

SVETOSLAV ROERICH
AND HIS ART

By R. C. Tandon.

1938

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Svetoslav Roerich has undoubtedly received a rich heritage of artistic talent. His own achievement is at the same time so distinctive that he entirely escapes the charge of plagiarism. This fact is in itself highly remarkable. For living in the closest association of his celebrated father, it was possible for a person of lesser gifts to have been swept off his feet. The younger Roerich has not only found his feet, but the ground underneath is so firm as to be able to support a noble edifice. The fact is already proven by the many and valuable works in which the genius of the artist has found its expression.

Born in 1904, in St. Petersburg, in Russia, Svetoslav Roerich received his early schooling in his own country, as well as in Sweden. In 1918, he went to England where he studied art for about two years. For further studies he proceeded, in 1920, to the United States where he lived mostly in New York and Boston, studying at first at the Columbia University, and later at the graduate School of Architecture at the Harvard University. As a student he had travelled extensively both in Europe and America, and acquainted himself with the artistic trends of thought in the various countries visited by him. His visit to the East first came about in 1923, and this has been renewed at intervals, and has proved highly fruitful artistically.

Even before Svetoslav Roerich came out to India, in 1923, he held an exhibition of his works in the United States. Several more exhibitions of his paintings took place in the larger cities of the United States in the two following years, during which he was absent from America. In 1926, he received the Medal of the Sesquicentennial Exposition of Philadelphia for an oriental composition. His paintings continued to be further exhibited by their owners, and he was beginning to be marked out for his special line of work namely portraiture. In 1930, he

created a great impression by a portrait of his father which was exhibited at the Venice Exhibition. Another portrait of Professor Roerich was exhibited in New York at the Exhibition of Portraits of Artists in October 1932, and won for the artist the highest approbation.

Svetoslav Roerich's portraits of his great father have won international renown, and have been distributed over several noted Museums. The Roerich Museum in New York, the Museum pro Pace, Arte, Scientiae et Labore in memoriam Alberti Regis Belgarum in Bruges, the Russian Museum at Prague and the Municipal Museum in Allahabad have been enriched by the artist's portraits of his father. Svetoslav Roerich's first participation in an exhibition in India was in 1936-37, when at the Government Exhibition of the United Provinces, Lucknow, were shown four of his large canvases, namely, "Ghepan Peak—Guardian of Kulu"; "Rebati"; "Lohar, Kulu"; and "Gundla Thakur's Castle, Lahul", works depicting subjects taken either from India or Western Tibet. These canvases were highly appreciated by distinguished art critics and connoisseurs and one of them, "Gundla Thakur's Castle, Lahul" now forms part of the permanent Roerich Hall, dedicated to the art of his father, in the Allahabad Municipal Museum. Svetoslav Roerich is further participating in the Indian History Congress Exhibition (1938) in Allahabad by means of four new paintings, "Autumn Trees"; "Mira"; "Lilies"; and "Gallardias", and has already received high praise for his distinguished work.

Svetoslav Roerich's paintings today form part of many private collections as well as public museums in three continents, the museums of New York, Paris, Prague, Bruges, Riga, Allahabad, Benares, Praha, and Trivandrum being the more important among them. His paintings have, moreover, been reproduced in the "Studio" (London), "Asia" (New York), "Magazine of American Art", and in art publications of France, India, Belgium, Italy, and several other countries.

It is remarkable that engaged in his creative work as an artist as he is, he maintains an active interest in numerous cultural organisations. Thus he is the Director of the International Art Centre of New York, the Vice President of the Roerich Museum, New York, and of the Urusvati Himalayan Research Institute, Naggar, Kulu, India, Member-Founder of the Russian Museum, Prague and is a moving spirit of the art world of New York. He is also the president of the American Section of the French society "Lusace", and Honorary Member of "Flamma" U. S. A., Life Member of the Archaeological Institute of America, besides being connected closely with many cultural and scientific institutions in Europe and America.

As has already been pointed out, the line of work in which Svetoslav Roerich has specially distinguished himself is portraiture. From his earliest artistic career he has devoted attention to this branch of art, until in his hands the practice of portrait-work may be said to have attained a high perfection. Of his earlier work "Portrait in Blue", and "Portrait of Mrs. K. Campbell" are remarkable studies. Not less distinctive is his "Portrait of Miss N. Rambova". In each case the artist has succeeded in bringing to surface the inmost expressions of his subjects, and has provided for their background appropriate eastern motifs. "Study in Orange and Purple" is another valuable picture in the same class.

The artist's sojourns in Tibet have provided him with many a subject for study, and "Yellow Lama" and "Red Lama" are most successful pieces of work. The latter portrays a Lama of the Kyelong monastery in Lahul, in ritual robes against a background of a Tibetan fresco. He is holding in his hands a silver horn as used in the ceremonies. The purplish pink of his robe contrasts beautifully with the blue and green background and the picture shows altogether a masterful handling of technique. Even more remarkable is the portrait of the Lama-hermit, Karma Dorje, whom the artist met in the Himalayas. This picture with its sun-bathed snowy background reveals a

wonderful study of an ascetic. With the knotted crown of hair, the spiritual expression of the face, the coarse loose covering over his body Karma Dorje strikes one as being an entirely unusual personality, and the artist's rendering of it through line and colour will rank among his best works.

Svetoslav Roerich has freely drawn his subjects from the inhabitants of the Himalayan regions, and "Gur, the Seer"; "Woman from Siraj"; "Rebati"; "Kulu Girl"; and "Gaddi" are only a few among his many successful studies.

The artist, however, excels in the portraits of his father, of which he has made a good number. As has already been mentioned these studies have attained to fame. The life-size portrait painted for the Roerich Museum shows the professor in an Eastern attire and has been rendered in the Chinese fashion with great subtlety alike of conception and execution. It has been characterised by the well-known art critic W. B. Mc Cormic of the *New York American* as "an extraordinary and moving piece of realism". Another portrait of Professor Roerich is set against a background of Himalayan ranges with a piece of rock carved with representation of the steed carrying the sacred fire placed in the foreground. "Fragment of a portrait of Professor Roerich" brings out the noble features of its subject with consummate skill. The artist has also made a few pencil sketches of his father, and one of these is in the Bharat Kala Bhavan at Benares.

If Svetoslav Roerich excels in portraiture, his work is by no means confined to that branch of art, and his mastery of line and subtle colour sense is revealed in a variety of canvasses. "Lahul" and "Rainbow Fall" are notable among his landscapes. In a different class are the impressionistic landscapes, "Naggar, Kulu" showing the premises of the Urusvati Himalayan Research Institute, the *ashrama* of Roerich, and "Tripura Sundari Temple", a sacred spot in Kulu. "Gods are coming" depicts a pro-

cession in Kulu, against the background of the Himalayan ranges and snows, with a remarkable study of a processionist in the lefthand foreground. In "Sadhu" and "Chalice of Buddha" may be traced some influence of his father, though it is remarkable how distinctive and individualistic the work of Svetoslav Roerich is. "Snake Charmers" is again a most remarkable picture. The charmer in flowing white garments, stands in the centre of a mountain road, and serpents—majestic creatures—are speeding towards him in answer to his call. The scene is set against a Himalayan background, the darker rock in the immediate vicinity being crowned by a beautiful tree. Mention must also be made of the many beautiful decorative panels painted by the artist. The motifs are generally Eastern. The panel showing two spirited black steeds with marks of the sun and the moon on the top corners and the sketch of a Tibetan warrior in the right foreground is a piece of great merit. Another piece showing a girl beckoning to a beautiful snake is likewise remarkable.

The work of Svetoslav Roerich thus shows a great variety. Above all the artist is interested in the portrayal of life. His special achievement is the outcome of a deeply-rooted philosophical view. "A man who wants to portray life", says he, "must know it in all its manifold expressions. It is not enough to learn to record the outer shape of things. One must enter into their very essence, and how else is one to know it, unless one has seen and studied all aspects of life."

And if we go over the range of Svetoslav Roerich's pictures we are at once convinced that in each case the artist is seeking to express the inner life of his subject and does not get lost in the externals of it.

The artist's interests are also manifold, and co-extensive with the cause of Culture. Since his youngest days he has been and continues to be an ardent collector of art in different fields, and his collections, specially of oriental objects rank among the rarest and best. He is also

interested in the verbal traditions of ancient medicines and has collected together a large number of old manuscripts and books, many of which date back to the very first days of printing and are considered a great bibliographical rarity. During his stay in India, he has also pursued a study of folk-lore, investigating and conducting researches in plant biology and medicine.

We cannot forget that all this achievement to the credit of the artist belongs to him while he is still quite young. He has an eye which keeps probing into the reality of things. It will not be at all too much to hope that the coming years will be more fruitful still, and will bring us, through him, some synthesis of life, which will be counted as his special approach towards the cultural achievement of his age.

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