

Why Louis Vuitton Gets the Last Laugh

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Сундук: trunk

I loved everything about the giant-suitcase-on-Red-Square story.

I loved the way that officials and politicians expressed astonishment — Откуда же он? (Where did it come from?) — as if you could just put up a structure 30-meters long and nine-meters high a few steps from the Kremlin and no one would ask what you were doing. I adored the hilarious comments on various websites by witty Muscovites, thus once again renewing my faith in the creative genius of the nation. Against the backdrop of the rest of the news — the usual array of the disturbing, tragic and grim — the suitcase story was a cracker.

Bloggers and commenters wondered what it was — сундук (trunk) or чемодан (suitcase). I, on the other hand, wondered why the main Russian words for containers to put things in for traveling are foreign in origin. Think of them: сундук is from one of the Turkic languages

(either Tatar or possibly Polovtsian); чемодан is a compound word from Persian — djame (dress) and dan (box); саквояж (grip, traveling bag) is easily deciphered as sac de voyage; рюкзак is clearly from the German rucksack (from Rucken — back, and Sack — bag); and even тюк (bundle, bale) isn't native Russian but comes from the Dutch tuig, which an online dictionary translates as gear, tackle or rig.

There are, of course, native Russian words for all of these things: ларь (box); ларец (small box); короб (trunk); сумка (bag); свёрток (roll); or связка (bundle).

I don't know why they didn't stick around in everyday traveling Russian. My totally uninformed, speculative, armchair etymology theory is that long ago the majority of Russians — like the majority of everyone else on earth — didn't travel, and so they didn't have words for travel necessities at their mental fingertips. When foreign merchants or officials appeared, pointed to their luggage and used their native word for it, that word filled kind of an empty niche in the language.

In any case, the Louis Vuitton structure on the square provoked what is called большой общественный резонанс (lively public discussion). One parliamentarian said it was wrong to put it "на сакральном месте Российского государства" (in a sacred place for the Russian state). A journalist argued that if you've got a mausoleum on the square and dead people buried in the Kremlin walls, a trunk is a real improvement. But he jokingly supported the patriotic call: Все на штурм чемодана! (Everyone storm the suitcase!)

A website poster continued the joke with a suggestion: Необходимо учредить орден "за победу над чемоданом" (We need to establish a "victory over the suitcase" award).

One commenter considered what might be in the suitcase: Путин вспомнил фокус с Троянским конём и повелел убрать чемодан подальше от Кремля (Putin remembered that trick with the Trojan horse and ordered them to move the suitcase farther from the Kremlin).

Another recalled a Russian fairy tale: В сундуке лисица, а в лисице утка, а в утке яйцо, да не простое яйцо (In the trunk is a fox, in the fox is a duck, in the duck is an egg, but not just any egg).

Others thought it was a hint to pack up and leave: У всех теперь чемоданное настроение? (Does everyone have wanderlust now?)

As for me, I think: The cost of putting up and taking down the pavilion — \$2.7 million. Free advertising from the nonstop media coverage? Priceless.

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