

An Opulent Theatre in the Middle of the Amazon Rainforest: A Plant's Gift

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Abstract: The rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis* Müll. Arg.) which yields rubber latex is a native of the Amazon forest. In the late 1800s, rubber was in great demand due to industrial revolution and the entire Europe depended on rubber supply from the state of Amazonas, Brazil. European business people in Manaus city located in the middle of the Amazon forest became very rich by exporting the rubber latex obtained from rubber trees growing widely in the rain forest. A reflection of their hedonistic life is the Amazon Theatre built in the middle of the Amazon forest by spending an astronomical amount of money even by today's standards. Despite the crash of the rubber boom due to an act of biopiracy, the Amazon Theatre stands even today and is a main tourist attraction.

Keywords: Rubber tree, Manaus, Henry Wickham, *Pseudocercospora ulei*, South American leaf blight

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Introduction

Manaus, the capital of the state of Amazonas of Brazil is situated near the confluence of the Negro and Solimões rivers. The water of River Negro (Guainía) which starts from Colombia is water is black in colour as it passes through dense forests and collects humic acid resulting from decomposition of phenol-containing vegetation. The Solimões flowing from the Brazilian-Peruvian border is muddy with brown coloured water. The two rivers meet near Manaus to form the huge Amazon river. However, the dark and light brown coloured waters of the two rivers do not mix for nearly 60 km from the point where they meet due their difference in temperature, speed, and density (NASA, 2012). Called the 'meeting of waters' (Encontro das Águas), this is a major tourist attraction in Manus (NASA, 1012) (**Fig. 1**).

Although located in the middle of the dense forest of Amazon, Manaus became a very wealthy city in late 1890s owing to its export of rubber to Europe and America. The need for rubber between 1870 and 1910 in Europe and America for manufacturing bicycles and automobiles tyres, steam engine gaskets, belts for motors, and rain coats reached a peak and the annual requirement of rubber was as high as nearly 40,000 tons. As rubber trees were present only in the Amazon forest during this time Manaus became the main city of rubber export. This was because Manaus is located near the joining of the tributaries Negro and Solimões of the Amazon River making it convenient for the sailing of

large ships and it levied a lower export tax. In 1909 alone, rubber equivalent to today's value of more than 2 billion US \$ was exported from the Amazonas (Barham and Coomes, 1996). This rubber boom made the Europeans settled in Manaus who were exporting rubber very rich (Furneaux, 1969). The extraordinary wealth accrued by the European rubber barons of Manaus turned it in to the most extravagant city in the world. The rubber barons enslaved the native people to collect rubber latex from the forest. The slaves lived under miserable conditions and were brutally punished or killed when they failed to get the latex from the forest. (Suryanarayanan and Azevedo, 2023). The rubber barons led a hedonistic life and owned luxurious yachts and raised lions as pets. They imported food from Europe and sent their laundry to Paris. Manaus was electrified even before many European cities and was leading the world in the purchase of diamonds. It was called the 'Paris of the Tropics' in the late 19th Century. The city vied with any European city in having excellent waterworks, electricity, and telephone services; many foreign products including Smith & Wesson revolvers, Victor gramophones, Omega watches, Deutz cars, Underwood typewrites were available (Burns, 1965) and the city had the 'gay sprit of Parisian life' (Associação Commercial do Amazonas, 1912).

The hallmark of this luxurious life is the Amazon Theatre (Teatro Amazonas) built in Manaus city 129 years back. Designed in neoclassical style by engineers from Lisbon, its construction was initiated by Governor Ribeiro in 1884 under the Italian architect Celestial S. Sacardim. He designed the theater inspired by the famous Palais Garnier in Paris and took 15 years to complete it. The theatre is 92 m tall with a dome covered with 36,000 tiles obtained from Alsace, France and resembles the national flag of Brazil (**Fig. 2**). The rich interior is lined with gold leaf and red velvet and murals of European gods and goddesses. Italian Carrarra marble tiles were imported for building the stairs and pillars; steel walls and gates were obtained from England and the glass used were from Bohemia. Louis XV style furniture were imported from Paris and installed. One hundred and ninety-eight crystal chandeliers with 1,630 tulip-shaped glass shades from Italy adorned the ceiling of the theatre (**Fig. 3**). Large gilded mirrors reflect the brilliance of the chandeliers. The panels on the ceiling of the horseshoe shaped auditorium and of the audience chamber were painted by the Italian artist Domenico de Angelis the Younger (1735-1804) who was trained by the famous Marco Benefial (**Fig. 4**). Stucco work was employed to create a marble like finish of the balustrades and pillars. There were 700 chairs on the ground floor, 12 chairs in the official chambers and 5 seats in each of the 90 private chambers on the three balconies. The ballroom floor was covered with 12,000 wood panels. Hollow vibrating columns made of Scottish iron were placed strategically to enhance the acoustics of the hall. The orchestra pit is spacious enough to accommodate sixty musicians. The hall with 700 seats was decorated with ornate panels on the ceiling painted by de Angelis. The art work on the inside of the theatre was overseen by the Brazilian painter and sculptor Crispim do Amaral (1858–1911). He painted a curtain in the theater depicting the 'The Meeting of the Waters'. The main road in front of the theatre was lined with rubber to reduce the sound of traffic. The theatre costing about 2 million dollars, a huge sum for that time, took 12 years to complete and was inaugurated on 31 December, 1896 and the first performance in it was by Enrico Caruso on January 7, 1897. The polished floor was laid with 12,000 pieces of wood which fitted together without the aid of a nail or glue (**Fig. 5**).

All this hedonism due to the endemic occurrence of just one plant – the rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*, Euphorbiaceae) - came to an end due to an act of biopiracy. Henry Wickham, an English adventurer stole some rubber seeds from the Amazon to England which were used by the British to grow rubber plantations in their erstwhile colonies - Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Malaya (Malaysia)



Figure 1: The meeting of River Negro and Solimões (photo by the author)



Figure 2: The Amazon Theatre with its cupola arranged with tiles resembling the national flag of Brazil (photo by the author)



Figure 3: A chandelier in the theatre (photo by the author)



Figure 4: The ornate auditorium (photo by the author)



Figure 5: The polished wooden floor based on French style (photo by the author)

(Suryanarayanan and Azevedo, 2023). The rubber tree could not be cultivated to form plantations in Brazil due to a devastating disease called South American Leaf Blight caused by the fungal pathogen *Pseudocercospora ulei* (Ascomycota: Capnodiales: Mycosphaerellaceae) (Furtado et al., 2019); however, it was successfully raised as plantations in British colonies. Within a few years, more than 90% of the global demand for rubber was met by rubber exported from these colonies (Jackson,

2008). This led to the collapse of the rubber monopoly of Brazil in 1914 (Lawrence, 1931) and ended totally by 1940 leading to sudden decline of Manaus's affluence. In 1911 Amazonas lost its status as the world's sole rubber producer and supplied only 11.6% of world production which declined to 9.9% in 1912. In 1913, the governor Jonathas Pedrosa stated "I am sorry to say that this percentage will progressively diminish as oriental production expands." (Mesquita, 2010). Then the opera house closed down and there was not a single performance in it for 90 years (<https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/teatro-amazonas-manaus>). The expensive theater right in the middle of the dense tropical forest representing the rich life of the rubber barons of the Amazon is well preserved and is a major tourist attraction even today.

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