Urgent Problems

By NICHOLAS ROERICH.

"A new law forbids any loan of Italy's Art". (The New York Times. January 28, 1940). We deeply appreciate this law. In connection with it I remember my address to the Conference of Experts which took place at Rome in October 1930. Some excerpts are absolutely urgent also now.

In the course of the last few years, the safeguarding of artistic treasures has begun to be organized according to new methods which must be examined with attention and also with prudence. The introduction of the X-ray—that new and powerful factor in the study of works of art—causes us to admire the new possibilities placed at our disposal by science for the search of truth, but also obliges us to wonder whether this method will not produce certain effects on the colors as much as on the other elements of works of art. No one can doubt that the powerful X-rays produce consequences that may be either beneficial or destructive. But the highest authorities are unable to certify that this energy applied to works of art will remain "neutral and without effect". The time which has passed since the introduction of X-rays is too short to permit a definite conclusion as to their effects. Thus, although no one had the intention of inventing varnish or pigments that would be harmful, yet, various effects of these "perfections" are revealed after several centuries, as bringing harm to magnificent productions of human genius.

Certainly it does not follow that we should take a definite stand for the old methods without searching new means of approaching the truth. Everything must progress. Among the enterprises that are most useful in this respect we count, for example, the laboratory which is now being organized at the Louvre and where, thanks to the energy and gracious initiative of M. Henri Verne, new scientific methods can be determined and verified. I believe that I should here salute this extremely useful enterprise by expressing the hope that similar laboratories, organized in accordance with the most recent scientific principles, be installed in all countries, in order to study the effects of
local climates and pigmentations, as well as the technical methods at use, adapted to the particular conditions of each place. It is important in this respect for the laboratories in question to coordinate their work and exchange the results of their experiments. It is also necessary that researches of long duration be undertaken. Undoubtedly, one human life would not suffice for the study of certain results of these experiments; but, for the good of the future, it would be necessary, beginning now, to commence coordinated research work that others would continue until a very far-distant time.

We must reconcile modern discoveries with the experience of past ages brought down to us by the works preserved and also take into consideration the preparatory works of the old master. For example, the methods by which the oil used for painting was purified during a period of several years, the preparation of varnish and "olifs" by the primitives and iconographers, finally, the choice of woods for the panels, not to speak of colors. All this obliges us to fix our attention on the qualities of ancient methods, allied to modern improvements.

If the Conference adopted the principle of coordinating the artistic research laboratories affiliated with museums, I could propose that our museum join in this useful and necessary cooperation. The idea of Intellectual Cooperation in itself indicates that this International Institution could proceed to the revision and to the exchange of research work and of its results. Thus, with the end of serving future generations, still another fertile collaboration would be realized.

Aside from the perfecting of technical methods, it is certainly necessary in addition to take into consideration another essential question; that of the exchange of works of art, and especially the exchange of exhibitions of older creations.

This question causes contradictory thoughts to arise.

On the one hand, everyone understands that a better international agreement can be developed on the basis of art and science. Nothing in this world could take the place of these forces of peaceful enthusiasm and cordial fervor. But, on the other hand, one must not lose sight of the considerable risks and dangers that the transportation of works of art entails. Without counting the danger of the transportation itself, which is great, in spite of the most careful precautions, we know that works of art, like living organisms, are divided into "migrators" and "sedentaries". Strange though it may seem, works that are "migrators" by the will of Destiny, support the perils of travel much more easily than those that have passed centuries in one fixed place without risking the hazards of life. How often have I seen manifested, with sudden malignancy, following a transfer, an "illness" which, under other conditions, would not have occurred. Everyone knows the surprises occasioned by the transporting of a work across
the ocean. Even with thick boards, in spite of the most careful wrapping the linings become bloated and crack. The original coating heaves up, and often imposes the operation, always undesirable, of transferring the painting to a canvas. All linings ("marouflés") become bloated frequently. Similar injuries also ruin sculptured woods and ivories. These are the risks that no insurance can cover. Also, without diminishing in the least degree the great task of art, whose role consists in being the intermediate agent between the peoples of the world, it is necessary to think of the intensification and of the rationalisation of travelling, rather than of increasing the transporting of works of art into different climates, which breaks in some way the secular vibrations that surround the work of art.

All those who have charge of artistic treasures know that painful feeling which comes over them in seeing the injuries suffered by works confided to their care. We know how many just regrets arise following each transfer of works of art. Undoubtedly, particular care and judicious choosing, not only in accordance with their quality, but also in accordance with their physical nature can, to a certain degree, keep the productions of genius from the perils of these long voyages.

The coordination of the researches organized by museum laboratories, which was discussed above, would be useful in all respects, and it would particularly please me to know the opinion of the Conference on this point, which our Institutions would be happy to study in view of their imminent realization.

Art should be protected by all means. Armageddon is roaring.

Art and Knowledge are the cornerstones of Evolution. Art and Science are needed always, but in our Armageddonial days they must be especially guarded by all powers of our hearts. It is a great mistake to think that during troubled times culture can be disregarded. On the contrary the need of culture is especially felt in times of War and human misunderstandings. Outside of Art, Religion is inaccessible, outside of Art the spirit of Nationality is lost, outside of Art, Science is dark. This is not an Utopia. The History of Humanity gives innumerable examples of Art being the Great Beacon of Light in times of calamity. Scientists assert that colour and sound are a panacea. By beauty and Harmony even wild beasts were tamed. Let the sacred flute of Sri Krishna resound again! Let us visualize that Peace in which the majestic frescoes of Ajanta were created! In times of War let us think of future Peace, affirmed by Creativeness, Labour and Beauty. Travelling through Blessed India we once passed along a road in the shadow of mighty chinars. Our guide told us: "The great Emperor Akbar thought of the future travellers who will be sheltered by these beautiful trees. He looked into the Future." "To regard the Beautiful means to improve" — said Plato "Man becomes that of which he thinks" — preordained the Upanishads.