

SUNDAY HERALD



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GIVING BEAUTY...

ROAMING in the Kulu Valley of the Himalayas more than fifty years ago, Svetoslav Roerich picked up rocks to study their colour composition and observed the mountains around him, in a love of nature that vibrates from his canvases.

His passion for the Himalayas especially, spawned landscapes from his brushes, earning applause throughout the world. "The Himalayan landscapes, designed in monumental rhythms, open a fantastic world almost unbelievable to one who has never seen them himself," raved an art critic.

Svetoslav Roerich's paintings fall into three categories: landscapes, portraits and imaginative studies. But he has been hailed as a great painter chiefly for his

by C. B. Yeshvanth Kumar

landscapes and portraits. His paintings adorn the principal art galleries and leading private collections throughout the world. Many paintings have been reproduced in books, and magazines and postcards.

Living in the Himalayas, Roerich also studied the Tibetan and local systems of medicine. He is deeply read in philosophy, comparative religion, Indology and Oriental studies, aesthetics and art history. Besides, he is an architect, art collector, ethnologist and researcher in plant biology.

Born on October 23, 1904 in an aristocratic family in Russia, Roerich was educated in that country and Sweden during his early years. After a two-year stint in England from 1918, he studied architecture at Harvard University in the U.S. Even as a student he travelled widely in Europe and America, acquainting himself with contemporary trends in art.

HOW does architecture explain his interest in painting?

"Well, I am interested in arts," Dr. Roerich (78) said in an interview. "You cannot divide painting and architecture. They are one whole."

"I think architecture gives a good change; training in architecture is useful. India is a country which is abundantly rich in plastic arts. Take the temples, they have beautiful plastic expressions."

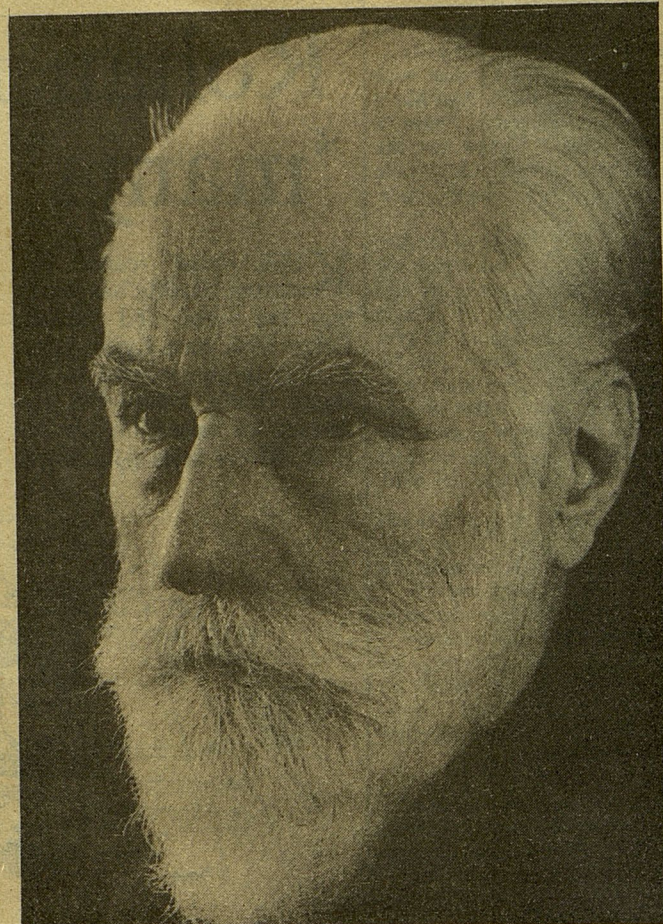
But how far does his interest in architecture play a role in his life as a painter?

"Well, I am interested in so many different subjects. And you can ask me how they come in contact with my daily life. I have lived for many years in the Himalayas. I was very interested in Tibetan medicine, and in other indigenous medicine of the region. It is a very rich subject. Because so many different types of medicine have come together at that point — Chinese, ayurvedic, unani and others. The Himalayan region is extremely rich in plants and medicine. As a matter of fact, they have not been completely studied yet."

At the age of 32, Roerich joined the ranks of the world's greatest painters when his portrait of his father found a place in the Luxembourg Museum in Paris. His first exhibition was held in America before he was twenty. Between 1926 and 1939, he travelled widely in Europe, India and America and held exhibitions of his paintings.

Roerich first visited India 60 years ago. He held his first exhibition in the country at Lucknow in 1935. This was followed by 40 exhibitions in the country to date.

After his first Indian visit, Roerich held an exhibition, "Paintings of India" at the Philadelphia Art Alliance in Philadelphia, U.S.A. in April 1940. Twenty-nine paintings of the temples, people and nature of India on show won favourable press



Svetoslav Roerich ... passion for colours

Photo: K. G. Somsekhar

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BEFORE he left the United States in 1931 to live in Europe and then to permanently settle in India, Roerich acted as Director - General of the International Art Centre in New York, founded by his father Nicholas Roerich.

Svetoslav Roerich's portraits have been criticised by a few because they bear a stunning resemblance to their subjects. In modern art, portraits need not bear such likeness to the sitters, the critics say.

Does Roerich think the criticism that only the portraits of his father have made him famous, is accurate?

"It is not accurate. I must say I was always interested in portraits. Why? Because I was interested in...man, in psychology. So naturally, portraiture is a sort of an entrance or a key to it. A portrait

should convey to us the person. My father was a very remarkable person with a tremendous amount of achievements to his credit — as writer, painter and public figure."

Did he paint portraits of his father only as a tribute of a son or...?

"No, I personally felt he was a unique person. Besides, there were numerous requests from various organisations for father's portraits. I have painted thirty portraits of my father so far. And if you ask me now, I would say I only perhaps regret that I did not paint more."

Is it correct to say that he was his father's principal student?

"That is difficult to say. But I was associated with my father in many of his larger works. He was my constant guide, companion and friend."

How far did his father's teachings influence his own work?

"Very much. I always appreciated his particular approach, whether in art, philosophy or his general attitude towards life. He was very humble. The one difference in our art is that I liked portraiture and he was not interested in it. But my father as a person was a most remarkable example. He was a splendid subject."

NOT only did Svetoslav Roerich paint portraits of his father, but he also leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Dr. Radhakrishnan. Among other personalities, he drew portraits of his life, Devika Rani — the first lady of the Indian screen.

Roerich married her in 1945, when he was 41. The couple have been living in Bangalore for more than three decades now. (Paradoxically, no exhibition of the painter has been held in the city.)

HOW often does he paint now?

"I like to paint all the time. I paint only in the mornings — which is a better time for any creative endeavour. The earlier the better. My output varies very much. It depends on how much time I have. A lot of other things come in between. You see, I still retain my interest in the Kulu Valley. We still have our old house there. There is a public gallery of my father's paintings."

Are there any paintings of his on the modern Indian situation?

"I would not be interested in painting Bhilai or Bokaro. That would not suit my personal artistic inclination. But it is not as if I consider these wonderful structures as not essential. As Panditji said, these are temples of prosperity....you see, there are certain basic foundations of our life. One of them is nature. The rural life is of far better standard because the people who live there are closer to nature. Our civilisation can be measured in the recesses of nature."

Is there any way he can sum up the message or central purpose of his work?

"I believe we must give to others something that is beautiful, something that is inspiring, moving. I believe in what Plato said over two thousand years ago: from beautiful images, we shall go to beautiful thoughts, from beautiful thoughts to a beautiful life, and from a beautiful life to absolute

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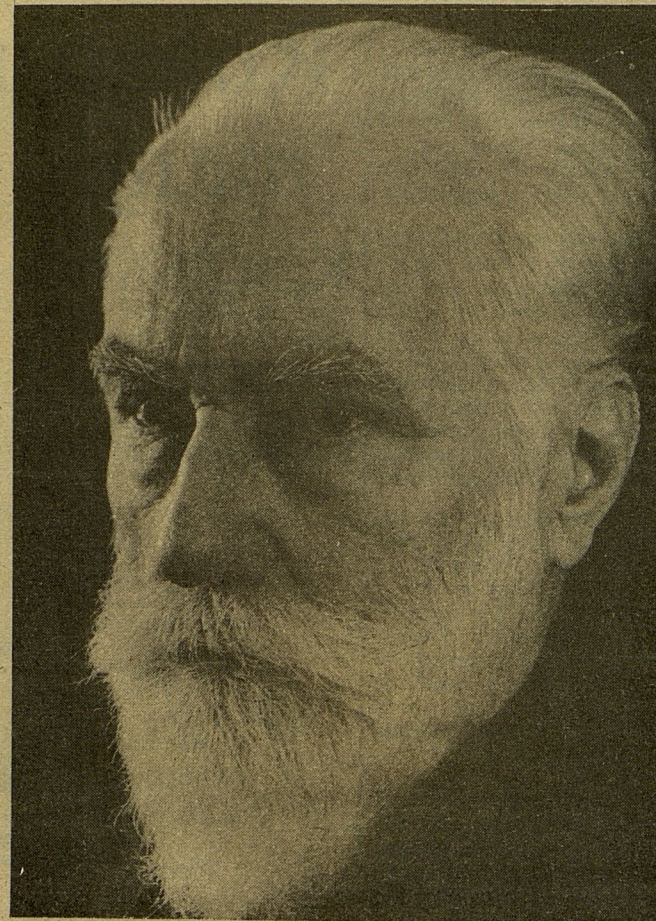
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