

**Osmania University**

THREE  
UNIVERSITY EXTENSION  
LECTURES

BY

DR. J. H. COUSINS

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NICHOLAS ROERICH :  
THE MAN AND HIS IDEAS.

NICHOLAS ROERICH :  
THE ARTIST AND HIS ART.

THE PROBLEM OF NATIONALITY  
AND INTERNATIONALITY IN ART.



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HYDERABAD (Dn).  
India

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THESE LECTURES were delivered in  
the Town Hall, Public Gardens,  
Hyderabad, Deccan, on January 17, 18  
and 19, 1939, accompanied by an  
exhibition of paintings by Nicholas and  
Svetoslav Roerich.



THE ARCHIVE OF  
**NICHOLAS  
ROERICH  
MUSEUM**



## NICHOLAS ROERICH

BY  
SVETOSLAV ROERICH

This portrait, in-colours; of a world-famed painter by his brilliant son, was acquired recently by the Luxembourg Museum, Paris, and given a special place and provision for removal to safety in the event of war and air-raids. Thus both father and son are taken simultaneously into the company of the "immortals" in art.

I

## NICHOLAS ROERICH, THE MAN AND HIS IDEAS.

Human character and human expression have so many grades within themselves, and so many different proportions in their influence on one another, that every essay in biography ought to be as unique as its subject. A study of the personality of an artist, whatever be his chosen art-form, will depend on the extent to which the artist has been artist only, or something more; whether, like Tennyson, he does nothing but write poetry, or, like Rabindranath, he writes not only poetry but drama, fiction, art-criticism, and on religion, philosophy, education, rural reconstruction, politics—and seldom writes a sentence that is not literature. Similarly, the study of an artist's art will depend on the extent to which his art is just art, or something more; whether it be the expression of the personality and a pleasure in skilled accomplishment, or a vehicle of communication from the depths of feeling or the heights of illumination.

The subject of the two studies of which this is the first, belongs to the category of the versatile, but at a level of quality that achieves mastery in a number of modes, and presents the world with the challenging phenomenon of a multiple specialist of profound and varied interest in human affairs, who, paradoxical though it appear, condemns mere specialization and watches for the secret of the universal fire.

An exhibition of his paintings has brought together a number of people in India in a common curiosity, or perhaps a common interest, concerning a famous painter, Russian by birth, of noble lineage leading back to Iceland. The paintings that have drawn a number of Indians together are not Russian, though few have pictorially interpreted both the outer and inner Russia as Nicholas Roerich has. They are expositions of Himalayan nature and humanity and legend; for the painter, after a life of publicity that would have dazzled and inflated the mere virtuoso, has by preference lived in comparative solitude in "the hills", painting, contemplating, receiving inwardly, expressing outwardly, save for intervals of exploration in central and western Asia in the interests of cultural and scientific knowledge.

Yet the painter of the most concrete of nature's manifestations in what appears to be the most concrete pictorial manner, is interested in the pageantry of the visible only to the extent that it suggests the reality of the invisible. With eyes that look both outwards and inwards, and perceive the tangible as codes for the revelation of the intangible, Nicholas Roerich looks also, in the phrase of Shelley, both "before and after". He is as eager in uncovering the Stone Age of the past, which was the first cultural enthusiasm of his youth, as in visualizing, and helping others to visualize, the Golden Age of the future, which has been the ulterior motive of his life. And these two interests, so apparently remote in the past and the future, are in reality only phases of, and inspirations to, his eager preoccupation with the realities of the present moment—that ever present, ever passing, imaginary line of longitude on the sphere of consciousness in which are interwoven the secrets of those two aspects of timelessness which we call

past and future. Twenty nations have signed the Roerich Peace Pact to preserve cultural institutions from destruction in warfare, and have adopted, to mark such institutions, the Roerich Banner of Peace (three red disks within a red circle on a white ground) designed to assert the superiority of creation over destruction, and ultimately to induce a psychological state in which warfare will be spontaneously outlawed as a spiritual impossibility. "Peace through culture" is Roerich's motto, and in the exposition of it his argument spreads out into an ocean of prose, and his conviction rises to peaks of poetry.

It is his double interest in past and present, each drawing out the significance of the other, that makes Nicholas Roerich at once a conformist and a nonconformist, a loyalist and a rebel. But before we develop what the foregoing summary stands for, let us survey the external history of Roerich the Man.

Nicholas Roerich was born in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad), the capital of Russia, on September 27, 1874, of lineage stretching from Jutland to Iceland in the time of Charlemagne, on his father's side, and Russian on his mother's. In 1883 he was sent to school, where his interest in archaeology and his bent towards painting disclosed themselves. His father desired him at the age of nineteen to take up study for a career in law. Such a parental frustration might have sent another budding artist into a surly acquiescence or rebellious lamentation. But the young Roerich stuff was different. He set himself to the mastery of *both* law and painting, in the spirit of the group of musical composers whose age overlapped his youth (Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakoff, and others) who had found the pursuit of business no insurmountable barrier to great musical expression. His university thesis hap-

pily combined his interest in past and present in art, its subject being "The Painters of Old Russia." His archæological interest went into the subjects of certain of his student-paintings in the Academy of Fine Arts. In 1897, when he was twentythree, four of his paintings found places in the exhibition of the Academy. One of them, "The Messenger," was recognized as proclaiming the originality of genius, and won fame for the young artist by being purchased by Tretiakov, the greatest collector of the time.

This success gave Law a back seat. Roerich practised his art with increasing skill and increasing recognition, and in 1900 he gave himself a year of the discipline of Paris. Impressionism was then the fashion. Roerich too was an impressionist. But his way was not to give a mere visual *impression* of a mental or emotional impression: it was rather to give a strong and clear pictorial *expression* of his inner impression. The simple clarity and sanity of ancient art had found in him an understanding appreciator, and it influenced him towards the development of what has come to be recognised as the Roerich style, with its vividness of colour in contrasted but harmonious relationships, and with striking forms that uttered the essentials of a scene, and ultimately became the medium of expression of super-substantial ideas. He was now twentyseven years of age, master of his craft and recognised, with a call from Beauty for the interpretation of her three phases—"the Beauty of town and nature, and the beauty of the unknown," as he himself has put it.

Having left Paris behind him, and turned home, he soon found himself in a position not only of artistic eminence but of cultural influence, first as Secretary and later

as Director of the Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts. As Assistant Editor of the society's magazine, he began those essays in art-criticism which ultimately developed into a literature comparable to that of Leonardo da Vinci the "myriad minded" in quantity and scope, but went beyond any of the great masters of painting in its intuitions of reality behind phenomena and in experience of that phase of knowledge which, for want of a more inclusive word, we may call the occult.

Through his early writings in Russia Nicholas Roerich became a dynamic reformer in matters pertaining to art. But this did not reduce his interest in such apparently static matters as the Stone Age, of which he became a collector. At the same time his work as an artist went on, and his paintings became familiar in the private collections of the Emperor and others, and in all the important public galleries. Naturally his pronounced style and unusual subjects collided with settled conventions. But the extraordinary beauty of his works, their keen sincerity without sentimentality, their revelation of deepening vision, won their way into one exhibition after another in the great European centres of art, and into galleries where the inclusion of a painter's work stamps him with classical renown.

In the year 1904, when Roerich was 30 years of age, his work entered on a new phase, coincidental with the emergence of a religious impulse in the artist's inner nature. He set himself the task of making pictorial interpretations of ancient religious architecture in Russia; and his fusion of the primitive tradition in painting with his own distinctive technique and his increasing intuition of the inner significances of the religious necessity in

humanity, led to the production of a series of unique works that attracted royal attention but passed on to a curious anti-climax. The Emperor had expressed a desire that the series of architectural studies should be preserved for posterity in the Alexander III Museum. But the war with Japan broke out, and the matter was dropped pending a return to normal conditions. Meantime the sixty-nine paintings that constituted this particular group of the artist's work were taken to the United State of America by an art-dealer as an item for the St. Louis Exhibition. By a tragic turn of fate insolvency overtook the dealer while the Roerich collection was in his possession. The paintings were included in his assets and auctioned. Two thirds of them were subsequently traced.

The year 1906, when the artist was thirtytwo, saw another development in Roerich's inner nature, and the beginning of a trek along the surface of the planet that seventeen years later brought him to what became his "land of heart's desire," India. In a tour of Italy in the year mentioned he realized the artistic influence that Asia had exerted on Europe. At the centre of this influence he saw India; and his first pictorial response to his discovery of a new world of art was an imaginative painting of a girl at the door of a Hindu temple. It was in this year, after his return from Italy, that Nicholas Roerich became Director of the School for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts. By precept in vigorous writings and practice in supreme art he rescued the institution from stereotyped mediocrity by infusing it with creative life. Here began his dream of a synthetical University of the Arts which was ultimately fulfilled in the founding of the Master Institute of United Arts in New York in 1921.

These external enthusiasms might well be feared as detrimental deflections from his work as a creative artist. They were in fact only indications of Roerich's immense inborn dynamism, which needed more than one outlet in action. Side by side with them the range of his art was widening. He took up the painting of stage scenery. His first adventures in this new phase of his art were so successful, and the impact of their power both as environment and interpretation of the dramas so deep, that he produced a succession of settings for grand opera which, instead of becoming old-fashioned or obsolete as moods change in operatic music, remain as masterpieces of painting apart from their original specific purpose. He also painted a series of landscapes that were less transcripts of nature than disclosures of the Creative Spirit behind nature. One of his church frescoes, "The Queen of Heaven" in Trinity Church in Talashkino, is regarded as of special note in its blending of Russian, Italian, Tibetan, Hindu and Persian traditions.

In 1915 and 1916 the art-world celebrated Professor Roerich's artistic silver jubilee. A proposal to have an exhibition of some thousands of his works was held up by the discovery that no sufficiently large hall for such a gigantic purpose was available. Delay overlapped the revolution of 1917. The exhibition was held, but on a smaller scale, and with striking success. While the new political circumstances were developing, Professor Roerich went on a summer visit to Finland. There however he caught pneumonia, and his return to Russia was delayed. Meantime, sensing the trend of events, he considered it the best procedure to remain in Finland. His doing so meant the leaving behind of his possessions. This was

followed by financial necessity that resulted in exhibitions of his available and new works from Stockholm to London.

During these vicissitudes of a life so brilliant in artistic achievements that appear to have attracted a deeper compensating darkness of obstruction, India was seldom absent from the wish of the painter. While in London, in 1920, he took tickets to India. But the bankruptcy of another individual again obliterated a large part of his resources, and India had to wait. Accompanied by his wife and family he went instead to the United States of America. In December 1920 New York had its first thrill over an exhibition of his work, and the excitement of the discovery of one of the immortals was carried by the same exhibition through twentyone great cities over a period of three years. By this time Roerich's place in the artistic interest of the States was fixed. Commissions came to him and reflected glory on private collectors. Stage scenery from his brush gave intense pleasure to multitudes. The spiritual element in his work provided preachers with subjects for sermons. The satisfaction of the need of a public gallery where his works could be leisurely enjoyed moved towards fulfilment. His own urge towards rescuing the arts from specialization, and bringing them into the lives of the people, inspired the creation of a succession of institutions, one for world-fellowship, one for the coordination of the teaching of the arts, one for the provision of an international art-centre. In the course of time these and a gallery of his paintings came under one roof in the twentyseven-storey building on Riverside Drive, New York, the Master Building, housing the Roerich Museum, the Roerich Museum Press, and a group of associated organizations devoted to the various

aspects of human service and idealism that were dear to the heart of the master.

In 1923 Roerich went to Paris, and from Paris to India. In 1924 he came from his home near Darjeeling to Adyar, bringing with him a new version of his first acknowledged subject, "The Messenger," as a gift to form a nucleus of an art gallery at the international headquarters of The Theosophical Society in memory of his fellow national, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. The President of the Society, Dr. Annie Besant, having to go on tour just at the time of his visit, I had the good fortune to be deputed by her to entertain the famous artist as her guest and to receive the gift from his hand. For the latter purpose I arranged a ceremonial presentation at which the painter made a speech full of the deep matters of art.

From then until now Roerich and his family, Madame Helena Roerich, and their sons, Svetoslav, a painter in the class of his father, and George, scientist and archaeologist, have lived in India. For a short time their home was near Darjeeling. Later they established the Urusvati Institute of Research in the Kulu Valley, where they still reside. At both ends of the Himalayas Professor Roerich has painted a long gallery of pictures that not only reflect the magnificent beauties of the Hills, but also embody something of the spiritual history and legend with which they are associated.

When I found myself heading towards the United States on a lecture tour in January 1929, I determined to see two things during my stay here: one of these was Leopold Stokowski conducting the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra; the other was the collection of Roerich's paintings that were somewhere in New York. The latter

was found to be impossible, as the paintings were stored while the Master Building was being put up for them. I was compensated in 1931-32 by being allowed to be a resident for a year in the apartments on the twelfth storey of the Master Building which housed on its third and fourth floors a thousand works from the hand of the master. Many an hour I spent absorbed in the beauty and truth, the magnificence and strength, the simplicity and delicacy, of the works. For that immersion in an ocean of sanctification I can never be sufficiently thankful. Happily I had the opportunity of rendering some small service by way of acknowledgment by taking part in disseminating Roerich's idea regarding a Peace Pact between the nations on the side of culture. His idea was so to raise the values of works of art in the minds of the nations as achievements of universal interest that such objects of art and the buildings in which they were housed would be mutually accepted as neutral objects in times of warfare and therefore immune from attack. To indicate such objects and buildings (and the buildings were not only to be museums and galleries but universities and other cultural institutions) the artist designed a banner after the manner of the Red Cross, which I have already described; and I had the high privilege of being Chairman of the Committee of the Banner of Peace in the Roerich Museum, New York, when the first official banner was consecrated with fitting expression in poetry and highly toned addresses before an audience of eminent people and sent out on a world-pilgrimage carrying its message from city to city. Subsequent events have indicated how little respect is paid to the creations of art when the war-spirit is in activity, even as the same events have indicated that the Red Cross carries no guarantee of immunity from attack. But the

ideal and necessity of the Red Cross remain. So also remains the Roerich ideal of ultimately creating an atmosphere of cultural sympathy and mutual interest in which peace may have a chance of finding a settled abode. The destruction of buildings of irreplaceable artistic worth in the war zones has not carried to the originator of the Peace Pact and Banner of Peace the easy moral of the futility of his idea. Nicholas Roerich is a philosopher, and a seer into the mystery of things; and every object of art that has been destroyed has been to him but another demonstration of the necessity of spreading and elevating culture, since, to a truly cultured individual, the ugly vulgarity of mutual murder and destruction is an impossibility. Heredity also may have something to do with his spontaneous protectorship of art-treasures, as it is on record that Roerich's great-grandfather, who was a General under Peter the Great, refused to obey orders to destroy an ancient church for strategical reasons, and got into trouble accordingly.

During his life in the Himalayas Professor Roerich has been actively engaged in research on such matters as the finding of grasses that grow in the arid districts of Central Asia and the transplanting of them to desert areas elsewhere, and on indigenous medicines.

On October 10, 1937, any feeling of isolation that Professor Roerich might conceivably have derived from long residence in places remote from the great centres of cultural activity must have been dispelled by the worldwide celebration of his artistic jubilee. Commemorative functions were held in numerous cities over the globe. Roerich rooms containing examples of his art were opened. In India groups of his paintings were made public in Allahabad, Benares and Trivandrum. A special congress

of the Baltic Roerich Societies was held at Riga to centralize the celebrations, and the congress produced a remarkable record of the world-salutation to consecrated genius.

In all his varied activities in the service of humanity and of truth expressed in beauty, Professor Roerich has had the help of a ready pen. One can hardly take up a magazine in India without coming across an article by him on some aspect of culture dealt with not academically and at second hand but with the direct experience of creation and illumination. He has added a number of books to the library of knowledge, travel, thought, humanitarian action, spiritual elevation, and art in the highest. Around himself and his work a world-literature has grown. We shall now call on these sources of information, and on some direct contacts, for a summary of certain of the ideas which, while they may not form the specific subjects of his paintings, have subtly shaped and coloured the intellectual and emotional media embodied as Nicholas Roerich through which his experiences and contemplations have expressed themselves. We shall reserve his ideas in regard to art and beauty for another study.

I spoke earlier of the double interest of Roerich in the past and the present, and the double effect of this interest in making him simultaneously a loyalist and a rebel. Incidentally it may be remarked that the double interest may be an effect of individual characteristics. Anyhow, the fact remains that they are present in an individual of world eminence, and the fact is worthy of careful study, of which only a suggestion can here be given.

The greatest artists have, in fact, always been rebels, not merely against false restrictions in the form and sub-

stance of their art, but against the inartistic elements in their place and age. Being sharers in the universal work of creation and evolution, they have been unable to keep themselves from creative activity which was naturally reformative. Leonardo, Dante, Shelley, AE and Barnard, have applied the passionate idealism of great art to the problems of their time. In our time Nicholas Roerich takes his place in the hierarchy of great tradition, not only by virtue of supreme achievement in his own art, but also by virtue of high seriousness and purpose in the integration of Art and Life, with his insistent message of the sufficiency of Art and its twin sister Knowledge for the rescuing of humanity from the ugly morass into which it has wandered because of its desertion of the narrow path of Beauty and Truth. "Only on the basis of true Beauty and true Knowledge," says Roerich, "can a sincere understanding between the nations be achieved." Nay, more, he declares, "without any exaggeration I emphasise that not one Government can endure henceforth unless it take into consideration the veneration of Beauty expressed in all branches of Art and higher Knowledge."

From a study of the writings of Nicholas Roerich one gathers that his main emotional and intellectual impulse is that of Unity. There is a constant harking back in his thought to a Source behind the phenomena of the tangible universe, and a pull backwards towards that Source which brings into operation certain tendencies towards elevation, refinement, harmonization, tendencies that influence all life including the arts. From that Source arise the creative and evolutionary impulses of the universe. There is therefore no essential separation between any units or groups of units within the totality. But

any attempt to secure the unification, or more accurately the uniformity, of units and groups, by mere organisation or mechanics, will fail, since variety is the condition of life in activity. As we move, however, from the details of life towards their inner realities, the ground of unification becomes simpler; and when in thought and practice we reach the level of spirituality, we are at the degree of life in which similarities are all that matter, differences do not matter, and hearts and minds blend in realization of their fundamental unity.

Spirituality, as thought of by Roerich, is not merely an abstract quality. It is the infusion of the highest degrees of the Universal Life into all degrees below itself. It is the measure of the specific gravity of every atom and every congeries of atoms in the universe, and the level towards which the waters of life forever rise. The sign of this spirituality is a variable hieroglyph which, whether it glimmer through a poem, or cry through the silence that is half of music, or haunt a picture like an unpainted presence, tells always of an inner recognition of the essential inter-relationship of all things with one another and with the Universal Life. In other words, the natural attitude and action of those who have attained this spirituality is unity-in-variety. Antagonisms cannot arise from it. Its test for any expression of life is the degree of tendency in that expression towards a harmonious unification of variety: not uniformity; for to strive for uniformity, to attempt to universalise one form of thought, one system of human organisation, one mode in art, is but to undertake the futile task of creating a false Absolute within the world of the relative, which, as old Euclid used to say, is impossible.

Spirituality is the calling forth of the spirit through the complex of qualities and capacities and organs that constitute a human being. "By what means will you call forth your spirit?" Roerich asks; "By what means will you lay bare that which in man is buried under the fragments of his everyday life?" His answer to his own question is short but inclusive: "Again and again I repeat, By the beauty of Art, by the depth of Knowledge."

Nicholas Roerich is not, of course, the first apostle of salvation through Beauty or through Truth, or through both together. The messengers of the Spirit in all faiths and times and places have proclaimed, in varying terminology and with various emphases on personality and observance, a common Gospel of Reality, and have insisted on its application in the discovery of Truth, and the effort to transform the chaos of one's own life and environment into a cosmos reflecting the measure of Truth that one has received or perceived. It is this purposefulness of creative effort that distinguishes the great artists of all time from the little dabblers in artifice.

Among these great ones Nicholas Roerich moves by virtue of both great purpose and great achievement. But he moves among them with a special distinction, inasmuch as his purposefulness is not simply an instinctive temperamental response to the creative impulse, but is open-eyed, knowing much of the source, the technique, and the purpose of that creative impulse in the universe and in himself as an individual. Standing on the Himalayan crest of a life of adventure and accomplishment on all planes, physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, with over half a century of unceasing creative work behind him, and a world reputation, this dedicated artist essays the double

task of spiritualising both Art and Life; giving to art the understanding and power and ascension that come from a larger conception of life than all but a handful of the greatest in the history of art have had granted to them; and giving life the illumination and purification that the revelation of the Divine Order and Beauty through Art can give, and that Nicholas Roerich has given in extraordinary measure and equally extraordinary beauty, conviction, and inspiration.