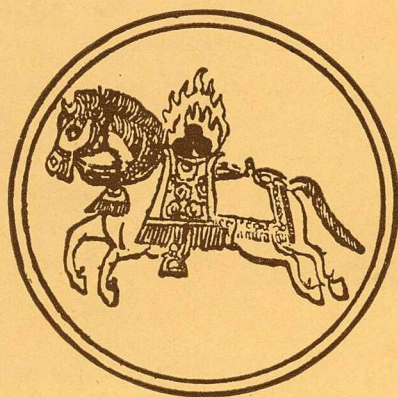


NICHOLAS ROERICH

THE GREAT ARTIST AND THINKER

By
E. W.



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By E. W.

On October 10th 1937 it will be forty years of the academicianship of the celebrated Russian artist and philosopher Nicholas Roerich, which date coincides with the fiftieth anniversary of his artistic, literary and scientific activities. The entire Buddhist world will greet this day with much rejoicing, and in admiration of the great work which Nicholas Roerich is doing for the cause of Art and Culture. Amidst his innumerable paintings dedicated to all the great teachings of the world, there are many which are very close to our hearts and our readers will remember some of the masterpieces reproduced on the pages of this magazine.

One is astounded at the unabating creativeness of the master and every way sign of his life is an inspiring impulse for the younger generation. In his essay "Half a Century" Nicholas Roerich recalls the first steps of his independent life, when being yet only half through the school, he was already moved to self-expression. As a school-boy he writes his first essays, but has to place them under a pen-name, anticipating that the editor might not accept the work from so young an aspirant. At the same time he starts to excavate ancient tumuli in the estate of his father, called "Iswara", makes notable finds and surprises his teachers by presenting them with archaeological treasures. He sends his first sketches to magazines, and their publication discloses his name for the first time to the attention

of the public. His fears that the teachers would disapprove of such early independent actions, luckily do not materialize and whilst still at school he already openly appears with illustrations for Russian classics, like Gogol, Pushkin etc.

In 1893 Roerich joins the Academy of Fine Arts and unusually quickly graduates in 1897. Armed already with the diploma of the Academy, and having at the same time graduated also from the University in the department of Law, Roerich enters the Tretiakoff Gallery with his painting "The Messenger" thus inscribing his name on the pages of history of Russian Art.

"In the history of contemporary Russian art, the individuality of Roerich in its contact with the last achievements and discoveries in this sphere, stands out independently, original and perhaps somewhat unexpected" With these words Serge Ernst opens his Monograph dedicated to Roerich. The author has indeed sensitively defined the element of originality, independence and the constantly renewed unexpectedness in the whole creative art of Roerich. Thus is defined the first period of the artist's activity.

Truly, when we shall now turn to the rich creativeness of Roerich since the world war, then it will become evident why the different critics underline not only the special style of Roerich, but also the inexhaustibleness of his creativeness.

After a long series of exhibitions in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, England, in 1920-22 there were organized on invitation of the Chicago Art Institute rotary exhibitions of Roerich's paintings in some forty cities of the United States. These brilliant exhibitions were crowned by the construction of a skyscraper Roerich Museum in New York, built by a group of admirers. This building houses also

other artistic and cultural institutions, founded by Roerich: The Master Institute of United Arts, the Roerich Museum Press, The International Art Centre and the Urusvati Himalayas Research Institute with a base in the Himalayas,—the natural result of the five years' Roerich Expedition in Central Asia. At the same time there was founded in New York the Roerich Society with cultural and educational aims. Since 1929 Roerich Societies have spread over twenty four countries and in them leading personalities of the world of culture participate.

Sulamith Ish-Kishor, in an article in a New-York monthly, thus describes her meeting with Professor Roerich: "At the Roerich Musuem, in an office overlooking the strip of park beyond which one sees the broad stretches of the Hudson River, is to be found a strangely charming magic personality,—the famous artist-exporer, Professor Nicholas Roerich. There is something archaic about his small narrow figure, his thin pointed white beard and his large light blue eyes which have a remote look, candid and clear as those of a very young child. Here is a living being who might have stepped out of an old fairy-tale book,—too honest for a Merlin, too spiritual and beneficent for a Klingsor. It is satisfying to one's artistic sense to hear that the name Roerich is a variation of the medieval Rurik—the Scandinavian prince who came to Russia and ruled Russia in the tenth century,—and that it means "rich in glory". A different kind of glory has been given it by the Roerich of to-day,—a glory much superior in nature to that of the old Viking. 'Simplicity, Beauty and Fearlessness'—expresses his artistic creed."

During the period since 1920, Roerich has painted over 900 paintings around which a whole literature has already grown. The famous Indian Poet Dr. Rabindranath Tagore

writes how deeply he was moved by Roerich's paintings and concludes his appreciative admiration with the significant words: "The Art of Roerich is jealous of its independence because it is great". Another well-known artist of India, Asit Kumar, points out that "in Roerich's paintings is expressed the true foresight of the Orient, and that nowhere has the splendour of the Himalayas been expressed so magnificently as in the paintings of Roerich". The National Historical Museum of Peking, where there also is a painting of Roerich, greeted the master with the following address: "We have ordinarily looked up to you, Sir, on account of your Occidental and Oriental learning, your reputation being exalted with the T'aishen and the Constellation of the Great Bear. In speaking of antiquities you have much knowledge and your eyes can cover a period of five thousand years. You have visited the most remote places, your travels covering ninety thousand li. Among connoisseurs you are a most renowned artist having the ability to depict sound and shadows and are reputed to possess much ability and skill. Although the objects of antiquity in quantity are comparable to the sea, Sir, you are among the initiate and know and appreciate them all". The voice of Mongolia is also most significant: "Such great universal personalities as Roerich walk the Path of the Bodhisattvas of the highest order as absolute lights of the century. In this age, the age of egoism, their great deeds will bring limitless results to those countries through which these lofty personages have passed. Therefore, our country considers the visit of Professor Roerich to our country as a great honour and joy!"

Besides a large series of paintings dedicated to the grandeur of the Himalayas with great understanding of the deep wisdom of the Orient, Roerich has lately also

expressed in several paintings the idea of the Banner of Peace, which is so close to his heart.

In the Roerich Hall in Bruges is exhibited his large canvas "The Great Mother of the Banner of Peace", under the Sign of which already 3 World Conferences have taken place, bringing into life the Roerich Pact for the protection of artistic and scientific treasures of the world. In 1935 the Pact was signed by twenty one countries.

Besides the Museum in Bruges, during the last years following Halls have been opened in honour of Roerich: in Benares, Allahabad, Belgrad, Riga, Zagreb, Buenos Aires, Kyoto, Praha and the Paris Centre was further enriched with new paintings.

One may write many volumes about the manifold creative works of Roerich, who besides painting is the author of a whole series of significant books like "Adamant", "Heart of Asia", "Altai Himalaya", "Realm of Light", "Shambhala", "Flame in Chalice", etc. published in English, French, Russian, Japanese and Spanish. The five-year Central Asiatic Expedition of Roerich has also been described in a volume by Dr. Georges de Roerich "Trails to Inmost Asia", published by the Yale University Press and recently also printed in French. One could dwell on many more significant questions, but for the present let us discuss the inner meaning of Roerich's paintings.

While in many art lovers, Roerich's paintings arouse admiration by their colour and form, for others these paintings are further a source of inner contemplation. There are people, who are vividly interested in the question, what Roerich paints at the moment, because for them Roerich's paintings are like indicating road marks—like prophecies. In literature it has often been pointed out that many paintings of Roerich, completed in 1913 and in the

beginning of 1914, just before the war, were of prophetic nature. The conception of these paintings indeed quite clearly indicated the events of the near future. And if we shall turn to the creation of the master, from the very first paintings, we shall see quite evident prophecies of historical happenings. Let us take his painting of 1897 "The Messenger" or the painting of 1898 "The Council of Elders" or "The March" of 1899 and "The Building of a City" of 1904 and shall we not see the prelude of the subsequent developments in Russia, the period of the "National Duma", all sorts of councils and conferences.

The next series from 1910 to 1913 again points to the nearest predestined future. In 1910 the "Last Angel" flies over the flaming country. Then "St. Nicholas" for the last time goes round the then still peaceful Russian Temples, and finally in 1913 is awakened the "Great Serpent". This conception in several variations, one: "The Serpent awakes" and the other: "The Cry of the Serpent", apparently worried the Spirit of the artist.

Later in 1913 and before March 1914 Roerich painted the well-known canvasses, which already after six months proved to be prophetic. "The Conflagration" shows a castle aflame, on the bas relief is a Belgian lion and a knight stands on guard. Then we see "Cloudy Crowns" where kings give an oath in some alliance, and in the air, in form of clouds, their crowns fly away. Another painting "Human Deeds" shows terrified wise men looking upon a city under destruction and "The Predestined City" shows the historical Kremlin. This painting was in Maxim Gorky's collection, who called Roerich "the greatest intuitivist".

In 1915 was completed the painting "Three Joys" and does it not remind of the future of Russia? "The Vision"

also indicates some events in the spiritual world and in 1916 appears "The Boundary of the Kingdom", and now when the artist is in the Himalayas one can understand this Vision of the Himalayan Ranges. Let us also not forget that in 1916 in the Christmas number of the largest Moscow newspaper "The Russian World" Roerich published his most significant novel "Fears", in which he quite definitely depicts many signs on the threshold of most important events. The novel concludes with the address to the symbolical uncle Michael, accusing him of negligence and ignorance which was to result in many happenings.

Beginning from 1925 and up to now many beautiful Images of St. Serginus were created. In 1926 there resounds the "Command of Rigden Jyalpo" and does not this painting turn the attention of people to the East, which is at present so meaningful? Of the same deep conception is the painting of the same year "Unspilled Chalice". In 1928 the attention is concentrated upon America and the threatened "Atlantis" appears, as if foreseeing the crisis which took place during the following year. In 1932 the "Mother of the Banner of Peace" is completed, also in foreboding of the necessity of this Banner of salvation. In the Himalayas now, Roerich has painted "Sanota Protectrix" and "The Pilgrim of the White City". Again the spirit of the artist is moved by pre-visions and his heart pains for the world, which is at present so much in danger. In another of the latest paintings "Armageddon 1936" people implore protection from fiery calamity. What may this prophecy mean? Roerich's Messengers and Pilgrims always appear in time. Also always in time are Roerich's strongholds encircled by fiery signs. It means that Roerich appeals in time to the Great Mother of the world, praying to unfurl the Banner of Peace.

The paintings of Roerich before the great war were completed in haste and with unusual tension. With the same inner knowledge the artist directs himself to the images of the East and to the protection of cultural treasures. This is not a mental reasoning, but one feels in the course of fifty years of creative work the same inspiration from above, which has already been noticed and appreciated by many of the best thinkers. And just now when so much is spoken of the artistic value of Roerich's paintings, I think it is the right time to point out the above facts, which have already become part of history.

I shall conclude with a passage from the famous American writer Claude Bragdon: "In the history of fine arts certain individuals have appeared from time to time, whose work has a unique and profound quality which differentiates them from their contemporaries, making it impossible to classify them in any known category and to ally them with any school, because they resemble themselves only—and one another, like some spaceless and timeless order of initiates. Such were Leonardo, Rembrandt, Durer, Blake and in other fields Beethoven, Balzac, Rodin...Roerich in his life, in his character and in his art reveals himself as a member of this fraternity". For thirty-five years—since the time of his first exhibition in Russia, he has been going up and down the world—Europe, America, Asia—absorbing the auras of diverse peoples, making pilgrimages to remote places and always and everywhere scattering wisdom, planting seeds of beauty".

Thus in the Himalayas Roerich incessantly works for the benefit of humanity. May his blessed creativeness continue to bring Light and Joy for many years to come and may "Chintamani", carried by the white steed of happiness, enrich his life with further glory!

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