

UNKNOWN ARTISTS

By NICHOLAS ROERICH

Roerich's masterpieces are in the leading museums throughout the world: the Louvre, Luxembourg, Victoria and Albert, Rome, Benares, Belgrade, Zagreb, Allahabad, and numerous other collections, including Adyar, and more than 1,000 of his works are in the permanent collections of the Roerich Museum in New York. Let us turn to less celebrated artists, some of them men of genius, whom the gods allowed to die young, or who produced masterpieces anonymously, as do countless editorial writers on the daily newspapers.

AN exhibition was organized in Paris recently concerning the idea of which I have already had occasion several times to write and speak. From the point of view of the history of Art, it is always most important to reveal the so-called unknown artists. The names of great masters are very often in public judgment collective conceptions. When looking over the standard handbooks on Art, we find in addition to the well known celebrities numerous names of men whose creations are not commonly known. And yet these artists lived to old age, worked incessantly, and had as their teachers great masters.

About the Paris Exhibition the press reported as follows: "An exhibition of sixty paintings, acclaimed by connoisseurs as great masterpieces but bearing the signatures of unknown artists, was organized in Paris under the patronage of Georges Huysmans and was heralded to be the most remarkable of the series of thirty exhibitions of the Parisian season."

Where Connoisseurs Nod

The exhibition of unknown artists reminded old collectors and critics of many episodes concerning mistakes of judgment committed by the best art authorities. One of them narrates: "Thirty years ago I got the idea of submitting to the jury of an exhibition a small Roman landscape painted in light-yellow and bluish colours, also a pen-drawing representing a peasant with a large hat. Both paintings were flatly refused. And yet the landscape was by Corot and the drawing was by no less a person than Rembrandt himself."

Another art critic added that paintings by unknown authors were now and then acquired by the largest art museums and believed to be by known great masters. At a recent exhibition of old Italian art in Paris, there was exhibited the famous "Open-air Concert," previously catalogued by outstanding authorities as a Titian, and now regarded as a masterpiece of Giorgione.

Such anecdotes remind us of the famous saying of Toulouse de Lotreck: "A painting should be perceived by the heart." In other words, a painting should be valued on its merit and not because of the signature. This French artist adds: "What would it matter if a picture of an Evangelist turns out to be not by Velasquez, if its high quality ranks it equal to the brush of the master!"

We can remember many facts from life, which prove on what quicksand conventional judgment is based. In the Metropolitan Museum of New York there is a painting attributed to Matsys, which is actually a painting of the very interesting but completely unknown master of the Netherlands, Haselaer. His signature—which I and the well known authority on art, Senator Semenoff-Tianshansky, have seen—was evidently removed by its previous owner. On the market it is of course an entirely different thing to sell an unknown Haselaer or to have the opportunity to offer a famous Matsys.

I have myself seen a written certificate by a well known authority stating a painting to be a Rembrandt. Yet from this painting there had just been removed the name of Jan Victors—a distinguished pupil of Rembrandt. I also remember a landscape of the eighteenth century, under which was visible an older signature of the seventeenth century. One could cite many stories eloquently proving that a painting should be judged not by the signature, but on its merit.

Conventional Judgment

There are two types of collectors. One group requires first of all only the name. The other demands an artistic quality. For the collectors of the former type there have been created the innumerable "fakes." A rather rude art dealer used to laugh: "A signature costs but a couple of shillings."

Many tragedies and dramas in the art world are due to conventional judgment. Again, if we take the largest encyclopaedia on art, we are struck by a multitude of completely unknown names, men who apparently left no result of their activity, yet were associated with the greatest masters. They were commissioned to adorn cathedrals and public buildings, which proves that they were *en vogue*. Besides, their names were cited by old historians of art, who obviously had cause to esteem them greatly. Verily judging by the rare signed paintings we are convinced that these artists, although unknown to us, were great and excellent masters who fully deserved their page in the history of Art.

If today, before our very eyes, there disappears a signature from a painting, we are justified in supposing that such sinister episodes took place also in the past. It is said about a well known collector that he always carried with him a phial of alcohol and while bargaining for a painting he washed off the signature in order to depreciate its value. Many tragedies indeed have taken place around art objects. We ourselves were once horrified at seeing how a restorer

turned a beautiful painting into a work of seemingly dilapidated condition in order to purchase it cheaply.

After all, one can write a most instructive story about the life of paintings and other art objects. Who knows, perhaps some dramatist will some day take as his subject not a human being, but a tragedy from the life of a painting. A long procession of dramatic, tragic and highly joyful and solemn episodes is depicted around works of art, weaving their aura.

Everyone has heard of the destruction of the masterpieces of Leonardo by religious fanatics and cruel invaders. I remember how a beautiful sketch by Rubens was used as cardboard for the binding of a book. An excellent portrait by Brulow was covered with an ugly landscape. Under a so-called painting by Ingres was discovered the signature of his collaborator Carbonnière. In all countries there has always taken place an intentional or involuntary shifting of names and definitions. Together with revaluation and fashion, every century has had its own conventionalities. Instead of true revaluation new concealments are taking place.

Modern Problems

But let us not dwell on old art only. The problems of contemporary art are still more acute. Let us hope the examples of the past will teach our generation to open their hearts to young artists. And after all, who can affirm who are unknown and who the known artists, and to whom are they known or unknown?

I have been told of a most remarkable collection of "unknown" French artists of the modern period. A collector from Marseilles began to collect paintings of artists who died very young or who in despair discarded art. A large collection was gathered. A visitor who know not the names might have thought that they were paintings by Degas, Monet, Manet, Rafaelli, Menard, Latouche and other celebrated French artists. This collection contained also some strongly individual conceptions. It became quite clear that an enterprising person might arrange from such a collection a most striking and significant exhibition. Besides paintings of artists who died early in life, there were those of artists who considered themselves *découragé*. And it is yet another question whether all of them were right in considering themselves failures. Sometimes a terrible injustice brings people to this entirely undeserved decision.

The Vanity of Ignorance

A friend of ours, when saying "unknown" always used to add "unknown to me." And in this he was quite right. How can anyone say that a person unknown to him at the moment and in a certain place, may not be greatly revered by other people elsewhere? Such a consideration should be understood by many people nowadays. Otherwise, in self-conceit, some persons may imagine that if they do not know something or do not accept it, then all other people also do not know and do not admit it. Such is the usual vanity of an ignoramus. Besides, the question

of being known or unknown is one of the most conditional. This definition is based on many casual circumstances, both conscious and unconscious. Many excellent geniuses have received recognition only after their death. For curious reasons people seem to value only the factor of death in their judgments.

Hélas! Because of crass ignorance, so often the ugly dance macabre replaces the beautiful predestined dance of Life.

May exhibitions of "unknown" artists remind us once more of the conventionality of human judgment, and may they create one more act of justice in the contemporary world.

The Sense of Beauty

Shrimati Rukmini Devi in her inspiring article "The Sense of Beauty"¹ says: "The true end of all art is that each one of us should be artistic, that each one of us should be able to appreciate beauty, to be able to work in harmony with all life, and that the life of each of us must become so

refined, so artistic that we shall irresistibly respond to every fine and noble thing."

Verily in every Academy, Institute, and School of Art, besides the artistic technicalities, there should be instilled the true sense of beauty. The sense of beauty, even if it is inborn, still needs educating for unfoldment. In the same way, though every human being has the gift of thought, yet the art of thinking needs education. The classical Museion—the home of all the Muses, was precisely that Temple where the sense of beauty was developed and glorified. In the same manner should people today welcome every upliftment and refining of the human spirit which takes place in such unifying noble temples, reminding us of the glorious Academies of ancient Greece. These beautiful hearths were, as are ours today, the sign of a true renaissance. In these all-unifying Academies people will learn to become more kind, honest and just, for these qualities belong to our highest concept of the Beautiful.

¹ THE THEOSOPHIST, June 1936.