

The Art of Nicholas Roerich

Great things are done when men and mountains meet,  
Things are not done by jostling in the streets.

Blake.

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In the modern world of cynicism, boredom, frustration and scepticism, a world where we listen to the sound of "rat's feet over broken glass in our dry cellars" and where we apprehend that "things fall apart their centre cannot hold", the artist has a tendency to present the disintegrating world in a disintegrated form, like Impressionism, surrealism, Cubism and futurism. He is apt to be either shockingly obscure in communication or to borrow a phrase from musical criticism 'short minded'. He suspends a line a space, as it were and hopes that the audience will understand. He is very much in the position of a man, who throws his piece of bread on the foam of the ocean, in the hope that it will come back to him buttered. So modern painting is never a coherent unit in a form of emotional and poetic argument, though it possesses invertebrate qualities.

In such a crazy, almost maddening world of art, Nicholas Roerich gives to the average man that ecstasy of joy that permeates the human soul in moments of communion with the one, that manifests itself in the multiplicity of the cosmic system and thereby consecrates it with its own hues. Roerich seems to believe that the cosmic process is dynamically moving, throbbing, living, conscious of itself and capable of speaking to the mind of man, only if it would care to listen to the wisdom that is to be imparted. Very few artists in the world have



ever realised the fundamental unity that exists in created things, for they have always been caught up in the whirling vortex of time. Looking at Roerich's painting one realises how exquisitely, everything in the Universe is fitted to the biological accident Man. Man is a part of Nature's Being, organically related and it is in Nature herself that Man realises himself, and knows himself sublime. The realisation of the essential unity leads man to knowledge, wisdom and love, those values than man vainly seeks in other fields of life. It is there that his essential freedom resides. It is there that he can find an everlasting solution to the ills of existence. Then and only then man begins to feel that 'Music, moonlight and passion' are essentially identical. He transcends the flux of time and begins to realise that every moment that had seemed so irritatingly painfully is converging to a point where it attains Nirvana.

That is the Nature of the ecstasy that one gets while gazing at the paintings like "The Strings of the Waterfall", "She leads him", "The Bhagwan" and "The Buddha". Nature appears in her pristine majesty, untouched by the ravaging, plundering, devastating hands of man that has drifted away from her benevolent influence. The sweep of the cosmic rhythm, the immensities of the desolate horizons, the gigantic, almost at times gaunt rocks and throbbing precipices, and last of all the organically related accidental creature man, so insignificantly defined on the canvas, move in an ecstatic trance to the sublime tranquility that transcends the Universe and yet is manifest in it. The more one gazes at those canvases the more the imagination perceives that every line, every tone and half



tone is poised so cleverly and yet would move with lyric ecstasy to its destined goal. Of course, the perception is almost snail horn-perception. It is never a sudden revelation. It cannot be. But once the imagination is kindled, one apprehends that he is lifted from the earth and is moving with the clouds "wreathed and curled" and like Keats cries "And more than ever rich it seems to die." At that moment the colours scintillate, with all their glacial effects and behind the strings of the waterfall, one sees the glory of the ~~unsculpted~~ unsculptured image. You see it and yet it eludes you. It tantalises and yet it seems to whisper "I am the truth" and the music is my voice." Such whisperings were heard by Roerich and he redeemed them from decay. The redemption from decay of such whisperiness and such visions constitutes great Art.

In pure Nature-scapes, like the Himalayas<sup>n</sup> series, the Indian realises a greater kinship, for he begins to visualise what his Indo-Aryan ancestors felt - over the snow-capped peaks, wanders the world Yogi and for his delight the sky changes its colours, the winds vary their music, the Ganges and the Jumna flow with their ~~an~~ orchestral chaunt and the snow preserves its chastity. No Indian artist for ages together even felt or realised the still music of the Himalayas. Roerich knows and depicts, not only the psychology of the Himalayas, but also the feeling that these rocks are eternally poised because they are drunk with the milk of Paradise. He has wandered and watched them from varied angles and we who jostle in the streets have only to look at the canvases to know the truth.

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