

By Chandrasekhar

IT IS SAID that a man of art, like that of literature, knows no bounds. Few can exemplify the saying more convincingly than Sveteslov Roerich. He is the one contemporary artist more than any who has been recognised by peoples and governments of diverse ideologies like Russia, American and India.

If India was the first to register such a recognition by conferring on him the prestigious title of "Padma Bhushan", he is as familiar a name in the art world of America as a Kandinsky or a Pollock. The Russian people and Government have gone one further by giving him a special status in their national life.

On the occasion of the centenary celebrations of his illustrious father, Prof. Nicholas Roerich, Sveteslov had the unique honour of having air-lifted his paintings to the Soviet Union for a nation-wide exhibition by a special plane from Bangalore. Once there, the paintings received a royal reception, the exhibition running for a marathon 20 months and seen by over 450,000 visitors.

To crown it all, comes this year the coveted "Soviet Land Nehru Award" for his valuable contribution to the cause of Indo-Soviet Friendship through the medium of art and for his activities in its service. Indeed, it is rarely that a single individual has enjoyed such signal achievement in his lifetime.

The reason for this universal appeal in this great artist is not far to seek. He has the sensitive touch both as an artist and as a man. This sensitivity is transparent in all he does and is a way of life for this gentle soul of a renowned humanist artist. Indeed, if ever there is a nomination for world citizenship Sveteslov without hesitation should be the first choice! For he has the correct attitude for such citizenship, being acceptable to all kinds of people, races and nationalities.

Yet Sveteslov is so contented, so engrossed in his own little but overwhelming world of art that anything outside that sphere of beauty and creativity has little consequence for him. He is an artist who is totally absorbed in his work. And all his activities are directed towards realising his ideal of revealing beauty in all its ramifications.

It can be truly said of Sveteslov that the man is the style. His steady mind and suave deportment reflect his refined taste and culture. On a first consideration one will be struck by his simplicity. Though a born aristocrat, he has no airs either about his birth or attainments. Nor can one discern the depth of his penetrative knowledge of men and matters. How many are aware that though a Russian, his understanding of the essentials of Indian culture is befitting a fanatic Indian! His study of both the ancient and modern artistic traditions of India is authentic. His magnificent landscapes bear eloquent testimony to his extensive knowledge of India's vast history, its immense artistic heritage and its spiritual wealth. They speak for his clear understanding of the extraordinary beauty of Indian art, its spiritual stature, exemplified through its rich artistic heritage.

Despite these factors, he is not an artist who is oblivious to what is happening in the world of art. Though steeped in his own rich, imaginative world of form and colour, he is the one contemporary artist who is qualified to form the link between the glorious past and the sparkling brilliance of modern trends of art. It speaks for his liberal disposition that there is hardly any local artist who is not known to him, or whose work he is not familiar with. He is equally uninhibited in tendering words of advice to young, aspiring artists, though it is rarely that he speaks derisively of other artists.

All this makes one ponder ^{how} ~~who~~ and what is the secret of this polished deportment and sweet temperament. No doubt, he has imbibed his humane disposition from his saintly father. One can certainly visualise the ascetic character of that august personality in the soft-spoken, elegant exterior of Sveteslov. That does not mean that Sveteslov shines in his father's brightness. On the other hand, he is as individualistic as his father and mentor. Only, while the father was a

combination of diverse achievements, Sveteslov has remained loyal to fine arts, fine arts which is at once sublime and edifying. There is no room for the evasive, concealed and complex ideas of modernism in his approach to art. He refuses to be carried away by the popular, deceptive concepts that characterise modern art. Indeed, it is revealing how he describes a servant woman of his household as the prettiest subject he has had for a portraiture. And that in the presence of his proud wife, DevikaRani than whom the film world has not seen a more natural, graceful and dignified beauty!

There are not many artists, living or dead, who can measure upto Sveteslov in his artistic achievements. Whether it is the landscape, composition or figurative, he employs a trained craftsmanship to achieve his objective. He presents his work in clear perspective, comprehensible as much to the trained eye as to the laity. In either case, the sense of beauty and aesthetic values stand out, ideas of intellectualism fading out of the surface.

At the same time, Sveteslov also appreciates the modern techniques, though he may not employ many of them in his own works. His concern ~~for~~ seeing beauty and he adopts the purely academic approach in his creative endeavour to realise it.

Sveteslov's media is oil and tempera, the latter a technique which is on the verge of disappearance. But he uses oils more for his portrait studies, reserving the more difficult tempera technique for his landscapes and compositions. But whatever the media, he has a wonderful conception of his canvas. His dispersal of colour schemes and arrangement of the subject matter is such that the painting has its impact whether it is considered as a whole or in its different distinct parts.

Sveteslov has mastered the unique style of investing his works with a wide variety of dashing colours and swaying rhythm. His aggressive colour schemes instantly evokes an awe in the viewer, an awe which will ultimately reveal the richness of the ideas and the fullness of the feeling. It is this quality which makes his portrait studies derive a direct appeal to the senses.

Much the same can be said of his landscapes

where Sveteslov captures the grandeur of nature in all its colourful beauty and sensitivity. In a work like "Kanchenjunga", a subject which had fascinated both himself and his illustrious father alike, one can see the majestic splendour of the mountain range with the silvery peak emerging through the billowing clouds. The work bubbles with an esoteric beauty so peculiar to the Himalayan range, a beauty which can be appreciated only when one has a clear conception of the spirit through its legendary past.

Sveteslov seeks an open-air atmosphere to his studies of nature. How well he does it can be appreciated in his works. They are decisively stated, whether it is translating the Himalayan vastness into a radiant epic scene or capturing the lyric beauty of a rural setting. In them one can see him expressing light more impressively than the Impressionists. His search for the best way to portray light evolved into a genius for creating light in unbelievable splendour and clouds in chaotic frenzy.

One will easily be overwhelmed by the sizes and number of Sveteslov's works. One may understandably feel dismayed by the enormity of the output of his temperas, but one has to concede that he is an artist whose work ~~can~~ one can go on exploring for the rest of one's life and find something new each time.

Unlike many artists of his generation, the doctor from the Kulu valley has refused to continue the vanguard art of the 30-40s. The cubist-oriented geometric ^a abstraction has not influenced him, though he is an admirer of Picasso and Barque. He is one of those for whom the abstract or the cubist form appears over-worked and its rational and utopian justifications are too limited.

Nor has his ideas been confined to a rigid purist approach. But while most artists of the early fifties looked to surrealism as an alternative to the purist approach, Dr. Roerich started trying to evoke a more universal content in his style. One could call it the sublime in art, eliminating the customary reminders of nature and of past and existing art. His idea has been to grip the viewer, numb him ~~into~~ a frame of detachment from everyday habits which shield him from the strangeness of the world, at the same time succeeding in revealing this strangeness.

Yet it is Dr. Roerich more than any of his

generation who has realised that automation is an essential ingredient of the modern way of life. How convincingly he introduces the idea is revealing in his canvas "Among Those Shapes I Move".

The size of his canvases also helps him to create an environment, a special space that physically isolates the viewer from his usual surroundings. It is no dream world, everything is real and clearly defined within the picture plane. Only the sense of vastness provokes an experience of the sublime. As in "We Build Our Own Prisons", the rich hues animated by varying stripes of contrasting colours project a disquieting atmosphere to convey the artist's idea as to how he longs to run away from the overpowering urban landscape to the pleasurable, natural beauty of the rural vastness.

Bangalore
Dec. 24, 1976

S. N. Chandrasekhar

