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Nicholas Roerich
October 10, 1874—December 13, 1947
His roots were in the primeval past—
He lent grace and beauty to the living present—
He labored to make straight the path into the future.

By THEODORE HELINE
Now and again in the course of human history a man appears who places an immortal impress upon the age in which he lives. Such a man was Nicholas Roerich. It is safe to say that in this serene yet crusading Apostle of Culture the most profound spiritual significance of our epoch found its most effective and comprehensive embodiment. By his identification with the whole scope and sweep of the spiritual renaissance which comes quietly but surely to birth in the midst of the present world chaos and tribulation, it seems certain that history will accord him a place in our time similar to that which it gives to Francis Bacon, for example, who stands out as a focal figure in a time when a new creative impulse entered into the European cultural stream, or to Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci as towering lights of the period of the Renaissance, or again to Pericles as but another name for the glory that was Greece, or to Akhnaton, the Egyptian Pharaoh, as the one really living image of one of the world’s oldest and greatest civilizations. In short, Roerich’s place is even now secure as one of the world’s immortals by virtue of the elements of immortality which he has so conspicuously imparted to his many magnificent and varied cultural activities and artistic creations.

Roerich’s life was of epic proportions. The range of his creative genius has been equalled only by a few. Continents were to him what provinces are to lesser prophets. Europe, America and Asia claimed him as their very own and all the world united in rendering him the highest homage.

Nicholas Roerich achieved international eminence as an artist, scientist, author, philosopher and educator. To each and all of these diversified activities he brought the insight and understanding that comes to the inwardly illumined. He was Russian by birth and of Slavo-Viking descent. He became an American by adoption and made Himalayan India his residence for the last twenty-five years of his life. These simple biographical facts are in themselves indicative of his universal character and his worldwide mission.
It was also in keeping with his life's general pattern that the land of his birth and the land of his adoption are the two principal areas in the world in which new racial strains are in process of development, and that after he had drawn into his being the fresh, creative impulses from these two lands this citizen of the world should turn to the Orient and in particular to India, the heart of Asia and the Mother of Religions. In that land where the things of the spirit have always been exalted above the things of this world, his soul found its true home. Also, the elevated consciousness in which he worked naturally drew him to the mountains and to the very roof of the world. And so it was among the lofty Himalayas on India's northern border, where the atmosphere, psychic and physical, is charged with inner power as nowhere else on earth that he completed the major part of his historic mission.

A Many-Sided Genius

Roerich's was the Master Mind that could do many things and do them all well. He first studied law; then archeology, becoming a professor in the subject. Then came his preoccupation with art, art in all its manifold expressions. In the course of the years he founded numerous institutions and inaugurated a world movement for the establishment of Peace through Culture. Intensive activity marked his life from first to last.

Professor Roerich had a particular interest in the ancient, the legendary, the prehistoric as well as in the unfolding Future which he came to serve and in which he had an abounding faith. His researches into the Stone Age were of scientific importance.

There is something deeply significant in the fact that Roerich's early years were devoted to art on the one hand and science on the other, and that the particular branch of science which he chose to cultivate was archeology. This had a very important bearing on his life's mission. It links up with the fact that science rules our modern world, a science that has shut out both art and religion from its sphere. The materialistic world it has created has left the soul of man in a spiritual void. Roerich came to correct that condition.

The first step toward that correction was to find ways to readmit art and religion into the field of science. Time was when they functioned as a trinity in unity. It must be so again. The benefits of specialization which divided them have been won. To continue the separation is fatal to civilization. It militates against man's spiritual progression.

And so a man comes on our earthly scene to serve as a Master Synthesizer. It is Roerich. In order to perform that task he sets out first of all to acquaint himself with science and with art and with religion, and above all with the means to bring them together once again in their individual and united service of man. This mission he conceived in the terms of Peace through Culture. That is, a Culture embracing art, science and religion functioning as a trinity in unity.

So he became a scientist exploring the culture of the primeval world, the Stone Age. It fascinated him. He applied the artist's imagination to his task and in so doing entered into the state of consciousness that then prevailed. He became aware of nature's processes and their cosmic significance. He tuned in with the rhythms of creative evolution. He observed as a scientist observes, he understood as the intuitive artist understands, and he beheld in reverence as the reverential beholder. Inwardly he experienced the unity that exists at the heart of art, science and religion but which man today apprehends and regards only in a state of separation.

This sense of unity which Roerich evoked from within the depths of his subconscious mind as he worked in the dual role of scientist and artist, the primitive man experienced in an instinctive, subjective way. Modern man must arrive at this same experience only now it must be in his objective consciousness through a development of the inner faculty of intuition and imagination. This comes with the cultivation of the science of the soul. Roerich cultivated that science. He was an exponent of the Ageless Wisdom, the Arcane Doctrine. He therefore carried the experiences of the man of the Stone Age who knew art, science and religion as one, and which he recapitulated in his early life, up to a corresponding point on a higher level of the spiral of attainment where modern man must lay hold of it in our time. Roerich was a prophet of this restoration. He was by virtue of this in deed and in truth the Voice of an Epoch.

Roerich's archeological interests were carried alongside of his artistic achievements throughout the whole of his career. They entered into his exploration in Central Asia during a five-year expedition from 1923 to 1929 that took him into Mongolia, Tibet and remote places in Central Asia. On these travels he collected data on Asiatic culture and philosophy, discussed ancient lore and the Ageless Wisdom with lamas in Tibet (and in their very own language), made a pictorial record comprising five hundred magnificent paintings and carried out a commission from the United States Government to search the Gobi Desert for drought-resisting plants to help save American denuded lands in the Dust Bowl.
On this expedition he encountered both hardships and dangers. But what are obstacles, he asks, but "new possibilities to create beneficent energy, and without battle," he adds, "there is no victory."

**A Master Artist**

Roerich's paintings, which number 5000, are to be found in the leading museums and art collections all over the world. It is said that in Russia there is no museum or gallery that does not possess some of his works. In some museums entire halls are dedicated exclusively to his paintings and in New York City a 29-story building was erected to his honor in 1929. This is perhaps the first time in history that an entire museum was built to house an artist's masterpieces while the artist was still alive.

Here is a modern artist who is not "modern" as this term is generally understood. His works are as different from those of the Modern School as they are from the Old Schools of the period of the Renaissance. They do not follow the ordinary line of development but spring like a new, fresh creation direct from some higher source. No one can miss their dazzling splendor, their tremendous power, their air of triumphant freedom and the exaltation of the spiritual atmosphere they radiate. They are charged with cosmic energies and divine meanings. They compel not only admiration but reverence.

Here are objects embodying the good and the true and the beautiful to such a degree that their spiritual significance is inescapable. They tell of a new force that is coming into the world, a force to quicken the Spirit of Man to new and nobler enterprises. For this were they given to the world.

A remarkable testimony as to the influence of Roerich's paintings on an observer is that of Ivan Narodny, a celebrated art critic as quoted in Padmanabhan Tampy's book on Roerich. Declared Mr. Narodny after viewing the master's canvases in a New York museum: "I began to feel the magic of their aesthetic rhythm, the metaphysical tones of their design and colour harmonies and I felt a new ray of light was falling on my disillusioned soul; I had actually sunk into moments of silent devotion or prayer. I was a changed man. From a depressing melancholy and cynicism of life, I had been transformed by the sight of the canvases of Nicholas Roerich into an aesthetic optimist, a believer in the mystic powers of beauty."

Roerich's paintings are at once sacred and occult. "He is certainly one of the most spiritual of masters since Leonardo and Blake," observes Mr. Conlan. And again, Mr. Tampy writing about this "teacher from the white summits" characterizes his works as essentially symbolic and occultly mystic. "He is essentially esoteric in his labors, he writes, "and through his prophetic visions embodied in his paintings which speak to the heart of men, he leads humanity to the gates of heaven."

The first phase of Roerich's art consisted of realistic paintings depicting scenes in prehistoric Russia and the wanderings of his ancestral Norsemen. This was followed by some years in the theatre and lastly by the Asiatic period in which he produced his greatest works, works of Himalayan grandeur and splendor.

The theatre offered wide scope to this versatile genius since the stage presents a composite art, more especially opera and the ballet. So here we find him designing both scenery and costumes, and writing librettos as well.

His first creation for the theatre was settings for Wagner's *Valkyrie* which he did, not "on order" but solely for his own self-expression. This attraction for Wagner was quite inevitable since what this composer did consciously and purposefully with music, Roerich was doing with color—bringing the Spirit back into our life by the powers of the beautiful. Both dealt with myth and legend; both were of heroic mould; both formed their work into epic cycles and both brought Initiate consciousness to bear upon their respective works giving to them an enduring spiritual significance.

Stage designs for all other Wagner operas followed; also for the Russian opera *Prince Igor*. "These settings," writes an eminent critic, "have the character of great music; they are themselves a form of visual music." They have an inner unity with the drama such as only an artist of great synthetic powers can bestow upon a work.

Then there were the stage decorations for Maeterlinck's tragedies, *Princess Maleine* and *Sister Beatrice*, which gave him an opportunity to express the poetry and beauty that arises from out of the realms of myth and legend in which Maeterlinck and Roerich were equally at home.

But it was in the ballet where Roerich's theatre activities found their highest and most complete expression. For *The Rite of Spring* he did the stage settings, costumes and libretto in collaboration with Stravinsky who composed the music, and assisted by Nijinsky, the dancer, Daghileff, the producer, and a corps de ballet. Writing of this, Barnett D. Conlan, in his book entitled *Nicholas Roerich—Master of the Mountains*, ventures the opinion that this production, done in Paris in 1913, "may well come to be recognized as the most important artistic event in the 20th century."

*The Rite of Spring* was a theme to call forth the most exuberant powers of an artist who was not only in close and conscious rapport with nature's mystic powers but who was in himself a part of the resurrection forces of the age he came to serve. In commenting further on Roerich's service to the ballet, Mr. Conlan says, "It is interesting to see to what extent Roerich, as an artist, belongs to Russian music, to that great movement which, beginning with Glinka, and developing through opera and the theatre finally produced the Russian ballet, the most important event in the history of Western music."

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after Wagner and in some ways the finest synthesis of all the arts since the Greeks. The poetic legends of Russian life which inspired the works of Glinka, Balakirev, Moussorgsky, Borodin, Rimsky Korsakov and Stravinsky has always been the chief element in Roerich's work ... I have reason to think he was the most authentic element in it.

Roerich's Prophetic Office

It is to be expected that one worthy of being designated the Voice of an Epoch would have a prophet's grasp of the nature and the direction of the social forces at work in the world and the general manner of their outworking. Roerich possessed such knowledge as evidenced by a series of paintings done before the first World War in which the approaching catastrophe was unmistakably depicted in such pictures as Last Angel, Ominous Signs, Human Deeds, Doomed City, The Lurid Glare, The Cry of the Serpent.

It is to be noted that these pictorial warnings came when such upheaval as presently overtook the world was looked upon generally as virtually impossible. Then when disaster did overwhelm the world not only in one all-engulfing conflict, but two, and with a third threatening, and the masses despairing of ever finding a way out of the continuing tribulation, this same Voice of our Epoch proclaims in another series of prophetic pictures the coming of the Promised One and the Great Restoration. This message is conveyed in his cycle of pictures called the Messiah series; also in Bridge of Glory and Himself Came. Incidentally it is interesting to note that these last named pictures were all made in America, as was also the Sancta Series.

Roerich has but repeated in our day what the Lord Christ proclaimed two thousand years ago when He told His Disciples about the great tribulation that was coming upon the world in these “latter days” and that when these things came to pass they were to lift up their heads for their redemption had drawn nigh. Moreover, that in that day there was to be a great sunburst of Divine Glory and they would see the Son of Man coming in a cloud in power and great glory.

Roerich has translated that prophecy in its entirety, first the judgment as previously noted, and then the Restoration. Very literally one of his canvases portrays the Second Coming in a cloud though it is not recognizable as such in terms of orthodox Christianity since Roerich's message is never creedal but always universal. This is in the picture called The Sign of Maitreya. It shows a Tibetan surrounded by lofty peaks praying to a gigantic rock-hewn figure of Maitreya. While engaged in this devotion he catches a glimpse of the Great Horseman riding across the sky in the shape of a cloud. The long-awaited One has come.

In the universal character of Roerich there was a perfect blend of the Oriental insight into the inner realities of the spiritual life and the Occidental power to bring these mystical concepts into practical objectivity. True to his birth sign, Libra, which in the natural zodiac occupies the point on the western horizon, Roerich, in his consciousness stood on this line where heaven and earth, the inner and the outer, meet in perfect balance. And again, true to Libra, sheath of Venus, goddess of Beauty, it was primarily through the medium of art and by the power of Beauty that he made revelation to our age of the living spirit that permeates all form and gives significance to everything about us.

A Westerner by physical heredity, he was an Easterner by soul lineage. There were associations with India in his life from the very first. When finally he did visit India he came to his own and his own received him with deep homage and with the reverence they hold for the spiritually wise and good and true. An eminent artist, Bireswar Sen, welcomed him in the name of India in the following words which appeared at the time in the Hindu Weekly: “To most of us, Roerich is a legendary figure of romance. Against the lurid glare of the flaming West, his mighty figure looms large like the motionless and benevolent Buddha in the midst of a vast cosmic cataclysm. Far above the tumultuous din of frenzied nations rings his voice—the unequivocal commandments of the Eternal, the Voice of Truth, Beauty and Culture. Great is Roerich—and greater still are his works, the beautiful harbingers of Peace and Good Will among men. Indefatigable in action, indomitable in spirit and innocent at heart, he is the new Sir Galahad, seeking after the Holy Grail.”

Concerning most people it is quite natural to ask about their religion. But not so in the case of Roerich. Upon even the slightest acquaintance with this man and his work there is an instinctive recognition that his consciousness functions on the universal level where all creeds and all faiths blend in a realization of their common source and goal. Roerich's religion was cosmic, not creedal, a fact borne out by his life and work viewed in its completeness and more specifically as he expressed it in his series of paintings of the world's great Teachers and Saviours in which the veneration and emphasis extended to one is no less than that bestowed upon another.

Peace through Culture

When Roerich spoke of Peace through Culture he meant vastly more than current usage of the words convey. To him culture had a sacred content. It stood for the sum total of man's creative abilities as these found expression in the divine triad of beauty, truth and goodness. Culture to Roerich was no mere synonym for personal refinement and social grace; nor again, for intellectual excellence and formal religious piety. It stood for no passive existence, idleness or ease. “The hope of ease in all times,
speak, "forced the people to forget the higher." And his crusade was to bring the higher back again into our civilization.

Culture, then, as this peacemaker conceived it and promoted it, meant a life of intensive creativeness on the spiritual front for the purpose of bringing forth a more luminous and fruitful way of life. It is the moral equivalent for war which the psychologist William James postulated as a necessary requirement for the establishment of a permanent peace on earth.

Two instruments were conceived by Professor Roerich for promoting a new world order through Culture. One was a Banner of Peace, the other, a cultural Pact of Peace. The Banner is white with three red spheres in the center representative of art, science and religion. These are enclosed in a circle indicating their underlying unity. The symbol is also representative of the past, present and future, all of which are embraced within the circle of eternity. And Roerich expressed in his life and work this symbol in its double significance, for as artist, scientist and prophet, he was perpetuating the ancient wisdom, envisaging the unfolding future and making radiant and fruitful the living, pulsating present.

The concept of promoting Peace through Culture by the creation of a Banner and a Pact of Peace was first conceived in 1904 when its author proposed the plan to the Society of Architects in Russia and again in 1914 to the state authorities. It was received with the highest interest but delayed owing to the war. The project was formally promulgated in New York in 1929. In 1933 the Third International Convention of the Pact and Banner of Peace was held in Washington when thirty-five nations were represented. Two years later in Washington the United States and all twenty Latin-American countries signed the treaty of the Roerich Pact. In the words of President Roosevelt spoken on that occasion, the event marked "a step forward in the preservation of the cultural achievements of the nations of this hemisphere." Continuing, the President observed that "in opening this Pact to the adherence of the nations of the world, we are endeavoring to make of universal application one of the principles vital to the preservation of modern civilization. The Treaty possesses a spiritual significance far deeper than the text of the instrument itself . . ."

In 1937 the Baltic States entered into a like compact and Committees for carrying forward the work have been established in many other parts of the world. A brochure titled The Roerich Pact and Banner of Peace was published by the New York Committee in 1947.

The great humanitarian aspect of the Pact is summed up in articles One and Two which provide that "educational, artistic and scientific institutions, artistic and scientific missions, the personnel, the property and collections of such institutions and missions shall be deemed neutral and as such shall be protected and respected by belligerents. Protection and respect shall be due to the aforesaid institutions and missions in all places, subject to the sovereignty of the High Contracting Parties, without any discrimination as to the State allegiance of any particular institution or mission. Also that Institutions, Collections and Missions thus registered may display a distinctive flag, which will entitle them to especial protection and respect on the part of the belligerents, of Governments and peoples of all the High Contracting Parties."

Culture and peace are the most sacred goals of humanity, declared Professor Roerich. "In these days of great confusion, he averred, "both spiritual and material, the disturbed spirit strives to these radiant strongholds . . . Above all confusions the Angels sing of Peace and Goodwill. No guns, no explosives can silence these choirs of heaven. And above all earthly wisdom, idealism, as the Teaching of Good, will still remain the quickest reaching and most renovating principle in life."

On another occasion Professor Roerich declared that "there will be no peace until people learn to discriminate between the mechanical civilization and the future culture of the spirit . . . Only through creative work is the balance of a country established."

The inauguration of this movement for Peace through Culture has been hailed as an Act of Destiny for our time.

Roerich the Writer

Professor Roerich was the author of many books and a contributor to a wide variety of magazines in all parts of the world. He wrote in several languages and his more important works have been translated into all the principal tongues, both European and Asiatic.

The subjects are of wide range—art, archeology, travel, philosophy and the Esoteric Doctrine. His volume Agni Yoga is among the latter. It deals with the Yoga of Fire, or the pentecostal experience awaiting the new humanity as it makes contact with the fires of the Holy Spirit.

One need but glance at a few of the many titles of his works to detect the prophetic nature of his writings. One of his earliest, published in 1925, is titled Path of Blessing. Then there is Flame of Chalice which by its title alone kindles the inner fires of every aspirant in his quest of the Holy Graal. Shamballa, Realm of Light, Fiery Stronghold, Sacred Vigil and Gates of the Future all conjure up in the mind of the aspirant sacred images and holy experiences associated with the path that leads to Illumination and Mastership.

Heart of Asia deals with the land where Roerich s soul found perhaps its most congenial environment and in Altai Himalaya he conveys by both word and picture as only a master can, something of the physical and spiritual glories of these sublime heights.
An Emissary of the Elect

Roerich was a great intellect; he was an artist of supreme rank. But over and above this he was a great soul. His consciousness was cosmic and the prime source of his power was spiritual.

That Roerich was a direct emissary of the Great White Brotherhood no one could well doubt who has become familiar with his thoughts, his aims, his ideals and his works. His divine commission was Peace through Culture. Art—art in a multiplicity of forms—was his primary medium of expression, and Beauty in its redemptive aspects the power with which he accomplished his most significant results.

It was a high and sacred call that had come to this devotee of the Beautiful and it was with a vivid realization of this fact that he discharged his every task. A profound spiritual significance, therefore, attaches itself to all his works. They are like so many revelatory messages from the powers on high. Each and all were calculated to further humanity's spiritual awakening and to point the way to the New Order of peace and unity, of righteousness and graciousness, that is to succeed the age of iron, the centuries of war and the period of distress, sorrow and frustration that now draws to its cataclysmic close.

In the midst of universal disaster and destruction which inevitably accompanies the collapse of a civilization that has made personal gain and material achievement paramount, Roerich came to turn the minds of men to the spiritual realities on which can be founded an enduring order of existence that will yield beauty, harmony and peace. This he came to do at that psychological moment in human history when such a messenger was of supreme importance to the future of the race.

Unifying Art, Science and Religion

The nature of mankind's present needs are such that one who was preeminently the artist could accomplish more than one centered primarily in either science or religion. Science is too strongly focused in the material side of life and religion has lost its way in doctrinal abstractions and sectarian dogmatism. In the words of Alexis Carrel in Man the Unknown, "There is not the shadow of a doubt that mechanical, physical and chemical sciences are incapable of giving us intelligence, moral discipline, health, nervous equilibrium, security and peace." And as for religion, neither is it equal to the task, since as Carrel further observes, "mystical activity has been banished from most religions. Even its meaning has been forgotten."

And so today's supreme task called for a leader who was first of all an artist but who had at the same time the intellectual qualities and practical accomplishments of a proven scientist together with the devotion, the reverence and the spirituality that distinguishes the deeply dedicated religious soul. And such a man was Roerich.

That forgotten mystical sense of which Alexis Carrel speaks, Nicholas Roerich came to help man recover. A mysticism pervades everything he touched. As with Blake, the spiritual outlook dominates. He was profoundly religious, not in the creedal but in the cosmic sense. The character of his ministry was impersonal and universal. It was, moreover, so far removed from the purely utilitarian activities prevailing in our time as to quite fail of recognition by the uncomprehending multitude for whose enlightenment and upliftment he spent his precious life.

The truth of this statement was made quite evident when recently one of the most widely read and best favored of our journalistic columnists devoted over a score installments belittling and even ridiculing this Master Interpreter of our Age as an oriental "Guru" who with a semi-oriental glamor and professional blandishments had hoodwinked good Americans to accept him as a man of science and a purveyor of honest doctrine. A second series of similar diatribes followed immediately after the great artist's passing. No more impressive commentary than this cruel calumny in our daily press against one of the most illumined and consecrated spirits of all time could be made upon the general spiritual illiteracy and materialized outlook of our age and the consequent need that it has for advanced souls of the redemptive type such as was Nicholas Roerich.

Revival, Renewal, Restoration

Contrary to the way of the world, Roerich made Spirit the starting point of all his enterprises. Material requirements followed. His primary mission was to restore vision to a people. Out of that vision would spring a new civilization, a new race. "Let us not expect great buildings or sigh over primitive conditions and lack of material," was his advice to some young, eager New World builders who wanted his counsel as to how best to proceed. "The smallest room" said he, "no larger than the cell of Fra Angelica in Florence, can contain the most valuable possibilities for art. The smallest assortment of colors will not diminish the artistic substance of creation and the poorest canvas may be the receptor of the most sacred image.

"If there comes the realization of the imminent importance of teaching Beauty", he continued, "let it be begun without delay. One must know that means will come if there will be manifest the enduring enthusiasm. Give knowledge and you will receive possibilities; and the more liberal the giving, the richer the receiving."

Revival, renewal, restoration—these were keywords to Roerich's career. Divine creativeness characterized his universal mindedness and the
attribute of timelessness pervades all his works. His achievements were monumental and his dynamic spirit seemed altogether like an inseparable part of nature's all-embracing universal rhythms.

This earth can afford no more fitting frame for a man of Roerich's heroic stature than the Himalayas in which he spent the closing portion of his richly productive life. This Master of the Mountains occupied a position midway between two centers of planetary power. On the one hand was the powers of materialism that govern present humanity in their external way of life; on the other was the spiritual Hierarchy that watches over human destiny and so governs as to bring mankind of its own free will eventually to a realization of its essential spiritual nature and a way of life consistent therewith. Their effort is to shorten the Path, to ease the journey, to reduce the errors, to lessen the needless suffering.

As an emissary of this Invisible Government, Roerich came to cleave the darkness from the light, to reveal the way of spirit to them that labor in bondage to the world of matter. He came when humanity was beginning to realize that no movement, no organization, no institution, however well intended or ideally motivated, could resolve the crisis that now confronts the world except it be based on soundly spiritual foundations.

Roerich realized that before such movements, organizations and institutions can arise in sufficient number and strength to meet mankind's basic need today and usher in the order of right relations and universal goodwill, there will have to be a complete reversal of current world thought. To aid mankind to achieve that necessary reorientation became, therefore, a fundamental proposition in the program he came to execute.

His equipment for that task was a mellow wisdom that had ripened in the course of ages past, a surrender of the personal life to the service of the group life of the race, and a proficiency in the arts and sciences that enabled him to reveal immortality in all his creations. And the primary powers with which he sought to fulfill his appointed task were those that flow through Culture. The arts were his vehicles and these he exalted by giving them a new significance for our time. And it was his faith, backed by prodigious works, that by their beneficent influence when properly restored in our individual and collective life, peace and harmony and gracious living will once more return to this earth. Such was Roerich's gospel; such his Hierarchial message to our time; such the Voice of an Epoch.