

# VIEW OF THE PORT OF BARCELONA



Painted by Francesc Soler i Rovirosa from Barceloneta in 1889

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AUTUMN 2025

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**FOTO:** MMB Fund. Francesc Soler i Rovirosa.

This large painting, which portrays the Barcelona waterfront with great precision, is a remarkable work from the art collection of the Barcelona Maritime Museum.

This work allows the identification of numerous architectural elements of the city and the port, but also brings to the observer different types of boats, sailors at work and scenes of the city's daily life. Thanks to its realism and meticulousness of detail, it has great value as a graphic representation of the city's maritime history at the end of the 19th century.



View of the port of Barcelona from the Barceloneta. 1889. Author: Francesc Soler i Rovirosa. Photo: MMB Collection

Before painting this scene in tempera on a cotton canvas over 8 meters long, the renowned painter and set designer Francesc Soler i Rovirosa made the sketches and color tests from the roof of a building, now gone,

which was located on the corner of the current Passeig de Borbó and Carrer de Ginebra. From the height of a fourth floor in Barceloneta he created this panoramic view of the port area and the city.

## When and why was it painted?

On the ground floor of the corner of Passeig de Gràcia with Carrer de Casp, where the Casa Antoni Rocamora now stands, in 1882 Ignasi Elias commissioned the architect Salvador Viñals to build the Cafè Novedades. It was a spacious premises of more than 1,500 m<sup>2</sup>, with 160 coffee tables and 23 billiard tables. The creation of this portrait of Barcelona is related to the renovation in which Francesc Soler Rovirosa participated, and to the reopening that was held on 31 October 1889, a social event announced days earlier in the Barcelona newspapers and about which several chronicles were subsequently written. One of them referred to this painting and its author: "On the front there is a view of Barcelona with its port, of large dimensions, and in the other paintings we remember, among other views, the Cathedrals of Burgos, León and Seville, the Alhambra of Granada, the Escorial, the Royal Palace of Madrid, Toledo and San Sebastián (...). This restoration has been directed by the architect Don Salvador Viñals and the painter Francisco Soler y Rovirosa. All the decorations and paintings belong to Señor Soler". Another chronicle mentioned the thirteen paintings painted on glue that were located on the upper part of the walls. Unfortunately, we do not have any photographs of this painting inside the café nor any plans of the Cafè Novedades building to know the dimensions and shape of the wall where it was located.

In the catalogue written by Rossend Casanova, for the exhibition "Portrait of Maritime Barcelona. A vision of Francesc Soler i Rovirosa", which was organised by the MMB in 2009, there is a very detailed and documented description of the main painted elements that can be identified.

In this [catalog](#) Rossend Casanova locates and describes up to thirty architectural elements of Barcelona.

## The author

Francesc Soler i Rovirosa (Barcelona, 1836-1900) is considered one of the innovators of Catalan scenography, especially for his technical contributions and creative solutions. He developed a new conception of scenic space, his perspective abandoned rigidity and became atmospheric, while maintaining the realistic tradition in the formal sphere.

At a young age, while studying drawing and painting, first at the Lorenzo Ferris Academy and then at the Llotja, he began training as a set designer with Mariano Carreras in the Odeon Theatre workshop. He also attended Josep Planella's workshop at the Teatre Principal; Fèlix Cagé's at the Liceu, and Lluís Rigalt's at the Principal de Gràcia. At the age of eighteen he began to paint his first sets.

In 1856 he continued his training by learning and working in France, Belgium and England. In Paris he delved into the possibilities of French stage design. There he met the great European stage designers of the time, and soon became the head of the layout and perspective section of Cambon's workshop, and head of Thierry's workshop. At the age of thirty-three, when he returned to Barcelona, his great specialty was large-scale stage shows, stage production, costumes and machinery for magic comedies and large-scale shows. He obtained great recognition both in artistic conception and in technical resolution. The success achieved by the perfection and spectacularity of his work led him to tour Havana and New York in 1880. Upon his return, he was the one who trained the main stage designers of the following generation.

He worked on other commissions other than stage design and was artistic advisor to the Universal Exhibition of Barcelona in 1888. He also worked as a decorator for establishments, among which we would

like to highlight the Cafè Novedades (1889), where we find the origin of this painting that is currently part of the MMB collections.

## Journey to the MMB

In 1914 the Cafè Novedades was demolished, but his family kept this painting. Years later his daughter donated it, along with other works by her father, to the Institut del Teatre.

As recorded in the Maritime Museum's entry register, on October 10, 1941, from the Theatre Institute, an 8.22 x 2.17 m canvas described as a reproduction of a view of the port of Barcelona and attributed to Francesc Soler i Rovirosa was deposited at the Museum.

The fact that it is described as a canvas rather than a painting and its dimensions suggest that it arrived rolled up, as it had probably been preserved in recent years. We do not know in what conditions of conservation the painting arrived at the Museum, as no written documentation has been found of its state of conservation or of restorations prior to 2006. The oldest photograph in the Museum's archive is a glass plate from around 1940 where the sky and the entire painting have more brightness.



Gelatin and silver bromide negative on glass of the painting View of the Port of Barcelona, dated around 1940. Photo: MMB Collection.

### Its state of conservation in 2006

In 2006 this painting was stored in the Museum's reserve room. The canvas was mounted on a rigid support

formed by three large wooden panels joined together, framed within a large custom-made frame, with two legs that allowed the painting to be exhibited free from the walls. On the back of the two side edges, two strips of the painted canvas (8 and 10 cm) could be seen that when constructing the wooden support it had been decided to hide by folding it backwards. At that time, and currently, the visible part of the work measures 2.18 x 7.30 m.

Its state of conservation was quite poor: it had many patches of paint in danger of falling off, especially in the lower section; in other areas part of the paint had been lost a long time ago, and it was evident that very different materials had been added to the original paint.

An initial emergency intervention was carried out to stop the painting from falling off. But to stop its deterioration it was necessary to find the reason that was causing it. The need to restore this spectacular view of Barcelona was immediately assessed, with the main objective of eliminating the materials that were causing the painting to lift, and then recovering, as far as possible, its original appearance to display it in the Museum.

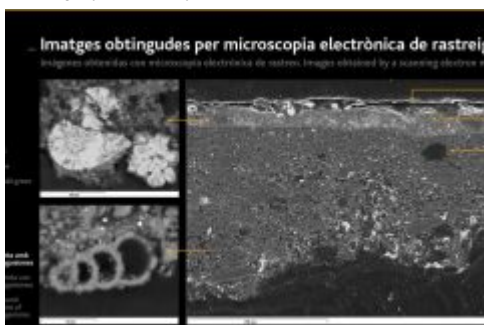
Given its size, a space was set up within the Museum rooms where visitors could see the restoration live. To facilitate understanding of the work being done, panels were placed with information about the work and the author, and others with images and texts explaining the different phases of the restoration process, as well as the analyses and studies that were being carried out.



Image of the detail of the lifting and detachment of the paint. Photo: MMB.



Space set up for restoration at the Museum, with explanatory panels. Photo: MMB.



Analyses obtained with scanning electron microscopy. Photo: MMB.

## Studies prior to restoration

This work was created as a decorative element using a technique as delicate as tempera, a paint that is easily soluble in water, without any layer of varnish or protective material, as was used for stage sets. Like many other heritage assets that have survived to this day, this painting had undergone transformations that had modified both its appearance and the structure of the materials. For this reason, before starting the restoration, it was necessary to identify which materials Soler Rovirosa had used, and which materials had been added after its creation. It was also important to know what deterioration was hidden by the extensive repainting that had been carried out in interventions subsequent to its creation.

The previous studies had to give us enough information to know what the state of conservation of the original painting was and what restoration treatments should be carried out.

The physicochemical analyses of eight paint samples from significant points in the work, carried out by the Group for the Analysis of Cultural Heritage Materials of the Department of Chemical Engineering, of the Vilanova i la Geltrú Polytechnic School of Engineering, of the Polytechnic University of Catalonia, confirmed the existence of a highly absorbent preparation layer of calcium carbonate that presented different chromatic tones depending on the location of the samples (quartz particles, red cinnabar particles and green copper arsenite particles). In the original painting, common pigments in the 19th century were identified (emerald green, lead white, coal black, lead yellow, Prussian blue, cinnabar red, silicates and iron oxides) and the original animal glue binder. Pigments that had been discovered and used around 1920 (titanium white and cobalt blue) were identified in the overlaid paints, and alkyd and acrylic resins as binders that corresponded to added layers of paint. All samples confirmed the presence of beeswax, which in many cases had penetrated to the deepest layers.

Infrared reflectography, based on the optical properties of materials exposed to infrared radiation that allows the study of the underlying strata of the pictorial layers, carried out by the Painting Department of the Faculty of Fine Arts of Barcelona, allowed us to appreciate how Soler i Rovirosa combined transparencies and thicknesses, see the drawing lines and locate the grid that he used to transfer the sketches to the large canvas.

Before the restoration, the entire surface of the work was photographed. Throughout the entire process, numerous details were observed and photographed with different types of lighting: the grazing light that allowed the irregularities, cracks and paint losses to be clearly differentiated, as well as the added stuccos, and the ultraviolet spectrum light that allowed the additions, repaints and varnishes to be distinguished; therefore, it facilitated the location of non-original materials.



The same scene photographed with grazing light and ultraviolet light.

Photo: MMB.



The same scene photographed with grazing light and ultraviolet light.

Photo: MMB.