"When I think of Nicholas Roerich, I am astounded at the scope and abundance of his activities and creative genius. A great artist, a great scholar and writer, archeologist and explorer, he touched and lighted up so many aspects of human endeavour. The very quantity is stupendous—thousands of paintings and each one of them a great work of art. When you look at these paintings, so many of them of the Himalayas, you seem to catch the spirit of those great mountains which have towered over the Indian Plain and been our sentinels for ages past. They remind us of so much in our history, our thoughts, our cultural and spiritual heritage so much, not merely of the India of the past, but of something that is permanent and eternal about India, that we cannot help feeling a great sense of indebtedness to Nicholas Roerich, who has enshrined that spirit in these magnificent canvases."

Jawaharlal Nehru
December 1947
Nicholas Konstaninovich Roerich, painter, theatrical designer, archeologist, and explorer, was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, on October 9, 1874, the firstborn son of lawyer and notary Konstantin Roerich and his wife, Maria. While still quite young, Roerich showed a particular aptitude for drawing, and by the time he reached sixteen, he began to think about entering the Academy of Art to pursue a career as an artist. In 1893, at the insistence of his father, who preferred that he go into law, he simultaneously enrolled in the Academy of Art and St. Petersburg University, where he was to meet the budding young artistic entrepreneur, Sergei Diaghilev, who was among the first to appreciate Nicholas' talents as an artist.

In 1895, Roerich met the prominent writer, critic, and historian Vladimir Stasov. Through him, he was introduced to many of the composers and artists of the time—Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Stravinsky, and the basso Fyodor Chaliapin. At concerts at the Court Conservatory, he heard the works of Glazunov, Wagner, and Scriabin, among others. Thus, an avid enthusiasm for music was born.

Following his time at the university, Roerich set off for a year in Europe to visit the museums, exhibitions, and salons of Paris and Berlin; but just before leaving, he met Helena, daughter of the architect Shaposhnikov and niece of the composer Mussorgsky. There seems to have been an immediate mutual attraction. They were soon engaged and got married upon Nicholas' return from Europe.

Helena Roerich was an unusually gifted woman—a talented pianist and author of many books, including *The Foundations of Buddhism* and a Russian translation of Helena Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*. Her collected letters, in two volumes, exemplify the wisdom, spiritual insight, and simple advice she shared with a multitude of correspondents—friends, foes, and coworkers alike. Later, in New York, Nicholas and Helena Roerich founded the Agni Yoga Society, which espoused a living ethic encompassing and synthesizing the philosophies and religious teachings of all ages.

With the couple established in Leningrad, Roerich applied for and obtained the position of Secretary of the School of the Society for the Encouragement of Art. He later became the Society’s head, the first of many positions that Roerich would occupy as a teacher and spokesman for the arts.

In his depiction of both historical and natural themes, symbolism and the use of allegory had become essential ingredients in his work.
In 1906, in the first of many entrepreneurial efforts that were to bring Russian art and music to the attention of Europeans, Sergei Diaghilev arranged an exhibition of Russian paintings in Paris. These included sixteen works by Roerich. The same year, Diaghilev introduced Chaliapin to Paris audiences, along with the music of Mussorgsky, Rachmaninov, Scriabin, Stravinsky, and others. In 1909, he presented Chaliapin in Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Ivan the Terrible* with sets and costumes designed by Roerich. In the *Polovtsian Dances* from Borodin’s *Prince Igor*, Roerich established a growing reputation for the telling depiction of ancient cultures and their practices. This unique talent was nowhere more apparent than in his designs for *The Rite of Spring*. At first entitled *The Great Sacrifice: a Tableau of Pagan Russia*, the motif for the ballet grew out of Roerich’s absorption with antiquity, and as he wrote in a letter to Diaghilev, “the beautiful cosmogony of earth and sky.” In the ballet, whose libretto he cowrote with Igor Stravinsky, Roerich sought to express the primitive rites of ancient man as he welcomed spring, the life-giver, and made sacrifice to Yarilo, the Sun God. It was a story unlike that of any ballet before it. Stravinsky’s score and Vaslav Nijinsky’s choreography were equally revolutionary, and provoked controversy that was to continue for years.

By this time, in his depiction of both historical and natural themes, symbolism and the use of allegory had become essential ingredients in his work. As one critic wrote: “He populated his world not with participants in transitory dramas and comedies, but with spokesmen for the most steadfast ideas about the truth of life, the millennial struggle of good and evil, the triumphal procession of a bright future for all.”

In 1917, Nicholas and Helena Roerich and their two young sons, George and Svetoslav, were in Finland when the revolution broke out in Russia. Not able to return to Russia at that time, they instead journeyed on to Sweden, London, and subsequently to New York, where, in 1920, at the invitation of the Kingore Gallery, Roerich opened a highly successful exhibition of over four hundred paintings. While in America, he designed productions for the Chicago Opera Company, painted a series in New Mexico, and the *Ocean* series in Monhegan, Maine. Returning to New York in 1921, Roerich founded the Master Institute of United Arts, in which he attracted a talented group of instructors which included Deems Taylor, teaching musical theory and composition; Robert Edmond Jones and Lee Simonson, teaching theater design; and top instructors in courses that
included all musical instruments, painting and drawing, design and illustration, sculpture, architecture, ballet, drama, journalism, and languages. The Master Institute flourished, but did not survive beyond 1937. While the world was in the grip of the Great Depression and the Roerich family was on an expedition in the Far East, funds ran out and subsequent events caused a complete collapse of the organization which Roerich and his supporters had labored so earnestly to build.

It was not until 1949, when under the direction of Sina Fosdick, one of the founding board members, that the institution was reborn as the Nicholas Roerich Museum, located in a brownstone on West 107th Street, where it remains to this day.

During their stay in America, the Roerichs began to plan for a voyage to India. An orientation toward Eastern spiritual values is reflected in much of Roerich’s creative work from this period. This is seen in the Ocean series. The three paintings, *Himself Came*, *Bridge of Glory*, and *Miracle*, demonstrate the spiritual power that was beginning to characterize his work. In *Bridge of Glory*, Saint Sergius of Radonezh, a Russian spiritual leader, walks in contemplation before a blue bridge formed by the aurora borealis, Roerich’s metaphor for the future spiritual bridge that will connect heaven and earth.

In her essay, *Flowers of Morya: The Theme of Spiritual Pilgrimage in the Poetry of Nicholas Roerich*, Irina Corten writes: “At the core of Roerich’s belief system is the Hindu concept of a beginningless and endless universe which manifests itself in recurring cycles of creation and dissolution of material forms caused by the pulsation of divine energy. On the human plane, this means the rise and fall of civilizations and, in terms of individual life, the reincarnation of a soul...” As Roerich, the poet, writes in the poem *About the Eternal*:

*Brother, let us abandon all that rapidly changes. Otherwise we will not have time to turn our thoughts to that which is changeless for all. To the eternal.*

In May 1923, the Roerichs were at last on their way to India where, in that ageless land, amid the snows of the Himalayan range, they sought to turn their thoughts to the Eternal.

The Roerichs landed in Bombay in December of 1923. By the end of the month, they were already in Sikkim on the southern slopes of the Himalayas, and it is clear by the speed with which they reached the mountains that the Himalayas were where their interests lay. They initiated a journey of exploration that would take them into Chinese Turkestan, Altai, Mongolia, and Tibet. It was an expedition into
Kanchenjunga 1936, Tempera on canvas, 23-3/4" x 39"

Great Spirit of the Himalayas 1934, Tempera on canvas, 30" x 40-1/2"
untracked regions where they set about the study of religions, languages, customs, and culture of the inhabitants. Roerich wrote about this first Central Asiatic Expedition in his book *Heart of Asia*. In it, he creates for the reader a vivid account of the wonder of the land and its people. However, the images are nowhere as vivid as in the five hundred or so paintings that resulted from the trek. In the paintings *Kanchenjunga*, *Sikkin Pass*, *His Country*, *Great Spirit of the Himalayas*, and in the *Banners of the East* series, we can see the breathtaking splendor of Northern India providing physical images for philosophical concepts. In *The Path*, the figure of Christ leads the way along a tortuous path through crags and peaks of the Himalayas, a metaphor for the hazardous obstacles confronting the spiritual journeyer. Eastern religious figures and concepts also appear in the paintings, important among these being various images of Lord Maitreya as represented by the Buddhist Messiah, the Kalki-Avatar of the Puranas, or Rigden Jyepo of Mongolia, all of whom are described in legends that link them with the Ruler of Shambala, who, as H.P. Blavatsky writes in her *Theosophical Glossary*, “is destined to appear on earth for the final destruction of the wicked, the renovation of creation, and the restoration of purity.”

Many paintings of this period depict the image of woman and her destined role in the coming era. One can assume that what Helena Roerich wrote to a friend, in 1937, reflects Nicholas’ own belief:

**In that ageless land, amid the snows of the Himalayan Range, they sought to turn their thoughts to the eternal.**
"...woman should realize she herself contains all forces, and the moment she shakes off the age-old hypnosis of her seemingly lawful subjugation and mental inferiority and occupies herself with a manifold education, she will create in collaboration with man a new and better world. Cosmos affirms the greatness of woman's creative principle. Woman is a personification of nature, and it is nature that teaches man, not man nature."

Nicholas Roerich depicted the great female deities in such paintings as *She Who Leads*, *Madonna Laboris*, and *Mother of the World*. This latter work is one of Roerich’s most inspiring images, rendered with majesty in deep tones of blue and violet. Helena Roerich’s contribution to the life and work of Nicholas cannot be overestimated. Their union could be best described as a lifetime collaboration in fields of mutual endeavor. Her philosophy, comprising a living ethic, was shared by Nicholas and motivated him in his work and life. As their fortieth anniversary approached, he wrote in his diary “...On such a long voyage, meeting many storms and dangers from without, together we overcame all obstacles. And obstacles turned into possibilities. I dedicated my books to Helena, my wife, friend, traveling companion, inspirer!...together we created, and not without reason is it that the work should bear two names—a feminine and a masculine.”

In 1928, at the end of their major expedition, which was the first of many more to come, the family settled in the Kullu valley at an elevation of 6,500 feet in the Himalayan foothills, with a magnificent view of the valley and surrounding mountains. Here they established their home and the headquarters of the Urusvati Himalayan Research Institute, which was organized to study the results of the expedition and of those expeditions that were yet to come.

The following year, on a trip back to New York for the opening of the Roerich Museum’s new premises, Roerich raised an issue that had been close to his heart for many years. Using the Red Cross as an example, he proposed a treaty for the protection of...
HE BELIEVED THAT ALTHOUGH EARTHY TEMPLES AND ARTIFACTS MAY DISAPPEAR, THE THOUGHT THAT BRINGS THEM INTO EXISTENCE DOES NOT DIE, BUT IS PART OF AN ETERNAL STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS.

cultural treasures during times of both war and peace—a proposal he had unsuccessfully tried to promote in 1914. In consultation with lawyers versed in international law, he drafted a pact, and suggested that a flag would be flown over all places under its protection. This flag he called the Banner of Peace. The design of the Banner shows three spheres surrounded by a circle in magenta color on a white background. In this sign, and the motto Pax Cultura that accompanies it, is symbolized Roerich's vision for humanity. He wrote, “Let us be united—you will ask in what way? You will agree with me: in the easiest way, to create a common and sincere language. Perhaps in Beauty and Knowledge.” Finally, on April 15, 1935, Roerich’s efforts to promulgate such a treaty resulted in the signing of the Roerich Pact by the nations of the Americas—members of the Pan American Union—in the White House in Washington.

It is in his Himalayan paintings that one most easily finds evidence of the loftiness of spirit and sense of mission that led Roerich to attempt the tasks he set for himself. In them can be seen the sense of drama, the urgency of a message to send or perhaps a traveler to greet, a mission to perform, a path to travel. The towering mountains symbolize the spiritual goals that humanity has set for itself. Roerich urges people on toward their spiritual destiny and reminds them of their task to prepare for the New Era in which Rigden Jyepo will gather his army, and under the Banner of Light, defeat the host of darkness. Roerich the warrior was already armed and mounted; he sought to muster his army for the battle and bid that their breastplates bear the word “culture.”

The pursuit of refinement and beauty was sacred for Roerich. He believed that although earthly temples and artifacts may disappear, the thought that brings them into existence does not die, but is part of an eternal stream of consciousness—man’s aspirations nourished by his directed will and the energy of thought.

Nicholas Roerich died in Kullu on December 13, 1947. His body was cremated and the ashes buried on a slope facing the mountains he loved and portrayed in many of his nearly seven thousand works.

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