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Fourth Dimensional Vistas in Roerich's Art

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WHEN I was a young boy, my mother told me tales of the wonder-working holy pictures by emphasizing that all the icons in the churches and in the homes had the magic power of influencing the worshippers. Not far from our home was a simple country church with a number of icons, among which one, the image of St. Nicholas, was said to be a wonder-working holy picture before which the worshippers knelt, prayed and lit the candles.

"But how about the other beautiful paintings?" I asked my mother. "How about the pictures of 'A Moonlight Night' by Kuindji or 'The Idyll' by Bruiloff, of which we had excellent copies?"

"Not every work of art has the magic of miracles," commented my mother. "There is a sacred and a secular art".

This was great news to me and I began to brood about the magic of art. I wondered what it was. I looked at the beautiful pictures in the museum and I looked at the so-called sacred paintings, which were less beautiful, but weird.

In order to see the miracle-working power of the sacred painting, particularly of the St. Nicholas icon in our village church, I decided to test the secret magic by praying for hours for a new suit of clothes and a watch. I left the church and waited for the miracle; but nothing happened.

I then decided to test the icon with another appeal. I took from the nest of a pigeon a freshly laid egg, carried it in my hand into the church—at a time when nobody was there—and knelt before the icon of St. Nicholas, praying

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for a miracle of a live pigeon to fly out of the egg. I prayed for hours, in fact the whole night, and no pigeon flew out of the egg. Nothing whatever happened after my numerous tests with the wonder-working icon, and I realized the stories that my mother had told me of its magic was nothing but an allegory of a fairy tale.

Years went by.

I grew to young manhood and still beheld many people praying before the wonder-working St. Nicholas, fully believing in its miraculous powers. By this time I had become an agnostic and like all the rest of our sophisticated educated youth, energy and matter, tangibility and scientific theory meant everything to me.

In those years an idea came to me, to get even with the superstitious tales of the church, which had "fooled" me and continued to "fool" the worshippers, as I thought. And I decided to play a trick, by exchanging the icon of St. Nicholas for a reproduction of Rembrandt's famous "Prodigal Son", and other icons for some beautiful paintings of well-known masters, so that the church could have real works of art.

About a week or so after, a police officer called on me and arrested me for what was termed "desecration of the church" and I was placed in jail. According to Russian law, this was a terrible crime, and I faced banishment to a monastery prison for years or exile to Siberia.

To be regarded as such a terrible criminal for exchanging the works of art more for fun than anything else—was a shock to me. And for a long time I could not get over my accusing conscience: "Man, you are a criminal".

After having spent months in jail for no other reason than that of trying to prove the fraud of miracle-working icons, I began to consider the term 'criminal' as meaning something *socially failed* but *individually heroic*, and thus from an agnostic I became an intellectual anarchist like Bakunin, Kropotkin in fact any philosophical anarchist of today. I did not believe in any miracles, nor in any pictorial magic.

Years and years passed.

I had been living already for years in America—in fact, I considered myself a rooted New Yorker—when something happened that upset my agnosticism and intellectual anarchism.

It was shortly after the end of the World War—in 1921—When I had grown disgusted of all idealism, all worthy aspirations in life. In fact I was a cynic of the worst kind, on the verge of a mental and physical breakdown.

Mr. Hunt Diederich came to me in one of the gloomiest moments of the time and dragged me along to see a “new Russian artist arrived from England” and his exhibition shortly to open at the Kingore Gallery in New York.

It was the exhibition of the works of art of Professor Nicholas Roerich. His canvases were just hung on the walls and I was alone with Hunt Diederich looking at them like one dazed after a heavy illness. The longer I looked on them the more I felt relieved of the uncanny pressure on my heart.

I had heard of Professor Roerich's art faintly and had seen some of the reproductions of his dramatic settings, but I beheld his works in a systematic array for the first time. Here were his “Old Pskoff”, so familiar to me from my youth in reality, his “White Monastery”, his “Sadko” sets, etc. I began to feel the magic of their “aesthetic rhythm”, the metaphysical tones of their designs and color harmonies and I felt like a new ray of light was falling on my disillusioned soul; I had actually sunk into moments of silent devotion or prayer.

When after an hour's quiet rejoicing over the new impressions, I left the Kingore Gallery, I felt that something strange had happened to me—I was a changed man. From a depressing melancholy and cynicism of life I had been transformed by the sight of the canvases of Nicholas Roerich into an aesthetic optimist, a believer in the mystic powers of beauty.

After I had left Roerich's exhibition I began to realize that the pictorial magic, of which my mother had spoken

to me, actually existed—and here it was. A miracle had been performed within my soul—my conscious state of mind. The Roerich pictures had healed me from a serious oppression. It was the inner nature of his pictorial magic—that metaphysical quality of art, which had been attributed to the iconographic art of the past. It is something elusive and intuitional, which neither technical terms nor academic arguments can explain. Thus I found—after 30 or more years—that there is a transcendental basis to the legends and mass beliefs of the miracle-working art, which I have found most outspoken in the creations of Professor Nicholas Roerich.

During my last visit to Moscow, I had occasion to find my views corroborated in a little country church beyond the Esthonian boundary. As the train on which I travelled from Esthonia was held up for an hour by repairs of the road, I walked to a nearby village church, where the people were gathering. To my surprise I found that an exhibition of art and handicraft was being held in the church and I was told it was the new Living Church of Russia. On the exhibition table among other things of art I noticed two reproductions of the paintings of Nicholas Roerich, taking the place of the icons on the altar.

“There is something sacred about these pictures” commented the priest.

I smiled and told to the priest the story of my experience with the “sacred art” in my early youth.

There is something “sacred” with the art of Professor Roerich—an emanation that only those can feel who have the power of an “inner sight”.

Having seen the paintings of Professor Roerich in America, which dated mostly from the time of the World War, I looked at him as an epic colourist—a Beethoven and Moussorgsky combined. But my trip to Moscow revealed to me a totally new master—Roerich as a lyricist and classic romanticist. While visiting Moscow, I called on Alexis Victorovitch Stchussev, the director of the Tretyakov Gallery and head of many other museums and

While gazing thus contemplatively on the canvas of the "Polovetsky Camp" I began to hear soft tones of Borodin's "Polovetsky Dance", from his opera "Prince Igor", and while focussing my eyes on the "Messenger" I began to hear Schubert's "Erlkoenig", played by a marvellous aeolian orchestra somewhere in the distance. Thus the pictorial images of Roerich the lyrist had been transformed into auditory images of Roerich the romanticist.

I was standing for several minutes before Roerich's paintings and listening to a "music" which my mind had created. I stood like one in a trance and forgot that I was in a museum, as I imagined myself in a hall where pictures suddenly became records of new, unknown sounds. I became so oblivious of all my surroundings in this pose that I did not hear when the secretary of Mr. Stchussev entered, saying: "You are looking at Professor Roerich's paintings —aren't they beautiful?"

"I am not looking at them. I am listening to them", I stammered as one awakened from a dream.

"That was the view of Scriabine" continued the secretary, and he began to tell me of the new arrangement of the Gallery.

Although I had always felt that Roerich's art had definite phonetic features, it had never been impressed on my mind so clearly as now. I had looked upon Roerich's paintings of the Russian character as strange, transcendental "musical" scores, an impression which was intensified by seeing his Himalayan series. There was always something of a Beethoven or a Moussorgsky in his canvases. His abstract blues and reds, his luminous yellows and purples were always suggestive of "tones" and "harmonic" phrases. In their messages there was something transcendental that should not only be seen, but also heard.

But never had I felt the phonetic feature of Roerich's art so distinctly as I did in seeing his early works in the Tretiakov Gallery. I spoke of this later to Reinhold Gliere, the distinguished Russian composer, and he admitted that

art institutions, and he invited me to visit him at his office in order to show me personally the new arrangements of this towering aesthetic temple of a New Universe. I called at the appointed time at the Tretyakov Gallery, but Mr. Stchussev had not yet arrived. He had left a message with his curator that he let me see the rooms alone until his return from his unexpected official engagement.

It was late afternoon of a rather delightful summer day. I entered the famous institution with the feeling of a humble pilgrim. Its atmosphere was overwhelming and elevating. I found myself not in a conventional museum but in a solemn temple of the Russian genius.

Walking slowly through the silent halls hung with the best pictorial masters of Russia I beheld canvases by Surikov, Vrubel and their contemporaries, when suddenly I dashed into a room in which an entire wall was devoted to the paintings of Professor Roerich. The late afternoon sun was playing on them as on pieces of another world, and I stopped, looking at them in delight. It was all so sudden that I felt as though an old friend had unexpectedly loomed up from behind the corner and were reaching me his hand for greeting.

The pictures of Professor Roerich that I beheld in the Tretyakov Gallery were new to me. There was his "Messenger", "The Battle", "The Polovetsky Camp", "Building a City", "Red Sails" and another one. As I continued looking at them I exclaimed unconsciously: "Is it possible?"

In so far I had known Roerich as an epic artist; but here he was a romantic lyrist, with his mellow earthly greens and pinks, his naturalistic atmosphere and background. In these there were touches of poetic realism, or rather, of symbolic impressionism. I began to gaze at them as on some new elements of his creative genius and to imagine Roerich when he painted them. The museum was so solemnly silent and the atmosphere was so poetic that I stood like one transfixed.

he actually could see music visualized and that consequently in the same way paintings could be heard.

My view of the phonetic nature of painting in the case of the works of Professor Roerich was fully confirmed by seeing his latest Mongolian series, now exhibited in the Roerich Museum in New York. But Roerich in his latest creations is no longer a lyrist as he is in his paintings in the Tretyakov Gallery or in the Russian National Museum. The master has grown even more epic than he was a few years ago in his Himalayan series. His Mongolian series bespeak a far more intensified rhythm than his earlier ones.

Though I had no opportunity to look at Roerich's latest Mongolian series, in such quiet and meditation as I did at his early works, yet I felt that his "Guardian of the Entrance", "Great Rider", "Commands of the Teacher" and "The Command of Rigden Djapo" emanate tone-poems of purely Mongolian order. In these you find the sounds of exotic lamasery instruments and bells, drums and pipes unknown to our occidental orchestras. Their glowing colours radiate sounds of an eastern scale: the langorous songs of the Gobi Desert sound in the secluded lama series. How epic is the song of "The Tibetan Women" or "A Lama"! Almost you hear their strange unintelligible words!

Roerich in his latest epics of the Gobi has revealed to us the music of a Fata Morgana of the Great Desert. The upward rising mountain tops in their glowing reds, blues, or whatever the chromatic motif may be, are suggestive of contrapuntal strokes, aeolian instruments and abstract tones. His phantom beings are there not only to be seen but also to be heard. His subject matter and background, his detail and the work as a whole have not only a pictorial but just as well a phonetic meaning. Look at Roerich's paintings with the inner eye and compare the symbolic scale of his backgrounds with his figures, the sky-line with the tones of his earth, and you will begin to realize the miracle—the transformation of the ocular perceptions into the auditory ones!
