

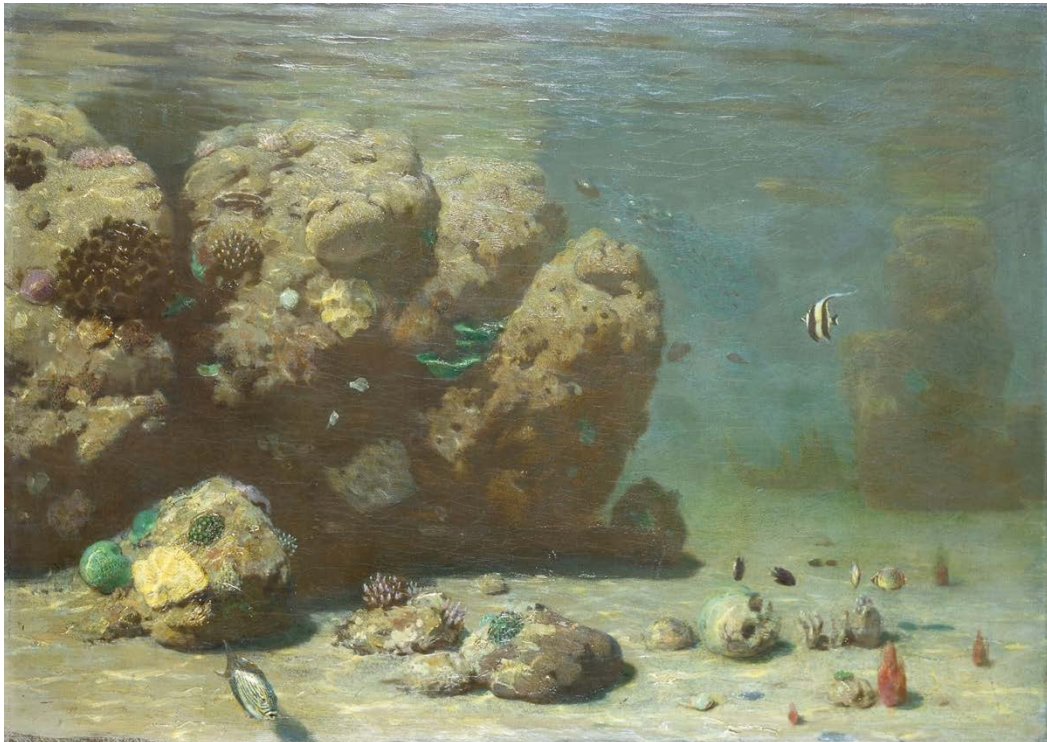


## The life and work of the Austrian underwater-painter & explorer, Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez (1838-1926)

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Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez (1838-1926) gained local credit for his underwater-oil painting held in the Natural History Museum Vienna (hereafter NHM Vienna) [5]. This painting (figure 1) is a true monument to the history of science and art – as it is the first realistic underwater landscape in the world to be based on sketches taken in a diving bell in the year 1864/65 in Ceylon (today Sri Lanka).



**Figure 1.** *Underwater-Landscape*, oil on canvas, Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez, dim.unframed: ca. 68 × 49 cm, created before 1889, NHM Vienna, photo: A. Schumacher.

Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez was born on June 7<sup>th</sup> 1838 in Hietzing (today part of Vienna). His father Karl von Ransonnet-Villez (1802-1892) was Vice-President of the Supreme Audit Control Authority in Vienna.



Already at an early age he showed artistic talent, which was generously encouraged by his parents. At the age of 12 (1849) he began training at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and he remained faithful to his artistic studies throughout his life. Apart from his interest in art he was also fascinated by nature, especially by the sea.

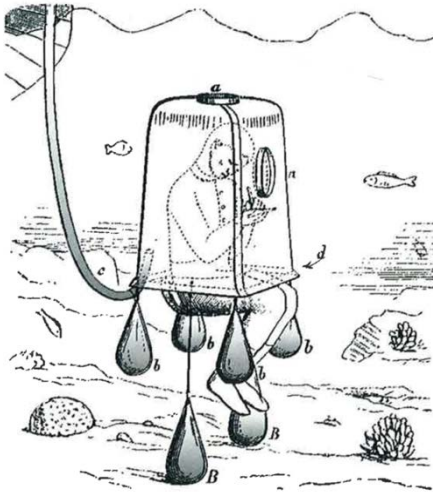
In 1855 he began studying law in order to become an official in the Imperial Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This position offered him the possibility to travel and to maintain his interests in nature and art.



**Figure 2.** Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez: self-portrait, Archives, NHM Vienna, photo: A. Schumacher.

In 1862 Ransonnet travelled to Palestine, Upper Egypt and Arabia, wishing to explore the Red Sea. In the small coastal village Tor (today El Tor) he collected corals and other sea animals. On this journey he sketched the first underwater landscapes sitting in a boat and observing the underwater world through the water surface. The specimens he collected he donated to the NHM Vienna [3]. Back in Vienna he published a description of this journey: *Reise von Kairo nach Tor zu den Korallenbänken des Rothen Meeres* (1863) which included five lithographic illustrations [7]. Two of them are underwater scenes showing the coral reefs of the Red Sea.

Ransonnet was not completely satisfied with these images. Only two years later 1864 he travelled to Ceylon (today: Sri Lanka) and East-India to study the underwater world more closely. He had a diving bell constructed according to his own design. Ransonnet described the design and trial of the diving bell in his book *Sketches of Ceylon* elaborately figure 3) [8, p. 13-14].



**Figure 3.** Eugen von Ransonnet: the diving bell, illustration from: *Ceylon. Skizzen seiner Bewohner, seines Thier- und Pflanzenlebens und Untersuchungen des Meeresgrundes nahe der Küste*, Braunschweig, 1868; libraries, NHM Vienna.

On November 25<sup>th</sup> 1864 he hired a boat with six helpers and sailed to a small bay close to Galle (formerly Point de Galle), in the south of the island. A hose connected to an air pump on the boat was inserted and then the whole apparatus was brought into deep water. Ransonnet dived from the boat into the bell: “...a strong header from the edge of the heavy boat brought me into the depth. Immediately I found myself in the diving bell; cautiously I slid inside and started breathing in the confined space, in which all the sounds had a benumbing echo between the iron walls...” [8, p. 13-14]

In the bell Ransonnet was able to observe the underwater world and to take sketches on the spot. He was truly fascinated by what he saw: “Only a few feet in front of me I saw a wonderful two and a half feet high group of corals [...] In the background of the scenery expanded a sandy plain, which glinted in clear emerald green through the crystal bright water. In the distance a rock jutted out to the surface, but further away everything was blurred in a maroon shade. Bit by bit the fishes – the butterflies of the sea – which first kept away began to swarm around me, who could describe their enchanting colours, when the glow of the waves swept along their fluorescent scales.” [8, p. 132]

Ransonnet “used a greenish-coloured varnished paper” that allowed him to draw on it with a soft pencil even when wet. The sketch then was put into a tin box and dived out of the bell; a second layer of varnish kept it from being blurred and finally it was coloured with transparent oil paint. [8, 133 footnote].

For a long time, it was assumed that these sketches were lost [9, 6, p. 4-5]. But as research [4] shows two pictures held in the Artistic Collections of the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco, previously filed as ‘aquarelles’, are the ‘lost’ original pencil and oil-sketches, which Ransonnet made in his diving bell.

It was Ransonnet’s intention to be as realistic as possible. But at the same time he tried to capture the romantic atmosphere underwater. The Viennese oil painting (figure 1) is probably the best prove of this. This painting based on the sketches made in Ceylon is surely the most mature masterpiece of Ransonnet’s underwater oeuvre. Ransonnet donated it to the newly built NHM Vienna, where it was on display together with the collection of corals [2, p. 208 f.].





Even for Ransonnet's sporting spirit the diving-bell experiments were too complex and too expensive to carry on. Looking for a new technique he constructed a mirror-apparatus or periscope. Unfortunately, there are no detailed descriptions and sketches on this device but a possible predecessor could be David Brewster's underwater telescope, which he published in 1813 [1, p. 427]. Ransonnet's later underwater pictures of the Adriatic Sea were all based on observations through this simple but ingenious device.

After World War I in 1921 Ransonnet sold 17 pictures to the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco. He wanted his pictures exhibited in places dedicated to the exploration of the underwater world. In Monaco they were presented in the museum's conference room close to the ones by his successor, the underwater painter, Zarah H. Pritchard [10].



**Figure 4.** *Two groups of Madrepores on the coast of Ceylon near Point de Galle drawn in a diving bell. February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1865. Oil on paper. 18 x 24 cm. © Musée océanographique de Monaco.*



**Figure 5.** Underwater motif at the entrance to the Sea Bear Cave. (Island of Busi, Dalmatia near Lissa. c. 1884, Watercolour, 13 x 19,5 cm. © Musée océanographique de Monaco.

Ransonnet spent his old age in his villa in a small village named Nussdorf am Attersee in Upper Austria, where he died in 1926.

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