

SVETOSLAV ROERICH

by

Frances R. Grant

Rarely has destiny accorded so rich an endowment of creative genius upon an entire family as it has on that of Nicholas Roerich, who illumined our entire century with his evocation to the human spirit, by his art and thought.

Svetoslav Roerich - true son of his father - has added to this patrimony his own uniquely personal ingredients drawn from the crucible of wide artistic and philosophic explorations. The result is a panoply of creative works which surge across the spectrum of his versatile personality: as artist, scholar, penetrating researcher into wide ranges of man's social and cultural expressions, and, always as a courageous and profound commentator on the awesome challenges of our times.

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I turn first to the portraits of Svetoslav Roerich, because it was in this facet of his creative expression that I first knew him, when I had the privilege of meeting the Roerichs, arriving in the United States for the initial momentous exhibition of Nicholas Roerich's paintings here.

Svetoslav, then in his teens - and throughout the decade (more or less) that he spent in the United States including his <sup>Columbia and</sup> Harvard University period - was already giving evidence of his inherent gifts for portraiture in sketches and paintings. He had - and continues to have - an almost faultless capacity for catching at once the "pictorial" aspect of his subject; but beyond this - and this ingredient is the quality in his portraits that makes them truly great works of art - he projects the "essence",



as it were, of the subject. To the startling exactitude of his brush, in capturing features or personality, he added a mysterious distillation of the human being, which invariably shows through.

Even in the earliest works, done before he left the United States - such as his "Madonna of the Roses", and other early sketches and portraits - this distillation of the composite person shines out beyond the canvas.

These talents have flowered brilliantly through the years. Take his paintings of the "folk" - types which he apparently loves to capture: the hill people of India's border lands; wanderers on the wayside paths of the country; lamas; children; sadhus - in each of these arresting figures, some of which were exhibited during the forties in New York, Philadelphia and other United States centers, the central figures, <sup>some</sup> larger than life, pulsate with laughter, ~~or slyness~~ or humor, or with the peasant's patience, all bespeaking the drama of the world's peoples.

In his already renowned portraits of some of the historic figures and personalities of our times - such as those of his wife, Devika Rani, distinguished actress of India; and those of the great leaders <sup>and Statesmen</sup> of India - Nehru, Radhakrishnan, <sup>c.p.</sup> Ramaswami <sup>Ayer</sup> and others - the artist's hand, sure and startlingly perceptive, is seconded by his philosophic reflection into the historic man. These works certainly will remain as among the finest portraits of their subjects but - like the great portraits of history - they become an assertion also of the individual's significance for his times - artistic "memorabilia" of an epoch as it were, and the personality of man, the subject, who set his seal upon it.

One must comment separately, of course, on the series of Portraits which Svetoslav Roerich has made of his Father -



and which record the whole of his years, beginning from the majestic work which hung in the Roerich Museum in New York: In eastern robes, which so suited his presence, Nicholas Roerich is holding <sup>an</sup> ~~the~~ ancient <sup>casket.</sup> ~~coffre~~ which ~~was placed in the corner-~~ <sup>Early</sup> ~~stone~~ of the Roerich Museum. From this ~~first~~ portrait, through his Father's life, Svetoslav developed an artistic narrative as few artists could ever have attempted - they form an epic tribute of a great son to a great Father. There is in each of these works an incandescent quality, startlingly real in terms of characterization, but equally pulsating in their almost tangible luminosity and spiritual evocation. These great works truly are worthy of their subject!

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An entire volume could be dedicated to Svetoslav's diversity of subject and creative exploration. For instance, in his compassionate attention to the life of India, Svetoslav has also found themes for his brush among his neighbours ~~in~~ India: the mother and her child; man's toil in the fields; his neighbour's contest with nature - every phase of the life around him is distilled on his canvases to a message of permanent meaning in the constant tale of daily living.

But in these works he is less concerned with the individual as a subject, as with his role in the cycle of life. The figures in his genre works become one integral feature in the rhythm of the theme: thus, in the series of "My Neighbours" or "My House", and other paintings of the human drama from birth to death, the anonymous <sup>by</sup> ~~but~~ unforgettable performers merge into the landscape in an undulating oneness of vivid colour and design.

And, of course, Svetoslav Roerich - with his artist's eye and his philosopher's contemplation - must ponder the majestic panorama of the earth and its beauty. He, having so widely travelled through all of India's variegated nature, perpetuates it on his ~~convases~~ <sup>canvases</sup> in its softer or more dramatic



facets, with a flow of colour that <sup>✓</sup>cirtually pulsates. Like his Father, he has looked upon the Himalayas, and - unlike lesser artists who might have despaired - has not feared to meet the challenges of that most spectacular grandeur of earthly landscapes. Certainly his colour and vistas recall also the Himalayan paintings of Nicholas Roerich, but we are grateful that Svetoslav, also has found the secret of projecting that vast majesty of nature with a palette that captures the glow of sunset and sunrise on the summits; the Himavat at morning; or its emerging from the nebulous sea of clouds; in all, the almost unbearable radiance of the Himalaya's whiteness. In hundreds of sketches and paintings, Svetoslav has responded to the inspiration of these vistas, and has continued the saga of his father, in his own idiom and with his own variations of an eternal theme.

No one may look at these paintings and not be aware of their call: the call to any penetrating spirit who has stood before the whole ramparts and pondered on their secret beyond, on man's capacity to surmount this impenetrability, not physically but in his faith, or anguish, or prayer. Perhaps this commentary on these extraordinary records in art of the Himalayas may seem far afield, but the communication of art to the spirit of man is exactly what we are discussing in Svetoslav Roerich's works. In his Himalayan paintings, as in those of his father, this is the message that reaches out to me, as I contemplate their beauty and their mystic implications.

It is not unnatural, then, that one turns from the Himalayan landscapes of Svetoslav, to another field of his work - the mystic and symbolic paintings, which may well be regarded as a translation of the Himalayan message of nature into the terms of man's relation to the cosmic processes. These paintings - even their very themes - are reflections on man as the creator of his destiny: he stands hourly at the cross-roads of his choices, always challenged by the inner and outer voices that



beckon to him. So, as the Himalayan landscapes speak to the viewer of evolution in its cosmic proportions, these canvases present, in mystic but dramatic terms, the responsibility of the individual man for his own self-perfection.

Certainly ours is an age when apocalyptic conflicts confront man. Then who, if not the artist, must remind his contemporaries of this testing that is inexorably before him. This spiritual concern of Svetoslav Roerich is not a new one - some of his earlier paintings bespeak his contemplation of this call to the essential choices which man must make. But the gentler meditative presentations of this theme, such as his "Whither goes my brother?" or "Words of the Teacher", rise to dramatic force in works such as his triptychs and other recent prophetic works - "Humanity Crucified, Whither Humanity" *old a build* retells the story of the unending crucifixion; his inexorable *own man* "Angel of Justice" broods over the city, as its terrified populace remains in darkness; the eternal conflict of man against his higher self as "Jacob wrestles with the Angel" and many other mystic representations of salvation and resurrection. In these, the message of Svetoslav Roerich, compassionate in spirit, rises to the prophetic warnings which our times demand and which the artist, in his role as prophet, can not evade.

One may not pay tribute to the creative work of Svetoslav Roerich, without adding a tribute to the synthesis of his personality and to the endless areas of art and science and human aspiration, which have been his concern.

The extraordinary spirit of inquiry - artistic, intellectual, sometimes even rebellious - , which this writer remembers in Svetoslav Roerich's youth, has matured into the man with infinite interests, great knowledge and a universal compassion, that pervades all his activity. The expression, "Renaissance Man", is sometimes too lightly used, but in Svetoslav Roerich one sees, indeed, the consummate person, who recognizes no boundaries into which the heart



and mind and spirit of man may not penetrate. He can, as does Svetoslav Roerich, in every nuance of his creative life as in his art, shed light on his times and enrich the lives of his fellowmen.

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