

NICHOLAS ROERICH:  
HEROES, MYTHS, AND AGELESS MOUNTAINS

by  
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In his paintings, writings, and public life, Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947) expressed a personal philosophy that has inspired many throughout the world. This year, the centennial of his birth, the contributions of Roerich are being celebrated in Europe, Russia, America, and India.

It is April 12, 1961, and from his space capsule more than 200 miles above the earth's surface, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin beholds earth and sky as no man ever has before. The sight so overwhelms him that he later writes in ROAD TO THE STARS, "... the horizon blazed in a bright orange which gradually changed into all the colors of the rainbow: to light blue, blue, violet, black. Words fail to describe the color range. It reminded me of the canvases of Nicholas Roerich."

Gagarin's words pay high tribute to Roerich's bold color sense and the mystical power of his paintings. And the tribute is well deserved. The Roerich Museum, on Manhattan's Upper West Side, has in its collection hundreds of the artist's scenes of ancient Russia and of his life in the Himalayas, all done with forceful hand in his unique style.

1974 is a particularly significant year at the Roerich Museum: it marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Professor Roerich on October 9, 1874, in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Nicholas Roerich was a man of many facets - in the truest sense, a modern-day "Renaissance man." Not only was he an artist, but also writer, philosopher, educator, archaeologist, and Orientalist. He was a man equally at home in two cultures: he spent the first half of his life in Russia, Europe, and the United States; the second half took him to the heights of the Himalayas. His accomplishments made him a well-known figure, yet he never lost the warmth and humanity that won him friends and followers.

Among the influences present from his earliest childhood was his love for India and her mountains. Even as a young boy he was fascinated by a beautiful painting of Kanchenjunga Mountain that hung in his father's office; later, as a painter, he used the same subject for one of his most awe-inspiring canvases. Archaeology



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was another lifelong passion that took shape during Roerich's boyhood: at a very early age he began excavating on his father's estate near St. Petersburg and found implements of the early Slavic peoples.

As it came time for young Roerich to go to the university, it became clear that his father, a well-known attorney, wished his son to follow in his footsteps and study law in St. Petersburg. Roerich himself was deeply interested in art and archaeology but was able to reconcile the different interests by enrolling simultaneously, in 1893, in the faculty of law and the Academy of Fine Arts. (And he was able to graduate from both!)

In 1897 Roerich, still an art student, painted one of the milestones of his career - the work which first brought him to public notice. This early canvas already has the elements of mystery and foreboding characteristic of his later paintings. Called THE MESSENGER in English, it is the Russian subtitle of the work, "Clan Rising Against Clan," that is much more descriptive of its subject: it portrays men of one tribe hurrying upriver to warn another tribe of impending attack. The painting so interested a celebrated Russian art patron named Tretiakov that it now hangs in the world-famous art gallery in Moscow that bears his name.

Roerich's knowledge of archaeology gives us an abundance of detail on the customs and habits of the early Slavs. His interest in archaeology and in the history of Russian culture led him to visit and to paint many of the monuments of Old Russia. His most extensive travels, from 1902 to 1904, resulted in a series of paintings in oil - a medium he was soon to reject completely in favor of tempera.

Despite his interest in archeology and the monuments of Old Russia, Roerich was active in the contemporary artistic movements. In the early part of the 20th century, he was part of a lively organization of Russian artists and art enthusiasts that was to become quite influential. Alexander Benois was their leader; he was joined by such leading artists as Valentin Serov, Mikhail Vrubel, and Leon Bakst. Roerich served for a time as president. The group's biggest undertaking was an ambitious journal, MIR ISKUSSTVA (The World of Art), in which they denounced the realism and nationalism then favored in Russian art, espoused Symbolism, and reported on new movements in Germany, London, and Paris. Editor of the journal was Serge Diaghilev,



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who was to play an important role in one of Roerich's many triumphs.

By 1910 Roerich had visited most of Western Europe, and it was in Paris in May 1913 that he collaborated on what one critic has called "one of the most important artistic events of the 20th century": the premiere of Stravinsky's ballet *THE RITE OF SPRING* at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees. It was the work of several men of genius: Igor Stravinsky, composer; Diaghilev, then director of the Russian Ballet; Vaslav Nijinsky, lead dancer; and Nicholas Roerich. Roerich wrote the libretto, designed the costumes, and painted the striking scenery.

Barnett Conlan writes in his book *MASTER OF THE MOUNTAIN* that only Roerich could have portrayed "... the outer sense of spring - the great spaces of the glowing light, the hard green landscape caught up by the evening glow, but he also gave that inner sense of the sharp, chill sap rising through the pores of the earth, all the acid activity of fresh vegetation as shrill in its movements as the east wind. The colors were hard and clean, the forms rough and primitive..."

*RITE OF SPRING* was not Roerich's only contribution to the stage. He designed costumes and painted decors for the works of some of the best known talents of the day, works such as Rimski-Korsakov operas, Borodin's *PRINCE IGOR*, and the plays of Ibsen and Maeterlinck.

Roerich first came to the United States in 1920 at the invitation of Dr. Robert Harshe, director of the Art Institute of Chicago. This was the beginning of a wildly successful exhibition tour of 29 principal cities that lasted a year and a half. The first showing of the nearly 300 paintings was in December 1920 at Kingore Gallery in New York.

The catalog of the Kingore exhibition pays tribute above all to Roerich's color sense, calling him "a master of tonal gradations, of delicately rendered color oppositions ... the variations are magical in their depth and subtlety." Roerich himself wrote, "Just as a composer when writing the score chooses a certain key to write in, so I paint in a certain key, a key of color, or perhaps I might say a leitmotif of color."

His tempera technique was a simple one. The color "key" chosen, he laid on this color as his ground color and rapidly



painted over the ground until the composition was complete. The intensity of his paintings owes to the brilliance of these "keys" - ultramarine, emerald green, crimson, sapphire, and what the kingore catalog calls his "seemingly endless chromatic variety." Barnett Conlan writes of Roerich's oriental color sense (which he attributes to early exposure to Byzantine art) and considers the tones to be "almost Persian in richness."

Roerich himself wrote very little of how he achieved this remarkable clarity of tone, but he did have some interesting theories on the mystical powers - the therapeutic powers - of color. He wrote about research on the influence of colors on disease. He also wrote poetry of a highly mystical nature in which he cited the symbolic attributes of color: red as courage, blue as peace, green as wisdom. His extensive writings on art are, for the most part, philosophical, focusing on man as creator rather than on Roerich's own technique as an artist.

There are, however, rare exceptions, as in Roerich's book *THE INVINCIBLE*, recently published by the Roerich Museum. One fascinating essay of this collection, "GATES INTO THE FUTURE," gives some insight into Roerich as a technician. He deplores oils as a painting medium on the basis of the "sad changes" that have occurred in many of the oils of past centuries. Cracking and darkening of canvases create "a sort of black veil" rather than "the golden patina of ancient lacquers." Another unfortunate result he sees is pentimenti (reappearances of underpainting due to increasing transparency of the over-painting upon aging): "galloping horses prove to have eight legs."

Roerich recommended tempera or combinations of glue and powder colors and stressed the use of a good fixative - not, he wrote, a poor quality shellac. As an authority on ancient Russia, Roerich had studied her icon painters and their exact science of preservation. He was intrigued that their careful choice of compatible ingredients could produce such long lasting art treasures, not by using "complicated mixtures," but simply by "that blending which was so correctly defined by the French in their daily life as *valeur*."

While still in the United States, Roerich began planning his first expedition to the most remote regions of Central Asia and the Himalayas. This expedition lasted five years (from 1923 to 1928) and resulted in an extensive survey of the local



archaeology, ethnology, and linguistics, as well as botanical studies. The main record of the expedition, however, is found in Roerich's several books - among them HEART OF ASIA, ALTAI-HIMALAYA, HIMAVAT, and SHAMBALA - and his remarkable paintings.

The best sources of information on Roerich the painter, and yet another indicator of his genius, are those contemporaries who knew him, worked with him, and wrote extensively about him. One such person is Sina Fosdick. Though herself Russian-born, Sina Fosdick first met the Roerichs in New York in 1920. She had come to the United States as a pianist and a teacher; meeting Roerich changed her life.

As she remembers it in her essay "MEETING MY MASTER," "A rare privilege has been given me in this life: to meet a Great Soul, a Master, and to be allowed to become his disciple.... How can I say in so many words what he taught me? When I remember all those years of listening to his great wisdom; of learning in daily contact with him how to deal with others, in conflict and sorrow; how to forgive but not to compromise; how to feel joy, but also to perceive reality without closing one's eyes to it; how to love Beauty, accepting it as one of the highest expressions of the human spirit ... To be close to Nicholas Roerich was like studying in several universities at the same time: it was like dipping into the well of the great past, into the history of man ....."

Mrs. Fosdick wrote these words in 1948, the year after Roerich's death. Today she is working just as hard to keep Roerich's ideas alive, as executive vice-president of the Roerich Museum in New York City. The museum is housed in a lovely old home off Manhattan's Riverside Drive, not far from Columbia University. Roerich's paintings fill the two upper floors and line the stairways. Portraits of the Professor and his wife (a noted Oriental scholar in her own right), done by their artist son Svetoslav, are prominently displayed. Even with frequent visitors moving about, the museum has the air of a sanctuary.

Mrs. Fosdick had the good luck to join two Roerich expeditions, in Altai and Mongolia, and to visit the Roerichs in India, first in Darjeeling and later at their last home in Kulu Valley. Her reminiscences give a vivid picture of the warmth



and charm of the great man and of his tirelessness.

"It was," she says, "an indescribable joy to work with him." She marvels at his "amazing productivity .... he never missed a day of painting during the expedition. He made his sketches on cardboard, notebook, a piece of wood, paper, anything - of course in a small size because of travelling. Later, coming back to base in Kulu, he painted his large canvases from (these) sketches."

His activity and productivity truly were amazing. During his busy stay in the United States, he found time on a single day (indeed a normal day) to write extensively, see visitors, plan his forthcoming Asian expedition, and spend several hours at his easel. Even as he grew older, Roerich's prodigious energy seemed not to suffer a bit.

Mrs. Fosdick recalls a typical morning in the Kulu Valley: Professor Roerich rose early, breakfasted, took a walk, then retired to his studio to paint until lunch-time. He had, she remembers, "a very small studio ... and he set up three or four canvases on easels, working on all at the same time."

From these small quarters Roerich turned out a fabulous array of paintings of the Himalayas, a good collection of which hang in the Roerich museum. He never complained of lack of space, and Mrs. Fosdick tells of a fellow artist who complained to Roerich that his own studio was unbearably dark and cramped. Roerich, ever the philosopher, replied to this. "The cell of Fra Angelico sufficed for him to paint!"

During his life Roerich produced more than 7000 canvases. From the very beginning he developed an easily recognizable style, a style derived from a unique perception of the world around him. Writes Edgar Lansbury, Curator of the Roerich Museum. "Roerich defies ... categorizing. He is a man who created his own style." More amazing still is the remarkable variety in his canvases. Though they are unmistakably his work, there is little of the sameness one would expect from so prolific a painter.

They are works of great beauty and works that demanded discipline and care. Roerich himself best summed up his own philosophy of painting when he said. "Bach wrote each day a prelude and a fugue. A true artist knows what he wants to do, without having to consult with someone above." In Roerich's



mind, "inspiration" was clearly not something that ebbed and flowed but was the result of constant work and application.

On another occasion Roerich was asked if he was ever sad to part with his works, to which he replied, "After I finish a painting, I have no feeling of possession - it should go on travelling."

Though he made innumerable sketches from life, Roerich was aided by a truly amazing memory. He wrote a fascinating essay on developing the memory that offers the following advice for artists or anyone who wishes to practice "creative thought": "... Very often we are unprepared to pay attention to every detail of life. Place before yourself a simple object - look at it, close your eyes and imagine it ... Usually we do not remember the definite color or the definite line, but it is advisable to practice this experiment each day ... you will finally notice that it is clear and sharp and has become simple for you."

Roerich's vision extended far beyond national or religious boundaries. This is well illustrated by a series of paintings done partly during his stay in Europe and America and completed in India. The subject is the great teachers of humanity - "the Banners of the East" - such men as Christ, Buddha, Mohammed, Lao-Tse, Confucius. They are presented, as Mrs. Fosdick says, "in line with his (Roerich's) philosophy, not as deified beings, but as leaders of men, teacher of men."

Roerich's love of the East and particularly of India prompted him to move his family permanently to the Kulu Valley after completing his great expedition in 1928. There, for the last 18 years of his life, he continued to paint the strange, rugged Himalayan landscapes as no Western artist ever has. What Roerich's canvases capture is the uniquely Eastern reverence for the mountain and its mystical significance. It has been said that Western man views the mountain as the fearful unknown, while the Eastern man builds his temples on it. In the paintings of Nicholas Roerich, we are often confronted by temples and monasteries perched on perpendicular cliffs.

In Kulu Roerich founded the Urusvati Himalayan Research Institute and continued the studies begun on his expeditions. He had gained the praise and admiration of the intellectual and cultural leaders of India including the late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Said Nehru of his great friend. "When I



think of Nicholas Roerich I am astounded at the scope and abundance of his activities and creative genius. The very quantity (of his paintings) is stupendous - thousands of paintings and each one of them a great work of art. When you look at these paintings, so many of them of the Himalayas, you seem to catch the spirit of these great mountains which have towered over the Indian plain and been our sentinels for ages past."

Roerich was, by his own definition, a "practical idealist." Never is this so evident as in his efforts to create a universal treaty for the preservation of historic monuments, cathedrals, museums, and national treasure in times of peace and war. Recognizing that men would for whatever reason continue to fight their wars. Roerich designed a banner of peace to fly over such monuments and mark them as neutral territory. The Red Cross of Culture, he called it. The public knew it better as the Roerich Pact and Banner of Peace and saw it signed on April 14, 1935, in the office of President Roosevelt, by the United States and all 20 Latin-American countries. India, the Soviet Union, and many European countries later followed in signing, bringing the total to 39 countries. Roerich was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts. As Sina Fosdick explains, "Roerich wanted it to enter the consciousness of people what would happen if an army of invaders could destroy not only a museum but a whole city."

Although India was, in a sense, his spiritual motherland, Roerich never lost sight of his native country, nor has he been forgotten there. He has a revered place among Russian artists. Several halls were dedicated to him at the Russian State Museum in Leningrad, and his paintings hang in museums in Gorki, Kiev, Odessa, and Novosibirsk and the Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow, which has an impressive collection of his early paintings.

When Roerich died in December 1947, the world paid him homage. He was buried at his last home in Kulu. Today, Svetoslav Roerich and his wife, a well-known Indian film actress, have created a museum in Kulu dedicated to the life and art of Nicholas Roerich.

Writes Svetoslav of his father, "Every effort of his was directed toward the realization of the Beautiful, and his thoughts found a masterful embodiment in his paintings, writings, and public life ... His personality stands out as a complete example



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of the "Superior Man" for whom life has assumed the sublime aspect of greater service."

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