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Nicholas Roerich

By T.H.Somervell

Articles from time to time appear in Mysindia from the pen, or the diary-pencil of Nicholas Roerich. But I ~~am~~ have not seen an article about Nicholas Roerich by someone else, although I have little doubt that one has appeared at some time or another in this paper. Even if there have been several, I need no excuse for adding to their number. For Nicholas Roerich is probably the greatest figure in the modern world of art. He is not merely a painter, although as a depicter of mountain scenery he is unequalled in the whole long line of landscape painters. He is not merely a philosopher and a sage, although in at least half his pictures a foreground figure or a little incident in one corner proclaims the philosophy of life behind the dropscene on the canvas. But Roerich is one of the few men in the world, and the only man I have ever personally met, who is entirely devoted to the beautiful.

The earlier years of Roerich's long life were spent in interpreting the legends and folk-lore of his home-country, and among the most distinguished of all his work are the designs for scenery for some of the Russian Operas. It might almost be said that the modern non-realistic but truly artistic decoration of the stage began with Roerich's Russian scenepainting. For the first time in the history of the drama atmosphere was created by the decoration of the stage, without recourse to the commonplace actualities of the traditional nineteenth century scenery. Then came the war, and Roerich found in Eastern countries a fitter environment for the pursuit of the beautiful.

Having interpreted the life and the landscape, homely tragedy and humour, dignified saints and quaint traditions of his own country in Europe, he came to live in two of the world's choicest spots. First



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he chose Darjeeling and lived in a house that looked straight on to the finest mountain view in the world, and now he lives in Kulu where the scenery is quieter and less striking but no less beautiful, where the slopes are gentler and the precipices rather less imminent, a lovely land for a Man's old age. We talk of "declining years" but none could say that Roerich <sup>yet</sup> has reached those, or indeed will ever reach them. The quest of beauty in life and in the world, in others and in God, is one which knows no decline - Roerich's life is a true crescendo as all life should be, and when the time comes for him to lay aside the brush and the colours, I believe his spirit, in this life and the next, will ever ascend to newer and fuller beauty. Roerich is not the "artist of ordinary tradition; not the volatile Van Gogh, nor the sensual Gauguin; not the painter of fine things whose life is sordid or selfish; not from Chelsea or Montmartre or the Quartier Latin with their strange mixtures of the reputable and the disreputable. He lives the normal, simple beautiful life of the family. This serenity is evident in many of his pictures; no mere illustration of serenity, but itself part of the serenity of the painter's own life. In religion he might be described as a theosophist, for he has the broadness of outlook of the true theosophist who endeavours to see beauty wherever the religions of mankind can show it; yet he is an equally real sense a Christian, for, Christ was the most beautiful of all interpreters of the Divine, and the world has lost an infinity of good by inventing so many religions about Him. Roerich's life is one ~~of the~~ long quest for beauty, and wherever he sees it he worships; wherever he fails to see it he tries to introduce it. The creative side of his life is part of the same quest; he paints prolifically in an endeavour to disseminate beautiful things in many places. Happy indeed are those who are fortunate possessors of his pictures; they are no mere reflections of nature, but interpretations with permanent and increasing value.

In a world torn by factions and jealousy and by everything that makes for the destruction of beauty and liberty, it is good to know there are centres of real culture and peace and worship, such as the home of the Roerichs; for it is the three great Values of Life that the world has forgotten nowadays. Truth, Beauty, and Goodness must come to their own, and men like Roerich are keeping alive the real things for which the world is waiting.