TRACKS TO MODERNITY
— 15.10.21 - 13.02.22
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FOREWORD

The year 2021 marks a number of railway anniversaries¹, a good opportunity for EUROPALIA to devote a festival to a world in its own right, that of the train, an invention which has shaped modern society and which today again seems capable of occupying a leading role.

EUROPALIA TRAINS & TRACKS offers a multidisciplinary programme based on three themes: the impact of trains on society, time and movement, and meeting and farewells. Over seventy artistic projects, including numerous new creations and residences, can be seen not only in cultural institutions across Belgium but also in the field, in stations and trains!

Tracks to Modernity kicks off the festival. The exhibition offers an incursion into the world of railways. From the time they appeared in the early 19th century through to the middle of the 20th century, trains were indeed a subject of interest for artists. Depictions of them echo the eras and the sensibilities expressed in them. They illustrate both anguish and enthusiasm for a new industrial world, launched at full speed but now out of control. They depict stations and towns which are redesigned

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¹ Among others the 175th anniversary of the rail link between Brussels and Paris, connecting the two European capitals for the first time, the 40th anniversary of the TGV and the 25th anniversary of the Thalys. 2021 was also declared the “European Year of Rail” by the European Commission.
to accommodate them, new places associated with equally new opportunities for travel. Artists are captivated by lights and swirls of steam. They become worshippers of technology, mesmerized by the speed and almighty power of trains. They underline the plastic beauty of their curves, pistons and marvellous mechanisms. They depict the machine and the fantasy, their feet on the ground or their head in the dreamlike world of travel and inner adventure.

*Tracks to Modernity* gives you a chance to explore these worlds, through the works of major artists of the 19th and 20th centuries but also through more confidential works shedding light on this theme from their specific point of view.

The Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium and EUROPALIA teams wish you a pleasant visit!
An invention as fascinating as it is frightening

The first railway lines appeared in Britain in the 1820s. On the continent, Belgium was the first country to follow suit and, in 1835, Leopold I—keen to put his newly-independent country on the international map—opened a public railway line between Brussels and Malines. Trains were at that time the ultimate symbol of modernity, and a major tool of the industrial revolution and of the transformation of western societies. They were celebrated and embodied the wildest hopes of development and enrichment, but also crystallized fears and rejection of change.

Railways revolutionized the relationship with time and space. Distant destinations were brought closer and travelling made possible and permitted where previously it had been an adventure which only a few dared to and were able to undertake. Local, solar time, indicated by the ringing of church bells and differing by a few minutes from town to town, gradually disappeared, incompatible with the accelerating pace of life and with travellers’ safety and comfort.

Known for his interest in mines and mine workers, Constantin Meunier (1831-1905) was active at a time when Belgium was being profoundly transformed by industrialization. The work Black Country – Borinage evokes this context and underlines the technical origin of railways and the first interests it served: those of the mining industry. The inventions of the steam engine and of railways are indeed closely linked to mining: steam engines were used as early as 1712 in mines to pump out water, and James Watt allowed their use to be generalized by improving them in 1769. Based on his work, George Stephenson created the first locomotive in 1817. At first stationary and used to tow wagons, it became mobile itself in 1825, reaching a speed of 30 km/h. Wooden and then steel rails were created to facilitate the movement of heavy trucks. As well as being a means of handling, trains proved to be essential for finding new market opportunities. Coastal towns and the markets they relied on were no longer sufficient to absorb the growing economic output. Land transport, so dangerous and ineffective until the 18th century that they were neglected in favour of maritime routes, was given new impetus by trains.

Gustaaf Wappers (1803-1874), Leopold I’s official painter, was a friend of Charles Rogier, a statesman and art lover who, as Minister of the Interior, set up the project for the first Belgian railway line. It is therefore unsurprising that Wappers, a fervent patriot, was interested in trains. What is more surprising is that he presented them in a terrifying way. Wappers named this painting after the poem by Hendrik Conscience (1812-1883), whom he had introduced to Rogier and Leopold I, and who was then beginning his career as a writer. Satan’s Wagon or The Steam Chariot—which the poet said he had dreamed of during his first journey by train—exemplifies the ambiguity of feelings in the face of this revolution. The poem evokes the train at first as a “terrifying monster-animal” emerging from the depths of the earth, “groaning furiously”, “spewing fire and destruction”. As the verses progress, however, it takes on a more reassuring tone and then becomes outright enthusiastic: “Hurrah! Hurrah! We’re sailing! So intensely, so happy, so fast, so free.” Despite the title of his poem, Conscience was to say that trains were “man’s most wonderful invention to date”, underlying Belgium’s pioneering role and at the same time giving credit for them to Charles Rogier.
2 The intrusion of the train

The train quickly changed society profoundly. It wove its web within cities, where stations, metal bridges and railways increasingly encroached on the urban fabric, but also in the countryside, where it imposed its presence, tearing up the scenery with its cuttings and its fleeting appearances. The train collided with traditional society. As Émile Verhaeren wrote, “You were the same people living in a place, / You knew nothing but your same old ways, / And now the whole world rolls over you, / With its tumult and its waves” (L’Or).

At the end of the 19th century, the Impressionists seized on modern subjects, and trains occupied a significant place in their works. Clouds of steam, speed, movement and the changing light of stations were all aspects which painters strove to reproduce. In Italy, Giuseppe de Nittis injected speed and movement into his paintings without even showing the train in them. Shortly afterwards, in Brussels, Henri Ottmann depicted the Luxembourg Station, its tangles of tracks and the smoke from its trains.

Saint-Lazare station is located in the heart of the Quartier de l’Europe created in Paris at the beginning of the 19th century. Trains played an important role in the development of this neighbourhood: the boarding point of the first railway line in the Île-de-France region was located there in 1835, and the opening of new lines in the following decades necessitated considerable redevelopments. These culminated in 1867 with the building of the Pont de l’Europe, a wide metal bridge which replaced the square of the same name and spanned the railway lines leading to the station. It was in this period that the neighbourhood was fully developed in line with the modernization principles defined by Baron Haussmann. This Quartier de l’Europe, its bridge and its station became symbols of Parisian modernity and attracted the interest of numerous artists. In 1877 Monet produced a set of twelve paintings there which can be seen as his first series, setting up his easel in and around Saint-Lazare station. Manet, Caillebotte and Goeneutte also depicted this neighbourhood, playing on steam effects in their paintings and underlining in their works the close link between modernity, railways, urban planning and architecture.

This painting by William Powell Frith might be seen as a summary of modernity. Firstly in pictorial terms, because it depicts key elements of modernity: the train and the station. Secondly in terms of its mode of production, because it was commissioned for a very large amount of money by an art dealer who speculated on its future success. And lastly through its mode of dissemination, because the dealer’s gamble paid off: the painting was exhibited in 1862 and tens of thousands of people paid one shilling for the right to admire it. Just like railways, the work was intended for the middle class, required their mass participation to be profitable and was a product of speculation.

The station is a quintessentially modern place, with an innovative iron and glass architecture. Frith used it as a stage enabling him to depict modern society. Eighty-six people can be seen in it, ranging from a young married couple to a criminal and including a middle-class family, a railway porter, an immigrant and a beggar. Newspaper sellers and hurrying passengers are a reminder of the rise of the press and the emergence of clock-time. Mingling on the platform, the people in the picture will nevertheless be sorted in the train: class differences had never been so organized as since the advent of railways.
One of the few female artists to have focused on the theme of trains was the Austrian painter Marianne Stokes, born Preindlsberger (1855-1925). After studying drawing in Graz, she continued her artistic studies in Munich and then in Paris, where she dreamed of going and which offered more opportunities for women, particularly the possibility of attending live model classes. In 1884 she married the English painter Adrian Stokes, with whom she developed a close artistic relationship. They travelled to artists’ colonies in Ireland and Denmark, but also in Italy and Hungary, and sometimes exhibited their works as a dialogue.

Marianne Stokes painted at first in a realistic style, producing subtle portraits and domestic and rural childhood scenes. In the 1890s, her painting evolved towards a pre-Raphaelite style emphasizing detail and colours. She then turned to religiously inspired or mediaeval themes. The passing train therefore constitutes a curiosity in her production at the time. In this painting, a young woman at work appears pensive, between two ages and two eras; between the rural world and modernity.

Jan Toorop (1858-1928), a Dutch painter born in Indonesia, and Darío de Regoyos (1857-1913), one of the best-known representatives of impressionism in Spain, both lived in Belgium in the 1880s. De Regoyos was one of the founders of the Brussels avant-garde group Les XX, which Toorop joined in 1885 and whose members included Théo Van Rysselberghe, Fernand Khnopff, James Ensor and Félicien Rops. Both artists also spent time with Constantin Meunier and Émile Verhaeren.

Both works contrast modernity and tradition. Toorop juxtaposes a workhorse and an “iron horse”, which coexist in the picture without interacting; we sense the difference in pace, the train speeding past and the horse slow, imperturbable and absorbed by its task. The same feeling is generated by Darío de Regoyos’ painting: a religious procession and a passing train echo each other, but we imagine the one to be silent, slow and meditative while the other hurtles by, disrupting the rural tranquillity with its noisy roar. In Émile Verhaeren’s words, “Darío de Regoyos strove to depict provincial Spain, silent and sombre. He liked to call it ‘España negra’, i.e. Black Spain”. It is this Spain and its remote corners, between tradition and modernity, which he represents in this painting.
3 Film & Photography

The world of the train is eminently cinematographic and it was given a prominent place from the earliest days of filmmaking. Prime examples are the Lumière brothers’ 1897 film *L’Arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat* (Arrival of a Train in La Ciotat) and *La Roue* (The Wheel), directed by Abel Gance in 1923, in which the world of railways plays the leading role. The train often marks a moment of transition in the story, between two cities and between two realities.

Could it not be said, however, that the first cinematographic experience was felt by 19th century travellers even before the invention of cinema? On trains, they experienced the “moving gaze”: their eyes had to train themselves to interpret images subjected to speed and continuous movement. The train creates a new mode of perception. Like the Impressionists and others after them, photographers played on trains and the graphic qualities of steam, signals or stations. We see in their photographs the link to industry, the expression of almighty mechanical power and the poetry of railway landscapes.

4 Modernity, speed and sensations

“We declare that the splendour of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. [...] Time and Space died yesterday”, asserted Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909 in his Futurist Manifesto.

It was modern society—its speed, its violence and the sensations it generates—which interested the futurists. Although the train as already no longer the most technologically advanced means of transport, it occupied a crucial symbolic place in the works of those who wished to “[sing of] the multi-coloured and polyphonic surf of revolutions in modern capitals; [...] glutinous railway stations devouring smoking serpents; factories suspended from the clouds by the thread of their smoke; [...] great-breasted locomotives puffing on rails like enormous steel horses with long tubes for bridle, and the gliding flight of aeroplanes.”

![Alfred Stieglitz](image)
These works by Boccioni evoke one of his major painted series, the triptych *Stati d’animo* [States of Mind] housed in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The artist moves away from the cult of the machine here to get to grips with the effects of technology on the human psyche. For Boccioni, the artistic means of the past are inadequate for rendering the emotions of a world completely transformed by science. Therefore he develops new pictorial means. His concept of force-lines, lines representing an invisible extension of the essence of objects, dates from shortly afterwards. The triptych links space, movement and psychology. The Farewells [*Gli addii*] take place in a whirl in which locomotive chimneys and embracing couples can be seen. Those who go (*Quelli che vanno*) seem to be carried away by oblique lines. Those who stay (*Quelli che restano*) appear pinned to the ground by vertical lines.

It is possible that Boccioni was inspired by a work by Charles Cottet, who in 1898 painted the triptych *In the Land of the Sea: Those Who Go, The Farewell Dinner, Those Who Stay*, transposing the scene into modern society. The movement and speed of a fast-paced world are palpable in Boccioni’s work, whereas Cottet’s figures are static and subject to a slow and painstaking separation.
A symbol of freedom, trains can also embody war, oppression and exploitation. At the end of the 19th century, westerners—under the guise of a civilizing mission—developed railways designed to exploit the resources of their colonies more effectively. “Without railways, the Congo is not worth a penny”, said Stanley, who colonized the country for Leopold II. And in the Congo, the undertaking was colossal. The terrain was particularly rugged, workers were subjected to extreme working conditions and the human losses were considerable.

The financial interests and imbalances generated by railways were also at the centre of the demands of French railway workers, who undertook a large-scale strike in 1910. In the drawings of Jules Grandjouan, a militant poster designer, railway workers are pitted against directors, those who take risks against those who possess.

The First World War, which the Futurists exploited pictorially, undoubtedly marked a broader realization of the power of railways and of the sometimes nefarious purposes for which they can be used. Mass deportations to concentration camps during the Second World War are the best-known and most tragic example of this.

Gino Severini (1883-1966) was one of the leading figures in Futurism. After moving to Paris in 1906, he frequented avant-garde circles there and, four years later, signed the Manifesto of Futurist Painters alongside Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo and Giacomo Balla. Of delicate health, he was not called up for the army in the First World War. In 1914, Marinetti wrote to him: “I believe that the Great War, experienced intensely by Futurist painters, can produce a veritable convulsion in their imagination […] [Boccioni, Carrà and I] urge you to take an interest in the war and its repercussions in Paris. Try to experience the war in painting, studying it in all its mechanical forms [military trains, fortifications, wounded men, ambulances, hospitals, parades, etc.].” Between 1914 and 1915, Severini therefore set about painting the war, and particularly war trains, which he depicted both in their humanitarian role (as in his painting Hospital train) and in their destructive role. Although he had a view from his studio of Denfert-Rochereau station and the trains transporting troops and equipment, he painted Armored train in action from a photograph published in the press. From 1916 onwards, Severini turned away from Futurism and painted in a cubist style.
In the secret of his kitchen, the amateur painter Joseph Steib (1898-1966) created a series of 57 paintings between 1939 and 1944 which he ironically entitled *Le Salon des rêves* (The Salon of Dreams). Some depict German misdeeds, others anticipate happy scenes, and others again are veritable anti-Hitler pamphlets. The Conqueror presents Hitler as a monster, half man and half beast, in the style of Arcimboldo. In *Les roues tourneront pour la victoire* (The Wheels Will Turn for Victory), Steib anticipates the joy of liberation, which he predicts as happening in 1944. A train flanked by flags arrives on rails in the shape of the Eiffel Tower. The title echoes the German propaganda slogan sometimes written on trains: *Die Räder müssen rollen für den Sieg* (The wheels must roll for victory). Another Nazi slogan, *Toutes les forces pour la victoire* (All Forces for Victory), is mocked in the work of the same name.

A man is weighing himself in the concourse of a station. Force is precisely what he lacks: his trousers have become too big for him. A portrait of Hitler designates the culprit. *L’amour du prochain* (Love Thy Neighbour) appears to depict a deportation scene. In the Haut-Rhin department, the Nazis were organizing collective punishments to deter those refusing to cooperate: numerous families were thus deported all the way to Silesia or to camps in Saxony. In addition, round-ups of Jews had begun in 1942 and Steib lived in Mulhouse, a major transit hub for trains to Germany.

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6 Luxury tourism and mass tourism

Tourism was born in the 18th century. At the time it was restricted to an elite: young men of the aristocracy and the upper middle classes—in England in particular—were expected to complete their education with a journey around Europe. This journey, called “The Grand Tour”, gave rise in 1800 to the term *tourist*.

It was only with the development of railways that genuine leisure tourism began. This too was at first restricted to an elite, those who had both time and resources and who could therefore enjoy the palaces, seaside resorts and spas of the late 19th century. The less affluent sometimes got away to the coast on a Sunday in packed “pleasure trains”.

It was not until the 1930s and the advent of paid leave that tourism—initially domestic—took on a new look. For the first time, people’s free time exceeded the simple time required for workers to rest and they had time available for leisure. Thanks to reduced prices for holiday-makers, thousands of families were able to go away on vacation and tourism expanded considerably.
The first Belgian railway posters were aimed at a wealthy international clientele and focused on the destinations, rarely representing the train. They were published by the state, in collaboration with private rail franchises or with the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits, founded in 1876 by the Belgian Georges Nagelmackers. Their production was sometimes entrusted to renowned artists such as Théo Van Rysselberghe or Florimond Van Acker. In the early 20th century, promotion became organised: in 1908 the “Belgian Propaganda League to Attract Foreign Visitors” was created, and after the war there was quickly concern to revive tourism so that “our neighbours […] can come to visit this little Belgium and leave their gold here.” In 1926 the SNCB (The Belgian National Railway Company) was created. It entrusted poster production to Léo Marfurt, well known to the public for the drawing of Miss Belga seen on cigarette packets at the time. In the late 1920s, Cassandre and Pierre Fix-Masseau created revolutionary posters influenced by Cubism and Futurism: the message was clear, strong and simple. It is no longer the destination which counts but the aesthetics of the train, its strength and its speed.
Aesthetics of the machine

In the diagram he published in 1936 at the time of the Cubism and Abstract Art exhibition presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Alfred Barr, the famous founder and first director of the museum, identified “machine esthetic” as one of the key influences which had led to abstract art, along with external influences such as African sculpture or Japanese prints. Even if Barr’s diagram should be viewed with reservations because it tends to present abstract art as a high point, it is nevertheless indicative of the importance of the pictorial vocabulary as a result of the new interest in machines.

This interest developed from the mid-1910s onwards. Up to then, machines had not been a favourite subject for the avant-garde, which had different aspirations: the themes of the countryside, rural life and the quest for the primitive grew in importance even while industrialization was increasing. From the 1910s onwards, however, machines became part of everyday life: cars, bicycles, sewing machines, typewriters and electricity invaded streets and homes. Certain artists now used technology as a means of developing their art, as an ally which some ended up admiring and integrating in their works.
From 1917 to 1923, Fernand Léger (1881-1955) went through his “mechanical period”. The war, even though he had experienced it on the front line, had not put him off machines. On the contrary, he saw in them a personal and pictorial revolution, awed as much by the personality of some of his companions in misfortune as by “an open 75 mm gun breech in bright sunlight, the magic of light on white metal.” Léger said he had bitten into a new reality: from then on “the object was always with me.” Indeed, after being discharged, he took an interest in the shapes of modern industrial life, in cities, streets and their vocabulary: posters, typography and colourful geometrical signage.

It was this signage which formed the basis for a dozen works painted by Léger between 1918 and 1919 in which coloured “disks” appear. These disks represent railway or port signals and testify to his quest to depict the “new visual state” of the world. The Railway Crossing (1919) is to be interpreted in this context. Unlike the 1912 version, produced in a cubist style at a time when Léger had not yet introduced other modernist themes in his work, the 1919 version makes way for bright colours, an essential element in modern urban signage.

Victor Servranckx (1897-1965) was fascinated by industrial society and its plastic manifestations. In the 1920s, he was influenced by Futurism and Purism, which both emphasize the aesthetics of machinery. It is known that he corresponded from 1922 to 1925 with Marinetti. He was also a subscriber to L’Esprit nouveau, a review published by Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant, the founders of Purism, which advocated—in reaction to Cubism which was considered too decorative and disconnected from modern reality—the representation of elementary shapes devoid of details. Servranckx expressed this attraction to industry on several occasions. In 1922, in the manifesto L’Art pur ou la défense de l’esthétique (Pure art or the defence of aesthetics), an unpublished echo of purist ideas jointly authored by René Magritte, he states: “One has to be insensitive to beauty to deny it in the shapes of a locomotive, a microscope, a rotary press or a needle.” In 1925, in his conference Voies nouvelles de l’art plastique (New path of plastic art), he confirms: “We love the beauties born of us without our knowledge: factories, shining rods, smells of benzene, the lyrical song of sirens and horns, the sounds of engines, the strident cries of iron or steel being pressed between the cylinders of rolling mills, the departure of international trains.”
The compartment

In literature and in the visual arts, the train compartment holds a special place. Simultaneously public and semi-private, it is often associated with sexuality, as in the film *The Kiss in the Tunnel* (George Albert Smith, 1899), in which the train becomes a sexual symbol, penetrating the tunnel and thereby offering a moment of darkness conducive to kissing. Alfred Hitchcock was to use the same process sixty years later in *North by Northwest*, a film in which the Freudian symbolism of the train reaches its climax when Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint lie down on the bunk as the train enters the tunnel. Train compartments are also often associated with crime scenes and danger, as in the work of Max Ernst, who created strange and decadent compartments in which fear, threat and violence are expressed. The compartment can also offer privacy and a solitude sometimes conducive to introspection and reflection.

Strangeness and introspection

With the surrealists, the link between movement and feelings took on its full importance. They explored the passenger’s point of view: the psychological aspects took precedence over the attraction of modernity and technology, to which they barely paid any attention, the First World War having perhaps dimmed any enthusiasm.

Their work was fuelled by the research of Sigmund Freud, who took an interest in trains and their effects on passengers. The train and its compartments form a veritable microcosm which becomes a tool for exploration of the subconscious and critique of bourgeois society. Blaise Cendrars, in his poem *Prose of the Transsiberian and of Little Jehanne of France*, sees the journey as an introspective process in the course of which thought escapes and evolves. Giorgio de Chirico and Paul Delvaux, for their part, offer us images of alternative realities populated by immobile movements and timeless trains inhabiting a strange or even disturbing world.
Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978), the son of a well-known railway engineer, gave birth to metaphysical painting. His works—which generate a poetic, enigmatic and timeless atmosphere—were strongly influenced by Nietzsche, whose work led him to perceive reality as a set of signs to be decoded. In 1912, the painter, who had recently moved to Paris, was obliged to return to Italy where, accused of deserting, he thought he would be able to obtain exemption from military service. Realizing that he would not be able to avoid it, he fled from the Turin barracks on the first train to Paris. *The Anguished Morning* is one of the paintings echoing the fears arising from this hasty return. De Chirico then developed his iconographic language: Turin squares, locomotives and arcades in perspective make their first appearances. The same year, he made his debut at the Autumn Fair. *Melancholy of an Afternoon* followed a dream in which two iron artichokes appeared to him, a dream which he evoked in two short poems and which was to mark a turning point in his painting, leading him to amplify his play on metaphors and to produce haunting images of signs devoid of logical relationships but capable of triggering unpredictable mechanisms in the viewer’s psyche.

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**Melancholy**

Weighed down by love and sorrow
my soul drags itself along
like a wounded cat.
Beauty of the tall red smokestacks.
Solid smoke.
A train whistles. The wall.
Two artichokes of iron regard me.
[...]
And afterwards?

Was it the recent hegemony of cars or the growth of air transport? In any event, the train lost some of its lustre in the second half of the 20th century and artists gradually turned away from this theme. However, the modernity of these machines is taking centre stage again today, due in particular to ecological concerns. Paradoxically, the train, which was previously synonymous with the rapid acceleration of society, is now seen as a means of deceleration allowing people to return to a less hectic way of travelling and living.

Model railways generally offer an idealized representation of the countryside and human life: magnificent lush Alpine meadows, charming villages and joyful fairs, interspersed with trains belching out steam. In 1 to 87, Fiona Tan created a vast model railway landscape. Nostalgia, reality and prospects for the future collide in it. The title of the work refers to the 1:87 scale which determines its dimensions. Although at first glance the scene appears idyllic, this impression begins to waver upon closer inspection. The viewer becomes a witness to circumstances which seem to be out of tune with the apparent innocence of the landscape: while people in a community garden are growing vegetables, a train crash occurs. Fiona Tan (born in 1966) juxtaposes the tranquil nature of the miniature landscapes with a complex reality which can no longer be described by means of simple explanatory models.

Fiona Tan
1 to 87
2014
The contemporary artists exhibited this season question in an original way the missions and values of the Royal Museums. Discover their questions, participate in the debate and share your views on our social media channels by following #MuseumInQuestions.

Is sharing our collective memory essential?

exhibitions
15.10 2021 > 13.02 2022

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**ART & TRACKS**
LOCO-CREATIVE WORKSHOP!

From station to station, create your own geo-poetical constellation. From carriage to carriage, draw the movie of your journey, to the rhythm of the lines, the shapes and the colours. From 1st to 3rd class, experiment and put your senses to the test. From signs to signals, be a part of a collective and ongoing creation process where everything is possible and forbidden at the same time!

A co-creative space at the heart of the exhibition "Tracks to Modernity" welcomes people of all ages for a participatory artistic experiment.

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