

Nicholas Roerich: The Pioneer of Russia-India Cultural Relations

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Russia and India are very big countries with rich culture and heritage. Their culture, traditions and heritage are inspiring for others. These both countries are very friendly to each other in all aspects, whether political or cultural ties. They have been cooperating each-other in all spheres of life. Russia and India, having special privileged strategic relations, are working on many joints cooperations and projects. Both of them have been trying to preserve their traditions, culture and heritage for a long time.

There have been great people in both countries, who contributed for such cause. There have been very few people, who worked conserve the culture and heritage of both countries. Nikolai Konstantinovich Rerikh (or Nicholas Roerich) was one of them, who tried to preserve

the culture, traditions and spiritual values of Russia and India. Nikolai with his family (wife and two sons) settled in Kullu, Himachal Pradesh, where his estate has been turned into International Roerich Museum. This museum is fondly remembered by Indian and Russian people for his contribution towards building good relations between the two countries and depicting and preserving their rich culture and traditions through his art.

Nikolai Konstantinovich Rerikh or Nicholas Roerich was a famous Russian painter, writer, thinker, traveller and archaeologist. He was fond of high mountains and his works show mystic approach in his paintings. He had created more than five thousand painting, which are exhibited in museums and galleries in all around the world.

Nikolai was born in a rich family on 9th October 1874 in St. Petersburg. His father Konstantin Fedorovich Roerich was a famous notary of his time and famous artists and writers used to visit his house. Nikolai was attracted towards painting, archaeology and history since his childhood, it helped him to grow these fields. His inclination toward the heritage of the East brought him to Asia.

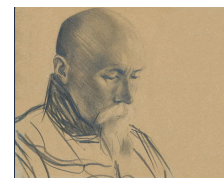
He finished his school (Karl May gymnasium) in 1893 and took admission in the faculty of law of St. Petersburg University to study law and simultaneously studied painting in Imperial Academy of Arts. Nikolai graduated from Academy of Ars in 1897 and from Faculty of law in 1898. Soon he became assistant to the director of Emperor's Art Encouragement Society

Guests from Overseas, Photo Credit: Wikipedia



Museum and assistant editor of the magazine 'World of Art' and he headed the magazine team from 1910 to 1916. He met his soulmate "Helena Ivanovna Shaposhnikova" in 1899. She remained his inspiration, true companion and first critique of his art throughout his life. Both of them got married in 1901 and had their first son born in 1902 and second son in 1904. His second son Svetoslav followed his father's path later on in his life.

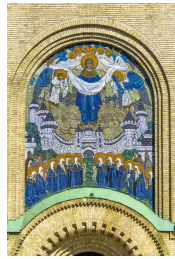
Nicholas Roerich,
Photo Credit:
Nicholas Roerich
Museum, New
York, USA



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In 1903-1904 Nikolai Roerich and his wife went to tour the old cities of Russian empire to study the root of Russian culture. They visited more than 40 cities and studied their ancient monuments like fortress, monasteries and churches. In a result of this trip, he not only produced a wide series of paintings of the artistic beauty of old buildings but wrote also about the great value of old Russian icon-painting and architecture in initial articles named “Architectural Studies”. His paintings on religious themes in the form of frescoes and mosaics appeared in Russian churches at the same time. Using his multi-dimensional talent, he worked as theatre stage designer also for many plays like “Russian Seasons”, “Prince Igor”, “Polovtsian Dance”, “Pskovian Woman” etc.

The Protecting
Veil of the Holy
Mother of God
Photo Source:
Wikipedia



After his marriage under the influence of his wife his interest grew into the religion and culture of East. He along with his wife started to study more and more theosophy, Vedanta and Indian thinkers like Swami Vivekanand, Swami Ramkrishna etc. He also got acquainted with the literary works of Rabindranath Tagore and his understanding of Asian culture and religions started to expand after reading them. This acquaintance with oriental thoughts started to reflect in his creative works, so besides painting ancient pagan Russia, he started to include themes of India and East in his works of art.

During the year of Russian revolution (1917), Roerich stayed in Karelia, near St. Peterburg due to his bad health and when civil war (1917-1922) broke out in Russia, he chose to accept the invitation to visit Scandinavian countries and later on moved to London. In 1920 on the invitation from the Director of Chicago Institute of Arts, Nikolai Roerich moved to USA with his family to organise big exhibitions and tour around thirty cities of USA.

He started to propagate his ideas about beauty and culture through his wide cultural and educational activities in USA. His understanding of culture was praise-worthy. In his views “Culture rest on beauty and knowledge.” (Roerich, 1994, p. 60) Beauty can be cognised by man only, which comes through culture and creative work is integral part it.

Roerich helped in opening many art institutes, cultural centres, museums and established an art association in America.

Nikolai’s dream to visit India came into reality in 1923. He was interested in the study of the world migration pattern of ancient people. He along with his family set foot in India for the expedition of central Asia in search of common source of Slavic and Indian Culture. Seeing the route of expedition, it was sure that the journey would be very challenging for the team to pass through Sikkim, Kashmir, Ladakh, Tibet, China (Xingjian), Mangolia and Russian territory of Siberia and Altai. It was one of longest expeditions in 20th century, which came to an end in 1928.

At the end of expedition, the artist found his new home at Kullu valley, Himachal Pradesh and lived there, rest of his life with his family. He founded the Institute of Himalayan Studies, named Urusvati to study the landscapes of the Himalayas.

He took another expedition in 1935 to the inner Mangolia, Manchuria and China at the invitation of US Ministry of Agriculture to collect seeds and study the drought resistant plants.

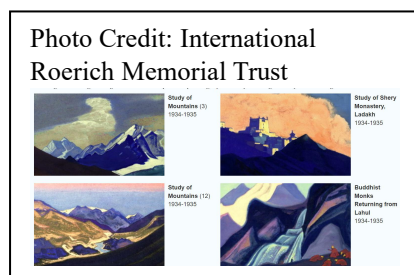
Roerich created new series of paintings on the mythology, spirituality and landscape of these countries.

According to Roerich, beauty comes from the culture and culture is the culmination of religious experience, art, science and education. He argued that understanding culture and civilization as one unit leads to confusion and undermines the spiritual growth of humankind. In his point of view, culture differs from civilization, since Roerich's thought was that "culture relates to the spiritual world of man in his creative self-expression, while civilization is just the external arrangement of human life in all its material and civil aspects."

In his words, "Wealth in itself does not generate Culture. But broadened and subtler thinking and the sense of Beauty produce that subtlety, that nobility of spirit which are distinctive for a cultured person. It is this kind of person that can build radiant future for its country." (Roerich, 1994, p. 49)

N. Roerich advocates that it is the duty of mankind to protect its culture and cultural monuments in the time of armed conflict. Keeping with this view he prepared Roerich pact, which says that in the time of war or civil strife, the sites of cultural values should not be targeted and the idea of protection and preservation of culture should be taught in schools. His idea was endorsed by renowned scholars and public figures like A. Einstein, Bernard Shaw, Rabindranath Tagore, R. Rolland and others. He created special flag, the banner of peace, which would mark all the sites of cultural values and inviolable objects of art. The Roerich pact was signed in US White House in 1935 and at first, it was ratified by 21 countries of American continent and subsequently in 1954, it was placed in "Convention for the Protection of Cultural Values in the Event of Armed Conflict" at Hague.

During the time of World War II, the painter turned again to the subjects of Russian Culture in his creative works. He started painting the themes of his native land and gathered money through the auctions of his paintings and tried to help his motherland. Besides this, he wrote articles and gave interview in

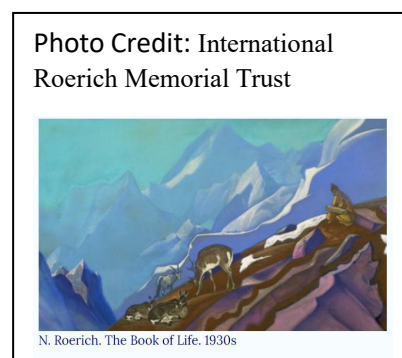
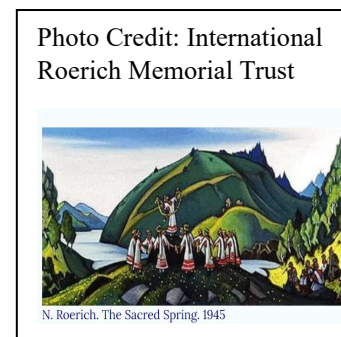


favour of USSR and always believed that his motherland will surely be victorious in this war against fascism, which proved to be true.

interest in archaeology, this subject was very much compatible to his art. In India he is known for the studies of the Himalayas Since, he belonged to the in art, his creative works spirituality and mysticism. He Himalayas in the shades of blue luminous blue creates the and spiritual beauty. These and immersive nature, which

Artistically, Nikolai is remembered as one of most talented Russian painters of his generation, who painted Russia's ancient past beautifully and realistically. Having deep

and mysticism in his art. movement of symbolism naturally tend towards generally painted the hue, and the colours in atmosphere of ethereal paintings are of hypnotic absorbs onlookers into



them and give them a sense of peace and tranquillity.

Nikolai Rerikh took his last breath on 13th December 1947 in Kullu, which he chose as his second home and was cremated in his Karmabhoomi.

In 1942, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru along with his daughter Indira Gandhi paid a memorable visit to Roerich family in Kullu. They discussed the future of India after World War II, and how India can have close cooperations and friendly relations with USSR after gaining independence. India's former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi remembered this family as everyone in the family was a gifted talent. She described Nicholas Roerich as a man with extensive knowledge, vast experience and a big heart. In real sense, he was the pioneer of Russia-India Cultural ties. He was a true son of Russia and a real friend of India. His elder son, Yuri Rerikh or George Roerich studied Indology in London, New York and Paris and became a great expert in Eastern Culture, religion and philosophy. He was a true linguist, who had mastered more than 28 languages. Many of these languages were Indian languages, which he used to help his family in the research of oriental studies. In 1957 he shifted to Moscow and started to work in the Institute of Oriental Studies. He headed the section of Indian Philosophy and History of Religions". He revived the Russian oriental studies and worked on volumes of Tibetan-Russian-English dictionaries with parallels in Sanskrit and thanks to him for the first time, Sanskrit was started to teach in USSR. He translated many Indian Philosophy and Buddhist books from Indian language into Russian. His contribution in Russian oriental studies is very valuable.

The younger son, Svetoslav Roerich became a very famous painter like his father and married the famous Indian actress Devika Rani and settled in South Bengaluru, where he founded the cultural and educational centre "Chitrakala Parishad" in 1972. This educational centre became the department of fine arts of Bangalore University and has a permanent gallery dedicated to N. Roerich.¹

NOTES

Roerich, N. Culture and Civilization. M.: ICR, 1994. – P. 60. – (The Roerichs Small Library).

Roerich, N. Culture and Civilization. M.: ICR, 1994. – P. 49. – (The Roerichs Small Library).

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