

Nicholas and Helena Roerich
The Spiritual Journey of Two Great Artists and Peacemakers
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Foreword

In 1961, after returning from the first trip into cosmic space, the Soviet Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin was asked to describe what our planet looked like from space. When he replied that it reminded him of a Nikolai Roerich painting, “Roerich” was a name familiar to only a smattering of people around the world. Few Russians recognized it because of the strict ban against Roerich erected by the Soviet authorities and enforced by the KGB. Few Americans recognized it because Vice-President Henry A. Wallace, (a former supporter of Roerich’s) had denied him re-entry into the United States in the mid-1930s. But for those who did recognize the painter’s name, it was an eloquent statement, for Roerich’s art portrayed a world of multi-dimensional beauty and lyric color.

How could a painter of such breadth and scope be so little recognized? Who WAS Nicholas Roerich? Why was it that Americans knew of the spiritual work of such Russian greats as Kandinsky and Chagall, but not Roerich? These were the questions that plagued author Ruth Abrams Drayer after she encountered his glorious artwork at the Roerich Museum in New York in 1982. These questions began a chain of events that led her to move to India to work with the painter’s son, Svetoslav Roerich, and to interview and correspond with an international assortment of people. She spent countless hours digging through crumbling scrapbooks and micro-film in many libraries, and reading through old correspondence and files stored in the Library of Congress, the British Secret Files and reports from various departments of the American Government released through the Freedom of Information Act (although most lines were inked out to protect the informants.)

Drayer’s fourteen-year quest and hard work has resulted in the fascinating story of two truly great leaders of the twentieth century. *Wayfarers: The Spiritual Journey of Nicholas & Helena Roerich* gives us a rare look into the lives of two modern initiates — spiritually advanced souls who lit up the human world with sparks of divine color and imparted a fiery wisdom to all they met.

Russian-born Nicholas Konstantinovich Roerich (1874-1947) was an internationally acclaimed artist, author, explorer, archaeologist, humanitarian and peacemaker. His wife, Helena Ivanovna (1879-1955) was an inspired and influential writer and teacher. Partners in all things, they shared the belief that “knowledge and beauty are the real cornerstones of evolution, the gates to a world community.” The Roerichs taught that a synthesis of knowledge from all fields of human endeavors was needed to form a fully developed being.

Nicholas Roerich wrote nearly thirty books, and created over 7,000 paintings and theater designs, depicting scenes from ancient Slavic myths to the Himalayan Mountains to inspirational themes from the world’s religions. People who see his art for the first time are often speechless at the inspirational use of color and the spiritual power evoked by his paintings—especially his later work, completed during and after their four-year-long Central Asian expedition. Roerich’s paintings portray spiritual development, culture and its role in human evolution, and possibilities for peace in a troubled world. A broader and more metaphysical understanding is added to the paintings once the viewer penetrates the deeply spiritual writings of Roerich’s wife, Helena.

In 1923, the Roerichs founded the Master School of United Arts in New York to teach all the arts in one place, and the following year they started an international art center, Corona Mundi. They believed that “beauty is the force that can bring nations together...Art and knowledge are the best international language... They will unify all humanity.” To reduce crime and illness — both mental and physical — Roerich promoted the benefits of hanging art in factories, hospitals, prisons, and city streets.

A daring explorer and archaeologist, Nicholas Roerich investigated remote and dangerous regions of China, Mongolia, and the Gobi Desert, where few Westerners had ventured before. In addition to seeking ancient manuscripts hidden in subterranean crypts and caves, there were deeper, hidden purposes to the Roerichs’ Asian explorations. They were searching for the sacred site of Shambhala and for signs of the return of Maitreya (an Eastern name for the world teacher or Christ),

whom they saw as a symbol of the future—the messenger for all humanity of the New World to come, and were following their Master’s direction to establish a Buddhist spiritual country in Asia. The Roerichs later established the Urusvati Himalayan Research Institute to study the discoveries made during their travels.

The Roerichs were Theosophists who studied the ageless wisdom of the East and West in depth, and worked inwardly with great spiritual Masters, who are sometimes called the “Hierarchy of Light.” Roerich wrote, “We forged the tapestry of our spiritual armor with the same golden threads that weave throughout all the great religious principles.” In the early 1920s, they co-founded what became the Agni Yoga Society (“Agni” meaning fire and “yoga” meaning union with God) to publish and promote the teaching of what they called “living ethics” and the wisdom they had received from the Masters.

While Helena preferred to stay quietly away from the spotlight, writing and doing her spiritual work, Nicholas went out into the public. In 1929, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in creating the Roerich Peace Pact, which was signed by President Franklin Roosevelt and twenty-two other world leaders to protect the art treasures of the world. Roerich was a friend and advisor to heads of state, scientists, artists, writers and poets, and his work won the praise of Albert Einstein, Leo Tolstoy, George Bernard Shaw, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore, and others.

Nicholas and Helena Roerich were spiritual pioneers, many years ahead of their time in promoting equality for women and brotherhood among races and nations. And like many pioneers, their work was attacked and sabotaged by the regressive forces that attempt to hold back human evolution. Despite attacks and setbacks, the couple maintained a heroic serenity and dedication to their higher purpose and embodied the noblest of human qualities. The Roerichs’ greatest contributions to human evolution may never be known, for they are part of the sacred and mysterious work of all spiritually advanced initiates serving humanity.

Yet, nearly a century later, many of their key ideas have found a place in the human heart: the equality of the feminine and masculine principles, the wisdom of the heart, striving for the common good, brotherhood and the guiding hand of the Hierarchy of Masters. The eternal truths that the Roerichs demonstrated on earth will echo through time as the call of great hearts awakening humanity to beauty and unity: “Beneath the sign of beauty we walk joyfully,” Nicholas wrote. “With beauty we conquer. Through beauty we pray. In beauty we are united.”

Since 1961, despite all of the political upheaval in Russia, and despite the present official Church condemnation of Roerich and other “new religious movements...that were incompatible with Christianity,” Russians have “found” Roerich. In America, the book, *Nicholas Roerich, The Life and Art of a Russian Master* by Jacqueline Decter has done much to spread his fame, as has the Roerich web site: www.Roerich.org and various articles and a video available through the Theosophical Publishing House at www.TheosophicalSociety.org.

However, of all the books and articles that have been written, *Wayfarers: The Spiritual Journeys of Nicholas & Helena Roerich* is the first to be written from a spiritual perspective, interweaving the heart and soul of the Roerichs’ life journey. It also is the first book in English to introduce the Roerichs’ plan to form a country where all Tibetan Buddhists could practice their beliefs in safety. Because the original research done for this monumental work comes from an American perspective, it brings to light many unknown facts regarding the Roerichs’ connection with America. This book is a valuable resource and contribution to the world knowledge of Roerich, and the living flame of The Ageless Wisdom they worked so diligently to ignite around the world.

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