

The Trans-Siberian Express at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1900

Panorama Transsibérien



In 1890 the Russian tsar decided to build a railway connecting Moscow with Vladivostok. The world's longest railway was not finished until 1916. At the 1900 Paris world's fair Russia and the Wagons-Lits sleeping car company presented the Trans-Siberian Express. Visitors could experience the luxury on board in real railway carriages.

Two different moving panoramas – a popular display technique of the 1900s– provided an impression of the journey through the Urals, Siberia and Manchuria. One of them was more an attraction than a work of art. The other panorama formed the longest painting in the world.



The Russian Asia Pavilion faced the Eiffel Tower on the other bank of the Seine river.

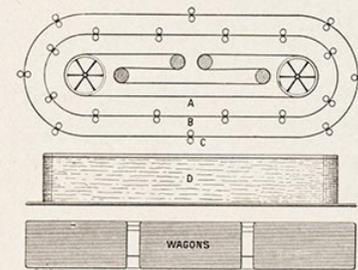
Russia had good relationships with France and was represented in several places at the expo, including a locomotive display in the railway pavilion.

Exposition Universelle

The Paris Exposition of 1900 attracted 50 million visitors. Inventions such as talking pictures and the escalator were presented. Art Nouveau was the dominant art style and the Grand Palais the largest exhibition space. Besides the national pavilions there was an Exposition Coloniale near the Trocadéro Palace.

Russia had a Kremlin-like *Pavillon de l'Asie russe et de la Sibérie* built by Roman Melzer (1860-1943), who later became the Tsar's court architect. Remarkably, the building contained two panoramas on the same theme. Besides the spectacular *Panorama Transsibérien* there was the refined *Great Siberian Railway Panorama*.





MÉCANISME DU TRANSIBÉRIEN
 A, toile du fond, où est peint le paysage et qui occupe toute la hauteur du bâtiment; elle se déplace à raison de 5 mètres à la minute; B et C, toiles plus basses, fixées seulement par un bas et qui marchent, la première, à raison de 40 mètres à la minute, la seconde, de 120 mètres à la minute; D, large courtois sans fin, horizontale, représentant le ballast; vitesse 300 mètres à la minute. Le voyageur placé dans le wagon a la sensation que c'est lui qui marche et que les différents plans du paysage sont immobiles.

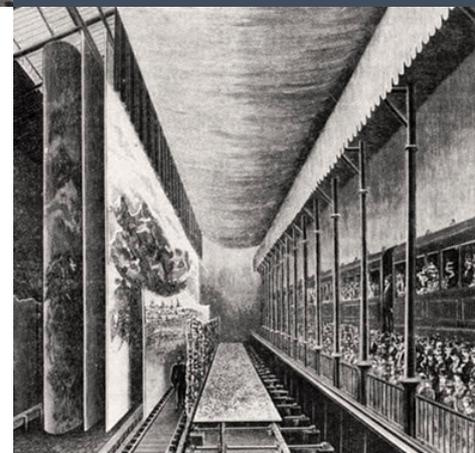
Between a slowly rotating backdrop and a fast 'conveyor belt' with sand and stones two landscape paintings were moving at different speed, creating a parallax effect.

Offering visitors a comprehensive experience, the Panorama Transsibérien included Russian and Chinese 'station restaurants'!

Panorama Transsibérien

The large panorama, in a separate wing of the pavilion, was a Wagons-Lits publicity stunt. Behind the windows of four real carriages an ingenious mechanism provided the illusion of a moving train. The system was conceived by architect Georges Chedanne, who also built the Elysée Palace Hotel for Wagons-Lits.

The scene painters Jambon and Bailley made the paintings of Siberian landscapes, Lake Baikal and the Great Wall. These paintings have not been preserved and probably had less artistic and documentary value than the other panorama.

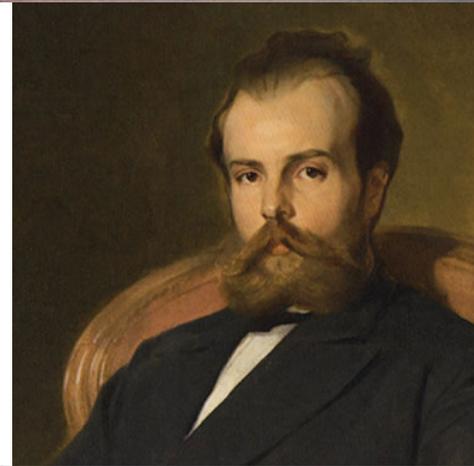




The Great Siberian Railway Panorama

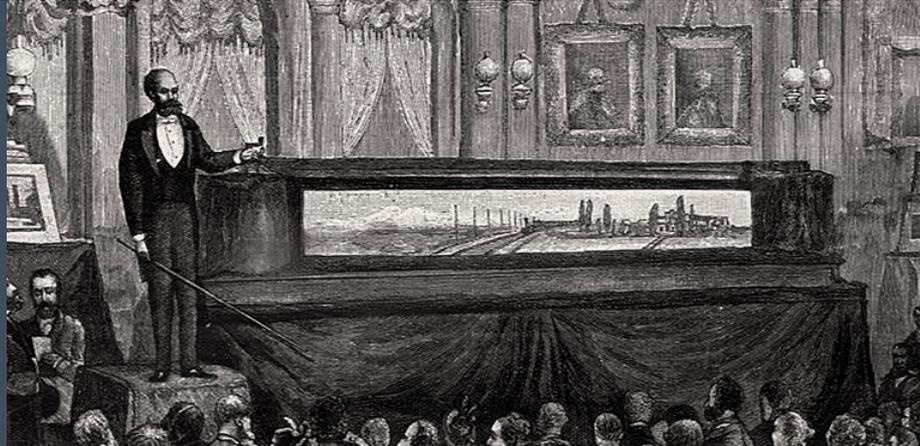
The second moving panorama seemed much more modest at first sight. It was only half a meter high, displayed in a cabinet a few meters wide. It was more detailed though and much longer. The panorama compressed the 10,000 kilometer journey in a whopping one kilometer of canvas, divided over nine rolls.

Its watercolor painter was Pavel Piasetsky. He was commissioned by the Trans-Siberian railway management in 1894 and worked on the project for years. After a dispute over the fee it was Tsar Nicholas II who paid the artist. The Tsar also ruled that the panorama would be displayed in Paris in 1900.



Despite its modest appearance Piasetsky's panorama gained the most appreciation. The expo jury awarded it a gold medal and the painter received the order of the Légion d'honneur.

Moving panoramas were in vogue around 1900. Several more were on display, including the Cinéorama and Mareorama.



Pavel Yakovlevich Piasetsky (1843-1919) was a Russian doctor, traveler, artist and writer. In 1874 he traveled with an expedition to China as a doctor and artist. On this occasion he created his first panoramic painting, a dozen meters long. Later on he captured the Tsar's coronation in a panorama.



Trans-Siberian Express

The carriages of the Trans-Siberian Express shown in Paris were more spacious and luxurious than other Wagons-Lits cars, including those of the Orient-Express. The extra space was possible thanks to the broad gauge used in Russia. The interior style was influenced by the tsars' taste.

Wagons-Lits had been operating the Nord Express to St. Petersburg and Moscow for several years. The connecting Trans-Siberian Express had been launched recently, but was yet to reach its final destination. Russia was spending money on the luxury train service in pursuit of a good image in the West and colonial ambitions in the East.

The most luxurious carriage no. 725 had an interior in Louis XV style, lined with morocco leather.

This carriage created a slightly incorrect impression of the train's luxury, as it was rented out to private parties only, such as one time the American Vanderbilt family.



Salon car no. 724, decorated in the style of Louis XVI, was upholstered with rose and blue silk. The salon was equipped with armchairs, sofas and a piano.





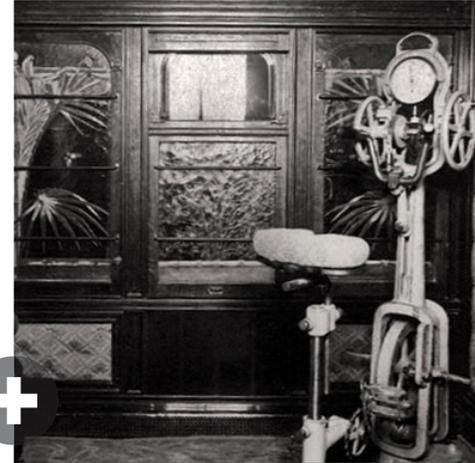
Parlor cars

For the depiction of the train's interiors Piasesky applied a special 'folded out' perspective. He also blended several rooms seamlessly together.

The pictured bathroom was located in one of the parlor cars. Passengers had a washbowl in their own sleeping compartment, but had to share one bath.



One of the carriages, which can be seen on the panorama, was equipped with a library containing a selection of some 100 books in four languages.



There was also a gym and a hairdressing saloon on board, hardly a luxury considering the 14-day journey time!



Megaproject

Following the 1890 decision to build the Trans-Siberian Railway, it took almost a decade before it was inaugurated and about 25 years before completion.

Railway construction

Soldiers and forced laborers (convicts) constructed the Trans-siberian railway in remote areas under harsh weather conditions. The panorama does not show a lot of this reality. Piasevsky did depict bridges under construction and workers laying down sleepers but gave everything a gentle look.

From 1894 onwards the artist traveled behind the railway construction by train, using a bicycle(!) for additional transport. He made sketches along the route. At a later stage, he was given his own studio carriage on the Tsar's order. On the last sections not yet reached by rail, Piasevsky traveled by ship across rivers and lakes.





Omsk and Tomsk

Already in 1890 the railway line crossed the Urals and thus the border between Europe and Asia. A few years later, Omsk was one of the first Siberian cities where a railway station was opened. While the bridge over the river Irtysh was still under construction railway carriages were transferred with barges.

The Trans-Siberian Express left Moscow for the first time in 1898. After a six-day journey the West Siberian city of Tomsk was the provisional terminus, although railway construction was already progressing further east. Tomsk was on a subbranch of the railway, because the River Ob could not be bridged there.

Trains

Besides the luxury Trans-Siberian Express operated by Wagons-Lits and the equally expensive all-Russian 'State Express', cheap ordinary trains also ran on the Trans-Siberian railway. The line was also of great importance for freight transport.





New-Nicholas

When the ground near Tomsk proved too swampy the railway bridge was built 70 kilometers away. There a settlement was established for the workers: Novonikolajevsk (New-Nicholas, named after the new Tsar). Initially there were only a few simple wooden huts between the birch trees.

Thanks to the Trans-Siberian railway the new settlement would become one of Russia's largest cities. Due to the proximity of a coal basin and good rail and water connections it developed into an important industrial center.

Novosibirsk

In 1925 the Soviet regime renamed the city into Novosibirsk. Meanwhile its population had grown to a quarter of a million. Nowadays it is home to 1.5 million people.





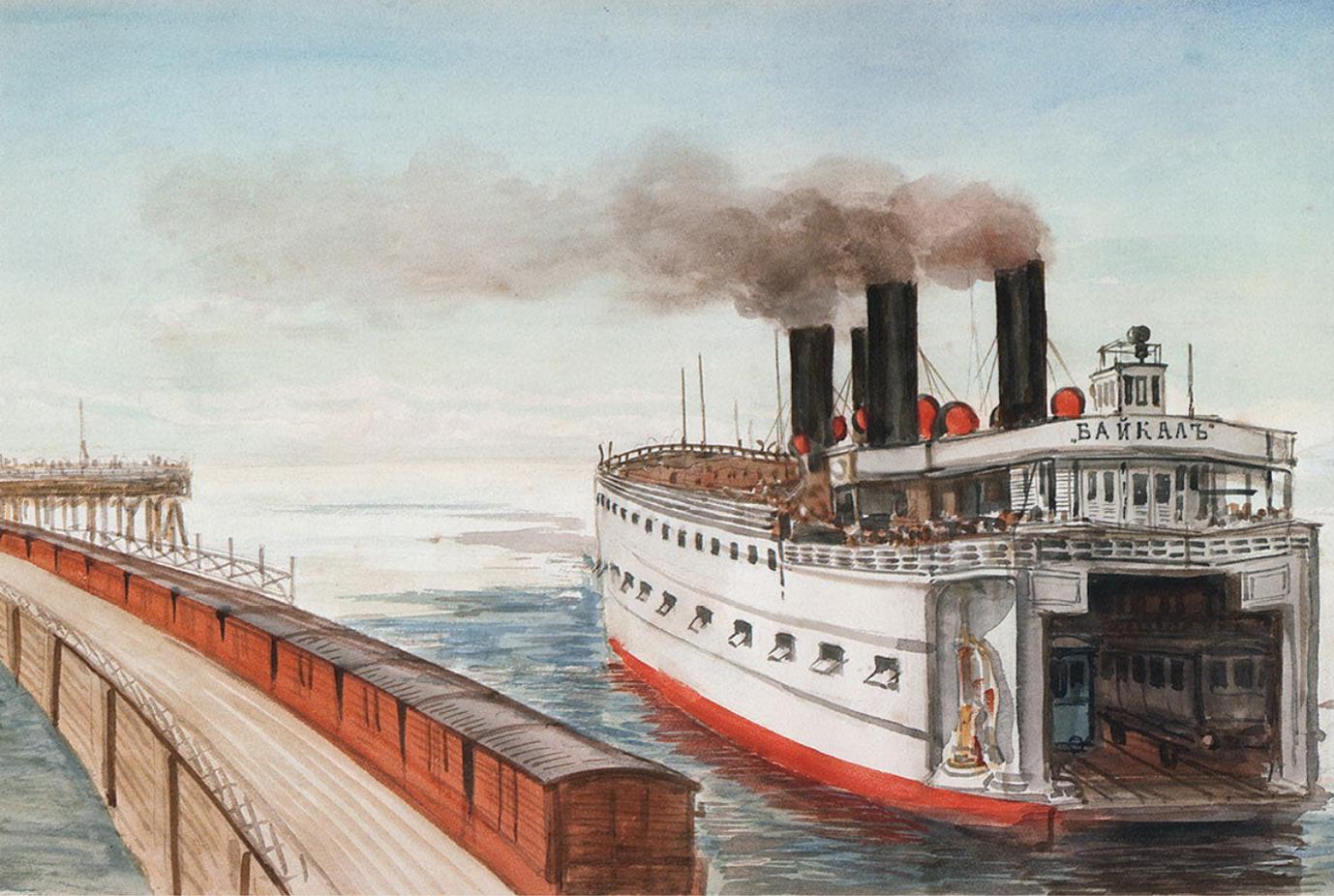
Wagon-chapelle

One of the most notable appearances on the Trans-Siberian railway was the *wagon-chapelle*: a traveling Russian Orthodox church. Piasesky depicted one of these chapel carriages on his panorama. They were not intended for travelers primarily, but for workers and railway staff.

Because of the long distances in scarcely populated Siberia churches were almost never nearby. Staffed by Russian Orthodox priests the carriages travelled from station to station. They were equipped with ringing bells at the end of the skylight to summon the faithful.



The coaches had complete Russian church interiors, including a lot of icons. From the outside the moving chapels could be recognized by their arched windows, inspired by Byzantine architecture.



Lake Baikal

Lake Baikal was a major obstacle for the Trans-Siberian railway, which reached Irkutsk in 1898. The world's largest and deepest freshwater lake freezes over every winter. For the crossing the SS Baikal was built, both an icebreaker and a train ferry. It had a back entrance and front exit for the train.

The steamship was built in England in 1897 and was transported to Siberia in parts, as a construction kit. The middle deck of the 64 meter long vessel could contain 24 carriages and a locomotive. The passage took four hours. In 1904 a new railway around the south of Lake Baikal made the crossing obsolete.



Manchuria

To reach Vladivostok, the last leg of the Trans-Siberian Express ran on the Trans-Manchurian railway through China. It was built by the Russians with Chinese permission.

From 1901 onwards passengers could also travel to Beijing via the South Manchuria Railway. Although this was still in the future at the 1900 Exposition, it did not prevent the Paris pavilion from having large Moscow-Beijing lettering on its facade.



Fabergé egg

In the same year of the World Fair, the St. Petersburg jeweler Fabergé created one of his 50 famous Easter eggs. It was commissioned by Tsar Nicholas II as a gift for Alexandra Fyodorovna.

The egg's theme was not surprising considering Nicolas II's close ties to the Trans-Siberian railway. In 1890, still a crown prince, he officially launched the construction at Vladivostok. As the Tsar he was still directly involved with the project.

The route of the Trans-Siberian railway is engraved in the silver part of the egg; gemstones mark the important places. The surprise is a gold and platinum miniature version of the Trans-Siberian Express.

The locomotive has diamond headlights and can be wound up with a gold key. The five carriages bear the inscriptions mail, ladies, smoking, non-smoking and chapel.





Aftermath

During the Russo-Japanese War the railway line was of great military importance. In 1916 the final part of the Trans-Siberian railway was completed. Vladivostok was now completely accessible via Russian territory, rather than through Manchuria.

The 1917 October Revolution put an early end to the Trans-Siberian Express; the Soviets confiscated the Wagons-Lits carriages. It was only in 1931 that the Soviet travel agency Intourist reopened the route to foreigners.

In 1913 Sonia Delaunay illustrated a poem by Blaise Cendrars on his 1905 journey through Russia as a 16-year-old: La prose du Transsibérien.

It was an avant-garde version of a Trans-Siberian panorama, oriented vertically instead of horizontally.



In the years following 1900 Piasetsky supplemented his panorama with a tenth roll on the new route east of Lake Baikal.

The complete panorama was exhibited in 1904 at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in Missouri.



The Panorama Transsibérien was demolished after the Paris expo; the carriages were shipped to Russia.



At present, the panorama is being preserved at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. With the support of the Russian Railways it was restored in 2004-2006 and temporarily exhibited at the St. Petersburg Vitebski railway station in 2007.

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