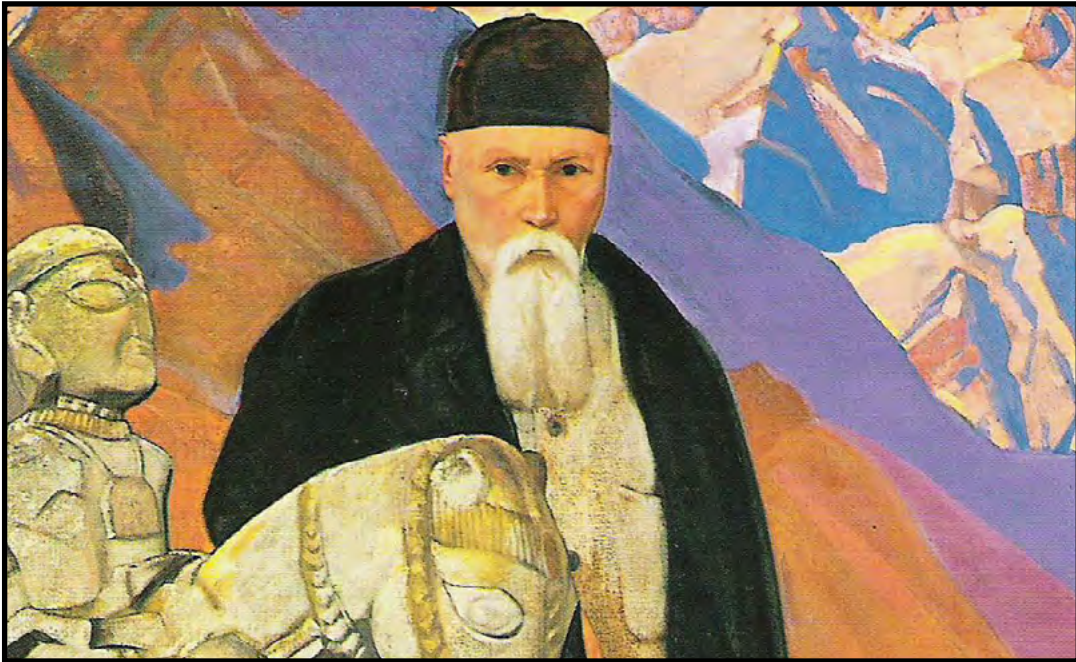


NICHOLAS ROERICH: AN ARTIST AND VISIONARY MYSTIC

From a Rosicrucian manuscript



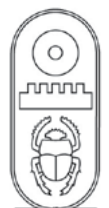
Portrait of Nicholas Roerich with Guga Chohan, painted by his son Svetoslav Roerich, 1937.

Nicholas Roerich was an uncommon character whose countless achievements reflected the Russian soul. Through the diversity of his talents, he left an indelible and timeless mark on the path to Enlightenment, such as Rosicrucians view it. His subtle affinity with nature, his deep intelligence, his taste for beauty in all its forms, and his visionary spirit placed him among the most remarkable personalities of his time. Throughout a prodigious, multifaceted career, the gifts of this artist were revealed. His work was praised by his contemporaries, such as Leo Tolstoy, Sergei Diaghilev, the patron Pavel Tretyakov, the scholar Wladimir Stasov, and many more. Jawaharlal Nehru considered him a “creative genius,” and the famous Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore praised his universal work. Tsar Nicolas of Russia held him in high esteem

and wanted to give him the post of Grand Chamberlain at Court, which he refused.

Nicolas Konstantinovitch Roerich was born in Saint Petersburg, Russia on October 10, 1874, into a family of the Russian upper middle class, whose Scandinavian ancestors were believed to have settled in Russia in early historical times. The name *Roerich* is commonly interpreted as “rich in glory,” and Nicholas illustrated this perfectly. Ever since he was young, he showed a prodigious work capacity.

On the advice of his father, he enrolled in the Saint Petersburg University of Law and the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in order to embark on an artistic career, which is something that was particularly close to his heart. Created at the age of twenty-two, his final project, *The Messenger*, is recognized as an admirable work and not only conferred on him the title of artist,



but it also placed him immediately in the history of Russian art.

Nicolas Roerich very quickly became director of the Imperial Academy for the Encouragement of the Arts, and instituted an avant-garde artistic training system, namely the teaching of all the arts under one roof, such as painting, music, song, dance, drama, and the so-called “industrial arts,” such as ceramics, porcelain painting, pottery, and mechanical drawing. Great freedom of action was granted to the professors, who were able to finally leave behind obsolete, institutional practices. These bold reforms helped propel the Academy to the highest level. The number of students soon reached 2,000. After it became one of the largest art schools in Russia, its reputation spread internationally.

The intersection of arts advocated by Nicolas Roerich testified to his desire to harmonize apparently hostile or opposed elements. It was an essential quality of his thinking, which is found in all the disciplines he explored throughout his life. He constantly sought to destroy compartmentalization, even in his own artistic production. He thus escaped categorization to create a unique, personal universe. It was at this time that he married Helena Shaposhnikova, daughter of a great Russian architect and niece of the composer Modest Moussorgski. Infinitely gifted and a talented pianist, she was a companion worthy of the great man, sharing his ideas and his achievements, and assuring him of unfailing support, particularly in the difficulties which they did not fail to face. From their union two sons were born: Georges in 1902 and Svetoslav in 1904.

While tending to his professional duties, Nicolas Roerich painted tirelessly, notably producing gigantic wall frescoes in different Russian churches. He also took part in several exhibitions in Russia, in

Europe, and then in 1906, at the famous Salon d'Automne in Paris. Prestigious museums acquired some of his paintings. He also created numerous sets and costumes for operas; among them, those for *The Rite of Spring*, the first performance of which was given in Paris in 1913.

Writing was another facet of his talent. Between 1916 and 1919, he put together a collection of sixty-four poems, in which he described his inner journey and affirmed his commitment to spiritual research; some of his work appeared in Berlin after the war, under the title of *Leaves of Morya's Garden*. In this work he evoked themes that he would later take up in his paintings, adding a layer of understanding to the symbols included in his paintings.



Portrait of Helena Roerich, painted by Valentin Serov, 1909.



Nicholas Roerich, Krishna, 1929.

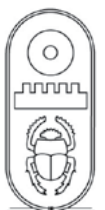
Roerich was deeply affected by World War I, horrified by the human and cultural disasters. He put himself at the service of his compatriots and donated his time and some of his goods to help them. However, a lung disease forced him to leave for Finland to seek treatment. After the revolution of 1917 and the ensuing chaos, he could not return to his native country, so he left with his family for Sweden, and later they went to England. His fame having crossed the Atlantic, he was then invited to America by the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1920, he inaugurated a series of traveling exhibitions, the first taking place at the Kingore Gallery in New York. He exhibited over 400 paintings there.

In 1921, Nicolas Roerich founded in New York the Master Institute of United Arts, based on the model he had established in Saint Petersburg. He said at the time that the education offered by his Institute leads to a very broad knowledge of the arts and “paves the way to universal beauty, thus opening the doors to spiritual enlightenment of the wisdom of the masters.”

A few months later while still in New York, he created Corona Mundi (Crown

of the World) International Art Center, the aim of which was to promote mutual understanding between all peoples by means of art, the international language par excellence. In tribute to the founder of these two Institutes, the Roerich Museum was created in 1924, the only American museum dedicated to the work of a single artist at that time. In the early 1930s, 1,006 works were presented. This museum still exists in a building on 107th Street in New York City, and it brings together one of the most comprehensive collections in the world.

In 1923, the Roerich family left for India, beginning a project that had been dear to their hearts for a long time. When they arrived in Bombay, they visited centers of cultural and historical interest, while meeting Indian scientists, scholars, artists, and writers. Then they went to Sikkim, on the southern flank of the Himalayas. Two years later, at the request of the American government, they embarked on a journey of scientific exploration which led them to Chinese Turkestan, Altai, Mongolia, and Tibet. This three-year expedition was sometimes carried out in the worst conditions. Throughout this expedition,



Nicolas Roerich recorded the reflections inspired by the landscapes, the villages, the people encountered, and the events experienced. When the climatic conditions reached extremes during climbs of passes whose altitude sometimes exceeded 13,000 feet (4,000 meters), he did not stop painting. During this journey, some 300 canvases took shape under his brush.

In 1928, after another expedition, the Roerich family moved to the Kulu valley, at the foot of the Himalayas. The artist established there the Urusvati Himalayan Research Institute, which he founded in order to analyze the results of his travels and to organize future explorations. Among the activities of this Institute were botanical, ethnolinguistic, and archaeological studies.

Under the direction of their father, the two Roerich sons, Georges and Svetoslav, collected medicinal plants and carried out in-depth research in botany. At the same time, they studied ancient medical traditions and the Tibetan and Chinese pharmacopoeia, and also conducted research on a cure for cancer.

Ever since his first archaeological discoveries in Russia in the years 1903 and 1904, Nicolas Roerich had been shocked by the state of disrepair of abandoned marvels. The destruction of prestigious monuments during World War I had reinforced his idea of promulgating a project aimed at protecting cultural treasures in all countries.

This began to take shape in 1928 when, during a stay in New York, he laid the foundations for a treaty for the protection of cultural treasures, in times of war and peace. He drew up a pact and proposed that all the places protected under the terms of the pact be identified by a distinctive flag: the Banner of Peace, marvelously symbolized

by the painting *Madonna Oriflamma*. The motto of the Banner of Peace is *Pax Cultura*. This Pact, which bears the name “Roerich,” is still in force; it was signed at the White House in the United States in 1935 and served as the basis for the 1954 Hague Convention and the founding of UNESCO. In 1929, Nicolas Roerich was nominated as a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize, because of his perseverant work. But the prize was not awarded to him.

From the beginning of World War II, Nicolas Roerich once again devoted all of his energy to helping victims of the

war. Horrified by the devastation of his native land, he called on his friends residing in the United States to help his Russian compatriots.

In 1942, they set up the American-Russian Cultural Association (the ARCA), which received the support of eminent figures such as Ernest Hemingway and Charlie Chaplin. The artist then donated to the Red Cross profits from the sale of some of his books and paintings. Around 1939, his health began to decline. He was



Nicolas Roerich, Madonna Oriflamma, 1932. She is seen holding the Banner of Peace.



A small Tibetan reliquary box sent from Nicholas Roerich to H. Spencer Lewis.

diagnosed with heart disease. His wife, Helena wrote on this subject:

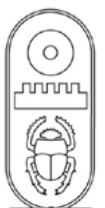
Very distressed by the chaotic events which shook the world and particularly worried by the growth of anti-Russian sentiment in America, his heart could not bear these pressures, nor the terrible pain of seeing everything oppressed that touches on culture, anything that will bring salvation to the next generation.

In 1947, Nicolas Roerich's condition deteriorated considerably. He underwent surgery in Kulu. Once on his feet, despite his state of weakness and the recommendation of his doctors not to get tired, he continued to paint the Himalayan mountains that he loved above all else. On December 13, 1947, after a vision of Sergius of Radonezh called him to join him, watched over by Helena, his faithful and loving companion, he peacefully breathed his last breath while he slept. His body was placed on a pyre of Himalayan cedar, scented with aromatic oils and covered with white flowers. When the fire was lit, large flaming wings hid the body from view until his body was consumed without smoke or odor. Then the artist's

ashes were placed under a gigantic rock, facing the eternal mountains of sublime and captivating beauty that he loved so much.

Throughout his life, Nicolas Roerich never stopped expressing refinement and beauty, a sacred quest in his eyes. He believed that even if temples and other earthly objects perish, the thought that creates and gives birth to them does not die, but is part of the eternal movement and elusive life of consciousness. He was convinced that the survival of our planet and the advancement of the evolutionary process depended on peace, a peace that people had to bring about through art and knowledge.

Although Nicolas Roerich was interested in the ancient teachings of Agni Yoga, or Fire Yoga, he did not adhere exclusively to any established religion. He had his personal, deeply spiritual philosophy, which included elements of Buddhism, Hinduism, pantheism, theosophy, and the Russian Orthodox religion. We also know that he was in close contact with Harvey Spencer Lewis and other leaders of AMORC, which was then working secretly in Russia. The tsar was



very tolerant of the Order and assured Nicholas Roerich of unusual protection for the Order on many occasions. It is even possible that some members of the imperial family were part of it, but there is no source to prove it.

Nicolas Roerich traveled extensively, especially in India, China, and Tibet. During those trips and expeditions, he moved from monastery to monastery, teaching and painting his admirable paintings, imbued with deep symbolism and his prophetic vision of the future of humanity. He also had many interviews with kings, queens, and high potentates during official and secret missions, missions relating to the state of the world and to spiritual questions related to its future. He collected a number of art objects, most of them sacred and dating from very ancient periods, some of which were donated to AMORC.

Nicolas Roerich was praised for his universal and prodigious work, and his fame went around the world. But the most vibrant homage was paid to him by Helena Roerich herself, in a letter dated January 13, 1948:

His heart could not withstand the quantity of poison produced by an insane humanity. . . . Our light, our beloved, went away as he had lived: simply, beautifully, and majestically.

The world has been truly orphaned since the departure of this beautiful spirit! India's reaction to his departure was touching, beautiful, and strong. Newspapers, periodicals, associations, friends, and acquaintances have clearly recognized what an irreplaceable loss to the world was the departure of this great creator of magnificent images, this giant of thought and action, this marvelous human being, this true friend of humanity.



Nicolas Roerich, Guests from Overseas, 1901.