


A PAINTER OF ROMANCE AND CHARM

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The article is devoted to the artist, thinker, writer, public figure of Nicholas Roerich and illuminates the European period of his life and activities and his huge contribution to the world culture.

Keywords: Roerich's paintings, the exhibition, the artist, culture, a priceless artistic heritage.

Conference participant,
National championship in scientific analytics,
Open European and Asian research analytics championship

 Digital Object Identification: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18007/gisap.csah.v0i5.902>

N.K.Roerich is a unique phenomenon in terms of the multiplicity of activities, which is a very rare quality. The most striking thing in his life is that during a short time he succeeded to do an extraordinary amount in various fields, showing an enviable performance. An artist, philosopher, writer, traveler, archaeologist – Nikolai Konstantinovich lived like ten lives – did so much. He wrote nearly 7,000 paintings, made a lot of discoveries, and he was an author of the idea of the first ever international treaty on the protection of cultural heritage – the so-called Roerich Pact. Encyclopedism and universalism are typical of the activities of N.K. Roerich, which is extremely rare.

It is known that the Roerich family stayed in England not for a long time. Sergei Diaghilev invited Nikolai Roerich to participate in the production of the opera "Prince Igor" on the stage of the oldest Opera House in Covent Garden. In mid-July 1919, the Roerich family arrived in London. At that time, Thomas Beecham, who financed Diaghilev's "Russian Seasons", offered N.K. Roerich to arrange one more number of productions, which he intended to put on the stage – Rimsky-Korsakov's operas "The Tale of Tsar Saltan" and "Sadko". At the same time, the artist worked on the decorations for Rimsky-Korsakov's opera "Snow Maiden", performed a sketch for M.P. Mussorgsky's musical drama "Khovanshchina." The success of scenes and costumes created by sketches of N.K. Roerich was grandiose. The European public that attended the performances of "Russian Seasons" arranged by S.P. Diaghilev for the first time was able to feel the full force of the Russian art represented by the aggregate of its best composers, performers and

artists. However, while being in England, the Roerich family thought about the implementation of their long-held dream – a trip to India. They applied for a visa to move to the country, which at that time was the colonial province of England. The desire to get to India was so strong that Nikolai Roerich intended to make even the scenery for opera "Tsar Saltan", which had an eastern outline, in the Indian scheme. After Roerich had arrived in London, he immediately got into the turbulent artistic life. He communicated with many cultural figures, attended exhibitions, concerts and gave lectures.

Soon the Roerich family changed their address – they moved to a house on Queen's Gate Terrace, 25a, next to Hyde Park. Here is how this house is described by N.A. Tooms "Queen's Gate Terrace Garden, 25 ... a beautiful residential area next to Hyde Park. There are a lot of embassies and mansions nearby. The whole street is special, and the houses are like twins with small colonnades at the entrance. The Roerich's house on this street had a workshop, where Nikolai Konstantinovich Roerich began writing a series of panels "Dreams of the East." For the first time Roerich's paintings were exhibited in London in 1908 in one of the best showrooms – the Royal Albert Hall. A huge canvas – 3.3x3.6 meters "Treasure of the Angels" was among them.

On the twenty-ninth day of April, 1920 in London, there was opened a solo exhibition of Nikolai Roerich named "Spells of Russia" in Goupil Gallery. And again in London, among 198 paintings there was "Treasure of the Angels", which is associated with so many secrets and interpretations. There were also presented other paintings of the artist created in Russia and Finland – "The Last Angel", "Doomed City",

"Sword of Courage", "St. Procopius the Righteous", "Blue Mountains. Caucasus", "Buried Treasure", "Call of the Sun", "Ecstasy", "Waiting", "Saints Boris and Gleb", "Daughter of a Viking" and others, as well as sketches for theater productions in Moscow and London, such as "Princess Malen", "Peer Gynt", "Tsar Saltan", "Prince Igor", "Snow Maiden" and "Khovanshchina", etc. A.P. Sobolev writes: "The exhibition committee includes well-known public figures, a writer Herbert Wells is among them. The opening was attended by members of the senior English society. The catalog was released with an introduction by the Director of the London Library, a collector and connoisseur of the Russian art Hagberg Wright." (<http://grani.agnia.net/science.htm>)

The press briskly responded to this exhibition – many journals put articles and reviews, the artist's paintings left nobody indifferent. And even those who did not immediately accept his works noted a color scheme, unusual combination of colors and the skill of the painter. It is interesting to note that at that time the newspaper "The Times" published an article of May 4, 1920 about the exhibition of Roerich titled "Spells of Russia" – a painter of romance and charm." The author admired the paintings of Roerich and, at the same time, doubted that N. Roerich was a great artist, so at the end of the article once again emphasized that no one could be sure how long his charm would last and how strong it would be. Here is the original article:

"The spells of Russia."

A painter of romance and charm.

Nicholas Roerich, a large exhibition of whose works is now to be seen in the Goupil Galleries, is a professor and an academician: but there is

nothing academic in the bad sense in his art. We have seldom seen picture more immediately attractive and even amusing. His art reminds us of delightful Russian toys; but thought the buildings and the figures are summary, he gets a great deal of intensity into his simplified shapes; and, like Gauguin, he makes them real with his impressionist power of painting light. He has indeed applied the impressionist discoveries to a whole world of romance unfamiliar to us both in its appearance and its legends.

It may be the light that never was on sea or land, but it is strong, unifying, and consistent with itself. Like Maestrovik, Roerich has a great power of using many different style; sometimes he gives us a most vivid, if rather shallow, illusion of reality; sometimes he is Japanese, sometimes Persian, but always he "comes off" as completely as a Russian ballet, and with the same surprising mixture of the primitive and the sophisticated.

He is a delightful painter and likely to become very popular in London, but he is not, we think, a great artist. He can do many things easily, simply, and with obvious charm; his pictures would look well in a room furnished to suit them, indeed in any London drawing-room well furnished in the latest style; but they are rather a very charming kind of furniture than great expressive art. In particular the figures, most skillfully placed and set in the landscape, are a little too much like dolls, though very amusing dolls. All that he paints satisfies the eye at first sight like a very taking tune with a folk-song character; but one might grow a little tired of it in time.

All the same, he is an artist one can enjoy at once, and that is a great merit; and in some of his works, such as the "Call Of the Sun", especially the smaller version, he has a strange power of expressing the primitive both in his design and in his execution. The title of the exhibition, "The Spells of Russia," well expresses this peculiar power of his; his art does cast a spell, though one cannot be sure how lasting it will be. (The Times, May 4, 1920)

However, exhibitions and joint work with S. Diaghilev at the theater brought Nikolai Konstantinovich fame in England. His circle of acquaintances

was very broad. He had good relations with the British writers Herbert Wells and John Galsworthy, with cultural and art figures H. Wright, F. Brangwyn, A. Kots, B. Bottomley and many others. Roerich left behind a priceless artistic heritage represented in the best museums of the world, and the vast literary heritage that contains a lot of information about the figures of the Russian culture.

Today Roerich's paintings have also a huge success. The painting of Nikolai Roerich "Madonna Laboris" set a record price for a piece of work of the Russian artist sold at auction in July, 2013. Roerich's "Madonna Laboris" fetched J7.8 million (over \$12 million) at Bonhams, setting the highest-ever price for a Russian painter's work sold at an auction anywhere in the world. "Madonna Laboris" was painted in 1931 as part of a series of paintings on the theme of "Great Female Deities of the World." Having recently resurfaced, the piece is considered one of the most important of Roerich's works to appear at auction of late. Yelena Harbick, Bonhams' director of Russian Art in New York, calls it "a work of exceptional artistic merit. A large-scale, balanced and harmonious composition, rich and saturated tones of turquoise... and fiery-red accents, create... long-lasting memories for anyone who sees it." (The Daily Telegraph, May 31, 2013)

The Russian Art Director of Sophie Luo auction house, a sale price of the Roerich's painting was almost 8 times higher than the estimated value. The buyer was in the room. This is a world record for the Russian artist's painting sold at auction. "We were thrilled to be given the responsibility for selling this masterpiece by one of Russia's most intriguing painters. "Madonna Laboris" was always known to exist but its whereabouts had remained a mystery until it was rediscovered by Bonhams experts in a private collection in the U.S.A. It is undoubtedly one of the most important works by Nicholas Roerich to appear at auction for many years so it was not surprising that the bidding was so fierce. The result suitably reflects the exceptional artistic merit of the work. Roerich is a major, almost mystical, figure in the history

of Russian art and famously designed the set for the Rite of Spring which outraged Paris society 100 years ago" (www.bonhams.com/magazine issue 7, July 2013). In November 2013 another painting a celestial, lavender-lit vision of the snow-capped Himalayan mountain, Kanchenjunga (1935-1936) by Nikolai Roerich was the top lot in The Russian Sale at Bonhams, New Bond Street. The sale made a sale total of J5.9million.

In the summer of 1920, in London, there was a meeting of N.K. Roerich with Rabindranath Tagore. After this meeting there began their correspondence. Tagore visited an apartment of the Roerich family. He was surprised by the artist's paintings from the series "Dreams of the East", which Nikolai Konstantinovich worked at that time on. The poet advised them to be sure to visit India and invited them to his country. However, the bankruptcy of Thomas Beecham did not enable to bring to life many of the plans of the artist. Operas "The Tale of Tsar Saltan", "Kitezhi" and others have not been put on the stage and remained in the sketches for these productions. Hopes for the sale of paintings at the exhibitions arranged were not justified either. The Roerich family had already got issued visas, but they had to postpone a trip to India because of the circumstances. At that time, the Director of the Chicago Institute of Art Robert Harshe offered N. Roerich to hold an exhibition tour throughout the U.S. cities. Nikolai Konstantinovich accepted the offer, and in the autumn of 1920 the Roerich family sailed to America. They arrived in India only in December 1923.

The activities of N.K. Roerich during the "abroad period" are an unprecedented example of propaganda of the Russian art: arrangement of exhibitions, lectures, establishment of museums and institutes (Institute of United Arts in the United States, "Urusvati" Institute in India). Once abroad, Nikolai Konstantinovich continued to serve the Russian culture, he was worried about the fate of the country and believed it would have a better future. India became his second home. Many paintings he dedicated this beautiful country and stay there forever.

The personality of N.K. Roerich takes one of the leading places in the Russian and world culture. His multifaceted and brilliant talent of the artist and a writer, scientist and archaeologist, as well as broad organizational activities in various spheres of artistic, cultural, educational and social life not only in Russia, but

also in other countries attracted the public attention both during his life, in the following years and today.

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