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## Movement on canvas

STANLEY CARVALHO on DR SVETOSLAV ROERICH, 84-year-old Russian painter, humanist and author

SOME people say he looks like a saint. Others say he resembles Hemingway. He reminds a few of Leo Tolstoy. Whatever people think of him, he remains Dr Svetoslav Roerich — painter, humanist, writer, and husband of the legendary first lady of Indian cinema, Devika Rani.

Tall and fair with a flowing white beard, Svetoslav Roerich, the 84-year-old Russian painter, has made India (Bangalore) his home for over three decades now. "I love India. It is a unique country," he states seriously.

His 'love affair' with India began in 1923 when he first came to this country along with his parents and brother. Being great lovers of nature, the family spent a few years in the lap of the Himalayas before moving over to Kulu in 1929. "The Himalayas fascinated me immensely. It is a great temple of nature and its riches of natural beauty cannot be found anywhere else in the world," he says reflectively.

Dr Roerich was born in St Petersburg in 1904. His family left the USSR in 1917 and Svetoslav had his early education in Russia and Sweden. He studied art in England before moving over to the universities of Columbia and Harvard. It was in the US that Svetoslav won his first award at the young age of 21. He won the medal of the Sesquicentennial Exposition at Philadelphia for an oriental composition.

A multifaceted personality, Dr Roerich is best known for his paintings. He learnt painting at a very young age from his father Nicholas Roerich, who was an internationally renowned artist and philosopher. A visionary, his father made a serious study of Tibet. His canvases too were populated by the mystic figures of Tibetan lamas. Svetoslav's elder brother George, who died in 1960, was a historian and fluent in Sanskrit and Hindi. He left behind valuable work on Tibetology.

Dr Svetoslav Roerich's paintings can be classified into landscapes, imaginative paintings, portraits and biblical and other compositions. He held his first exhibition in India in 1936. His works focus on common or popular Indian people. His portraits of Nehru, Dr Radhakrishnan and recently Indira Gandhi are well-known. His other famous portraits include those of his wife Devika Rani, dancer Roshan Vajifdar and his father. "Portraiture," he reasons "is as important as religious art." His paintings "Love thy neighbour as thyself", "Triumph of love" and "Angels will sing again" depict his strong faith in the Christian idea of love and brotherhood.

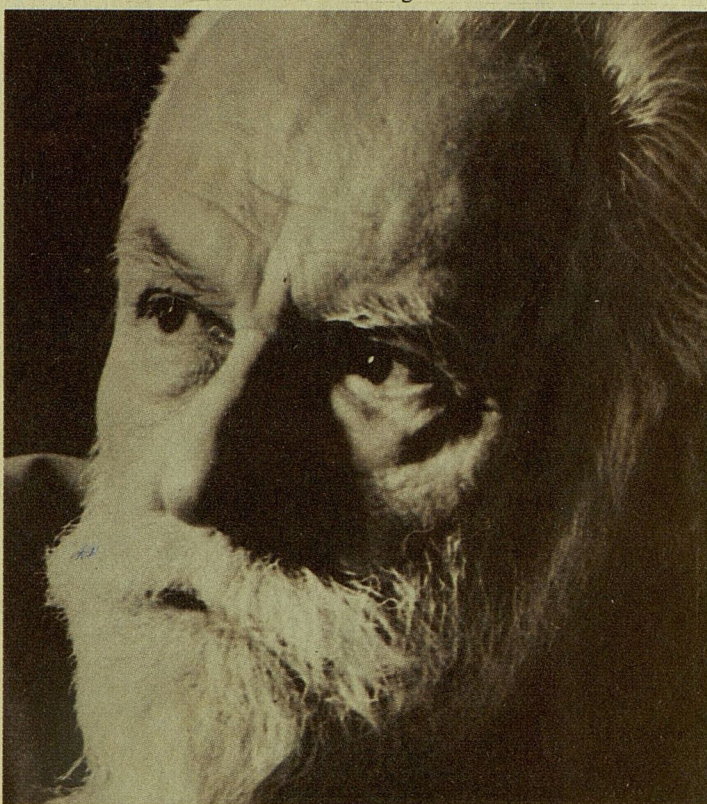
His landscapes were poems of colour, said Dr S Radhakrishnan. One can experience spiritual splendour in his works, whether they portray the majesty of the Himalayas or the lyrical beauty of the simple Indian countryside. His colours are brilliant and catchy, never harsh; they are bright, yet never flashy. "Colour is an important medium of portraying an

idea. The brighter the colour, the more effective the idea," he asserts. His Himalayan paintings, with his famous 'Roerich blue' and dramatic highlights, are regal in their splendour. The most striking aspect of his paintings is the movement or the action. Dr Roerich has worked with almost every type of medium. "However, tempera has been my favourite," he admits.

For Dr Roerich, art is "a fundamental expression of life" — and "life", he observes, "is the constant striving towards beauty and perfection." His major

soon after marriage to stay with Svetoslav Roerich.

Dr Roerich still has close ties with the USSR and remarks, "I am extremely happy about the growing relationship between India and USSR." Most Soviet delegations that visit Bangalore come and see him. The Roerichs visit Russia now and then. In May 1987 during their visit they met Gorbachov in the Kremlin. Gorbachov told Dr Roerich, "This meeting is a very old wish. The beginning of the cordial relationship between the USSR and India was linked with the history of the Roerich family." Indeed a rare kind of Indo-Soviet synthesis. Dr Roerich has links with Bulgaria also. He is a Fellow of the Bulgarian Academy of Fine Arts. Bulgaria will collaborate in run-



Dr Svetoslav Roerich: a love affair with India

source of inspiration? "Life itself," he retorts quickly, adding, "My philosophy of life is based upon the great philosophies left to us by our great predecessors."

Dr Roerich's works have been exhibited all over the world and can be seen in some of the most reputed art galleries. His portraits have been acquired by the Luxembourg Museum in Paris. He strides the world art scene like a colossus and an exhibition of 340 of his paintings is now travelling all over the USSR.

Whatever brought him to India? "Indian philosophy was part of my early background even in Russia. My parents loved — India and eventually we came to live here." He recalls nostalgically his association with the Nehrus: "I met Nehru in 1942. The Nehrus used to visit our family home in Kulu quite often. Nehru was an esteemed and dear friend upto his passing away. So also Indira. We were also closely associated with Dr S Radhakrishnan and Tagore. I met Tagore in 1919 in London and the warmest relations existed between Tagore and my father."

What of his marriage with Devika Rani, who also happens to be a niece of Tagore? Dr Roerich met Devika in 1944 in Bombay and the next year they got married. Despite being at the zenith of her film career, Devika quit films

ing their research centre in Kulu.

Dr Roerich was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1961 and the gold medal of the Calcutta Art Society in 1971. He is also the recipient of the Order of Friendship of Nations from the President of the USSR and the title 'Knight of Madara' from the President of Bulgaria. On October 8, 1987, he was conferred the fellowship of the Lalit Kala Akademi in Bangalore. He has also been conferred various other fellowships from the USSR and Bulgaria.

Dr Roerich expresses happiness over the art scene in India. "India is progressing and developing in so many directions and has achieved so much. Art is no exception. It is growing rapidly and the future is bright. Art education and art activity in India is on the increase."

The grand old artist is full of life and vigour. Besides painting, he is involved in a lot of cultural work in Bangalore. He is a senior trustee of the Chitrakala Parishad and Society of Fine Arts.

What of the future? "Plans are afoot to set up a Kulu Research Centre in the hill town of Naggur. It will be an international research centre," he explains. Devika plans to make short documentaries of Kulu's birds, flowers, customs, etc, and make cassettes available for Indian and foreign television.