Christianity], Zagreb 1990.
- Kisić A., *Ex-voto Adriatico. Zavjetne slike hrvatskih pomoraca* [Votive paintings of Croatian mariners], Zagreb 2005.
- Mendeš N., *Stari jedrenjaci* [Old sailing ships], Rijeka 2006.
- Mohović R., *Ex-voto*. Catalogue of the exhibition, Mošćenice 2006.
- Morgan D., *Visual piety. A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*, Berkeley 1999.
- Rogić Nehajev I., *Slike iz usporedne povijesti* [Pictures from a parallel history], in Barbalić R.F., Marendić I., *Onput, kad smo partili* [That time when we departed], Rijeka 2004.
- Tripputi A., *Ex-voto di Puglia. Cronache di vita quotidiana*, Bari 1999.
- Žitko D., *Ex-voto. Votivne podobe pomorcev* [Ex-voto. Votive seamen images], Koper 1992.