

SPECIAL EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS BY NICHOLAS AND SVETOSLAV ROERICH

Thanks to the personal interest taken by H. H. the Maharaja, the Baroda Picture Gallery could hold an exhibition of representative works of Professor Nicholas Roerich and Professor Svetoslav Roerich, the famous Russian artists, on the occasion of His Highness' Birthday celebration (10th-28th January 1946). It was opened by the Dewan, Sir Brajendralal Mitter, with a very appreciative speech.

The Roerichs occupy a position in Indian art life unrivalled by any other Western masters. Whereas even the great Impressionist and post-Impressionist painters have become familiar only to a very exclusive upper-class, the art of the Roerichs has been accepted almost as an integral aspect of modern Indian culture. However, this popularity cannot be ascribed solely to the Buddhist symbolism of many works of Nicholas Roerich. For to-day Buddhism is the creed of Central and Eastern Asia, and modern Indians, though in sympathy with some of its tenets, have on the whole rather hazy ideas of what, for them, belongs to a long-gone past. And in the art of Svetoslav Roerich Asiatic symbolism plays no role at all. Not to speak of the fact that such a superficial adaptation or imitation would never have brought forth great works of art.

The art of the Roerichs rather represents a very interesting and fruitful case of cultural convergence. The style of Nicholas Roerich has grown from the general revolution in modern Western painting during the last half century, but the special circumstances of Russian national and of individual family tradition have guided his aesthetic development towards a new, very personal style which might be defined as a sort of synthesis between Eastern and Western ideals, that synthesis from which may spring a rebirth of our time-worn traditions on both sides of the Eurasiatic super-continent.

This revolution had been directed against the cult of the detail which threatened to suffocate European civilization in the course of a century of amazing discoveries and inventions. The swelling flood of new facts, techniques, methods, fashions, following each other at break-neck speed had risen beyond the assimilative capacities of even the greatest genius and had enforced a specialization which threatened to stunt human personality and to blunt its cosmic receptivity and genuine creative response. This reaction assumed all the shades from a relapse into barbarism or romantic escape into other, less specialized civilizations to a complete revaluation of all traditions. From the broader perspective of human experience all over the globe, but especially in Asia it developed a search for new real life values in a process of eliminating all non-essential problems and issues. In art—always a faithful mirror of our innermost cravings, obses-

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sions and ideals—this revolution found its expression in the post-Impressionistic movement. Impressionism had been the climax of Western art. It formed the zenith of differentiated detail observation, but at the same time turned back from the visible objects to the aesthetic vision created by them. Then the pulling down set in both of traditional ideals and forms: A new realism which had lost faith in all ideals save personal honesty visavis the "realities" of a life in a crisis, a surrealism delving into the subconscious, varying forms of constructivism starting their experiments from the fundamentals of form, colour and movement, and finally a new simplified and monumental style inspired by a new broader interpretation of a rediscovered mighty past, Greco, the Romanesque murals, Byzantium, the mummy masks of the Fayum and the Egyptian tomb reliefs, Persian and Indian paintings, the Zen scrolls of China and the Japanese wood cuts. A chaos confusing in its contradictory tendencies to those not familiar with its historical background. But fundamentally a uniform movement: The return to the essential!

In Russia this revolution coincided with the decline of the Tzarist despotism. The Western cultural varnish introduced by Peter the Great had always been not more than a sort of "colonial" monopoly of the aristocracy and wealthy bourgeoisie. Cultured Russians like many cultured Latin-Americans felt Paris to be their real home. Thus to the pre-Bolshevist nationalistic as well as democratic tendencies the Russia prior to the age of Peter the Great, with her mixed Byzantino-Tartar civilization, appeared as the cultural ideal. In Russia, therefore, the revolution in European art found an echo in a return to the monumental lines and glowing colours of Byzantine art and to the brightness of the Tartar-Central Asian folk traditions. It is no wonder that Nicholas Roerich, grown up in the traditions of a family descended both from the founders of the kingdom of Kiew and from Turkish conquerors, responded to these new ideals and became one of the most famous leaders of the Old Russian school. His paintings and stage decorations for the Russian ballet aroused a sensation in London and Paris in the years just before the First World War. But like all revivalist movements, also the Old Russian school proved to be no more than the glow preceding the flames of a genuine revolution. Its yearnings for the wild passions of a despotic and yet in some way democratic past were quenched in the violence of the Bolshevik revolution dreaming of a modern Russia and a modern socialist society. And Nicholas Roerich's name now might belong to the past like those of so many Russian emigres, but for another transformation.

Russia had always been as much a part of Asia as of Europe. Scythians, Tartars and Mongols have ruled over its South and East, and even in the last centuries the influence of the West has been balanced by the intimate contact with Muslim and Buddhist culture as a result of Russian penetration in the Caucasus, Turkistan, Siberia, Mongolia and Manchuria. The East has always fascinated many Russians, and the revival

of Byzantine mysticism under the Pan Slavists and Old Russians not seldom proved a stepping stone to the mysticism of Lamaistic Buddhism and Indian philosophy, at least in its Theosophist guise. Thus the Roerichs had been early followers of Mme. Blavatsky; Nicholas Roerich turned more and more to Buddhist speculations; and his son George is a well-known Tibet authority. Thus the flight of the emigree family from the Bolsheviks ended via Sweden, England and the U. S. A. at last in India, in the Himalayan mountains sacred both to Hindus and Central Asian Buddhists. Thus Nicholas Roerich became the master painter of the Himalayas. The call of the Russian steppe gave way to the spell of the vast Tibetan highlands, the glamour of the Byzantine frescoes and izy Nordic days and nights to the fiery glory of the sun rises and sets over the glaciers and peaks of the Kuen Lun, Kanchenjunga and other giant abodes of the gods. Living amidst the mystic atmosphere of old tirthas and lamaseries around his home at Naggar in Kulu, he could not help introducing the symbols and figures of legend and myth haunting this scenery, and, in doing so, experimenting with new forms studied in the old masterpieces of Asiatic civilization. A collector of Indian, Tibetan and Chinese art, Nicholas Roerich has attempted a synthesis of Eastern and Western taste. It is true that this synthesis has not always been successful; but this is unavoidable in all pioneer efforts. In many cases the symbols have remained exotic accessories, in other pictures the synthesis is so much on the surface that it can be easily dismembered—a shortcoming also of other experimenting masters, *e. g.* Mantegna, Dürer, Rembrandt, etc.—But then, in many experiments, tried again and again, it melts at last into a genuine unity, a great masterpiece. It is just this repetition—likewise a characteristic of all masters struggling under the task of expressing a superhuman vision, *e. g.* Greco or Marées,—which reveals the personality behind the experimenting artist. Already the old mystics have known how difficult it is not only to stay on the heights of spiritual experience, but also to transcribe its dynamism and peace, perplexing contradiction and simplicity into the terms of human expression.

Svetoslav Roerich is of a quite different calibre. Russia he had known only as a child, and the "Old Russian" revival mainly through his father. Educated in the United States, he is not a mystic, but very much of this earth. His is not a wedding of Western and Eastern mysticism. And yet he, too, is a mediator between East and West, a cosmopolite who has seen much of the world and overcome the prejudices of nation and race. His art is not a vision of cosmic grandeur, but of warm humanity. His landscapes are not the grand glaciers and peaks of the Himalaya, but the sweet meadows, gardens and forests of its valleys or the Central Indian highlands, or the groves and cliffs of the Malabar and Bombay coast, or the sceneries of the United States. His figures are not heroes, saints and ascetics, but character studies, portraits, folk types. His compositions are not legends and myths of the past, but the joys and sorrows of mankind. His synthesis is not so much a fusion of Russian and Asiatic traditions as an application of the principles of modern science in order to make alive those great ideals

which Asiatic as well as Western tradition has preserved—and petrified. A modern man to whom the East and the West are equally dear, not as contrasts, but as complements. If it might be said that the art of Nicholas Roerich has been in a certain harmony with the ideals of the last two generations in India who sought consolation from foreign political and cultural domination in the romantic and mystic ideals of the past, Svetoslav Roerich rather is in sympathy with the generation now coming to power who, though loving the past, are chiefly concerned with the practical problems and task of a modern India.

The exhibition devoted equal space to the paintings of father and son. Of both there was a great number of fine landscape studies, with the characteristic difference of personal accent. The father works almost solely in the bright, often hard medium of tempera; the son prefers the softer and warmer oil technique.

Amongst the large-size compositions of Nicholas Roerich a number resumed, of course, the Old Russian themes: Apocalypse, the Message of Tyron the Warrior, the Blind, Alexander Nevsky, Healing Herbs, St. Boris and Gleb, and especially the beautiful "Easter Night" (Easter procession in front of the now destroyed famous cathedral of Novgorod with its miracle-working Picture of the Holy Virgin); but even in these, *e.g.* in the rider figure of Alexander Nevsky, Chinese inspirations are occasionally felt. The Tibetan compositions were of rather varying type. In some the adaptation of Buddhist motives was rather too obvious, *e.g.* in Rigden or Bhagwan. But wonderful were the majestic Himalayan sceneries, though they create an unreal effect on those who had never seen those overwhelming wonders of light in the pure atmosphere of the heights: Shambhala Lam, Enchanted Realm, Message of Shambhala, Song of Shambhala, Kanchenjunga, etc., best perhaps the Saga of Cessar, a Tibetan camp scene, the figures of the reciter and his public of herdsmen around a fire contrasted against the dim moonlight on the surrounding mountains. Also "She who Leads" was a specially successful version of an allegoric theme known in several versions. In "Ramayana" finally a cosmic interpretation of the Indian epic was attempted, the gods personifications of nature forces visualized by the sage in his Himalayan hermitage.

Of Professor Svetoslav's larger pictures quite a number were portraits, amongst them a fine variant of that of his father in the Luxembourg Museum, Paris. In others, *e.g.* Mrs. Qadir and Miss Bogdanov, the artist tried to invent a background scenery in harmony with the character of his models. In two other studies: "Mauve and Green" and "Red and Blue", he even went so far as to reproduce a Madonna-like and a passionate female character in the psychological values of the surrounding flowers and colour background. In other cases the sentiment of the scene is reflected in the linear rhythm of the background, In "Pietà" the sorrows of the Madonna bent over the limp body of her dead son were echoed in the flame-like sweeping curves of drab green light. In "Jacob and the Angel" the struggle between man and the Divine became a wonderful vortex of white and yellow light whirling in the midst of darkblue billows, like

some cosmic cataclysm far off in the Galaxy. Less effective was a similar experiment in "The Garden of Eden", too much bound by academic conventions. Another interesting rhythmic experiment was "Messenger", the impression of a despatch rider racing at full speed. In other paintings the light problem predominated, such as the iridescent reflections on the waterfall in "Sacred Words" or in "Hope"; or the light through the crowns of the palmtrees in "Toil", a peaceful and charming Malabar scene; or the silhouettes of the modern Hindu girls on the Bombay cliffs in "The Waiting Ones" and of the water-carrying women before a sunset on the burning plain of Rajputana in "When the Sun Sets"; or the glowing, hurting noon light on the "Fishermen" by the side of their boats on the sandy Coromandel coast.

The chief piece was a Triptych, an apocalyptic vision of our time. "Whither Humanity": Masses of refugees fleeing through a gorge surrounded by pitiless cliffs which threaten to break down on them from every side; but there seems to be no escape, and exhausted people collapse and wail under a gloomy sky the pale green light of which seems to foreshadow disaster. "Humanity Crucified": The allegoric figure of a nude young man collapsing at the side of two pitying women fills the centre of this composition. Behind it, soldiers are marching into battle and women crying in despair, and in the background the Angels of the Last Judgment pour out the fiery phials of God's Wrath. And finally "The Release", a billowing inferno in which souls try in vain to rise from torture and despair. But this inferno is brightened by the light of Christ descending into this hell, surrounded by four archangels. The Love of God at last triumphing over the gates of Evil. A triptych of dangerous themes, but successfully solved by economy and stylization, by a simplification of all forms and a strong and suggestive rhythm and counter-rhythm of lines and colour and sometimes reminding of the visionary pictures of William Blake.

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Roerich Paintings.

Kanchanjunga, by
Nicholas Roerich.



Easter Night, by
Nicholas Roerich.



Messenger, by
Svetoslav Roerich.



Recd from the
State Museum
of
Illinois

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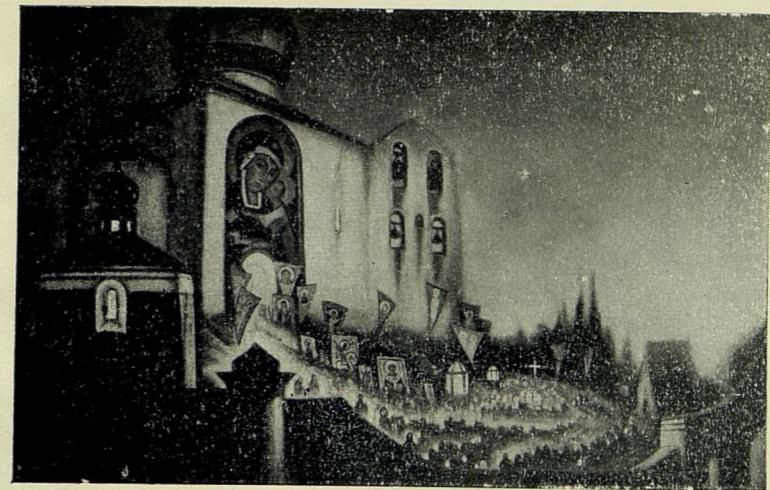
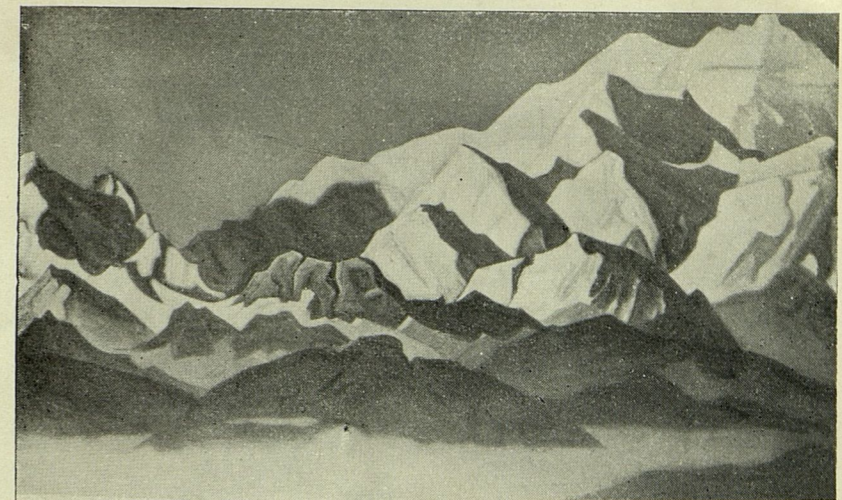
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