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Art as a Way of the Future

An Appreciation of the Work and Message of
Nicholas Roerich

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WHILE the world is in flames there comes a message of beauty like a call from a distant star: a monumental Monograph on the Art of Nicholas Roerich, published by the Roerich Museum in Riga under the editorship of A. Prande with magnificent colour and half-tone reproductions and a very instructive text by Barnett D. Conlan.

There will be people who say: What can art mean to a world in which human lives are sacrificed in millions, where whole countries are being devastated and all cultural values which humanity had developed in milleniums are trampled under foot! When the most fundamental rights have lost their validity, what can art and beauty mean to man? While struggling for their bare existence, can men afford to direct their attention to things which are not of immediate necessity? This is what many will think if in these times one dares to speak of art, beauty, and culture. It is because they think that art is a luxury, a superfluous by-product of the human mind, good enough as an enjoyment of idle hours, but without further influence on life.

But quite on the contrary it is just art that makes human life *human*, it is art that raises man above the animal! Art is the language of a higher consciousness, freed from the narrow scopes of animal want and utility. It is precisely the lack of this consciousness which has caused man to fall back into the animal state where brutal force and blind instincts dominate all other qualities of life. An eminent scientist, Prof. Alexander, (quoted on page 169 of the Monograph under review) comes to a similar conclusion:

"The Western World is now suffering from the limited moral outlook of the three previous generations, during which the most advanced industrial countries treated art as a frivolity. The soul would wither without fertilisation from its transient experiences. This fertilisation of the soul is the reason for the necessity of art."

This necessity is now even greater, because we are going through experiences which otherwise might kill the last remnants of spiritual life. The horrors of mechanisation which have descended upon humanity are the outcome of mental lethargy, in which the mind renounces

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the sovereignty over its products and allows them to be misused and multiplied until they run amok and suffocate all life.

"The material and mechanical efforts of the last century have left civilisation in the position of a man who has come to create a highly organized body without a soul, and, as soul and spirit are not to be manufactured, he is in danger of being caught in a gigantic web of soulless organism, whose joyless existence must eventually drive him to self-destruction." (Conlan, p. 30).

Art as the antithesis of mechanization, of the soulless repetition of dead form, is the only remedy which is able to dissolve the rigid crust which threatens to engulf human life. Art is the animated and harmonious expression of inner experience. It may take the form of a song or of a religion, of a poem or of a picture, of an architecture or of a philosophy, of a sculpture or of a symphony. It contains the characteristics of life, completeness, harmony, individuality and consciousness. It frees us from all that is dead, incomplete, piecemeal disharmonious, mechanical and dull. The greatness of a work of art depends on the depth and intensity of experience and the force of expression. Depth corresponds to universality, it reveals the common roots of life. The intensity of experience and the force of expression are based on individuality. All great art, therefore, bears the stamp of universality and individuality at the same time.

The deepest experiences of humanity have been embodied in the forms of religion. They are, therefore, the greatest art-creations of man, and in spite of their collective origin they are as individual in their form (expression) as they are universal in their essence. Those who try to break this form in order to lay bare the universal foundation, end with a few generalizations and commonplaces, which have neither the power of conviction nor the fire of inspiration: they leave us cold because they have been deprived of individuality through which life can express itself. Those, on the other hand, who deny the universal essence of all form, end in a rigid dogmatism which separates them from their fellow men and deprives them of that spiritual unity through which the diversity and individuality of life are correlated and harmonized.

Only those few who steer clear of these two extremes are able to see the beauty and profound art of religion and the religious nature of true art. Nicholas Roerich is one of them, and as he combines the creative genius of the artist with the religious sensitiveness of the mystic, he is able to interpret the beauty of religious visions and ideals and to inspire his work, even if its subject is of apparently mundane nature, as in the representation of landscape and architecture, with a mystic sense which transforms the external appearance of nature into symbols of inner experience.

"His religious outlook would seem to differ from that of most people in being much more religious. Most believers adhere to some particular scheme or creed to which they attach more importance than to the living spirit. Roerich's belief reminds one, in some ways, of Wordsworth's: it is something that saturates all his art and writings and at every moment of the day. This is significant when we remember that Wordsworth had the same adoration for mountains. It suggests that all deep spirituality is derived from the mountains, and that the lofty regions of the earth are, as it were, the dwelling place of the Higher Consciousness." (Conlan, p. 159)

For this reason Roerich left the places of his triumphs in the art-world - St. Petersburg, Moscow, Paris, New York - and retired into the sacred mountain fastness of the Himalaya after having traversed the whole of Tibet and Central Asia during many years of travel. No artist has done a similar thing before him, nor has any explorer been better qualified than he who on account of a strange inner relationship with the people and the nature of those distant regions did not move about there as a stranger among strangers, but rather like one who comes home from a long and adventurous journey and recognizes bit by bit the places and people and things associated with his distant youth. At the beginning of his career, as an artist of international repute Roerich was called upon to paint the settings for Russian Opera, like Prince Igor, Sadko, Snow Maiden, Khovanschina, Tzar Saltan, the Maid of Pskov, and the Rite of Spring. These settings do not only reveal the wealth of his imagination but actually many scenes and things which came true in his later life. Was it a kind of clairvoyance which made him depict his own future or was it perhaps a remembrance of places and circumstances which he had experienced in a previous life and which irresistibly drew him back to the lands of his past?

Once while he was working in one of the rooms of the old palace of the former kings of Western Tibet, his family who had come with him, exclaimed: "Why, this is the very room of the King of Berendei!" and they stood astonished to see the artist working in almost the identical scenery which he had painted for this ballet many years before. Conlan, in relating this story continues:

"With a ballet like the Rite of Spring where the scenery is entirely mythic and prehistoric one could hardly expect, of course, such a coincidence to happen. But it does happen. Among the mountain fastnesses of Kashmir Roerich suddenly comes across the Rite of Spring.

It is Spring Day. The same fires are burning, there are the same costumes and dances, the same sort of music, so that he himself has to exclaim "When we composed the Rite of Spring together with Stravinsky we could hardly conceive that Kashmir would greet us with its very setting." (p. 50)

In Mongolia the Artist had similar experiences. He discovered many of the designs which he had previously created for the Stage;

and when the Siberian writer George Grebenstchikoff relates that "Mongols from Ordos, seeing Roerich, took him for one of themselves," it shows how much he really belongs to the East.

Among Tibetans I found a similar attitude. While staying in one of the monasteries which Roerich had visited on his journey to Central Asia the monks described him to me as a distinguished Chinese dignitary and a great follower of the Buddha. It was only many years later that I came to know that Roerich indeed had been in a high official position during his stay in China, but as to his adherence to the Buddhadharma we only need to see Roerich's art to understand the dominating role which the personalities and teachings of the Buddha and his followers play in the life of the Artist. Since the highlands of Asia have taken possession of his soul, the Buddha has entered his heart and all his paintings and writings breathe the universal spirit of Buddhism. Whereever this spirit has found a living expression, be it in religious monuments, sanctuaries, temples, and monasteries, which like citadels of faith tower into the sky, or in the forms of popular saints or mythological figures and events which mirror the higher reality of an invisible world, the artist has seized upon all these manifestations of a living faith. While knowing and recognizing the philosophical foundations of Buddhism he does not look down upon the forms of popular imagination as aberrations and corruptions, but with the profound instinct of the artist for a reality which begins where philosophy ends in paradoxes, he intuitively felt their esoteric value. Where others could see nothing but superstition, Roerich discovered beauty and through beauty he was able to approach the problems before him in the right spirit, until he was able to understand the significance of what first appeared merely strange in its outer form. Similarly, where others could see nothing but bleak, inhospitable mountains or at the best strange geological formations the Artist felt the great rhythm of life, a gigantic creative movement in them, a true symbol of the creative spirit through which art alone is possible.

"What beauty is there in the word 'creation' " he exclaims. "In all languages it convinces by reason of its power and the possibilities it opens up, for it is the symbol of joy and movement and of everything that breaks down the limits of dead convention. It is something that can overcome the 'impossible', lead us towards the conquest of fresh possibilities and procure the victory over routine and shapelessness. Movement is of its very essence and we might define it as an expression of cosmic law and of beauty itself." (p. 175)

It is the attitude which enables the artist to understand the majestic language of mountains and to raise the forms of the visible world to the level of cosmic symbols and inner reality.

The great teachers of humanity must have experienced a similar influence of the mountains. The Buddha lived for many years in a

mountain cave, he revealed the most profound aspects of his teaching in his great cosmic sermons on the Vulture's Peak. Christ's teachings culminate in the Sermon on the mount, Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai, the Rishis of old retired into the Himalayas, and Loatse disappeared into the mountains of Tibet.

"In Chinese the sign for 'man' when combined with that for 'mountain' gives the compound for 'spirit', and Chinese literature, whether it be that of the poets, Buddhists or Taoists, is full of reference to the mountain.

"There where lofty peaks glitter overhead and the waterfalls resound, man attains to perfection."

"The sages, poets and saints come from the mountain and return there".

"Towards the evening of his life he departed for the mountains and was transformed into spirit." (p. 161).

Roerich sums up these facts in the words: "All teachers journeyed to the mountains. The higher knowledge, the most inspired songs, the most superb sounds and colours are created on the mountains. On the highest mountains there is the Supreme; the highest mountains stand as witnesses of the Great Reality." (p. 178).

Besides the movement and plastic value of forms, the deep, bright, sometimes dazzling, colours in the pure atmosphere of the Tibetan and Central Asian highlands are another source of inspiration. One must have actually seen them in order to be able to appreciate fully the masterly way in which Roerich has rendered them in his paintings. Colour reproductions very seldom give the full scale of values of his colours which combine strong contrasts with the most delicate gradations, the latter especially in the treatment of the sky. Roerich is not only a master of mountains but also a master of skies. In black-and-white (half-tone) reproductions, where generally all plastic forms and the vigour of design and composition are well brought out, the sky generally appears as a plain, immovable background, whereas in reality it contains a wealth of colour, subtle movement and depth. The spatial feeling in Roerich's skies is generally as strong as the plastic qualities of his mountains, architectures and figures. He possesses a neolithic sense of surface values for the roughness of an old weather-beaten wall, the peeling plaster of a Chorten (Stupa), the smoothness of boulders in a river, the sharp-cut forms of granite rocks, the softness of rolling hillocks, the rigid architectural formation of high mountains, the scintillating freshness of ice-covered peaks and the supple plasticity of snow-fields. The love with which every stone and rock is moulded in Roerich's pictures gives them a peculiar reality in which the qualities of nature and those of a highly abstract art are combined. There is nothing accidental or hazy in these pictures, every form is clearly defined and saturated with consciousness. In spite of his great ability for abstract composition and his spiritual conception of the

world he does not avoid the outer reality of nature but uses its concentrated forms for the 'materialization' and intensification of his visions. It is interesting to see that just in those pictures where the artistic simplification and abstraction are most prominent there is a nearness to Nature which a mere reproduction of optical impressions would have never achieved. It is because the artist has realized the essence of nature within himself. The words which a Chinese writer on art wrote many centuries ago can be aptly applied to this case:

"The artist with his sovereign power seizes on nature and transforms it. He does this not because he believes he can improve it, nor because he wishes to imitate it, but because he wishes to become one with it. In this way he creates in the spirit of Nature something unseen before." (Quoted by B. D. Conlan, p. 100).

"The Chinese artist to a certain degree freed himself from the tyranny of bodily limitations and centered his consciousness in spiritual nature, and he was thus free to express abstract conceptions in a less conventional form. He withdrew himself from his lower consciousness, from the subservience to the laws of nature through a process of abstraction which, indeed, to some extent is operative in all artistic creation, but which is carried much further in Chinese art than in that of Western races." (Dr. Oswald Siren, quoted by Conlan on p. 166).

'To withdraw oneself from the lower consciousness',—in these words lies the whole meaning of art and its function in the development of humanity. In these words lies the promise which art holds out for the future: to overcome the illusion of our narrow egohood and to attain that higher consciousness which enables man to realize his true, universal nature.

This ideal state is symbolized by the sacred realm of Shambala, the model of a future human society, in which Rigden Gyalpo establishes the Rule of Righteousness (of 'the Good Law') over the whole world, like the World-Ruler Sudassana, who in a later birth was to attain Enlightenment as the Buddha Gautama. The mystic teachings of the Kalachakra, the cosmic 'Wheel of Time', in which the whole universe is represented in the form of a mandala, are said to have been handed down by King Suchandra of Shambala, to whom they were revealed by the Buddha shortly before his Parinirvana. (Should there be some connection between Suchandra and Subhadra, the last disciple of the Buddha, just as Sudassana, the Chakravartin of the past is the model of Rigden Gyalpo, the Chakravartin of the future, who is regarded to be a re-incarnation of King Suchandra?)

The sacred land of Shambala where these teachings were preserved and from where they were brought back to India in the tenth century in the form of the Kalachakra Tantra, is supposed to exist even now invisible to the profane world, but as an active centre of spiritual

forces, working for the good of humanity in many ways, nursing the seeds of a great future and preparing the world for the advent of a new order and for the coming of Buddha Maitreya, the Lord of Love and Compassion.

Already now the eyes of Tibet are directed to the great Coming One. All over the country we find "Signs of Maitreya" in the form of huge images of super-human size; and almost every Tibetan temple possesses a symbolical picture of Shambala, the future Realm of Glory, in the form of a painted mandala (generally as a mural painting), representing the Eternal City, the Buddhist version of the Castle of the Holy Grail, which latter here takes the form of the flaming jewel of the Dharmachakra. While the battle between the forces of Light and Darkness rages outside the walls of the sacred city, Rigden Gyalpo is enthroned in its centre, sending his messengers into the four quarters of the world.

One must be conscious of this mystic background if one wants fully to appreciate the spiritual message of a great number of Roerich's Tibetan paintings, just as for instance medieval Christian paintings, apart from their value as works of art, convey a special message to those who are familiar with the cultural atmosphere of Christianity, while to those who know nothing about it they will never reveal their deepest meaning.

Paintings like "Namtar of the New Era", "Chanrezi", "Chintamani"; "The Command of Rigden Djapo", "Sign of Maitreya", "Shambala". "Song of Rigden Djapo", while using the language of an ancient religious symbolism, contain experiences of great actuality and "are signs of a New Era, of new psychic perceptions, of a subtle world which is all about us, waiting until we are sufficiently evolved to perceive it." (Conlan, p. 157).

In Roerich's art the distant past and the distant future become forces of the present, and if we look deep enough we shall discover that both merge into each other in the eternal cycle of the universe, as revealed in the mysteries of the Kalachakra.

Thus Roerich is not only a great artist who enriches our life through the aesthetic value of his work, but a torch-bearer of Shambala, a prophet of the Age of Maitreya, whose coming depends on the preparedness and co-operation of each single individual.

It is the aim of his art to make the individual conscious of this great task, to kindle the spirit of constructive co-operation for the building up of a new world, because, as he himself proclaims: "The Beautiful is the great highway which leads to eternal Unity" and "Obstacles are only new possibilities to create beneficent energy. Without battle there is no victory."

It is this spirit which will convert the power of Chengis Khan into that of Maitreya.
