

L S Seshagiri Rao
Department of English,

Bangalore University,

October 14, 1974

To

Madame Devika Rani Roerich,

Bangalore.

Dear Madam,

I have great pleasure in enclosing the article, ' Prof. Roerich - the Russian Colossus and Guru'. I am glad to have been associated with the centenary celebrations.

You are free to make use of the article as you ~~find~~ choose.

with regards,

Yours sincerely,

L. S. Seshagiri Rao

Has translated Dickens's 'A Tale of Two Cities' into
Kannada;

Has edited a collection of short stories in Kannada
for the Sahitya Akademi of India

Editor, Jnana Gangothri (A Kannada Encyclopaedia for
students of High Schools and Colleges)

Chief

Editor, Bharatha - Bharathi Pustaka Sampada (a project
for the publication of 510 books to introduce
the great men and women of India to children in
the age group 8-14; 150 books have been published)

Honorary Secretary of the Kannada Sahitya Parishat (the
Kannada Literary Academy) - 1945-1950

At present,

Member, Kannada Advisory Committee of the Bharathi
Jnanapith (which annually awards a prize of a
Hundred Thousand Rupees to the best literary
work in any Indian language)

Kannada Advisory Council of the Sahitya Akademi
of India (the National Academy of Letters)

Editorial Board of the History of Kannada
Literature, Bangalore University

L S SESHAGIRI RAO

De Post-Graduate Department of English,
Bangalore University

Age : 49 Years

Academic Qualifications : B A Honours in English Language
and Literature

M A in English Language and
Literature :

First rank in both the examinations

Author of 1) Three collections of Short Stories in
Kannada

Literary Criticism

- 2) Kadambari - Samanya Manushya (a study of
the Novel as a literary form)
- 3) Masthi Venkatesha Iyengar (a study of the
writings of one of the most important of
contemporary writers in Kannada)
- 4) Oliver Goldsmith
- 5) English Bhasheyalli Adhunik Sahitya
Vimarshe (a survey of Literary Criticism
in England and the U S A in the last
half a century)
- 6) 'Paschaty Sahitya Vihara' (Essays on the
works of non-Indian writers like
Shakespeare, Pirandello, Kafka and
Tolstoy)

③

Has been awarded the Devaraja Bahadur Literary
Prize by the Karnataka State Government (1969)

Has been Awarded the First Prize for Literary Cri-
ticism by the Karnataka State Sahitya Academy
(1972)

Reviewer for BOOKS ABROAD, Oklahoma, U S A .

L. S. Subhagiri

GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
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NICHOLAS ROERICH - A MAN OF LETTERS - L.S. SESHAGIRI RAO.

Nicholas Roerich belongs to a race of giants that somehow seems ^{to be dwelling in the modern world, the race of artists-prophets. It seems} appropriate to speak of Maharshi Roerich - so magnificent and cosmic ⁱⁿ his vision, so confident and lofty is his language. He reminds one of Walt Whitman and Romain Rolland, of Goethe and Carlyle, of Tolstoy and Tagore. His writings are religious - religious in the highest and noblest sense; they are religious in their ^{perspective and in their} unfaltering affirmation of the vision of cosmic unity and the meaningfulness of life. Painting, poetry, essays and occasional writings - all served as the vehicles of a passionate devotion to life.

The world knows Roerich as a painter. But he was something more than a painter. He was a dynamic student of life, a soul passionately in love with life; and his paintings embodied his joyous response to life. And his joy found expression in his poetry and in his prose works, too. His published works include some twenty - seven volumes mostly dealing with cultural, philosophical and pan-Human subjects. In all these we hear the glad voice of the Worshipper at the shrine of life. Not that he was a stranger to suffering and evil. He belonged to the Russia of the pre-Revolution days. He was forty-two at the time of the Revolution. And he witnessed the grim holocausts of the two World Wars. He had travelled far and wide; and he had ample experience of human folly and the insolence of office.

But Roerich's vision is cosmic. He sees all universe as one; and to him history is not a collection of the stories of nations but the vision of the onward march of mankind. In fact, he habitually and effortlessly thinks and writes of all humanity as one, and as if time and space do not exist at all. This transcendental vision gives his writings a rare iridescence and unity. His writings are strewn with references to the practices of ancient tribes, the customs and rites of Tibetans, the shrewd tricks of rulers like Tehangez Khan, and declarations of monarchs like Frederick the Third, and the achievements of ancient civilizations like those of Egypt and China. He quotes effortlessly and with singular appropriateness from the Wisdom Literature of ancient Israel, ancient India, and ancient Greece. It is not surprising that he should write on paintings and painters, or on his beloved Himalayas. But he writes on urbanization and the vision of Lady Paul, repeats an old tale from Tibet and a strange

episode narrated by Warner Baxter, inquires into the causes of Cancer and of Spanish Influence, comments on ancient medicines in different parts of the world and on women's movement in India. He writes on Spinoza and on Sir James Jeans. He quotes from the French scientist Valency and the Indian saint Vivekananda. His volume Agniyoga deals with the Yoga of Fire, or the pentacoxstal experience awaiting mankind as it makes contract with the fires of the Holy Spirits. He is as familiar with the wisdom of the Lamas of Tibet as with wisdom of Tolstoy, and seeks to learn from the Upanishads as from the renowned scientist Einstein. He is as interested in primitive religion as in the book, 'Has Science Discovered God?'. In one work Roerich speaks of 'Messiah, Maitreya, Muntazar - and the entire glorious succession of names which in such diversity have expressed this very same sacred and hearty striving of humanity.

This Citizen of the World and Pilgrim of Eternity proclaims the worth and the glory of human life, and points to the future reassuringly. He once said, 'If you want to contact the best cards of humanity, speak with the people, of the future, of that to which the human mind aspires even in the far-off deserts.

Nicholas Roerich proclaimed in all his writings the Gospel of Beauty. To him the Beautiful also meant the Good. Art was not some-thing apart from life, a luxury which merited a few leisure hours of some lucky mortals. Art was a part of life. He said, 'Bring art to the people where it belongs. We should have not only museums, theatres, universities, public libraries, railway stations and hospitals but even prisons decorated and beautified. Then we shall have no more prisons.' A young artist often complains, 'I cannot live by art. I have to enter the commercial field.' Asked Roerich: 'What type of promoter would destroy the creative fire which gushes unrestrained through all materials?' He declared that the products of ceramics are not inferior to sculpture in marble. Each adorning of our daily life is an artist of life.

In his writings Roerich usually moves from the specific to the general, from the concrete to the abstract and from historical fact to symbolic interpretation. For example, his essay on seals opens with the sentence, 'Then Much is said about the ancient Chinese seals found in Ireland.' Then he considers the study of seals by archaeologists. This leads him to reflection that many technical achievements of Egypt, the use of gunpowder in China and certain creations of Mayan culture have been forgotten by us. From this he logically proceeds to a consideration of International relations in his own day,

culminating in certain reflections on peace. He says, 'People are actually thinking about peace, some self-interestedly, others selflessly. In all cases there is required some sign, the substantial seal of the fact that outside of human violence and hatred there have been possible peaceful relationships in different domains of business. 'He observes, 'The price of peace is defined as living human merit and dignity, as benevolence of heart.' And he reaches the paradoxical and provocative conclusion, 'The seals of antiquity are for the future.' In his writings, time and again Roerich suggests a strikingly new point of view. To give but one instance, speaking of evil, he points out that an evil man goes on with evil even after he realizes that his reputation is at stake, that he has to challenge a powerful enemy or that he risks ridicule. 'The self-sacrifice of evil he declares, 'is indeed a serious reproach to humanity'

Though generally he develops his essay unhurriedly and deliberately Roerich's writing can be packed with thought. Consider, for example this sequence of sentences: 'Education and culture are synonymous. In both is contained readiness for infinite cognizance. In the future of such a constant rejuvenation of consciousness the very essence of man is being purified.'

Roerich's poetry can be read by most of us only in translation. It reminds us of Tagore's poetry. I cannot resist the temptation to bring to listeners at least a few of his lines. One poem, 'We shall See', begins with these lines:

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Ours is an age of urgent trifles and fragmented lives. In the hurry and the chase and the din and the dust of modern life, we have neither the time nor the serenity for a vision of the future of all mankind. Today is on us before we have understood yesterday, and tomorrow will overwhelm us before we have begun to comprehend today. In a world of such maddening whirls and blinding dust we need a Roerich to liberate us from the prison of the here and the now, and to restore to us *the consciousness of man's citizenship of the Cosmos and* the epic march of humanity.

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Broadcast

by

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The world knows Roerich as a painter. But he was something more than a painter. He was a dynamic student of life, a soul passionately in love with life; and his paintings embodied his joyous response to life. And his joy found expression in his poetry and in his prose works, too. His published works include some twenty-seven volumes mostly dealing with cultural, philosophical and pan-human subjects. In all these we hear the glad voice of the Worshipper at the shrine of life. Not that he was a stranger to suffering and evil. He belonged to the Russia of the pre-Revolution days. He was forty-two at the time of the Revolution. And he witnessed the grim holocausts of the two World Wars. He had travelled far and wide; and he had ample experience of human folly and the insolence of office.

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One of the world's greatest painters, the founder of the Himalayan Research Institute for research in Linguistics, Ethnology, and Botany, an outstanding archaeologist of his time, the founder of the Banner of Peace and the Roerich Poet, the first President of the World of Art Society, a remarkable poet and the author of some thirty volumes--Nicholas Roerich was all these and much more. This artist-scientist-archaeologist, this 'Master of the Mountains' and the friend of mankind, this man who crossed the mountains and whose paintings and ideas crossed the seas, seems to belong to a distant, heroic past; but he was born a hundred years ago in Russia, and died 27 years ago in India.

Roerich's range of interests and achievements are breath-taking. Even as a boy he was interested in archaeology. By the time he left Russia, at the age of 43, he had collected as many as 75,000 exhibits and more than 3,000 rare paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Government of the United States of America commissioned ^{him} to study drought-resisting plants in the Gobi desert. He was 25 when his poems were first published in periodicals, and his collection of poems, 'Flame in Chalice' (1929) established his reputation as a poet. In his 30 volumes, he has written not only on painters and paintings but on many aspects of civilization and culture. These writings bear testimony alike to his wide reading and to his capacity to organize a bewildering mass of material. He painted settings for the plays of the foremost European dramatists like Ibsen and Maeterlinck and for the works of Wagner. He spent five years travelling in Central Asia, and visited Sikkim, Punjab, Kashmir, the Altai Mountains, Mongolia, Gobi and Tibet. The journey, rewarding as it was both to him and to other scientists--his paintings on this tour proved a veritable treasure to archaeologists and anthropologists--held it perils, too. In Khotan, a chieftain detained him and again his caravan was stopped at an altitude of 15,000 feet. The Chief's officers forbade painting because they could not distinguish between a painting and a plan. His own travels in Russia and had convinced him of the need to preserve and protect the historical monuments and the treasures of art and science of all lands.

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So he conceived the idea of a banner of peace--a banner (designed by him) which would indicate museums and art galleries so that in times of war these may be ^{spared} spared. He worked tirelessly for this idea, and twenty-one nations signed the Roerich ^{PACT} Pact in 1935; The Majority of nations have now ratified the pact. Roerich ~~Pact~~ founded a number of institutions like the International Art Centre, the Roerich Museum, the Himalayan Reserch Institute and the World League of Culture.

What an amazing life! That a man can pack so much of study, travel and work into a little more than half a century seems incredible. But this catalogue of his achievements does not include his major achievement--the painting of over ^(7,500) ~~75,000~~ paintings. His paintings are exhibited all over the world, and are on display at several centres like Varanasi, Allahabad, Calcutta, Madras, Shantiniketan ^{CHANDIGARH} and Trivandrum in India. The Himalayas enchanted and overwhelmed Roerich; and, if Roerich is indebted to the Himlayas, the Himlayas are in his debt, too; ifor he bestowed mobility on the Himlayas and carried them in all their mystery and majesty to all parts of the world, in his pictures. A strange radiance emanates from his paintings; and even the layman feels the presence of a pervasive spirit. We are in a world of vast spaces. He sweeps the infinite and suggests life and feeling in the scene he presents. A painting of Roerich brings a peculiar sense of liberation, a thrilling emergence into a large and screne world. Man and Nature come together in kinship. It is remarkable that even when he places human figures in the midst of towering peaks and in vast spaces, they are not dwarfed but retain their dignity and pruposefulness.

Art was sacred to him. He saw in it, not just an activity of a few men, but a force in the life of mankind. "Art will unify humanity" he ^{wrote} wrote, "Art is one... Art is the manifestation of the coming synthesis. Art is for all--- Bring art to the people, where it belongs. We should have not only museums, theatres, Universities, public libraries, railway stations and hospitals but even prisons decorated and beautified. Then we shall have no more prisons". "As a prayer we repeat that knowledge and beauty are the real conerstones of civilization, the gates of a world community..... We must insist

that the creative sense of the beautiful should be applied in everyday life; that every household should be beautified, that in each household books should have the place of honour.¹¹

A young artist often complains, 'I cannot live by art, I have to enter the commercial field', thus implying that thereby he has to demean himself. Roerich declared that what was important was that "his product be clear, vivid and convincing and easily assimilated by the masses in their daily life". He continues, "After all, which of these conditions may be ~~regarded~~ regarded as disgraceful? Raphael himself, after receiving his order, was guided by the condition of conviction.... Gauguin, through sheer desire for selfexpression, painted the doors and interior of his dwelling". Roerich affirmed that the products of ceramics are not inferior to sculpture in marble. Every adorning of daily life, whatever his medium, is ^{an} artist of life.

This Titan of modern times was born a hundred years ago, on October 9, 1874, in St. Petersburg, in Russia. His father was a barrister, and young Roerich enrolled in the Faculty of Law. At the same time, he was attending the Academy of Art, the History and Philology courses of the University of St. Petersburg, and the Institute of Archaeology. At the age of 23, he was appointed Professor of Archaeology. At the same age he painted a great picture, 'The Messenger' which brought him immediate recognition. During 1902-04, he toured extensively in Russia, and realized the need to preserve the cultural treasures of his land. He did a series of paintings. In 1909-10, he visited Europe, and in 1920, the U.S.A.. Exhibitions of his paintings were held in several important cities. After his tour of Central Asia, he settled down at Nagar, Kulu, in India. Here he breathed his last ^{the 13th of December} on April 1947.

Roerich's wife, Madam Helena Roerich, was herself a writer. Their first son, Dr. George Roerich, was an oriental scholar and explorer. The second son, Dr. Svetoslav Roerich, is himself a ~~great~~ great painter; Madame Devika Rani Roerich, Dr. Svetoslav's wife, won laurels as a gifted actress.

In his writings, in his paintings, and in his life, Roerich was the Prophet of the Gospel of the Complete Man. All universe is man's home, all humanity is one. Man is the heir to the legacy of all ages and all lands. Roerich ^{is} unhappy that a wrong view of history and civilization has prevented a modern man from realizing what he owes to and ^{can learn from his ancestor of the Stone Age. He asks us to shed our notions} ~~cannotions~~ of superiority and look at the Stone Age without the coloured glasses of civilization. We shall then see "the marvellous beauty of its tinted stones and precious furs, its coloured woods and woven tassels". He declares that the Stone Age far surpassed our own in its aspiration to Art and Beauty; says Roerich, "From continually living in fear and fighting against the world that surrounds him, Man has come to imprison himself in a labyrinth, from which there will be no escape until he again strikes the broad highway from which ~~there xxxxxxx~~ he started". He knew at first hand that home of technology and paradise of gadgets, the U.S.A., and also Lhasa where, he says, moving pictures, sewing machines and European footwear were prohibited. He refuses to compartmentalize the activities of man's spirit; ^{his} own writings draw from the treasures of all ages and lands. He is as familiar with the ancient lore of Egypt, China and India, and the teachings and the customs of the Lamas of Tibet as with the history and the writings of his own country. He can speak with authority on the Stone Age and on the ^{AGNI YOGA} Agniyoga. He is equally interested in reports of parapsychic phenomena from Tibet and in Scientists' views on the existence of God. He points out that Einstein was a wonderful violinist and asks, "Has music belittled the astounding mathematical foresight?". He reminds us that Hoffman was at once a remarkable pianist and a mathematician and engineer. He quotes from the Bible and from ancient Chinese writers, and, with equal understanding, also scientists like A.H. Compton, Dr. Otrian, Bernard proctor and Dr. Valency. He painted the ruins he saw in Russia; he captured in colour the splendour and the serenity he had witnessed in Central Asia and in the Himalayan regions; he painted Jesus and Buddha; his paintings on Indian motifs include Sri Krishna, Lakshmi and Damayanthi. He wrote on ancient Chinese seals, on the

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Gayathri and on women's movements in India. The one enemy he feared was barbarism. In one of his essays he points out that an evil man goes on clinging to evil even when he realizes that his reputation is at stake and that he has a formidable enemy to face, and observes, "The self-sacrifice of evil is indeed a serious reproach to humanity". He saw the need for all mankind to unite in the struggle to hold back the forces of evil and barbarism.

We live in an age which is rightly suspicious of superman—there have been so many fake ones. That Roerich, despite his amazing range of interests and incredible catalogue of achievements, offered no magic formula to usher in the Golden Age, and that he declined coveted posts offered to him are perhaps the best evidence that here was a superman.

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