

NICHOLAS ROERICH
ON THE OCCASION OF HIS 90TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY
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By
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Nicholas Roerich rises like a lonely giant in the art of our time. He had been in the front ranks of the avant-garde during those last happy years before the crisis of western civilization which set in with the first world war and the Russian Revolution. In the country of his birth he had created important murals, in western Europe he had become famous by his sceneries and figurines for the Diaghilev Ballets which were not only the most sensational, but also the most fertile cultural influence of that time. And yet, already then the special bend of his personality was evident which later on would lead him away from the trends of the time, an archaist in the opinion of those who identified living art with all the disintegration that set in since then, a conserver and prophet of the future for those who believe that such a disintegration represents merely a transition phase between two successive stages in the evolution of man, occasioned by new means of living and the new perspectives opened by them.

When he painted scenes of early tribal life or of the simple but intense faith of the early church in Russia, he had seemed to be no more than a gifted representative of that historical painting which then glorified the growth of the various national and cultural aspects of the occident. But he was far more. For him it was a search for the primary roots of culture, the response of man to the cosmic forces surrounding him and surging up in his innermost being. The archaic was for him the world where this response still was original, alive, and not yet a worn-off dogma whose spirit had vanished from the conventionalized patterns of thought and imagery. Thus the horrors of the first world

war had inspired him to apocalyptic visions still more or less inspired by the imagery of the Bible, however also by that of other ancient myths. Thus his visit to the United States left no mark on his art, however active his life there had been. Thus, on the other hand, his travels in Central Asia and then his stay in the Himalaya, to the end of his days, have given a new turn to his art. Here was a scenery in which man is at the mercy of grandiose superhuman forces, here a religiosity absorbed in the demoniac terrors of the universe and yet in the ultimate harmony and peace beyond those appearances. Mountains of a grandiosity, plains of an infinite solitude that dwarf the few wanderers and their habitations, a sky of a glowing darkness which might have been the prototype of the simile used by our mediaeval mystics, or covered with driving, heavy clouds and surging fogs like in the witches' scene of Macbeth. Religious monuments whose symbolism merges with the overwhelming scenery, deities as threatening as that nature and yet, when piously approached, benign, disclosing the ultimate secrets of the universe, priests and devotees trying to wrestle with all these forces, trying to work, in the spirit of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, for the salvation of all living beings. This is not an ethnographic art attempting to catch the picturesqueness of an exotic milieu. Nor is it a mere transposition of Greek-orthodox mysticism into the symbolism of High Asia. Both elements could, of course, not be quite absent. Rather it is a struggle to evoke their spiritual contents, to push beyond the visible signs and symbols forward to that ultimate reality which we feel behind all that we can experience around us in space and time, or within us in the stillness of our mind and heart. It is a struggle to express this by the means available to the artist, intensification through simplification, rhythm, colour, symbolism. In some measure Nicholas

Roerich went, in this respect, the same way as modern art. But only to a certain point. When the shells of Christian or humanistic mythology crumbled, emptied of their once profound, but now meaningless contents, modern art had only the choice of becoming the whore of the dolce vita, of commercialism and political propaganda, or to confess its anguish in an empty, meaningless world, first by a hectic falling back on the primitive urges of mankind so long tamed, then strangled by civilization, then on hell visions of the absurd or on the abstract beauty of line, colour and structure, at last to be likewise prostituted as incessantly changing fashions of thrillers and shockers, wallowing in worse and worse obscenities, cruelties and absurdities. Progress -- towards death, though in a way, also the formal experiments for another, not yet born art of the future ! But for an artist like Nicholas Roerich to whom this world had become more and more a symbol of the Life Divine, such a wallowing in absurdities would have been no less absurd than for a Michelangelo, Lionardo or Goethe. His artistic course was rather that of El Greco, i.e. to catch the appeal of some subject and then to recast it again and again until every line, every harmony, every colour, every symbol had become an intensive expression of his vision. This meant, in praxi, not only a frequent repetition of the same subject, but also wide differences of quality, from the first, often conventional sketch to the unique masterpiece. As there had been an enormous demand for his creations, also those not yet matured studies have found their way into museums and private collections, and have offered a pretext for criticism just to those who themselves are the exponents of the most unhealthy abuses of modern art. However to which great master did this not happen? It may be conceded that Nicholas Roerich does not yet represent the reborn art of the future. How should this have

been possible in a time when the last great art of occidental civilization was just dying. The best he could do was to experiment with new possibilities of expressing the ultimate sense of life and of the universe as far as we are able to apprehend it. But just in this respect he will prove to be a bridge to the future, to another, still unborn art which will again be able to express the highest visions and aspirations of mankind.

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