The Orient Express is dead.

Its name was officially removed from the European railroad timetables a little over a month ago. On Sunday, Dec. 13, the sad, truncated, public version of the Orient Express completed its last run, westbound, from Vienna to Strasbourg. Thus ended the reign of the King of Trains, the Train of Kings.

The reasons for its downfall are not difficult to fathom. It fell victim not only to air and highway travel, but also to high-speed rail travel, which has made overnight European rail journeys an increasingly endangered species.

My purpose tonight is not so much to eulogize the famous train. It is, rather, to celebrate the endurance of an idea: that of luxury, mystery and sophistication via this most uncommon of common carriers.

As we shall see tonight, the Orient Express lives on – if not in its original form, then in the world’s consciousness, through art, literature, music – and most especially through tourism and the extraordinary actions of a fellow Kentuckian.

Although the Orient Express would seem to represent the epitome of European sophistication and culture, the train, in fact, has an American – George M. Pullman -- to thank for inspiring its genesis. More about Pullman in a moment.

The idea of running a long-distance train across the length of Europe, from Paris to Istanbul, was hatched in the mind of a Belgian, Georges Nagelmackers. Born in 1845, he was the son of a prominent family of bankers who were well connected with the Belgian court of King Leopold I.
Nagelmackers’ idea sprang from romance: romance gone wrong. After being spurned by a young woman, Nagelmackers traveled to the United States in 1869 to mend his broken heart.

When he arrived in America, what he found was trains – trains much more advanced than anything running in Europe. There he met Pullman, an enterprising fellow who had just invented a new type of railroad car he named the “Pioneer.”

Bigger, heavier and far more luxurious than anything then running anywhere in the world, the “Pioneer” allowed passengers comfortable accommodation by day, and soothing sleep by night.

Ever the promoter, Pullman had offered the “Pioneer” free of charge to the U.S. government to carry President Lincoln’s body back from Washington to Springfield following Lincoln’s assassination in 1865. It was used again to transport the victorious Gen. Grant for his trip home.

Pullman offered the distinguished Belgian a ride, which Nagelmackers eagerly accepted. The two talked at length, with Nagelmackers taking copious notes. Although Pullman had plans to start his own European luxury rail service, Nagelmackers beat him to the punch when he returned to Belgium.

The first Orient Express left Paris’ East Station on Oct. 4, 1883. Hauled by a French Class 500 steam locomotive with two sets of driving wheels each five feet high, the first Orient Express included two sleeping cars and a dining car.

The cars had the latest innovations. They had advanced suspension systems, proving, as one author put it, “a revelation to the male passengers, who for the first time on any European train, could shave without fear of cutting their own throats.” (Burton, p. 18)

Even more impressive was the dining car, which was “French design at its most overblown…

“Gas chandeliers cast light on a scene of baroque opulence – scarcely a surface escaped from scrolls, curlicues, swags of flowers in marquetry and gilt.”

The food and service were equally fabulous, with white-gloved waiters serving their guests local cuisine and wines of the regions through which they were passing.

The inaugural train chugged to Munich, Vienna, Budapest and Bucharest. At the Romania-Bulgaria border on the Danube River, however, the passengers were in for a surprise. Nagelmackers had failed to inform them of the lack of a bridge between the two countries; they said goodbye to their comfortable quarters and spent the rest of their trip on a ramshackle ferry, a dilapidated Bulgarian day train to Varna on the Black Sea, and then on an Austrian steamship for a stormy water passage to Constantinople.

Despite the trip’s shaky final leg, the journey was a resounding success, as news of the luxurious train spread around Europe and the world. The Orient Express was born.
During its 126-year life span, the Orient Express was the travel mode of choice for royalty, international businessmen and government officials – both authorized and clandestine.

It’s important to point out here that the reputation the Orient Express acquired for mystery, sophistication and romance was entirely justified.

There really was a murder on the Orient Express. (It happened in 1950 when an American naval attaché, possibly a spy, was thrown from the speeding train in an Austrian tunnel. Stalin’s agents were suspected, but the crime was never proved).

The train really was stuck in a snow bank for almost a week. (It happened in 1929 in Turkey during a winter storm that blanketed Europe. After the provisions ran out, the train’s crew made its way to a tiny village, where they procured food and drink for their charges. Eventually, a Turkish rescue train with a snow-plow arrived to dig them out.)

And the train truly was a 5-star palace on wheels, a kind of rolling “Grand Hotel.” Its reputation for elegance and fine cuisine was legion.

The story is told of a French chef, who created masterpieces in the train’s tiny, cramped kitchen. The chef’s dishes were especially loved by Britain’s King Edward VII, a gourmand as well as a gourmet. The King offered him the job of royal chef at a salary vastly higher than anything the Orient Express could pay. But true to the reputation of the Orient Express dining cars, and the loyalty of its personnel, Edward had to do without. The chef turned down the King. (Burton, p. 48)

The name “Orient Express” actually comprises a number of trains and routes concocted by Nagelmackers’ company, which he officially titled the “Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits et des Grands Express Européens.” (Comp—an YEE Ahn tair nass yon al day Vagon lee ay day Grans xexpress Oy-row-pay-ahn)
(http://www.acapela-group.com/text-to-speech-interactive-demo.html)

The Simplon Orient express, for example, ran from London to Paris, Milan, Venice, Trieste, Belgrade and Sofia to Istanbul, connecting with the Taurus Express which offered connections as far as Haifa and Cairo.

The Sud and Nord Express, during the golden years before WW I, allowed one to travel in Orient Express splendor all the way from Lisbon or Madrid to St. Petersburg. Over its lifetime, Nagelmackers’ Wagons-Lits company offered over 30 different luxury services covering the length and breadth of Europe and beyond.

The Orient Express and its sister trains were models of efficiency, organization and diplomacy, running, as they did, over the varying railroads of Europe, conforming to each country’s specific technical requirements, regulations and idiosyncrasies. But even the well-connected, diplomatic Monsieur Nagelmackers could not alter the course of European history.
Service was interrupted by both World Wars I and II. The Treaty of Versailles, in fact, which ended the First World War, was signed in France in a Wagons-Lits car, number 2914. After the fall of France, in 1940, Hitler made a point of completing French humiliation by holding the surrender ceremony aboard the same Wagons-Lits car. The car was later moved to Berlin and, in 1945, with the Allies advancing towards the German capital, blown up by the SS.

We’ll pick up the post-WW II history of the Orient Express in a moment. But first, I’d like to focus on what is, for me, the train’s most alluring feature: its ability not only to inspire artistic expression but also to act almost as a piece of performance art itself—through its service, décor, cuisine, and, perhaps most of all, through its distinguished passengers.

Never, before or since, have such a concentrated collection of wealthy, famous and powerful people traveled on a single transport mode. Here are just a few:

• Sir Basil Zaharoff was an international arms merchant, who found business literally booming in the nervous years leading up to WWI. Zaharoff’s first big sale was the relatively new naval vessel, the submarine, which he first sold to the Greeks. He then hopped on the Orient Express to Constantinople and sold it to the Turks, Greece’s arch rival. Soon, any European country with access to the open ocean was buying submarines, with Zaharoff taking his cut. Zahroff went on to sell cruisers, torpedoes, heavy guns, shells, rifles, machine guns, ammunition to all sides in the conflict. Much of that business was conducted on the Orient Express.

“It has been said with some truth,” according to one author, “that the 10 million casualties among the armed forces in the First World War represented a profit to Zaharoff of a little over £1 in gold per every dead soldier.” (Cookridge, p. 117)

Zaharoff had his own compartment on the Orient Express, no. 7, which was frequently visited by attractive young women discreetly hustled on board at pre-arranged sites. (Burton, p. 31) One night during a January trip in 1886, Zaharoff was awaked by screams, then frantic pounding on his compartment door. A beautiful, 18-year-old young woman, bloodied, terrified and clad only in a nightgown, collapsed at his feet. He looked down the aisle and saw her deranged, newlywedded husband, the Duke of Marchena (mar-TSAY-nah), armed with a dagger. Zaharoff’s bodyguard quickly subdued the Duke, while the young woman spent the night with Zaharoff. Their relationship blossomed and she eventually bore him 3 children.

• Calouste Gulbenkian made a fortune in the oil business, and also used the Orient Express as a kind of personal commuter train. In fact, Gulbenkian, an ethnic Armenian, could thank the Orient Express for his life. He and his family escaped Constantinople during the Turkish massacre of the Armenians in 1896. Posing as Turkish rug merchants, they escaped on the train, literally under the noses of the raging mob.

• King Boris of Bulgaria, who insisted on personally climbing into the steam engine’s cab and driving the train during its passage through his country. On one occasion, the King demanded that his
train go ever faster. He ordered the poor fireman to keep shoveling coal into the firebox, despite the danger of a boiler explosion. When the man opened the engine’s firebox, the fire blew back, engulfing him in flames, and he fell to his death. The king didn’t bother to stop.

• The Maharjah of Cooch Behar in northeast India, who traveled on the Orient Express with his retinue of officials, wives and concubines to a conference in London in 1907. To accommodate the distinguished guests, the Wagons-Lits company gutted two of its sleeping cars, replacing beds and furniture with oriental divans and floor cushions, all draped in gold-embroidered silk. (burton, p. 50)

The royal retinue enjoyed the luxury on the outbound journey. But on their return, the temperature plummeted, the cars’ heating system failed, and the Orient Express staff were forced to requisition coats and blankets from fellow passengers for the Maharajah and his company.

• Lord Baden-Powell (BAYD-n POE-L), founder of the Boy Scout movement, began his military career as a soldier in Afghanistan before WWI. He then became a spy. Posing as an eccentric English lepidopterist, he used the Orient Express to penetrate Eastern Europe, where he disguised his sketches of fortifications in his butterfly drawings.

• Another reputed spy, Mata Hari, was a regular on the Orient Express. She was ultimately executed by firing squad in France following WWI.

• Sigmund Freud gave the Nazis the slip in 1938, when he escaped Vienna on the Orient Express;

• American cabaret artist Josephine Baker became a heroine during a 1931 trip on the Orient Express. She gave an impromptu concert to the train’s dazed passengers following a wreck caused by a fascist saboteur’s bomb.

• There were musicians, such as the conductor Arturo Toscanini, Manuel De Falla, Rachmoninoff, Caruso, Chaliapin (shah-LYAH-pin), and Maria Callas.
• There was Sergei Diaghillev (syer-GEY DYAH-gih-lef ) and his Ballets Russe company as well as Isadora Duncan.

Likewise, there were famous writers, who rode — and were inspired by — the Orient Express.

American author John Dos Passos’ was well aware of the magical allure of a train’s name:

Here is Dos Passos, invoking the name of Thomas Cook, the famous British company that invented the concept of group touring, in his travel essay, “Orient Express:”

“O Thos. Cook and Son, what spells did you cast over the children of this century? The mischief in those names: Baghdad Bahn, Cape to Cairo, Trans-Siberian, Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits et des Grandes Expresses Européens…”

And here’s Dos Passos’ description of a dining car scene from his 1921 trip on the Orient Express:
“Juggling three times a day in a dining car. First through the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, then through Bulgaria and a slice of Greece. There’s the lady from Wellesley who writes for the Atlantic; an eggshaped Armenian from New York who was brought up at the monastery of San Lazzaro in Venice, studied painting in Asolo, hates priests, clergymen and Balkan cookery and talks plaintively of Tiffany’s and old Martin’s restaurant on 28th Street…”

And here is a dining car scene from Graham Greene’s novel “Orient Express,” in which he discusses ideas associated with train travel: the momentary silence that occasionally envelopes a public place.

“All down the restaurant-cars fell the sudden concerted silence which is said to mean that an angel passes overhead. But through the human silence the tumblers tingled on the table, the wheels thudded along the iron track, the windows shook and sparks flickered like match heads through the darkness.”

Most famously, however, there is Agatha Christie, and her 1934 thriller “Murder on the Orient Express.” Dame Agatha’s spare prose doesn’t waste time describing the famous train – it was too much a part of the collective consciousness to require description. But she does allow the Wagons-Lits director, M. Bouc, in his conversation with master sleuth Hercule Poirot, to make a philosophic statement about the strange nature of the international luxury express train. Typically, they’re in the restaurant car:

“All around us are people, of all classes, of all nationalities, of all ages. For three days these people, these strangers to one another, are brought together. They sleep and eat under one roof, they cannot get away from each other. At the end of three days, they part, they go their several ways, never perhaps to see each other again.”

I don’t want to give away the plot, so let me just say: “Ah, Monsieur Bouc! If you only knew the irony of your words!”

In any event, the novel translated beautifully into film, whose most successful version was made by Sidney Lumet (loo-MET) in 1974, with Albert Finney starring as Poirot.

Also in the realm of film, there is an extended scene in “From Russia with Love” on the Orient Express from Istanbul to Belgrade, in which James Bond (Sean Connery), the beautiful Russian agent Tatiana (Daniela Bianchi) (bee-AHN-key) and the ruthless killer from SPECTRE (Robert Shaw) battle over possession of the “Lektor” decoding device.

For atmosphere, however, you can’t beat Alfred Hitchcock’s “The Lady Vanishes,” made in 1938. Its soft-focus, black-and-white cinematography creates dream-like scenes aboard the mysterious train.

To me, however, the art inspired most vividly by the Orient Express is of the decorative variety, as exemplified in the railroad cars themselves, in particular by the Frenchmen René Prou and René Lalique.
Born in 1889 in Nantes, René Prou showed his work in Paris at the 1925 Exhibition, which launched the Art Deco movement.” By the 1930s, he had an international reputation. Among other plumb assignments, he was commissioned to decorate the dining room at New York’s Waldorf Astoria hotel, the council chamber for the League of Nations in Geneva, the interior’s of a number of ocean liners as well as the interiors of more than 500 coaches for the Wagons-Lits company.

René Lalique, meanwhile, was born in 1860 in a rural section of France. Following a successful international career as a designer of fine jewelry, Lalique “reinvented” himself as a glass artist, becoming one of the world’s most famous in this medium. Lalique’s contribution to the Wagons-Lits car interiors were a variety of decorative features, such as tulip-shaped light shades. But his glass panels featuring nude bacchanalian maidens, installed in the dining cars, were his most impressive contribution.

Thus modern art, driven in part by modern technology, industrial design and manufacturing processes, had a major impact on the decorative style of the Orient Express. Unfortunately, modern technology also was responsible for the Orient Express’ eventual demise. We now pick up the story after WW II.

By 1949, the third major international cataclysm of the 20th century – Soviet expansionism – played havoc with the Orient Express’ schedules. By 1961, the train was running only from Paris to Bucharest.

The sixties and seventies for the Orient Express were, as one author put it, “like the sad decline of an old friend: everyone knew death was inevitable,” but no one knew when. It came on May 20, 1977, when the Orient Express made its final departure for Istanbul. In subsequent years, sections of its route were cut, and cut again, until finally only the overnight Strasbourg-Vienna link remained.

And, as we’ve seen, last month that section disappeared as well. The European timetable lost the name “Orient Express” forever.

But, is the Orient Express really gone? As Paul Harvey used to say: Here’s the rest of the story:

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Five months after the Orient Express made its final departure from Paris for Istanbul, a Kentucky gentleman, Mr. James B. Sherwood, found himself in Monte Carlo at a Sotheby’s (Suth-a-bees) auction. On the block were a number of run-down, used-up cars from the Orient Express.

“I was looking for unique travel experiences which didn’t have too much competition,” Mr. Sherwood told me in a recent interview from London. He said he was impressed by the enormous publicity surrounding the cessation of the Orient-Express in 1977.

Mr. Sherwood had a penchant for luxury travel, as he’d bought Venice’s famous Hotel Cipriani (CHIP-ree-ah-nee) the year before, in 1976. But the hotel was losing money. “I thought a revival of
the Orient-Express train running on the London-Paris-Venice route would help to fill our hotel,” he told me.

He lost the first two cars in the auction to the King of Morocco, who wanted them for his private train. Determined to get a piece of the action, Mr. Sherwood took the plunge on the next two cars, both sleepers built in 1929. He paid $73,000 for the first one, $41,000 for the second. Before the day was over, he’d bought five vintage Orient Express cars.

Suddenly, Mr. Sherwood found himself in the private, luxury train touring business, which he himself was creating. Following a $16 million program to purchase and restore a total of 35 vintage Wagons-Lits cars, he christened his train the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, a new Orient Express was born.

The VSOE, as it is known, made its maiden run on May 25, 1982 and became the centerpiece of Mr. Sherwood’s new company: Orient Express Hotels, Trains & Cruises. The train literally is a rolling museum. As much as modern safety regulations would allow, everything on the VSOE is authentic and has been restored to its former elegance. That means each sleeping car is individually heated by a coal stove, stoked by it steward in the morning. That means sumptuous, multi-course meals in one of the three diners. And it means there are no showers — passengers on the longer journeys stay in five-star hotels every other night.

The cars that make up the VSOE are Wagons-Lits equipment from the Art Deco period of the mid- to late 1920s. Each has its own unique history. Sleeping car 3309 was part of the train stuck in the Turkish snow bank in 1929.

Shots were fired at sleeping car 3425 as it sped through Yugoslavia en route to neutral Switzerland in 1940. It carried the fleeing King Carol of Romania, together with his treasures. Sleeping car 3544 served in Limoges during WWII as a brothel.

Most stunning are the train’s bar car and, especially, the three restaurant cars, each of which has its own unique character. The Étoile du Nord diner features classic marquetry with baskets of flowers made of woods of many colors. The “Voiture Chinoise (sheen-WAHS)” is decorated with black lacquer panels featuring naively painted but charming animals, giving it the appearance of a black lacquered Chinese box. My favorite is the Lalique diner, which displays the artist’s aforementioned panels of nude bacchanalian maidens.

The VSOE runs most frequently between Venice, Paris and Calais. Several times a year, it travels farther afield to such destinations as Krakow, Prague, Dresden, Vienna and Budapest. And once a year, the train replicates the original route of its namesake, from Paris to Istanbul. This trip usually sells out over a year in advance.

As I’ve said, the VSOE experience really is performance art. Everyone has a role to play — even the passengers. It begins the minute one arrives at the station platform, as guests are escorted to their
compartments by the staff, clad in crisp blue uniforms with brass buttons. Once on board, you enter another era.

There is nothing comparable to awakening in the morning to the steward’s staccato “knock-knock-knock” on the door. His tray is laden with your breakfast, which you take in the privacy of your little world: fresh scones, croissants and breakfast rolls, pots of hot coffee, tea, chocolate, fresh orange juice. The day continues with a stop for a tour of a castle conducted by its owner, a chamber music concert or maybe a visit to a private art collection, then back on the train for lunch (the nagging question: which diner will you choose?). And following a multi-course dinner, with the stars twinkling outside, you find yourself in the bar car, elegantly dressed in black tie, clapping and singing to the strains of a gypsy band. It’s all quite unreal.

Even in its heyday, I doubt the Orient Express ever offered such consistent, over-the-top pleasure. And it’s all courtesy of our fellow Kentuckian, Mr. Sherwood.

Which begs the question: who is this Kentucky gentleman whose vision – and resources – are responsible for the VSOE?

Born in 1933, Mr. Sherwood grew up in Lexington, KY, where his late father, William E. Sherwood, maintained a law practice. Educated at Yale, James Sherwood served in the U.S. Navy from 1955-1958. In 1965, he founded Sea Containers Ltd., an international shipping company which eventually was valued at more than $3.4 billion.

Today, in addition to its international collection of historic, five-star hotels, the Orient Express company runs six private luxury trains around the world.

Mr. Sherwood maintains residences in Oxfordshire, England, where he lives for about six months a year and in Venice for about two months. He also has a home in Vail, Colorado.

But he still owns the family home in Lexington, where he visits twice a year.

“Friends say I still speak with a Kentucky accent,” he told me, “and I love mint juleps and Kentucky fried chicken, although I seldom partake of either, alas.”

“Various friends own horse farms, and we visit them on our twice yearly trips which often coincide with the Keeneland races, which we enjoy attending,” he told me. But what I was dying most to know was: does he have a special interest in railroad travel? Here’s his answer:

“My great grandfather was an investor in the L&N railroad, and its route from Carlisle to Maysville skirted one of his farms. During the (second world) war, I spent part of the summer school holiday at the farms and frequently rode on the footplate of the L&N steam locos.”

Which brings us back to trains – and the Orient Express. Is it dead or is it alive?
Despite what we learned in the news last month, Nagelmackers’ luxurious Orient Express probably died shortly after WWII. Even though its name remained in European timetables until just last month, the train was the Orient Express in name only. The Train of Kings had died years earlier.

But as a part of the world’s consciousness, the Orient Express is alive and well, as we’ve seen, in art, literature, movies, popular culture and luxury travel.

You can eat in the “Orient Express” restaurant at the Taj Hotel in Delhi. Next month, you can travel to Wales and watch a performance of Mozart’s “The Abduction from the Seraglio” – set on board the Orient Express in the 1920s. Or you can go on the internet, as we shall do in a moment, and be assured that Mr. Nagelmackers’ splendid idea lives on, in this case, courtesy of the perfume giant Chanel.

So I leave you tonight with a luxury train speeding through the night, a beautiful woman and romance – the essence of the Orient Express.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ljQDJ4EILc&feature=related

Postscript:  
Jean-Pierre Jeunet directed Audrey Tautou in the film that made her famous in the Anglophone world, Amélie, and then again in A Very Long Engagement. He spent three weeks working on the ad last year. For her efforts in making the two-minute, 20-second ad, she was paid $4.3 million. By my calculations, that’s a little over $28,571 per second.

End

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