

ROERICH

By N. JARENTZOV

There is no museum or art-gallery in Russia that does not own Roerich's canvases and designs for decorative art. In all, his creations number now over five thousand. A good many of them have been acquired by the National gallery in Rome, the Louvre (Pavillon Marsan) and the Luxemburg museums in Paris, and public art-galleries in Vienna, Prague, Venice, Milan, Malmo, Brussels, Chicago, Stockholm, San-Francisco, and Copenhagen. London saw some of Roerich's works at the Exhibition of Post-Impressionists in 1911.

In Roerich's work the spirit of freedom prevails both in subject and in technique. He ranges from the most translucent, moist, lovingly-gentle chords of colour (almost impossible to reproduce) to a startling effect of the weight of matter.

Roerich's freedom is not the reckless licence which sometimes finds its self-expression in dwelling on details; on the contrary, he subordinates all details to the leading idea with severe discipline. His freedom is the freedom of imagination in the higher planes; therefore, it finds its self-expression in the variety of subjects, and it makes him treat each composition as a whole—as a clear note in the harmony of Universe, and not as chromatic scale of realistic details. It is only when the details are inseparable from the established style of work that Roerich carries them out with the daintiness of a miniaturist. Such are his numerous ikons and church frescoes. There the grave beauty of the figures dwells within its longago-established harmony with the effect of dazzling conventional ornamentation of Byzantine origin.

It is interesting to quote here some paragraphs from the Russian poet Baltrushaitis, who, amongst others, wrote several pages in the beautiful volume published for Roerich's jubilee :

It is as essential to see the feast of colours in Roerich's paintings with one's own eyes, as it is essential to hear a musical composition with one's own ears, in order to conceive its individual nature. In the very structure of his works there is the presence of some inexplicable musical rhythm, which makes the onlooker not only look at them, but hearken to something with his spiritual hearing.

Roerich is past-master in colour-harmonies ; yet he is so severe with himself that he obviously rejects the temptation of a colour-play when the idea of his vision does not call for it.

Roerich's part in social work is not limited by the achievements of his gift. His inner experience merges his creative activity with the whole of the spiritual reconstruction which is taking place in these days. In the realm of his forms and colours Roerich is pre-occupied with solving the same problems which have now come to the fore in all modern art. The human soul of our time is struggling for a new conception of the world, for a new will. Building up a new spiritual attitude in his own sphere Roerich is taking part in reshaping our inner life as a whole.

Some are likely to come to the conclusion that his works are purely contemplated and detached from life. But this is not so ; they are contemplative only as much as contemplation is essential to creative capacity. Like fresh young shoots, they spring from the eternal will of life and react on it through their own liberating powers.

Roerich could not win a more beautiful crown than this organic bond between his work and contemporary social evolution in the search for the Holy Grail.

Another contributor to the same jubilee volume, the artist Benois, wrote in 1916:

Roerich is not easy to understand. He has not won me straight away ; but the deeper and safer is now his conquest of my mind. Having remained for sometime in the same degree of development, Roerich has made a move ahead, and since then has begun the work of 'the real Roerich'. Since then he has become dear to me, and is growing dearer and dearer.

However complete and expressive it is now, his art is still ripening, growing still more serene, simple and sure, and its highest achievements are still to come.

We are of the different origin : I am a Southerner, almost a Latin ; Roerich is a Northerner, almost a Scandanavian. I am drawn to the slender cypresses, to the domes of Alps barring the horizon, to the shining azure of the sea ; he is the inspired singer of the spongy hills of the North,

made soft and shapeless by the ice-drifts, of the sickly silver-birch and spruce, of the shadows running across the steppes. He is thrilled and stands in awe before the tent of a nomad ; whereas I shall not exchange for anything in the world the smartness of San Pietro and the imperial harmony of the Escorial.

Roerich is attracted by the desert, by distances, by the aborigines, by the first lisp of forms and ideas ; he insists on his conception that goodness is in the powerful simplicity of soul and infinity, and thinks that we ought to begin again from the beginning. He would not mind returning to the scanty speech of the aborigines as long as their instincts could be expressed clearly and directly, as long as the untruth and the muddle of the so-called civilization could be kept away. But, as usual, the real truth lies hidden between the two extremes, and we are approaching it from two opposite directions.

It is a characteristic whim of human fate that Roerich—a 'native,' 'forefather', a collector of stones, an excavator of shapeless mounds—is at the head of our greatest Russian centres of artistic culture, and is known as one of the most prominent connoisseurs and collectors of paintings of the old Western schools.

In my turn, I have acquired in recent years a deeper 'insight into the earth' and her primary laws. Besides San Pietro and the Escorial, I have leaned to love that very 'lisp' of Nature and Humanity which inspires Roerich the varengian.

From a youthful illustrator of ancient Russia, Roerich has developed into a poet. But, in his self-evolution, he has succeeded in remaining true to his original elements—and therein lies the power of his personality as well as the importance of his part in the general current of our art.

Roerich remains a typical Norman. Since his illustration to Maeterlinck's creations he has assimilated western romanticism and has shown himself not only a great master, but a poet-seer. Some of his sceneries for 'Princess Maleine' and for 'Sister Beatrice' are amazing in their true sense of the mediaeval North.

The philosophical value of Roerich's work is very great. I see in it more than merely artistic individuality. He is the representative of a whole school of thought, even of a whole sphere of culture. For expressing the gist of his philosophy he does not adopt abstract forms, but remains within the circle of concrete images and pictures of life—a life, may be, remote from and dead to our minds, yet very convincing in its past existence and calling forth a familiar echo in our hearts.

His figures are lost in his landscape, itself has acquired a distinct physiognomy. Roerich's best pictures are those in which Nature is defied, in which the artist is at one with his heroes, the primitive men. He attains special beauty and power when he trembles before the approach of an ireful thunderstorm ; or when he contemplates in ecstasy the boundless

distances punctuated by the monotonous rhythm of the primitive forms, and prays to Perun and Yarila—or curses them with shouts of vehemence. Equally beautiful is the kindred spirit of the moon searching for something behind the clouds; or his enthusiastic reading of the future in the hieroglyphics of Heavenly Battle.

There is something very deep in all this. The innate 'primitiveness' of Roerich, his myths and superstitions, link the cultured social worker, the leading spirit of a modern art school, with the aboriginal inhabitants of our marshes and forests; the all-but-broken threads are reappearing, linking up millenaries of human life.

Some might wonder: 'What are those animal-like forefathers to us? They are dissolved in Eternity, they are gone and decayed. But Roerich knows best. He knows that those ancestors of ours possessed a power which is still alive and still good enough for us. Roerich believes in their insight and grieves with them that the black sword of material culture penetrates the breast of nature, and that the trampling on the Mother-earth grows more and more sacrilegious with men's efforts to turn the stream of her history into channels of absurd material greed. That is where Roerich and I meet each other. I shall never be tired of describing the beautifully wrought forms of the Vatican and the Escorial, while Roerich will continue his hymns to the beauty of the steppes and to the soft expansion of the architecture of the clouds; but we shall speak of the same thing: of Beauty.....of that great secret gift which is granted to man. We two should be not foes but allies and—if God wills it—friends. Our foe is the same: it is the hooliganism of those who want to forget about all the whispers and spells of nature. To them, all the best buildings, best pictures, and best books are only as a film on the eyes hindering them from keeping their ledgers in order.

True Roerich's mind and taste are still Varenian: he loves and understands best that land which was conquered and loved by his ancestors; its very austerity gave them health and poured power into their veins. A serene tenderness kindles in Roerich's heart for those firesides where a whole file of his forefathers nursed the men, the girls, the mothers, of their clan. But, at the same time, Roerich has learned from the voices singing in his soul to love and to understand humanity in general. He wants to see guests coming from overseas; he wants to see their lands and all the world in its boundlessness and complexity. He will always gather his health and strength from the soil of his own kindred Novgorod which is saturated with iron but he will dedicate that strength not to narrow nationalism, but to humanism in the broadest sense.

At this present hour when peoples are possessed by the devils of enmity and untruth, Roerich withdraws into his desert—as I withdraw into my temples—to create prayers to the Lord of peace and beauty.

Having given this amusingly drawn psychological parallel, I feel nevertheless inclined to quote a few of Roerich's own lines from one of his early literary works, because I know that he has remained true to this conviction.

There is nothing alarming in the contrast between the beauty of town and the beauty of nature. Just in the same way as fine contrasting colours do not kill each other but form a new powerful chord, so the beauty of nature and the beauty of town dwell hand-in-hand, intensifying each other. They are the two tones of the chord—its third tone being the beauty of the Unknown.

Roerich does believe in culture; only he is convinced that art is a much more lofty international factor of evolution than the 'mechanical civilization' of the last half-century.

There is no reason to disbelieve the main outlines of the very old Russian legend which says that the ancient slaves were peaceful people who had no ambition to rule, to command, or to fight; that all they wanted was to be left in peace at their work on the land. "So they went across the sea to ask varengians to come and be their Princes and to rule over them.

Three brothers came and settled down in the Russian land: Rurik, Sineus, and Truvor. Presently the traces of the two younger of these disappeared; but Rurik was supposed to have started a whole dynasty, the last of which on the Russian throne was Theodor, Ivan the Terrible's son. Then came the so called 'Tumultuous Times', after which a young Romanov was elected Tsar—again as the nearest to Prince Rurik's descendants.

I have to remind the reader of this very probable origin of the Russian rulers (In any case the varengians *i. e.*, Norwegian, merchants and warriors were the first people of their kind to appear on the great waterway between the North and the Greek land, and had all the chance to get into power—whether by invitation or by force!) because I want to mention a most interesting reverie of our modern writer, Alexei Ramizov. The beautiful form of his writings disappears in translation because they are given in that ancient Russian speech which has been

mentioned before. Many of Roerich's could be best interpreted by means of Remizov's poems inspired directly by the artist's work—but, alas, those poems-in-prose must remain a treasure for the Russians only, because five words out of every ten have no parallel whatever in the known old English.

Nevertheless, I take my courage in both hands in order to give an approximate rendering of one of Remizov's pages; it is a most interesting reverie, and leads to what may be called a revelation.

"From beyond the sea there appeared, moving into the Russian Land across the quaking marshes, the ice-flows and the crackling undergrowth, a man hard as flint.

"He made a fierce bonfire and built for himself a town in stone.

"And this throne was of red moss, his crown of moonstone, and his sword and shield of granite.

"Beyond the seas and the mists the tale spread of the Viking who went away and did not return. The Skalds composed a saga about him, the Giants mused and wondered—Why was there no sign of the Viking for so long a time? The grey-haired mourn worked spells in watching his waves—but, 'No', said the waves, 'Viking will never return.' Oblemay himself—of a brighter green than the green of the sea grass—having licked his blind, cold cubs for the night would tell them a long tale about the Viking who went over to the Russian land.

"And his throne was of red moss, his crown of moonstone, and his sword and shield of granite.

"From beyond the Varenagian sea moved Viking the Flint into the Russian land, along serpents' paths, and settled in his stone town.

"In the blue twilight of the autumn he would ascend his tower, and his eyes glowed like blue flames in the blue mist;

they could see as far as beyond the third sea. And in the night the noydas of Lapland would join him and weave their spells o'er the stony range, o'er the wind, and o'er the waves.

"And the glare form of bonfires spread for miles around the town, hot and high. Like one born of the Russian land, the Viking starting putting it into shape.

"He went with Svitoslav to Tsargrad (Constantinople), and saw what he never could forget: an Angel in the fiery skies, and a winged fire, and blue arrows that came down on the fleet of Russian boats, burning them.

"He heard Perun (Jupiter) yell in anguish in christened Novgorod, and saw him toss and beat against the bank of the Volhov River.

"He saw the Hungari appear from beyond the Ural Mountains and cross the Russian land and vanish, darkling, behind the Carpathian Range.

"He was with Prince Igor on the Kayal River, and he will never forget the lament and the tears when the treason of the Russian Princes opened to the foe the gates of the Russian land.

"One after another the centuries passed; and resting under a snow—clad stone, he heard the terrible Tsar Ivan raging recklessly over the Russian land.

"Then the last threads of memory sank into darkness.

"More centuries went by.

"And then there again appeared a man—and settled in Petersburg on the Moyka: no more from the varengian sea, but from Kostroma town; and no more Rorik (as they called Rurik in Novgorod)—but Roerich."

And again as of old, he built for himself a stone town. The memory came back to him as in a dream, and he told us about the rocks and about the seas where he used to sail with his friendship of Warriors, about the giants and the serpent

and the noydas, about the terrible Angel and about how Russia was being built up, and how the treason of the Russian Princes opened to the for the gates of the Russian land.

His Blue is the Blue of the Northern Twilight;

His Green is the Green of the sea-grass;

His Red is the Red of bonfires,

And his Flame—from Byzantine arrows.

He built for himself a stone town—as roomy and as free as the old Novgorod that was its own Master—and the glare from his bonfires is again spreading hot and high over the Russian land.

Gollerbach, a foremost art critic of the Soviet, says :

—Roerich.....This name has long since come to identify an entire cosmos called into being by the creative will of the artist,—an entire world of forms of the deepest significance, inspired by *wisdom* in the antique meaning of the word; sophia is “mastership,” ability to create a thing; not without reason in Pindar and Aristotle is the true artist called “the wise”.
