

Transcription of British Library podcast

<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/whatson/downloads/files/btrtranssiberien.mp3>

Curator Chris Michaelides talks about the Cendrars/Delaunay poem-painting
Prose du Transsibérien

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For details see <http://www.bl.uk/breakingtherules>

My name is Chris Michaelides. I am a curator in the Italian and Modern Greek Section and I am at the newly opened St Pancras International Station to talk about an item describing an epic journey. The work in question is *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* (Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jehanne of France), a poem in free verse by Blaise Cendrars with pochoir (stencil) painting in gouache and watercolour by Sonia Delaunay. It is a picture-poem conceived as a dialogue between the text and its visual accompaniment of shapes and colours, the First Simultaneous Book, as the prospectus calls it, which was meant to be seen and read at the same time, like a conductor reads an orchestral score or the way we see and read a poster.

The book is an extraordinary and spectacular creation and the fact that it was published by a small publishing house financed by Cendrars himself, the Éditions des hommes nouveaux, makes it all the more remarkable.

It was published in 1913. This last year before the outbreak of the war was an *annus mirabilis* in Paris. It was the year that saw the publication of Apollinaire's *Alcools*; Proust's *Du Côté de chez Swann* (Swann's Way); Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes* and also the first performance by the Ballets Russes of Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring*. It was the culmination of the intense artistic activity in Paris in the years leading up to the Great War that witnessed the creation of a succession of artistic movements like Fauvism, Cubism, and Orphism and the development of the *livre d'artiste* in which there is interaction between word and image. This book is a masterpiece of this type of publication, as we will see.

A few words first about the writer and artist. Both Cendrars and Delaunay were key figures of the Parisian avant-garde. Neither of them was French – Cendrars was born in Switzerland and Delaunay in Ukraine.

Cendrars was one of the great travellers of his time, with a Rimbaud-like love of escape and adventure. By the time he settled in Paris in 1912 he had already lived in Berne, St Petersburg and New York and he later travelled extensively in Latin America and the United States. His work is bewilderingly varied in subject-matter and form, reflecting his encyclopaedic knowledge and the universality of his interests that ranged from African literatures and folklore to the California Gold Rush. Though much of his writing is supposedly 'autobiographical', it is often difficult to disentangle fact from legend, as indeed is the case with the Trans-Siberian

Sonia Delaunay grew up in St Petersburg and came to Paris in 1905 after a period of study in Germany. Together with her second husband, the painter Robert Delaunay she pursued the study of colour and she painted her first abstract works in 1911. As well as a painter, she was also a designer of bookbindings and textiles.

The shape of the book is unusual. It consists of four sheets joined together and folded in half vertically and then horizontally. It is 2m long and 36 cm wide. There are 445 lines of text printed in more than ten typefaces of different colours and sizes on the right hand side of the sheet with Sonia Delaunay's colourful abstract designs on the left but also invading all the empty spaces between the lines. A print run of 150 was originally envisaged so that, end to

end, all the copies would equal the height of the Eiffel Tower, the symbol of modernity. In the event, only 60 copies were printed.

The impression created by Sonia Delaunay's abstract shapes and brilliant colours – indigo blues, vivid vermilions, purples, yellows and greens – is one of light, movement, and speed. In the British Library copy, which is one of the artist's proofs, the colours have remained remarkably vivid. And yet, the mood of the poem is rather darker. In fact, Cendrars called it 'a sad poem printed on sunlight'.

It describes the 16-year old poet's epic, perhaps imaginary, train journey from Moscow to Harbin (in Mongolia) during the Russo-Japanese War and the Russian Revolution of 1905. The route is shown on the contemporary map printed at the top right of the sheet. It is a long, oppressive ride through Russia with apocalyptic scenes of war and revolution, and descriptions of cold, hunger, death and devastation which worsen as the train follows its eastward course and are punctuated by the repeated, melancholy question of Jehanne, the poet's companion, "Dis Blaise, sommes nous bien loin de Montmartre?" (Blaise, are we very far from Montmartre?)

This acts as a leitmotif highlighting the distance that separates the two travellers from Paris, their spiritual home. The poem, in fact, does not end at Harbin, the terminus of the line, but in Paris, and its final section is a great hymn to the city, evoking the multicoloured posters in its streets, the vivid yellow covers of French novels, its cafes, buses and trains, and the two great symbols of modernity: the Eiffel Tower and the Great Ferris Wheel which was built for the Universal Exhibition in 1900 (it was later demolished), the only figurative elements in Delaunay's designs. I suppose our contemporary London equivalents would be the Gherkin and the London Eye.

The poem contains an abundance of allusions and references ranging from the novels of Jules Verne to the Old Man of the Mountain. I find particularly fascinating and intriguing the various musical references it contains. The opening evocation of Moscow's Red Square in the sunset, the Kremlin, and the bells of its cathedrals is reminiscent of Mussorgsky's evocation of Moscow in the prelude of his opera *Khovanschina*. Cendrars was, in fact, writing, at the time a book on Rimsky-Korsakov and Russian music and he considered Mussorgsky the Dostoyevsky of music. Moreover, the description of Moscow as the city of the one thousand and three bell towers is probably a sly reference to Leporello's catalogue aria in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, especially since later in the poem there is an enumeration of the narrator's female conquests.

What is also remarkable are the cinematic techniques used in the narrative where descriptions of the chaos and noise of war are intercut with scenes of the calm interior of a well-to-do merchant's store and the singing of Hugo Wolf lieder or memories of the poet's mother in another bourgeois interior playing Beethoven piano sonatas. The poem foreshadows the montage techniques of Eisenstein who later became a great admirer of Cendrars' work, writing a screenplay from his novel *Suter's Gold*. Cendrars had a lifelong interest in cinema, later collaborating with the film director Abel Gance and even directing a film himself which, unfortunately, has not survived. His *La Fin du monde* (also included in the exhibition) was originally written as a screenplay.

Both Cendrars and Delaunay lived long and enormously productive lives but nothing they subsequently produced approaches the originality and beauty of their 1913 collaboration.