The Landscapes of Nikolai Roerich: East Meets West

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In the comparative study of civilizations, art is rarely examined from a standpoint of civilizational influences and melding. With the work of Nikolai Roerich, we can see a perfect example of the globalization of art.

Students and collectors of 19th- and 20th-century landscape painting are usually quite aware of the works of English, German, French, and American artists. Fewer individuals today, however, are familiar with the paintings of Nikolai Roerich\(^1\) (1874-1947), a Russian artist whose works ranged from Russian, Tibetan, Indian, Chinese, and Japanese landscapes, to folk sketches and scenes, to set designs for many of the great Russian composers of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Nikolai Roerich, who was well known as a painter, writer, visionary, philosopher, and essayist in his native Russia, is often overlooked by artists, critics, and historians in the arts and humanities in the West. A global thinker, explorer, and traveler, friend of George Bernard Shaw, Rabindranath Tagore, and Albert Einstein, his lifework was informed by a vision of universal culture. It involved forging connections between divergent cultures in a quest that found full expression in his art, as well as in his memoirs and essays.

The Roerich Banner of Peace, a special flag he designed which declares inviolable all the treasures of culture and art, even now waves over many cultural and educational institutions around the world. The Banner of Peace consists of three red spheres inside a red circle on a white background. The design may be interpreted in two ways: the three spheres may be said to symbolize religion, art, and science held in the circle of culture; or they may represent the past, present, and future achievements of humankind protected within the circle of eternity.\(^2\) Roerich’s activities promoting peace and understanding among nations earned him a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1929.

Roerich’s lifelong endeavor was to bring together Eastern\(^3\) and Western values and religious beliefs, and it represents a grand attempt to do what is from the Western perspective rumored to be impossible. It was Kipling, after all, who said “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” But meet they do, in Roerich’s Russian art and multicultural vision. Barn Conlan, in one of the few American
works on Roerich, felt that this ability arose from his Russian origin:

It is perhaps in the order of things that Nikolai Roerich should be Russian. So deep and religious an attitude to Art as his could hardly derive from any other race today, and his universal culture, his vast outlook which stretches throughout Europe, Asia and America, comes of a race which is half Asiatic, and which contains in itself a sort of synthesis of East and West.\(^4\)

Conlan is surely right that Roerich’s rare ability to synthesize divergent cultures has something to do with the fact that he was Russian, with deep religious roots in both East and West. He was at once European and Asian, born into the rich art tradition of Russian Orthodoxy and matured in the folk elements of Russian culture that were so integral to the whole national revival of the arts in late 19\(^{th}\) - and 20\(^{th}\) -century Russia. However, beyond these Russian roots, his work represents a broader convergence, a kind of “Himalayan Buddhism” meets “Russian apocalyptic Christianity.” The Russian Roerich, unlike many Western writers and painters, captures the true Serdtse Azii—“the heart of Asia,” as one of his major writings is titled. He brings together the varied faces and facets of Indian religions with the deeply religious culture and sensibility of his native Russia.

Already the facts of Roerich’s life and art are being forgotten. His life was truly that of a world figure, an international peacemaker and protector of the arts, as well as a dedicated and prolific painter of India and the East. Roerich was born in St. Petersburg in 1874 and died in India in 1947. The inscription on his burial site in the Kulu valley bears testimony to the high esteem with which he was and still is regarded in his adopted homeland: “The body of Maharishi Nicholas Roerich, great friend of India, was cremated on this spot.”

Roerich’s early career is marked by an interest in ancient Russia, its legends and folk epics and icons of the Russian church. Roerich’s style and method were deeply influenced by icons, and it is noticeable in his canvases: the stark and primitive lines and contours are the hallmark of his style. His first painting to have received critical acclaim, The Varangian in Tsargrad (1895), shows his original place in the revival of the Russian folk heritage already underway.

Today Roerich is known primarily or even exclusively for his paintings, but in 1907 he began a stage and set-designing period, resulting in historic collaborations with some of the great Russian and European composers and dramatists of his day. He designed sets for
Rimsky-Korsakov, for Borodin (*Prince Igor*), Wagner’s *Walküre*, Grieg’s *Peer Gynt*, and most notably Stravinsky’s *Le sacre du printemps*. The groundbreaking and controversial Sergei Diaghilev production of 1913 premiered in Paris, gaining immediate notoriety. The unconventionality and innovation of the ballet caused public outcry after the first act, upsetting the choreographer Nijinsky, and forcing Stravinsky to leave his box. Recalling the reaction of the Parisian audience, Roerich later wrote:

> Who knows, perhaps at that moment they were inwardly exultant and expressing this feeling like the most primitive of peoples. But I must say, this wild primitivism had nothing in common with the refined primitivism of our ancestors, for whom rhythm, the sacred symbol, and subtlety of movement were great and sacred concepts.5

In addition to sets and costume design for *Le sacre du printemps*, Roerich worked with Stravinsky on the libretto.6

Roerich, true to the Eastern tradition, is overwhelmingly a landscape painter, and human beings are shown on a scale befitting their relative size and significance in nature. Nowhere is this more true than in the mountain paintings which compose the greatest portion of his oeuvre. One finds this nature/human synthesis in his sky paintings as well: *Battle in the Heavens* (1912) is recognized by many Russian art critics as one of the major landscapes of the 20th century. The immense, stained-glass clouds and sky which dwarf the tiny huts in the bottom right corner comprise ninety percent of the scene, underscoring the modest position of the human being in the order of Roerich’s universe. His style could be characterized as “naïve” and “primitive,” but it is actually self-conscious and highly stylized as found in Gauguin’s Polynesian paintings.

It reflected not a lack of formal technique, but, rather, a triumph of style. Roerich’s work embodies and reinforces the incessant, the indefatigable and the grandiose scale of the Himalayas but in such a fashion that one remains aware of the human beings who share this world, these mountains, this “Shambhala” on earth. Roerich sought to represent these peoples and cultures through the majesty of the Himalayan peaks. Linked to the idea of the Himalayas, symbolizing the essence of Eastern spirituality, is *Shambhala*. This idea lies at the core of Roerich’s vision of a new spiritual consciousness: in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition Shambhala is the earthly link to heaven, believed to exist in a remote and secret valley in the Himalayas.
Roerich was already familiar with the idea of Shambhala while in St. Petersburg. He was one of the members of the construction committee of the first Buddhist temple to be erected in the Russian capital. His meetings with lamas and sages during his expedition in Asia strengthened his earlier fascination with this idea. In 1924 he met a Mongolian lama who spoke to him of Rigden Djapo, the ruler of Shambhala, who is prophesied to appear in the new epoch, and whose advent will be ushered in by wars and natural calamities.

Roerich could see a connection between divergent religious beliefs: the idea of Shambhala has similarities with the Christian notion of the Apocalypse and Armageddon, a new world order believed to arise after wars and catastrophes of unprecedented proportions. For Roerich the concept of Shambhala was imbued with a special meaning since it revealed the links between Buddhist and Hindu conceptions concerning a mystical future. In Heart of Asia, Roerich’s great memoir of 1929, he points out that this motif, evident in all elements of the folk culture, was a symbol for a sacred place:

Shambhala itself is the Holy Place where the earthly world links with the highest states of consciousness. In the East they know that there exists two Shambhalas—an earthly one and an invisible one. Many speculations have been made about the location of the earthly Shambhala. Certain indications put this place in the extreme north, explaining that the rays of the Aurora Borealis are the rays of the invisible Shambhala.

For Roerich, Shambhala was a place, but it also signified a new era. In the chapter entitled “Shambhala” in Heart of Asia, he explained this esoteric and multilayered concept which symbolized his vision for a great future:

Both in the large populous centers of Asia...and in the limitless deserts of the Mongolian Gobi, the word Shambhala, or the mysterious Kalapa of the Hindus, sounds like the most realistic symbol of the great Future. In tales about Shambhala, in legends, songs, and folklore, is contained what is perhaps the most important message of the East.

While traveling and living in the East, Roerich produced hundreds of canvases of Asian landscapes. His paintings of India and the East reveal his fascination with mountains—the Himalayas. Like Monet’s haystacks, he painted the Himalayas in every season, time of day, from every angle, light, and view, capturing this Eastern spiritual motif in
innumerable canvases. In his studies of Eastern landscapes, Roerich seems to have been inspired by the same conviction as the 16th-century Chinese philosopher, Wang Yang-Ming, who writes that the “innate knowledge of man is the same as that of plants and trees... Heaven, Earth, the myriad things...wind, rain, dew, thunder, sun and moon, stars, animals and plants, mountains and rivers, earth and stones are essentially of one body with man.”11

Across Asia, as in some European traditions, mountains symbolize spiritual ascent and the search for enlightenment and are the locales of religious and sacred sites, such as temples, monasteries, churches, and places of meditation. Many of Roerich’s paintings depict prophets and yogis—hermits who retreat into the mountains seeking enlightenment.

The Shambhala theme is repeated in scores of Roerich’s paintings; Rigden Djapo—Ruler of Shambhala (also known as The Great Horseman), Pearl of Searching (1924), Book of Wisdom (1924), Gompa (1932), Star of the Morning (1932), and From Beyond (1936) all vividly capture the spirit of Shambhala. The painting Book of Wisdom on the theme of the seeker, the novice, offers a breathtaking vista of the Himalayas stretching in front of us. In the lower right-hand corner, a novice is seated with an open book, his head inclined; the book symbolizes wisdom and knowledge he seeks. Since the mountains that stretch across the horizon are not steep or forbidding but present a wide open view, we are given to understand that the seeker will attain his spiritual goal. He will be able to enter the Shambhala that lies in the distance, beckoning him to approach.

The theme of the seeker is repeated in Pearl of Searching and From Beyond. Another landscape painting, Gompa (fig. 1), suggests the breaking of a new dawn. In this painting where the sky dominates the scene, one catches a glimpse of Shambhala, symbolized by a Buddhist temple perched atop a cliff.

Also linked to the Shambhala motif is the image of the female seeker. Not all seekers are male in Roerich’s Asia. The treatment of Eastern women in Roerich’s paintings is particularly significant. In Orientalist paintings, for example the French artists Eugène Delacroix, Léon Gerôme, Gustave Moreau, or J. A. D. Ingres, the female nudes are languid slave girls and odalisques, concubines or courtesans. The harem and the slave market hold a perennial fascination and provide a favorite subject for voyeurs. These are Asian girls in “bondage” under the painter’s gaze.

Even today, in the postcolonial era, the encounter of East and West
is often tainted with ideology and fantasy, expressions of an imperialis-
tic and age-long drive "to civilize, to dominate, and to possess." It is
still fairly common in the West to see portrayals of Eastern women as
the "Other," where they are depicted as glittering superficial beings.
When depicting Eastern women in the West, the focus is on their exot-
ic allure and carnality; they are usually portrayed as sexual beings,
products of the irrational East, there to be ravished and tamed.

The East is treated as the dark place from whence we all have
come; the East as woman—as woman of color. Delacroix's Algerian
Women in their Apartments (1834), Ingres’ Odalisque and Slave (1840),
and Gérôme's Slave Market are among some of the striking examples of
Orientalist depictions of the East as seductress, savage, and slave.

Roerich, however, is intent on portraying the authentic dusha nar-
odov, or "soul of the people." He depicts women in the unproblematic
and genuine roles that they play in their societies and cultures. In
Roerich's spiritual art, women are portrayed as older and wiser teach-
ers, as well as novices—students and seekers in the humble observanc-
es and practices of Indian culture. In his work, women are as intimate-
ly and honestly involved in the spiritual life of India as they are in
Russia. These are not enchantresses and seductresses, nor are they slaves. They do not assume the sexual positions of the *Kama Sutra*. For example, the painting *From Beyond* (1936) (fig. 2) shows women in non-stereotypical roles—that of teacher and seeker.

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 2: From Beyond, 1936. Tempera on canvas, 41 x 53 in. Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York.**

The painting is dominated by high sharp cliffs of an unearthly beauty and aura, suggestive of the mythical Shambhala. At the foot of the mountains on a rocky river bank sits a Tibetan woman clad in a long white robe. Apparently the novice has stopped by the shore of the river after a long journey. She looks up and sees another woman—the teacher, also clad in white garb, walking toward her. This woman "from beyond," with her hands in a gesture of prayer, is crossing the swift river on a thin plank. The apparition of the teacher from the mountains and the seeker's upturned face suggest a guide into the path of truth and wisdom, into the hidden kingdom of Shambhala. The painting is unique in this respect: the main protagonists of spiritual quests are almost always men in both Western and Eastern traditions. By portraying women in roles that were primarily reserved for men—seekers, devotees, teachers, and mentors—Roerich takes us into new ground.
Shifting focus away from women as sexual objects, Roerich portrays them as spiritual leaders. A series of 19 paintings titled “Banners of the East,” completed in 1924, depicts prophets, sages, and saints from around the world: figures such as Moses, Jesus Christ, Mohammed, and the Chinese philosopher Lao-Tse. Among these great spiritual teachers there is one female figure whom he calls “Mother of the World.” Roerich painted several versions of Mother of the World over a span of a few decades.

The female figure in this painting is similar to those in several other of his works of Christian iconography, such as The Queen of Heaven (a fresco in the Church of the Holy Spirit, 1912), Madonna Oriflamma (1932), and Glory to the Hero (1933). In all four of the works, the female figure is depicted as a woman neither young nor old, with a calm and composed expression. In Queen and Mother of the World (not dated) the similarity between the two figures is striking: they are both seated on cushions, hands folded in a gesture of prayer, and surrounded by saints and angels in the Christian version, and by Buddhas in the Eastern rendition. In Mother of the World (fig. 3), the woman’s eyes are covered by a veil, implying certain mysteries of the universe not yet revealed to humanity.

Woman as a symbol of the mother embodied for Roerich the unification of Eastern and Western spirituality. As an affirmation of this idea he gave the title of “Mother” to his painting depicting a female spiritual leader. In the Orthodox Christian tradition, the Madonna and St. Sophia are the personification of love and redemption, while in the East Hindu goddesses such as (Mother) Kali and (Mother) Durga embody female power and mysticism.

The feminine principle represented in Kali is endowed with both destructive and regenerative powers, not unlike St. Sophia who is believed to make her appearance after the destruction of the world. Roerich explained that “To both East and West, the image of the Great Mother—womanhood—is the bridge of ultimate unification.” Historical and archeological discoveries around the world of prehistoric female figures depicting the Great Mother confirm Roerich’s belief that humanity is bound, “unified” by a common Mother. In the symbol of womanhood as redeemer, protectress, and savior Roerich found the ultimate link between civilizations of the world.

The Buddhist critic, John Snelling, has characterized Roerich’s search for links between diverse cultures as a kind of obsession. He writes: “Roerich was intoxicated with the romance of Eastern spiritual-
Roerich was deeply interested in Indian culture; for him the most important aspect of India was its philosophy and religion. As a result of his fascination and familiarity with ancient Hindu and Buddhist religious texts, Roerich became a proponent of the idea of agni—"divine fire"—and studied agni yoga. In the Vedas and Puranas this yoga was linked with Shambhala. It symbolizes psychic energy and creative force, and teaches action by showing the path to what is good, identifying the real causes behind historical and personal events. This yoga teaches one to take action toward a righteous path through knowledge and enlightenment. In Heart of Asia Roerich explains the tenets and the
basic premise of agni yoga and its connection to Shambhala:

Not a mere Messianic Creed but a New Era of mighty energies and possibilities is expressed in the term Shambhala. Now, when each day we are overwhelmed by the discoveries of physics, the power of oxygen, or by the reality of the Great Fire of Space, when from the summits is proclaimed the teaching of Agni Yoga,...we can greet the Great Future of Mighty Energies!... The Vedic traditions say that the time is near, when new energies—mostly Agni energies, energies of cosmic fire—will approach the earth and create many new conditions of life.... Agni Yoga teaches: “Do not leave life; develop the faculties of your apparatus and understand the great meaning of psychic energy—human thought and consciousness—the greatest creative factors.”

Fire as a powerful symbol of energy and creative forces finds expression in many of Roerich’s paintings. Burning of Darkness (1924) depicts the mysticism of fire, “the Great Fire of Space.” Set in a narrow rugged mountainous pass, depicted in shades of unearthly blue, a small procession of sages and hermits, follow a haloed figure who is bringing out the divine fire. The fire represented by a small rectangular white glow casts a serene yet unreal light. The contemplative and serene expressions on the hermits’ faces underscore the atmosphere of a pilgrimage.

Fire was Roerich’s symbol for agni yoga, and he found its corollaries in other Eastern religions, and in his especially Eastern version of Christianity. In Zoroaster (1931), the Persian prophet is shown venerating the sun, symbolizing the cult of fire. In ancient Persia, as in India, the sun and fire were worshipped and there is a long tradition of fire cults associated with Zoroastrianism. Undoubtedly, the correspondences between these ancient religions and beliefs confirmed Roerich’s premise that all cultures were connected at a deep level, even if those connections may not be immediately visible.

The Last Angel, first painted in 1912, was significantly redone in 1942 as war returned; Christian symbolism and fire are its central motifs. The 1942 painting has an intensity which the 1912 version lacks; the earlier work, done before the First World War, somewhat romanticizes the symbol of Judgment Day, but not the destructive force of war. In neither version does fire symbolize a positive creative or regenerative force; specifically in the 1942 painting fire is represented as purely destructive.

Unlike the Indian symbolism of fire as a positive purifying energy, in Christianity fire is associated with hell and damnation. The 1942
painting emphasizes this Christian symbolism, expressing Roerich’s reaction to the horrors of war. By painting the figure of an angel with a sword in one hand and a scroll of parchment paper in the other, surrounded by flames and a ball of fire, Roerich voices his own judgment and condemnation. The haloed figure represented with a sword conjures up a powerful image of the avenging angel sent to punish the warmongers.

Like so many of his paintings, The Last Angel synthesizes Western and Eastern symbolism. The burning buildings on the angel’s left hand show Tibetan and Indian architecture, while those on the right depict Russian Orthodox churches. The Indian and Christian iconography of this painting underscores the similarities between Christian and Indian notions of Armageddon. Even though the angel is primarily a European Christian figure, there is a hidden Indian symbol in the painting—the eyes of Brahma who is towering over the figure of the angel. The eyes are stylized and not easily discernible but they are definitely suggestive of the all-seeing eyes of the Creator in Indian visual art.

Apart from the fire symbolism in Roerich’s iconography, rivers and lakes—and water in general—symbolize purification. Water plays a purifying role in Christian religious practices (baptisms), Hindu ritual bathing, and the Islamic tradition of cleansing five times daily before prayers. Both water and fire symbols find expression in Lights on the Ganges (1947). The river Ganges is considered holy in India; it is the personification of one of the gods and has its source high up in the Himalayas.

Every year, many millions of Indians bathe during the festival of ritual cleansing. Water purifies the spirit and cleanses the body. Ablutions in the Ganges purify the human soul; the bather emerges reborn after a ritual cleansing in the sacred river. In Lights on the Ganges (fig. 4), a devotee sends votive offerings down the river. The dark background is lit up by the little specks of flickering oil lamps which dot the foreground. The huddled figure of the woman is dwarfed by the mountain-like stone temples. The towering domes of the temples are reminiscent of boulders and cliffs, again suggesting human beings’ humble position in the order of the universe.

Another important theme that finds expression in a series of Roerich’s paintings, one that is directly linked to the Shambhala motif, is the figure of Maitreya [Sanskrit: “unity and love”]. In the Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist traditions, Maitreya is the fifth incarnation of the Buddha and symbolizes an age of redemption and restored unity.
According to this tradition we are currently living in the age of the fourth incarnation—the age of Shakamuni [Sanskrit: 'sage of the Sakyas'; another name for the historical Buddha who was from the royal Sakya clan]. Roerich, devoted to the mythic Shambhala, was fascinated by the message of Maitreya: this figure too, like the Messiah and St. Sophia, signals the coming of a new era.

Roerich finished a series of seven paintings on the Maitreya theme between 1925-1926. On his way from Kashmir to Tibet in 1932, Roerich came across rock carvings in the mountains dating back to the Neolithic Period. It was here that he actually saw for the first time the carved images of Maitreya which he had painted in the earlier series. One of the paintings in this series, Maitreya (1932), depicts an image carved into an imposing boulder: the stark but serene figure of Maitreya, eyes closed and hands folded in a gesture of contemplation. This painting is especially symbolic and powerful because of Maitreya’s significance as the harbinger of a new era—a new world order based on peace and justice, a world that Roerich envisioned.

The transnational vision of Roerich, synthesizer of the arts and philosophies of East and West, expressed in a universal respect and peacefulness that reaches out across all political, religious, social and economic divisions, could perhaps guide us beyond our differences in today’s world of ethnic and religious hatred and violence. The message of this visionary painter could engender a new multicultural conscious-
ness in our global village, and perhaps even help usher in the Age of Maitreya and the new world order.

[Biographical statement]

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Notes

1. There are several variations of this name such as Nikolai Rerikh and Nicholas Roerich. For the sake of consistency I use Nikolai Roerich throughout this paper.


3. I use the term East or Eastern in a general way, but in this paper it usually refers to the Indian subcontinent.


5. Decter, op. cit., p. 89.


13. One such figure carved on stone and dating to c. 230,000 BCE—the earliest known sculpture—was found in the Berekhat Ram site on the Golan Heights. A cave painting of a female weaver was discovered in France in the caves of Chauvet; the painting dates to c. 32,000 BCE. A similar female figure carved on a small piece of ochre was found in Blombos Cave in South Africa, dated at c. 75,000 BCE. The so-called “Venus figures,” as in the well-known Venus of Willendorf (c. 30,000 BCE) offer another example of the “Great Mother.”
