

Art & Science, Tradition & Modernity on the French Riviera: A Special Issue on the Occasion of the United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC) in Nice

Art & Science, Tradition & Modernité sur la Côte d’Azur : Numéro spécial à l’occasion de la Conférence des Nations Unies sur l’Océan (UNOC)

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ABSTRACT. This special issue highlights the convergence of art and science on the French Riviera in celebration of the 3rd United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC) and the One Ocean Science Congress (OOSC) hosted in Nice in June 2025. It explores the region’s rich legacy of marine research and naturalist traditions alongside contemporary cultural initiatives such as the Biennale des Arts et de l’Océan. The issue pays tribute to historical figures, pioneering scientists, and modern researchers whose work continues to shape our understanding of marine life and ocean sustainability.

RÉSUMÉ. Ce numéro spécial met en lumière la rencontre entre l’art et la science sur la Côte d’Azur, à l’occasion de la 3e Conférence des Nations Unies sur l’Océan (UNOC) et du Congrès One Ocean Science (OOSC), organisés à Nice en juin 2025. Il retrace la riche tradition naturaliste et scientifique de la région tout en valorisant les initiatives culturelles contemporaines comme la Biennale des Arts et de l’Océan. Ce dossier rend hommage aux figures historiques, aux pionniers de la biologie marine et aux chercheurs d’aujourd’hui qui contribuent à une meilleure compréhension et préservation des océans.

KEYWORDS. Nice, ocean, science, art, marine, UNOC, OOSC.

MOTS-CLÉS. Nice, océan, science, art, marine, UNOC, OOSC.

In June 2025, the city of Nice will proudly host two major international events: the 3rd United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC) and the One Ocean Science Congress (OOSC). These gatherings will unite thousands of researchers, environmental advocates, and policymakers dedicated to addressing the degradation of ocean health and the alarming loss of marine biodiversity. Jean-Pierre Gattuso and François Houllier highlight the global significance of these events, particularly in the context of climate change, biodiversity conservation, and urgent societal challenges. Their shared vision culminates in the *Nice Ocean Action Plan*, an ambitious framework designed to promote a healthy, resilient ocean for future generations (1).

To celebrate this pivotal moment, the city of Nice has chosen an oceanic theme for its 2025 cultural program (2). The Biennale des Arts et de l’Océan, titled *La Mer Autour de Nous*—inspired by Rachel Carson’s influential book *The Sea Around Us*—will feature 11 exhibitions across 9 institutions, along with 6 site-specific art installations throughout the city. One highlight is *Becoming Ocean*, a contemporary art exhibition at Villa Arson, presented within the broader context of artist residencies, as described by Myriam Thomas of the Tara Oceans Foundation (3).

Nestled between Alpine peaks and the azure Mediterranean, the French Riviera has long been admired for its dramatic natural beauty. At the turn of the 19th century, writer and illustrator Albanis Beaumont helped define this picturesque image through detailed travel and art books. His evocative engravings and writings drew the attention of the British aristocracy, contributing to the Riviera’s

emergence as a sought-after winter destination. John Dolan revisits Beaumont's life and legacy in this issue (5).

Nice also has a deep-rooted naturalist tradition, closely linked to the region's rich biodiversity. In the early 1800s, pharmacist-naturalists such as Antoine Risso and Jean Baptiste V  rany conducted extensive studies of local marine and terrestrial species, aided by fishermen and local farmers. Their pioneering efforts included some of the first scientific and artistic representations of marine organisms. In 1810, zoologist Fran  ois P  ron and his friend, the renowned artist Charles-Alexandre Lesueur visited Nice to document pelagic species, a topic explored in Christian Sardet's article (6).

By the mid-19th century, supported by V  rany, distinguished German and Swiss biologists such as Johannes M  ller, Carl Vogt, and the young Ernst Haeckel came to Nice and Villefranche-sur-Mer to study pelagic marine life. Their research flourished amid the revolutionary scientific atmosphere of Darwin's theory of evolution and the newly emerging cell theory of Schleiden and Schwann. Meanwhile, Jean-Baptiste V  rany and Jean-Baptiste Barla — assisted by the talented local painter Vincent Fossat—produced exquisite painted collections of fish and fungi, still preserved today as exsiccata and molds at the Natural History Museum of Nice (6).

This legacy of scientific and artistic exploration continues today, especially at the Villefranche-sur-Mer marine station, founded in the 1880s by pioneering biologists Hermann Fol — the discoverer of fertilization — and Jules Barrois (6). In the late 19th and early 20th century, Russian scientists took control of the station. They were originally attracted by the presence of the Russian Tsar's family and aristocracy wintering in Nice and the Russian marine's frequent presence in the plankton-rich bay of Villefranche.

Today, the *Institut de la Mer de Villefranche* (IMEV), under the joint direction of Sorbonne University and the French CNRS, upholds this heritage. World-renowned researchers and students work collaboratively to deepen our understanding of marine organisms, planktonic ecosystems, and oceanic processes, drawing continuous inspiration from the scientific pioneers who came before them (7). Finally, Jean-Eric Aubert traces the history of the Universit   Internationale de la Mer (IUM) a local institution created by his father raised awareness about marine and maritime issues among generations of local and foreign students.

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