

NICHOLAS ROERICH
and Arts Legendary Future
By Barnett D. Conlan

The work of Nicholas Roerich, which comprises some five thousand canvas may be seen in most of the public art galleries throughout the world. The early or Russian phase has been described at some length by N. Jarintzov, in an article which appeared in the Studio of April, 1920, in which he laid stress on the Russian side of Roerich's genius--in some ways as evident as that of Pushkin or Rimsky-Korsakoff.

This was the period of Roerich's stage settings for Russian opera, the dramas of Wagner, Grieg, and Maeterlinck and Strawinsky's Rite of Spring

In his lectures on Russian Art, Roerich shows that the work of the early ikon painters, hitherto considered naïve and awkward was, on the contrary, a very advanced and mature science derived from a profound knowledge of decorative art.

The Byzantine tradition, so much older than that of the west, seems still to be but imperfectly understood.

Roerich has studied it in the murals of Rostov and Yaroslavl, where the splendour of Venice merges into the strangeness of the far East. Moreover he has an innate sense of prehistoric times. He has been excavating all his life and immense collection of neolithic implements has convinced him that the stone Age was a period in which man had a more lively sense of beauty than to-day.

The primordial architecture of the earth, in its aspect of rock and mountain, and the spiritual aura of many a Byzantine mural have combined to give his work an original character and a primitive oriental flavour.

Roerich paints, I imagine, because he carries with him a strong religious sense of life and art which he wishes to express. The greatest periods in Western painting were no doubt those when art was religious. In recent times religion has been placed by "technique," so that most of the painters

who count in the last twenty-five years have had something like a religious respect for technique.

This preoccupation with the technical devices to the exclusion of all other interests might, if it continued, lead painting into an impasse, much as the technical progress in chemistry and engineering, if left to itself, may one day culminate in the technical perfection of the air raid.

It is possible then, that art, like Western civilization, itself, may, sooner or later, be faced with the problem of means and ends, and that it will turn to some deeper source than that of technical efficiency.

How this might occur it is not possible to say, for art being autonomous is not likely to admit of outside interference. It is interesting however, to note that there are artists like Roerich whose inspiration is not ~~likely~~ exclusively of the order of technical innovation and research but is none the less derived from painting. Roerich is one of the most active artists of our time. Travelling constantly for the last thirty years, through Europe, Asia and America, he has contacted the spirit of twenty-five countries and foresees that we are approaching a New Age in which art will play an all-important part.

In America and elsewhere he has founded art centres and drawn up the Roerich pact and Banner for the protection of monuments and art treasures, and this convention already signed by more than 21 countries may some day prove to be as effective as the Red Cross.

His paintings and art activities would seem to derive from a common source, which is a sort of fiery conviction that life can be made better and even international concord reached through the application of art.

Whatever be the result of this tremendous optimism, his work continues constitutes one of the most original panoramas in modern painting. In 1913 he has produced a series of works: The Lurid Glare, Human Deeds, The Doomed City, The Cry Of a Serpent, The Last Angel, all so obviously prophetic of what was coming, that I see no reason to doubt these

present-day conviction of his of a brighter future based on the higher activities of the mind, made concrete through art.

In painting the scenery for Prince Igor he was depicting an episode from his own life. years later we find that he has settled down in these tents, with the same smoke rising ~~fr~~ from the camp fires, and there stand the banners silhouetted against the green afterglow. He is on his expedition through Turkestan.

Again when working in the ancient palace of the King of Ladak, on the edge of the Tibetan precipices, his family who have come to meet him exclaim: "Why, this is the chamber of the King of Berēⁿdei!" because he is surrounded by the very stage setting which he had produced twenty years before, for the "Snow Maiden" of Rimsky Korsakov.

As he threads his way through the mountain fastnesses of Kashmir he suddenly comes across the setting for the Rite of Spring. Fires are burning there are the same costumes, the almost prehistoric dances, and the same style of music, so that he exclaims: "When we composed the Rite of Spring together with Stravinsky, we could hardly conceive that Kashmir would greet us with its very setting."

Roerich is perhaps the only case in the history of art of a painter who has carried out the exploits of Marco Polo or Sven Hedin. His four years of expedition through Mongolia, the Gobi, Tibet and Chinese Turkestan which began in 1924 resulted in some hundreds of remarkable paintings and eventually decided him to take up his residence in the Himalayas.

Having worked for years alongside the artist Lamas of Tibet he has come to have a comprehensive knowledge of the art of the East and is himself in many ways an Eastern painter.

One might almost say that it is his painting which has led him into Asia. In his early Russian work and stage settings there are, as we have seen, glimpses of much that he afterwards painted in Turkestan, Mongolia and Tibet, and his expedition through the heart ~~at~~ of Asia was the way

in which his art evolved.

His visit to these parts was as natural as that of ~~k~~ other artists to Paris, and when he reaches the heights round Ladak and Tibet we are not surprised to find him producing a series of paintings entitled "His own Country".

Both in style and inspiration Roerich's work is Byzantine and Central Asia. It is interesting to note that many of these landscapes which he painted on his way through Central Asia have a sculptural simplicity of outline which we find in the reliefs of Han dynasty.

These mountain masses of pure turquoise or pale green have that semi-opaque beauty which we associate with jade, and he has an ear for the sonorous character of these places and speaks of the Altai as "the most blue, the most reverberant of mountains."

He has often been compared with Chavannes and for the colour with Gauguin and van Gogh, but these pure blues, these jade tinted greens have also an affinity with the painting of Central Asia, the art of Tun Huang.

When we consider that the landscape elements in Byzantine art come from these parts and from China, then we have less hesitation ~~in~~ in believing that Roerich belongs to the Eastern order of painting.

Western art, however, is after all merely hemispheric, and there other traditions and techniques which are older and perhaps more spiritually significant.

That Roerich derives from these Eastern traditions makes his work of especial interest to-day when the movement of Western painting would seem to tend towards the abstract art of China and formalised art of Persia and the steppes.

He has also the Eastern approach in matters of technique. The Chinese artist only set to work after he had concentrated all his spiritual energies; the Byzantine image maker only when he had prayed and fasted. Roerich by his belief in active form of Yoga puts into his work the same sort of energy that urges him to scale the Tibetan precipices which are not only physical but psychic and metaphysical.

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In the command of Rigden Tsyepo we see the legendary King of Shambhala giving fiery orders from the heart of the mountain. Roerich, who has ^{an} innate knowledge of Tibetan legends, has imparted a glow and gyratory movement to the picture which suggests the rhythm of a fiery dynamo. It is significant that this legend which corresponds with the Eastern doctrine of psychic energy should have inspired a composition which, in some ways, evokes the movement of machinery and electricity. It is a work which goes a long way to confirm what Dr. Oswald Siren writing on Chinese art has to say with regard to the origin of artistic creation.

"If one explains art purely through technique one describes merely ~~the~~ the various elements in the genesis of artistic creation. One will be saying nothing about the spiritual mystery which gives the art its power of fascination.

"We have hardly ventured to draw the natural conclusion that the highest expressions of man's soul life, one of which is art, must have their origin in a spiritual will."

His work, however, in other ways, corresponds with the trend of modern art in the last thirty years. He certainly did not go to Asia in search of local colour or fresh subject matter. The greater part of his production is neither naturalistic nor picturesque and in such subjects as The Future the treatment is so highly formal as to resemble a Persian rug or Coptic tapestry.

The discovery of fabulous character of Asia gave him the impetus to continue painting for many years on the edge of these precipices. As he tells us:

"When you already know the beauties of Asia and are accustomed to all the richness of its colours, nevertheless they again astonish you and again elate your feelings, so that you feel able to accomplish the impossible."

And when in the wilds of Ladak he comes across those ancient strongholds Maulbeck and Lamayura-- he has to exclaim: whoever built Lamayura and Maulbeck knew what was true beauty and fearlessness. Before such a

vista Italian cities pale .And these solemn rows of stupas are like joy-
ous torches. Where lies a country equal to these forsaken spots ?Let
us be just and bow before such true beauty."

In his Tibetan landscape in the Louvre Gallery, he has given us a glimpse
of such Lamaic strongholds. Nothing, however, could be less naturalistic in
treatment. The subject, almost monolithic in outline, is lost in chasms of
cobalt and walls of purple and carries its meaning by sheer force of colour.

In a work like his Confucius, the subject is nothing, the treatment
everything.

The figure of the philosopher is a part of the landscape like the rocks
and trees around.

That is the Chinese outlook and it is that of Roerich, which explains
why the beauty of these mountain vistas suggests the work of some Modern
Wang Wei.

One might say that the movement in these brilliant canvases is of a
spiritual rather than a physical order. In the world of to-day which has
become almost wholly intellectual and mechanical, such work might well
be misunderstood, because its dynamism is not of the circumference but
from the centre, so that in a work like the command of Rigden Fyepo one
could quote his own words concerning the New Age. "This is the all vib-
rating Nirvana, not the false Nirvana of immobility but the Nirvana of
the noblest and most intense activity."

And just as the Chinese artist drew much of his inspiration from
the transcendent world of Zen Buddhism, Roerich draws from the
splendours of a legendary future.

Having wandered all over Asia from Altai to the Himalayas and
having heard many things in the temples and around the camp fire he is
ready to assure us that "Now has come the time of the illumination of
Asia."

In the illustrated quarterly Review which he is publishing from
the Himalayas, he sets out his firm conviction that, despite the tragic
aspect of things of to-day, we are none the less approaching a New Age
which will be built upon art.

His contact with the heart of Asia has given him this strong con-
viction of a brighter future built on art, and this, like his painting,
should have an interest to-day when the general trend seems towards an
impasse of destructive machinery.

In these dolorous days when frenzied nations are tearing at each other's throats like mad beasts, it is good to feel that the Voice of Culture, which is synonymous with the Voice of Sanity, has not been stifled out of existence and that there are sympathetic souls, tied by bonds of Benevolence and Love, in every land, yearning for the return of Peace and goodwill among men, when what has been ruthlessly demolished by the hand of Ignorance and Hate will again be rebuilt by the hand of Faith and Love.

Mr. Padmanabhan Tampi has written ~~men~~ me that he is bringing out a new edition of his monograph on your art on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of your stay in India. How fine passes ! It seems to me only the other day when you burst upon our wondering astounded sights in a flood of colour and passionate glory, bringing in your wake new visions of godlike splendour and infinite spiritual power. I cannot speak of others. But much of the sleeping flowers of my fancy have blossomed forth at your magic contact and I shall strive to the end of my days to acquire the poise. The serenity and the courageous benevolence which characterizes all your actions and vivest your soul with special psychic radiance. I join my voice with thousands of others in acclaiming you as one of us and pray that you may live long and happily in our midst for many many years to come....

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Roerich has studied it in the murals of Rostov and Yaroslavl, where the splendour of Venice merges into the strangeness of the Far East. Moreover he has an innate sense of prehistoric times. He has been excavating all his life and his immense collection of neolithic implements has convinced him that the Stone Age was a period in which man had a more lively sense of beauty than he has to day.

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Like the characters in Calderon's plays, his is a case of predestination.

In painting the scenery for Prince Igor he was depicting an episode from his own life. Years later we find that he has settled down in these tents, with the same smoke rising from the camp fires, and there stand the banners

silhouetted against the green afterglow. He is on his expedition through Turkestan.

Again when working in the ancient palace of the King of Ladak, on the edge of the Tibetan precipices, his family who have come to meet him exclaim: "Why this is the chamber of the King of Berendei" because he is surrounded by the very stage setting which he had produced twenty years before for the Snow Maiden of Rimsky Korsakov.

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When we consider that the landscape elements in Byzantine art come from these parts and from China, then we have less hesitation in believing that Roerich belongs to the Eastern order of painting.

His study of Byzantine work had led him to react against the naturalistic tradition implanted in Russia before the war, just as all the Western movements, since Cezanne, have turned against Renaissance painting.

Western art however, is after all merely hemispheric and there are other traditions and techniques which are older and perhaps more spiritually significant.

That Roerich derives from these Eastern traditions makes his work of especial interest to day when the movement of Western painting would seem to tend towards the abstract art of China and the formalized art of Persia and the steppes.

He has also the Eastern approach in matters of technique. The Chinese artist only set to work after he had concentrated all his spiritual energies; the Byzantine image maker only when he had prayed and fasted.

Roerich by his belief in an active form of yoga puts into his work the same sort of energy that urges him to scale the Tibetan precipices, which are not only physical but psychic and metaphysical.

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" We have hardly ventured to draw the natural conclusion that the highest expressions of man's soul life, one of which is art, must have their origin in a spiritual will."

His work however, in other ways, corresponds with the trend of modern art in the last thirty years. He certainly did not go to Asia in search of local colour or fresh subject matter. The greater part of his production is neither naturalistic nor picturesque and in such subjects as ' The Future ' the treatment is so highly formal as to resemble a Persian rug or Coptic tapestry.

In many of the Mongolian and Tibetan paintings there is much to suggest the arabesque and art of the steppe.

It is the discovery of the fabulous character of Asia which has given him the impetus to continue painting for many years on the edge of these precipices. As he tells us :

" When you already know the beauties of Asia and are accustomed to all the richness of its colors, nevertheless they again astonish you and again elate your feelings, so that you feel able to accomplish the impossible. "

And when in the wilds of Ladak he comes across those ancient strongholds - Maulbeck and Lamayura he has to exclaim " Whoever built Lamayura and Maulbeck knew what was true beauty and fearlessness. Before such a vista Italian cities pale. And these solemn rows of stupas are like joyous torches. Where lies a country equal to these forsaken spots? Let us be just and bow before such true beauty."

In his 'Tibetan landscape' in the Louvre gallery, he has given us a glimpse of such Lamaic strongholds. Nothing however could be less naturalistic in treatment. The subject, almost monolithic in outline, is lost in chasms of cobalt and walls of purple and carries its meaning by sheer force of colour.

In a work like his ' Confucius ', the subject is nothing, the treatment everything. The figure of the philosopher is a part of the landscape, like the rocks and trees around. That is the Chinese outlook and it is that of Roerich, which explains why the beauty of these mountain vistas suggests the work of some modern Wang Wei.

One might say that the movement in these brilliant canvases is of a spiritual rather than a physical order. In the world of to day which has become almost wholly intellectual and mechanical such work might well be misunderstood, because its dynamism is not of the circumference but from the centre, so that in a work like the ' Command of Rigden Jyepo ' one could quote his own words concerning the New Age : " This is the all-vibrating Nirvana, not the false Nirvana of immobility but the Nirvana of the noblest and most intense activity "

And just as the Chinese artist drew much of his inspiration from the transcendent world of Zen Buddhism, Roerich catches fire from the splendors of a legendary future.

Having wandered all over Asia from Altai to the Himalaya and having heard many things in the temples and around the camp fire he is ready to assure us that " Now has come the time of the illumination of Asia "

In the illustrated quarterly Review which he is publishing from the Himalayas, he sets out his firm conviction that, despite the tragic aspect of things to day, we are the less approaching a New Age which will be built upon Art. As he puts it : " You outside of art, religion is inaccessible, outside of art, the spirit of nationality lost, outside of art, science is dark. We are introducing art into every manifestation of life "

His contact with the heart of Asia has given him this strong conviction of a brighter future built on art, and this, like his painting, should have an interest to day when the general trend seems towards an impasse of destructive machinery.

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