

# The Railway Museum: Initiatives and Challenges

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## Introduction

The construction of the Railway Museum in Saitama City was entrusted to the East Japan Railway Culture Foundation (EJRFC) as the centrepiece of the JR East 20th Anniversary Memorial Project. It was opened on 14 October 2007 in Omiya, a location with a strong connection to the railway. Since then, the Museum has welcomed more than 4 million visitors (as of December 2010), and is now in its fourth year.

JRTR has previously reviewed various aspects of The Railway Museum and here we take a brief look back at progress so far, the present situation, and the challenges it faces seen from the curator's perspective.

## History of The Transportation Museum and Opening of The Railway Museum

The Transportation Museum was the predecessor of The Railway Museum, opening originally as 'The Railway

Museum' under the elevated tracks on the north side of Tokyo Station in 1921 to mark the 50th anniversary of the start of the railway in Japan. It moved to Manseibashi Station on the Chuo Line in 1936 and changed its name in 1948 to 'The Transportation Museum' when it came to include land, sea and air transport in general. This museum came under the jurisdiction of JR East in 1987 when Japanese National Railways (JNR) was split up and privatized.

However, the collection of rolling stock dating from the 135-year history of Japanese railways was limited to 8 carriages from the early days and there was tremendous difficulty in finding storage space for the expanding collection over the years. Finally, it was realized that a move was the only conceivable way to overcome the insurmountable problems of the aging building and difficulties in making it barrier-free.

Meanwhile, since the museum had strategic value in terms of both its contribution to society and its handing-on of railway cultural traditions, in February 2004, JR East



Exterior of The Railway Museum (Saitama City) today

(The Railway Museum)

completed a master plan aimed at building a new dedicated railway museum in Saitama City, and decided to relocate the railway collection of The Transportation Museum to the new museum. Work on the new museum started with the groundbreaking ceremony in November 2005, while the well-loved Transportation Museum closed its doors on 14 May 2006 after 85 years. Two years later, The Railway Museum opened on 14 October 2007, the 135th anniversary of the opening of Japanese railways.

## Overview of The Railway Museum

The Railway Museum is based on the three concepts:

- ① A historical museum that relates the changes in the railway system as industrial history, based around displays of actual rolling stock, etc.
- ② A railway museum that systematically preserves, researches, and studies relics and documentation of railways in Japan and around the world.
- ③ An educational museum that offers children hands-on learning about railway principles, systems and the latest technologies.

Built on these concepts, The Railway Museum currently exhibits 37 pieces of rolling stock and has a collection of



Opening of first Railway Museum in 1921 (under elevated tracks on north side of Tokyo Station)  
(The Railway Museum)



Series 0 shinkansen display opened in October 2009  
(The Railway Museum)



Rolling stock exhibits in History Zone

(The Railway Museum)



Panorama of *Teppaku Hiroba*

(The Railway Museum)



Steam rises from smoke machine at regular intervals (The Railway Museum)



Row of SL number plates embedded in floor

(The Railway Museum)

about 600,000 items, including government-designated important cultural assets. The museum benefited from extensive media coverage when it first opened and welcomed many visitors. In 2009, it achieved one of its original objectives, becoming registered under the Museum Law and widely recognized by society.

The Railway Museum Advisory Panel was formed in 2009 to obtain input from various experts as we classify and analyze the challenges currently facing us, and discuss and investigate how we should move towards solving them. As part of this initiative, in May 2011, we extended the grounds by about 4900 m<sup>2</sup> on the south side and set up a grassy area with play equipment called the *Teppaku Hiroba* (Railway Museum Plaza). This is intended to provide a new outdoor resting space and improve the museum's amenities, as well as to expand the display area for railway cars still in use and enhance the museum's ability to explain railway technology. A new display area for steam locomotive nameplates at the underfloor of the museum entrance, expands the collection and has been very popular. Of course, we are also discussing how to introduce movable exhibits and

educational-but-fun explanations satisfying visitors' needs.

In this way the museum is making full use of its extensive collection and expansive grounds and, through a process of trial and error, is working towards becoming a comprehensive railway museum that will satisfy many visitors and play a greater role that our social responsibility requires. I think that during this process further challenges—or perhaps fundamental museum tasks—have gradually become apparent.

## Difficulties in Dealing with Modern Industrial Items and Recognizing Value

As I am in charge of the management of documents and preservation of materials, I feel strongly that the railway industry has not really been appreciated as a field with items worth preservation as cultural assets. Our *Locomotive No. 1* imported in the early Meiji era, *Imperial Carriage No. 1* built for the Meiji Emperor in 1876, and the Railway Archive recorded in railway's earliest days have been designated by the government as Important Cultural Assets. However,



MARS-1 seat reservation system recognized as important memorial of information and electrical technology history

(The Railway Museum)



Storage room under reorganization

(The Railway Museum)



Visitors enjoying old carriage

(The Railway Museum)

just as culturally valuable are the MARS-1 seat reservation system (first used in 1960) recognized as A Cornerstone of Electro-Technology by The Institute of Electrical Engineers of Japan, and as Information Processing Technology Heritage by the Information Processing Society of Japan. In this way, the historic value of modern railways is gradually being recognized with the passage of time.

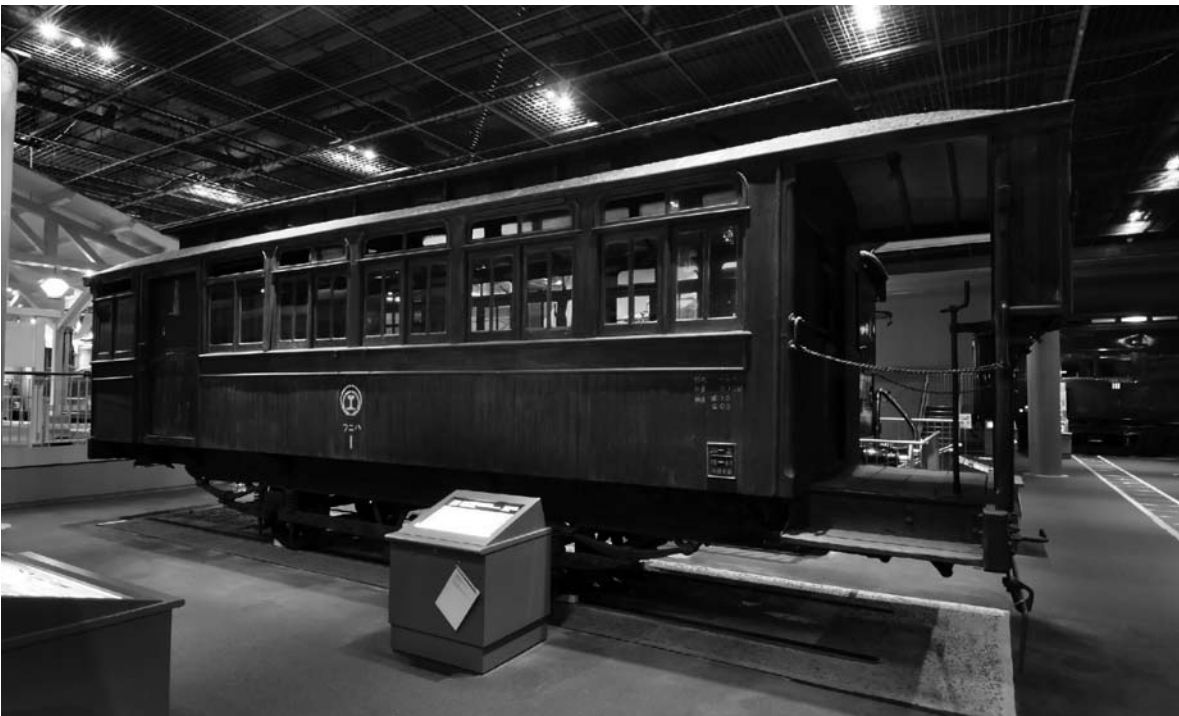
Nevertheless, most museum visitors still do not recognize these trains and related equipment as valuable cultural assets and some of the destruction caused by pranks and rough handling in carriages that are open to visitors have to be seen to be believed and are a constant source of worry for curators.

Technological innovation, computerization and lifestyle changes mean that items from the recent past can easily be lost. In addition, because they are still closely related to our lives and visible, people find it hard to appreciate their value. However, if not collected as museum items, some would be lost to the future forever. I hope everyone can see that although various products have become widespread and familiar, there is little awareness that such things must be protected now if they are to be handed down to posterity. How to select and hand-on this legacy is a major issue for museums dealing with modern industrial items. A key mission of museums is to convey history truthfully based on materials, including artefacts, survey records



The Imperial Train Exhibition (2010) took fine arts such as silk and lacquer work as themes

(The Railway Museum)



Examining JNR's first electric rail car *Hanifu* 1 before repairs

(The Railway Museum)

and research papers. In order to do so, I believe that it is essential to find ways to display extensive numbers of exhibits. In other words, it is essential to establish careful standards for collecting, and then to further enhance arrangement and exhibition.

As part of this task, we have started rearranging the museum's storerooms and consolidating data. Many items still remain uncategorized, and we must continue collecting new ones too. It is low-key work, but I believe that making

good use of the information we have amassed while finding ways to transfer it to our visitors in an easy-to-understand manner will surely help increase people's perceived value of the railway as a cultural asset.

## Ongoing Themes of Preservation and Display

Earlier, I mentioned the need to display more items—a dilemma facing every museum. It is a conflict between 'preservation'

and 'display'. Most people think that The Railway Museum is based around rolling stock and parts, what could be called 'huge lumps of iron', but in fact the museum collection is distinguished by a tremendous diversity of materials from a wide range of fields. These include documents, photographs (including photographic plates), film clips, arts and crafts, picture postcards, passenger tickets, timetables, posters, and commemorative goods. The railways built in the Meiji era supported Japan's modernization and postwar recovery, and I think our collection is so varied and abundant precisely because it affected not only the economy and technology but also daily culture. However, many of these railway-related items are made of very delicate materials. For example, paper items like passenger tickets require temperature and humidity control. In addition, the printing may fade if exposed to light. In other words, they require a controlled environment and preserving them requires storage in a dark temperature-controlled room, which is not conducive to display. However, when presenting the railway truthfully there is a need and strong demand to display these items as well as rolling stock.

And even sturdy hunks of iron still have problems—like what to do when a carriage body is scratched, or when attached parts are damaged? In most cases, the parts we want to replace no longer exist. Then there is the essential problem of whether they should be replaced anyway. In addition, sometimes differences between things of the past and present lead to unexpected situations. There is also the question of whether repairs should maintain the original qualities of a display item while considering the safety of visitors. This can cause huge problems. The objects are not simply for the eyes of today's visitors. We have to think about how they will be bequeathed to people of the future, decades or centuries from now, and about how to display them and pass them down to posterity. Nevertheless, I think that 'preservation' means not only protecting them but also 'displaying' them appropriately so that they will be passed on in people's memories. How to maintain the best possible balance between 'preservation' and 'display' while optimizing the transferred message is a key mission and will probably always be an ongoing theme.

## What Should Be Handed Down to Posterity and How?

Museum items are not just objects—they have ties with people, technology, and events. Consider a railway carriage; many people and technologies were involved in building it, and of course people and technology were involved in operating it, and related materials include operating regulations and timetables. And finally, millions of people will have ridden in it. Every one of these events, generates records, objects, and memories. How much

should be handed down to posterity? Today's advanced technologies and computerization create linked systems made up of people, technologies and circumstances, and many 'materials' cannot be seen or separated out. Not all of these materials and data can be handed on and choices must be made, which is why we have to ask ourselves what standards we will use to decide what to hand on and in what form. As a museum, we must establish a clear policy and always be prepared to re-examine it as times change.

In response to these challenges, the museum is starting preparations to setup an Exploratory Committee on Collection of Materials to discuss policies and plans for collecting museum items.

## Conclusion

With the rapid advances in information technology and IT equipment, the environment surrounding the railway is changing at a dazzling pace. The museum must keep pace with these changes as it tackles various issues and explores the future. Perhaps no clear answers will be found to the questions I have raised. I will listen to opinions from people working in the museum as well as outside advice, do my best to perfect our displays, materials and administration, and do everything in my power to make it a place where the history of Japanese railways is handed on to future generations. ■



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