

Shengjing Panorama: **A Landmark 360° Collaboration between the Velaslavasay Panorama and Experts of Chinese Panorama Painting**

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Abstract

In Europe, the history of the 360-degree painted panorama dates back to the late 1700s and faded from popularity after the invention of cinema. Yet in China, the first 360-degree immersive panorama was unveiled in 1989. The panoramic phenomenon continues to flourish on a massive scale in China with a group of highly skilled artists specialized in the creation of 360-degree paintings. In spring 2019, the Velaslavasay Panorama will unveil *Shengjing Panorama* - the first ever China-USA collaborative panorama. *Shengjing Panorama* depicts the urban Chinese landscape of Shenyang in the years 1910-1930 - an era of great technological change, global exchange, and diversity in architecture, religions, and culture. This presentation will give background information on the development of this collaboration between representatives of the Velaslavasay Panorama, including Andy Cao, Ruby Carlson, Rastra Contreras, Guan Rong, Sara Velas, and the Shenyang based artists Li Wu, Yan Yang, and Zhou Fuxian.

Keywords

Contemporary Panoramas, International Collaboration, Historical Memory, Archives & Artistic Practice, Immersive Panorama, Chinese Panorama, Velaslavasay Panorama

***Shengjing Panorama* in Los Angeles, California**

At dusk in September 2018, on 24th Street in Los Angeles we see a neon marquee of a 1910 cinema theatre that reads “Panorama and Gardens On View” with an orange globe beaming above. There are 19th Century houses across the street, some in the Queen Anne style, next to concrete apartment complexes and neighborhood children riding their bicycles as cars drive by cautiously (Fig. 1). We step into a canary yellow lobby with exhibits of ephemera and relics and follow a dim, wood-paneled hallway until we come to an even darker passage, our footsteps slowing to a crawl while our eyes adjust to a new visual world (Fig. 2).



Fig 1. Marquee of the Velaslavasay Panorama, 2018 Photo: Velaslavasay Panorama.



Fig 2. Lobby of the Velaslavasay Panorama, 2013 Photo: Sean Teegarden.

We reach a circular staircase and climb upwards to a strange light where we emerge on top of a crumbling, stone wall overlooking treetops, thatched houses, guard towers, horse stables, street vendors and people as far as the eye can see of another time and another, faraway place.

This is the view of *Shengjing Panorama* (Fig. 3), a 360-degree painting of Shenyang, China during the years 1910-1930, and the first ever panoramic collaboration between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China. Located at The Velaslavasay Panorama (VP) in the Historic District of West Adams in Los Angeles, California, *Shengjing Panorama* is a collaborative project initiated and conceived by Sara Velas and the VP and painted by Li Wu, Yan Yang, and Zhou Fuxian, panorama artists and professors of the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts.



Fig. 3. *Shengjing Panorama*, 2018 Photo: Forest Casey.

Utilizing single-point perspective, the painting is divided into the four cardinal directions to illustrate the local customs and culture of Shenyang during the time period of 1910-1930, including: religious ceremonial practices, marketplace and trading methods, foreign-designed and native historic architecture, transportation hubs, rituals of public life, and the diverse scope of the city. The painting is a close approximation of the city's geography and features four gourd-shaped Buddhist pagodas dating back to 1643, in the east, west, north and south (which remain in the city today) to help viewers pinpoint their direction.

Nature is a primary character in *Shengjing Panorama*. As viewers look over the horizon line, clouds and a luminous sky reveal a hue that is particular to Shenyang's geographical location. It is located on the north side of the Hun River (formerly known as the Sheng Water), a tributary of the Liao River, a trait that is reflected in the modern name Shenyang, for in Chinese tradition a river's north bank is the "Yang" side. Previously, Shenyang was called "Shengjing" (rising capital) in 1634, by Qing Emperor Taizong and later "Mukden/Moukden" in the Manchurian language and in 1923, its name was changed to "Fengtian." [1] Pine trees, oaks, white tree-blossoms and birches cover the city and extend towards the outer reaches, where the tombs of Huangtaiji and his wife Bo'erjijite resides in the north and Nurhachi's tomb in the east, very important landmarks for the city both historically and of today.

Architecture is a fundamental aspect of *Shengjing Panorama*, and the buildings featured in the painting help tell the story of Shenyang, a city whose accountable history begins over 7,200 years ago with the Xinle culture of the Neolithic period. [2] Shenyang was the capital of the Manchus during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and in 1625, Nurhachi (1559-1626) began building The Imperial Palace. The Palace was completed in 1783, consisted of 114 buildings, an inner wall and a city wall, and is a testament to the last imperial dynasty of China. [3] Once the Republic of China was established in Beijing, The Imperial Palace became an auxiliary palace. [4] Today the site is known as the "Shenyang Palace Museum" and is one of two preserved palace complexes in the country. [5] The palace complex is a large feature in the painting and when panorama viewers emerge from the entryway of the spiral staircase, they find themselves standing on ruins of the complex's outer wall.

Imperial Russia claimed parts of Manchuria as a semi-colony by leasing parts of the city from the Qing government, ailing at the time, and built strategic railways and enclaves. Russia's urban planning was influenced by European architectural traditions with a Russian flare. [6] The China Eastern Railway (1898-1903) and South Manchurian Railway (1906-1945) ran through Shenyang Station (featured in the painting) and made the city accessible and popular for business and tourism. This was reinforced by the Chinese government opening Shenyang (then Mukden) in 1903, as a place of international residence and trade. Consulates were established by America, France, England, Germany and Japan.



Fig. 4. *Nanguan Cathedral in Shengjing Panorama*, 2018 Photo: Forest Casey.

The city was home to fifty-three different nationalities and forty-five languages. Missionaries took advantage of the city's accessibility and built churches, such as the French Roman Catholic church which was rebuilt in 1912, as the Sacred Heart Cathedral. The grey brick and stone facade is visible in the panorama and still stands today (Nanguan Cathedral) (Fig. 4). Also visible today is the Dongguan

Church, one of the oldest Scottish Protestant churches in China. [7] Some of the most fruitful research for the painting came from photographs taken by missionaries during this time period.



Fig. 5. *Shengjing Panorama: General Zhang's Mansion & Marketplaces*, 2018 Photo: Forest Casey.

Scenes of everyday life are depicted in sections including the marketplace of Middle Street, where vendors and city dwellers would gather to socialize at tea-booths and purchase goods for sale (Fig. 5). Eight gateways of the old city wall, forty-feet high and thirty-feet wide with adjoining towers, linked the inner city from the outer city by way of large boulevards, which became thoroughfares for horse-drawn carriages, automobiles and walking public alike. These such streets, of which Middle Street is an example, featured prominent and ornate shop signs, carved in the shape of significant symbols such as the dragon or peacock. [8]

The Panorama Phenomenon in China & the Origins of *Shengjing Panorama*

Since 1989, over two-dozen major panoramic paintings have been created in China. Most of these massive installations take subjects of early 20th century warfare on Chinese soil. Historical events depicted through panoramas are focused on events relating to the Japanese occupation of China – such as the first 180-degree panorama *The Battle of Lugou Bridge* completed in 1988 – or events which occurred in China's early 20th century revolutionary period (Communists vs. Nationalists) such as the first 360-degree panorama created in China, *The Capturing of Jinzhou Panorama* completed in 1989. [9] While most of the panoramas in China depict battles, a handful showcase cultural and landscape based subjects, such as *Splendid Central Plains* which was completed in 2010, and certified by the Guinness Book of World Records as the “Largest Painting in the World” – an often unsubstantiated claim

made by several panoramas both moving and immersive throughout the decades. This painting rests at the base of the Tower of Fortune, an active TV broadcast tower in Zhengzhou City, Henan Province. Replete with a revolving restaurant, lookout point and a diverse offering of restaurants, this structure offers a curious contemporary context for a 21st century “classic” panorama – a combination of tourism and media.

At the nexus of panorama creation in China are the artists and professors at the Luxun Academy in Shenyang, China. The Luxun Academy is one of the oldest art schools in China and grew out of the Luxun College of Art which was founded in 1938, by revolutionaries Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. In 2005, the Luxun Academy of Fine Art hosted the 13th Annual International Panorama (IPC) Conference at their campus headquarters in Shenyang, the capital of Liaoning province. This event provided the first opportunity for artist Sara Velas (Founding Director & Curator of the Velaslavasay Panorama) to learn more about the Chinese panorama phenomenon in person. [10]



Fig. 6. Sara Velas at *Jingtangshan Touristic Historical Region*, 2013 Photo: Velaslavasay Panorama.

Experiencing the exquisite detail and monumental nature of these 360° installations firsthand sparked an intense curiosity to know more along with the desire to someday unite a project of the Velaslavasay Panorama with an aspect of Chinese panoramas – an internationally significant part of the contemporary panorama phenomenon. Participation in subsequent IPC conferences provided the opportunity for Ms. Velas to become acquainted with some of the artists, professors and curators heavily involved in the creation of panoramas in China. The chance to fully investigate this interest came in the spring of 2013, when the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts awarded Sara Velas a curatorial fellowship to further explore the existence and creation of Chinese panoramas with the possibility of integrating this research into future projects of the Velaslavasay Panorama. [11] A series of visits to additional panoramas gave further insight into how the immersive

paintings, rooted in the 19th century tradition of panoramas, were combined with contemporary technology. Ms. Velas visited the *Jingganshan Revolutionary Battle Panorama*, one of the first panoramas in the country to incorporate extensive projection mapping and added superimposed special effects (Fig. 6, Fig. 7). It became clear that China was pioneering new frontiers in panorama development.



Fig. 7. *Jingganshan Revolutionary Battle Panorama*, 2013 Photo: Sara Velas.

Over the course of several visits to Shenyang and other areas of China by a core group of Velaslavasay Panorama representatives, the idea developed to create a collaborative panorama which would be painted in China but displayed in Los Angeles at the VP (Fig. 8). The subject matter was chosen collaboratively and grew out of discussions about the local architectural history of Shenyang, the use of the panoramic art form in the past and present and the context of where the panorama would be exhibited in an historic theater in downtown Los Angeles. And thus a landmark collaboration began.



Fig. 8. *Professor Li Wu and Guan Rong of the Velaslavasay Panorama*, 2015 Photo: Velaslavasay Panorama.

As part of the research trips to Shenyang, the Velaslavasay Panorama representatives visited significant locations that would later be integrated into the painting,

including the mansion of General Zhang (Fig. 9), the Zhaoling Tomb in Beiling Park, the Imperial Palace Museum and Shenyang Railway Station (Fig. 10). Other documentation and research was conducted at the Guandong Movie Park, a “Hollywood” backlot where historic style buildings of various time periods were built as film locations for historical dramas and epic costumed television series (Fig. 11).



Fig. 9. *General Zhang’s Mansion*, 2015 Photo: Velaslavasay Panorama.



Fig. 10. *Shenyang Railway Station*, 2014 Photo: Sara Velas.



Fig. 11. *Guandong Movie Park*, 2014 Photo: Sara Velas.

The composition, basic sketches and finalized painting for *Shengjing Panorama* was fully executed by the three person team of Li Wu, Yan Yang, and Zhou Fuxian and

depicts the city of Shenyang in the years 1910-1930 (Fig. 12). The painting depicts more than 300 people and over 1000 buildings. [12] The composition design included extensive research conducted at city archives and through consulting local historians.

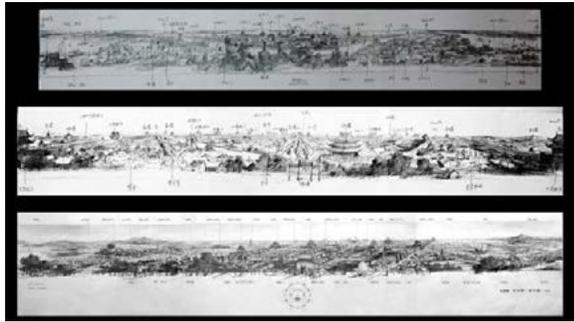


Fig. 12. *Preliminary Sketches for Shengjing Panorama*, 2016
Drawings: Li Wu, Yan Yang & Zhou Fuxian

Urban Memory & Cinematic Themes of *Shengjing Panorama*

“Demolition is easy. Preservation is difficult” [13]
“I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness—in a landscape selected at random—is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants.” [14]

Depicting the city of Shenyang during an era of great cultural opening, the painting reveals a time where hordes of optimistic visionaries clamored to Shengjing to seek fortune or a new way of life. Russo-French architecture, Japanese investment and Chinese craftsmanship mingled to create a unique cityscape, much of which is now being lost to large-scale development or has disintegrated over time due to infrastructural neglect and indifference.

Dugald Christie was an English missionary who in 1914 wrote of a defining characteristic of the people he came to know in Moukden and how they “have become Manchurian.” Christie writes: “The removal of these people from their ancient ancestral homes, and the gathering together of families from various provinces, result in a marked lessening of their conservatism, prejudices, and superstitions. Local ideas and customs often vary so greatly that when brought into close contact they neutralize each other. The consequence is that the people of Manchuria are, speaking generally, more open to new impressions than their kinsmen whom they left behind in the old rut in the China behind the Great Wall.” [15]

In this respect, Christie qualifies Shenyang in the early 20th Century as a liminal space, a veritable mixture of

lifestyles, thoughts and practices from other places and lineages that combine to create more of a fluid social environment. This recombination of histories and dispositions lays the framework for a comparative look at the history and development of Los Angeles, where *Shengjing Panorama* is on view at the Velaslavasay Panorama.

In May 2017, on a research visit to Shenyang, Sara Velas, Founder of the VP, and Ruby Carlson, Co-Curator, visited a vacant 20th Century apartment complex in a state of utter deterioration. They were led by Charles W. Gravelle, an historian and urban archaeologist who visits and documents historical buildings in Shenyang before they are erased without a trace. Such is the fate of many buildings and homes in the historic corridors of Los Angeles – here one day and gone the next, often replaced with architecture that is out of context with the surrounding neighborhood. This is simply one example of the parallels that run between Shenyang and Los Angeles, and part of what has grown to be the philosophical underpinnings of the creation and study of the painting.

When viewers enter *Shengjing Panorama* they are envisioned to be standing on the crumbling outer city wall, an emblematic position in the center of a manifold reference to the past: first, the historical time period of the painting depicting 100 years ago from the viewer of today, and second the historical elements from an earlier time. The viewer may consider what has already been demolished pre-1910, the crumbling remnants still visible up until 1930, what was lost from 1930-2018, and what still stands to be demolished in the future. This layered view of the past, the present and the future can be thought of in terms of Shenyang, of Los Angeles and of any city a viewer might be familiar with. It is this approach to viewing which resonates most strongly with the poetic quote by Vladimir Nabokov listed above—a guiding statement selected by the Velaslavasay Panorama as an overarching principle to shape the creation of *Shengjing Panorama*.

The era depicted in the painting, 1910-1930, also marks the heyday of the Union Theatre, the home of the Velaslavasay Panorama and one of the earliest purpose-built cinema houses in Los Angeles which dates from 1910. [16] In the early 20th Century, Los Angeles was being shaped dramatically by the burgeoning film industry, and this time also marks a turning point where panorama production fades as film begins to flourish.

Detailed representative structures of the early part of the 20th Century exist vacant in the Guandong Movie Park, just outside of Shenyang, preserved as a tourist attraction and as film sets for period pieces, similar to Universal Studios, a tourist theme park and film studio in Los Angeles. The Movie Park was used by Li Wu, Yan Yang and Zhou Fuxian as part of the research for *Shengjing Panorama* (Fig. 11). Guandong represents an inverse to how Hollywood set

pieces and indulgent theatrical designs were repurposed into the architecture of Los Angeles' New Chinatown, which was created in the 1930s when the construction of the new Union Station railway depot displaced the old Chinatown community.



Fig. 13. *Splendid Central Plains Panorama in Zhengzhou, Comparison of Shaolin Temple Kung Fu scene with and without digital projection, 2013 Photo: Sara Velas.*

In general, the contemporary use of soundscapes, light cycles and projection in Chinese panoramas emphasize the parallels of cinema and panoramas. A section in *Splendid Central Plains* in Henan, China references the importance of cinema in the context of panoramas by projecting scenes to animate the painting while playing immediately recognizable audio from one of the most famous Kung Fu films of all time, *The Shaolin Temple* (Fig. 13). This landmark 1982 production was financed by a Hong Kong company but featured a majority mainland Chinese crew and director (Chang Hsin Yen), notably including the cinematic debut of actor Jet Li who first trained as a martial artist. [17] *Splendid Central Plains*' inclusion of this subject matter alludes to questions about the historic authenticities presented via cinema and storytelling. *Shengjing Panorama* is a part of this conversation and has been created in conscious reference to the existing canon of Chinese panoramas and to worldwide panorama history.

Welcome *Shengjing Panorama*

On May 2, 2017, a handover ceremony was held at the Tiexi School for the Deaf in Shenyang, China. The gymnasium of this school was one of three locations used as a painting studio for the creation of the *Shengjing Panorama* canvas (Fig. 14). Attendees of the ceremonious gathering included Ji Yunhui, Vice President of the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts, Zhang Qingbo, Vice President of LAFA Art & Engineering, Li Li Lu, panorama painter and LAFA Professor, Wang Jing, Principal of the Shenyang Tiexi School for the Deaf, *Shengjing Panorama* painters Li Wu and Zhou Fuxian and Velaslavasay Panorama representatives Sara Velas and Ruby Carlson (Fig. 15). The 26 meter x 2.8 meter painting was shipped up and carried across the sea by air to Los Angeles in a custom-built wood crate. Panorama history was made in formalizing the exchange between the Shenyang-based painters and the Los Angeles-based artists and curators who run the Velaslavasay Panorama.



Fig. 14. *Handover Ceremony at Tiexi School for the Deaf in Shenyang, May 2, 2017 Photo: Tiexi School for the Deaf*



Fig. 15. *Handover Ceremony at Tiexi School for the Deaf in Shenyang, May 2, 2017 Photo: Li Zhigang*

Throughout 2018, the VP team, including Andy Cao, Rastra Contreras, Ruby Carlson and Sara Velas, has worked to install the painting cylindrically, research exhibition support material and prepare the three-dimensional platform

and terrain. Artists Sara Bautista and Ava Salzman are creating additional elements for the sculptural terrain. Taiwanese born, Los Angeles-based lighting designer Chu-Hsuan Chang is programming a DMX-controlled 20 minute dynamic light cycle for *Shengjing Panorama*, utilizing color-changing LED strip lighting. Sound artist Moritz Fehr is creating a spatial sound composition exclusively for the panorama which will include field recordings from China as well as historically relevant LA landmarks. In the spring of 2019, *Shengjing Panorama* will be unveiled to the general public at the historic Union Theater, home of the Velaslavasay Panorama in Los Angeles, California, USA.

Notes

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Author Biography

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Sara Velas is an artist, graphic designer, gardener, curator

and native Los Angeleno. She is the Artistic Director of the Velaslavasay Panorama, a nonprofit museum and garden she established in the year 2000 to present variations on art forms & entertainments popular before the invention of cinema along with experimental immersive experiences. In addition to her own immersive creations, Ms. Velas has been focused on researching the contemporary creation of panoramas in Asia. Her work with the Velaslavasay Panorama has been supported by National Endowment for the Arts, California Community Foundation, and the LA County Arts Commission, among others. From 2014-2017 she served as International Panorama Council President and has been an active member since 2004. Born in Panorama City, California, she received her BFA in Painting from Washington University School of Art in Saint Louis, Missouri in 1999 and resides in downtown Los Angeles. WWW.PANORAMAONVIEW.ORG, SSSVELAS.NET