

## THE DISTINGUISHING INNER MARKS OF ROERICH'S PAINTING

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A two-fold standard must be used to measure the significance of any kind of artistic creation: the degree to which its expression approaches perfection and completeness by the means proper to the art in question; and secondly, the spiritual significance which it presents as a sequence of inner happenings in the artist's soul. Such an order follows naturally from the two-fold nature of art, and corresponds to its two components — flesh and spirit, container and content; unless these are strictly subordinated and in equilibrium, the very nature of the creative activity must always and in spite of itself be imperfect.

If it satisfies only the external demands of craftsmanship, indeed, an artistic production remains a beautiful but empty phantom, an enchanting but vain toy; only when it bases itself on the modes of a great human value, on the fundamental riddles and solutions to them posed by our thought and our will, does a work of art become internally inevitable, majestic and whole, a living force active to the point of omnipotence, because it serves the first and last of art's tasks — comprehension of the mystery of man.

In realizing itself on the two planes indicated, art in its development proceeds as it were by two ways, whose relationship may be manifested by a sharp nonconformity, since form in general tends toward constancy and motionlessness, while the life of the spirit, which art must express, has eternally before it the destiny of change and movement.

But however different may be the fundamental characteristics of art, it strives stubbornly and spontaneously toward oneness of expression and content, because only when these completely coincide can an artistic idea be embodied with all the necessary harmony, and so become, in triumph over the **seeming** chaos of things, a miraculous source of liberation, and of the joy of returning to the harmonious oneness of the world.

Although in the historical perspective of art whole periods of such creative unity can be noted, it must nevertheless be considered a very rare phenomenon — so rare that very often it does not appear even in the works of very great artists.

An amazing example of this artistic wholeness in the Russian painting of the last quarter century is the work of Vrubel', Serov and Somov. Upon this is founded the whole significance of the works of Roerich.

The beginning of Roerich's artistic activity coincided exactly with that time when the human soul was little by little being seized by a profound ferment, betokening a different apprehension of the world and a new consciousness of it, which in its turn was gradually to regenerate both the fundamental feeling of life and the inner experience of men.

This ferment first and with particular force touched the whole realm of creative activity, demanding of it a new completeness and new means of expression, and so changing its inner tasks that the very conception of art as this had emerged from the data of previous experience had to be recognized as to a significant degree obsolete and false. The indispensable equilibrium between the spirit of creativity and its outward form was once again drastically destroyed, and demanded the speediest renewal. But however lively may have been the youthful sense on the part of the new generation of their own creative truth, their visions were still far from being always marked by a clarity adequate to clothe themselves precisely in the desired forms, and only a few of them, who like Roerich had showed the magic **gift of inward wholeness**, were fortunate in finding themselves at once, and in sensing at once, infallibly art's genuine tendency in the general spiritual chaos of the time. And this chaos, on the plane of creative activity, was often complicated by the circumstance that into the new, still incompletely settled aesthetic, intruded a new, still unconfirmed morality, and phenomena of a purely moral order were sometimes accepted for models of artistic beauty.

At a time when the majority of the representatives of the new creative will were concerned above all that their art should as little as possible resemble what had preceded, and were of necessity turning all their attention to the external side of their works, Roerich from the very beginning of his activity strove to reveal and confirm his thoughts on the inward plane.

And in this was revealed once again all the distinctiveness of his delicate feeling and inspiration. An unquestionable innovator in essence and spirit, he evidently became really imbued with that simple truth that every kind of novelty in artistic creation is inwardly necessary, living and fruitful only insofar as it is realized in accordance with the voice of a soul transformed, and not in accordance with the artist's whim. Is it not for this reason that Roerich in his works avoids as it were consciously too complex combinations of colors, and seems to be afraid of everything that might seem too unexpected and too pretentious? And is it not for this reason that, in working out his artistic problems, he is invariably concerned that his creative forms should **blossom** with their own colors as naturally as a plant blossoms in accordance with the purpose of its own nature, just as he demands from every conception of his own first and foremost that it should spring up and reveal itself without breaking away from the age-old roots of art?

By this ascent to the primal basis of creative activity, by this return to its secret roots, the whole immediate problem of art was worked out, and its lost completeness and freedom once more returned to it — a circumstance which communicates to Roerich's work a primeval spiritual meaning and weight. Indeed, the principal inner cause of so sharp a crisis in all human creative activity at the end of the nineteenth century consisted precisely in the fact that artists of the word, the brush, sound, and the chisel, with extremely rare exceptions, attached too little importance to the meaning of the creative miracle, giving themselves excessively, to the detriment of their freedom of inspiration, to representing the commonplace heterogeneity of things, their everyday fragmentation, and stubbornly striving toward the unrealizable reproduction of the whole burning breath of life, whereas the essence of art is the celebration of **comprehending** contemplation, the assertion of the general in the fragmentary, the raising of the transitory veils from the eternal face of life, the deepening of being and its creative activity. Roerich brought into Russian painting the living truth of such a prophetic view of the artist's duty and function at a time when it was faced with an entire uncertainty as to its future course; he had proved accordingly to be one of the first leaders of the new creative consciousness. Almost from the schoolboy's bench, with a stubborn inner consistency, he had begun to realize his own indisputable truth in clear and convincing works, often reaching a mastery in them accessible to only the genuinely strong.

Since such is the essence of our creative activity, the subject of art consists not of what tangibly exists and takes place around us, not of the so-called immediate actuality of the world, but of **our thoughts about the world**, and the artist becomes an artist only in so far as he severs himself and awakes from this actuality. Accordingly, instead of the phenomena and events of life, the reproduction of which has, in so really blind a fashion, been the concern of the artists of the preceding generation, Roerich set up the **vision** of life, legend, myth. Artistic content of such sort, strictly corresponding to art's true spirit, not only broadens the province of artistic creation, but sets all its potentialities free. Life's reality, of course, as it is accessible to our immediate perception, is too narrow for art, if only because our apprehension of the world is limited by time and space; we hear and see only to a negligible distance, and the whole actuality that is subject to our touch, in its separate links, endures for but a brief time, and is irrepressibly being converted into fact and dream. Only what we think about life, only the image of the world in our soul knows neither bounds nor measure, and reveals to our art the entire realm of recollection, hope, philosophic dream and premonition — as limitless as the universe.

If the whole content and significance of Roerich's ideas, insofar as he is true to himself, are confined to the realm of vision, to the spectacle of the world transformed and justified in the spirit, then even the external side of his art, all the pictorial and structural peculiarities of his paintings, are predetermined by the essence of vision.

The distinguishing mark of all Roerich's painting is its general shading, the characteristic coloration peculiar to itself alone. To this artist-seer the entire spectacle of life, measureless in its earthly heterogeneity, is revealed as it were in the illumination of an ineffable and unearthly light. Suffusing Roerich's creative rituals, and from within rather than from without, this magic glow clothes them in a sort of perturbing, elusive haze, and thereby communicates to them a legendary and transparent character, while this transparency is clearly manifest even in the brightest colors and clearest outlines. Owing to this general coloration, everything almost without exception that Roerich represents seems to be taking place at some enormous distance, removed to a point where all objects have already lost their external features, the more definitely to reveal their inner essence alone. Hence all the unusual spaciousness of his works, the very construction of which in the majority of cases is resolved into infinity.

It is noteworthy that Roerich draws his separate colors now from the fairy-tale depths of the evening or pre-dawn sky, now from the mysterious realm of the northern midnight sun, — from everywhere, in a word, where mystery has poured her enchanting, majestic and silent glow; both his fundamental feeling for the world, and the whole contemplative nature of his creativity demand this. It is perfectly natural that Roerich's colors **must** be distinguished by a certain monotony and a certain paleness, because an excessive diversification of color, as an external phenomenon, would only destroy the solemnity of this contemplative art and lessen the spiritual meaning of his figures. In those few cases where he had to have a more complicated and a brighter play of colors, it is masterfully subordinated on purpose (or more truly, in accordance with his strict inspiration) to the aforesaid pictorial symmetry, to a definite broad rhythm, whereby the essential quiet of the vision remains unbroken. For the rest, one may speak only in an extremely relative way of the monotony of Roerich's color, since this is especially well compensated by the delicacy of the basic tones and the great refinement of their inner tension. In them above all is contained the whole distinctive power and artistic secret of Roerich's works.

Completely corresponding to the colors of Roerich's pictures are his lines. Here, as there, the defining principle is the inner basis of vision, which does not permit either too infrequent breaks, or too trivial details, and which strives, in general and in particular, toward the solemn silence and quiet of icon painting. In avoiding an excessive diversity and artificiality of color, Roerich also to a great degree avoids fussiness of movement. His figures, therefore, at least those where he is most true to himself, stand before the observer in all the harmonious simplicity of their outline, as a tree rises from which all its foliage has fallen. This solemn harmoniousness of Roerich's lines, with their inner connection, is reminiscent of the rhythmic structure of ballad narrative — a circumstance which brings us back on this new plane to the realm of prophetic phantom and myth, to that silent threshold of contemplation, to which Roerich's colors also bring us. It is noteworthy that that basic lines which express the grandeur of this inner rhythm inevitably tend to ascend or, what amounts to the same thing, to be lost in the distance, in space. This is why, on the general plane of his intentions, Roerich avoids as far as possible detached space and closed surfaces, while in those cases where in accordance with the inner sense of a figure, he has to have closed facets, he either opposes to them in the same place an open space, or repeats them again and again in the more distant perspective of his work and thereby only intensifies the ocean breadth of infinity, in which is contained the highest achievement of his creative activity. With this feeling of infinity, which has become the guiding principle and fundamental artistic precept of Roerich, goes so amazingly and so actively his profound feeling of accepting the justified world. Because of this all the lines in his works repeat as it were the reverent gesture of a hand that blesses the world, and all his space is disposed like solemn steps toward a still invisible, but promised, temple, where every procession and every path shall have its fulfillment.

Roerich's lines, the general coloration of his works and the individual colors complement and reinforce one another so mysteriously that their conjunction, strictly speaking, must be looked upon as a single element. Such a coincidence of such diverse features is possible only because with Roerich the external fabric of every creative image follows integrally from its spirit and essence. Is not one of the highest approximations of art reached here — art which demands in its development ever more definitely that the expression of the artistic act should magically evolve from its visions, as the stalk, the leaves and the flower emerge consecutively from the wholeness of the seed? And in this connection it must be remembered that the entire artistic unity of this painting is created not by the artist's lucky inspiration, but has ripened in the depths of his inner experience, and constitutes no beautiful play of his fancy, but a profound inner necessity.

As concerns the content of Roerich's works, as an artist of lyric and epic rather than tragic scope, he is bound by the very nature of his genius to represent not so much action as feeling, spiritual condition, spiritual movement. And from the other side, the very essence of art, which he asserts, as thought about the world, led him imperatively into that province of inner life and contemplation. Accordingly, the events and phenomena of life, whose colorful record and outline often exhaust the artist's whole task, concern Roerich only insofar as there is embodied in them the eternal flaming of our soul and our will and insofar as in them is manifest the untransient image of life. Constituted in this fashion, Roerich's painting is the art of symbol. With this it must be reckoned even as regards its method. The concrete content of such creative activity, for all the distinctness of its figures, can often not be expressed with words. Roerich's painting must be seen. In this regard it has much in common with music, which must be heard. And does not this common character of Roerich's colors and lines and the spirit of music explain the circumstance that these colors and these lines bring the viewer into a confused rhythmical state, in which he has intimations of organ chorales, the sounding of solemn trumpets, Easter psalms?

But whatever may be the external content of Roerich's paintings, and however definite may be the names with which he designates his works, there is always inherent in them a certain inner mystery. And it is extremely characteristic that his every separate artistic intention has in view not the interpretation and revelation of this mystery, but only the silent spectacle of it, in order the more integrally to present it to our immediate apprehension. Here once more is laid bare Roerich's peculiar sensitivity as an artist. The fact is that art, insofar as it strives toward genuine creativeness, must have as its solitary goal the mystery of man and of the world. But to attain this mystery, only that person is able to share in it to whom it has been granted. To share in the miracle of life, however, means to integrally accept it in one's soul. This is why Roerich does not care in his painting to be an intermediary between the soul of the beholder and the secret essence of things, but rather exerts himself invariably to pose them face to face. For our art in general, at least the highest, **liberating** art, must strive not toward the representation of the phenomena and events of life, even when these have been generalized and purified by the contemplation, but is bound to exert itself to become phenomenon and event, living action and tremor. And it is bound to be not the termination of inner action, but only its beginning and the occasion for it. For this reason every figure of Roerich, according to its inner sense and the manner of its expression, is apprehended as a certain creative sign. But of course, all genuine art, not painting only, but the word also, even music, is only a magical **sign**, whereby our soul, awaking from its particular reality, must, though only for a moment, communicate with the being of the world and the mystery of the universe, so that in us may be accomplished the miracle of liberation.

It is essential to remember that from whatever realm Roerich may have borrowed his pictorial themes, their creative significance is equally valid and, for all the external heterogeneity of his artistic intentions, in every separate instance he was only once more, only again, asserting the inner unity of his painting. In other words, for a real evaluation of Roerich's work the external content of his paintings is properly an indifferent matter. And to make note of the archaizing, or the exoticism, or other details of certain of his artistic ideas, as has sometimes been attempted, means emphasizing the non-essential. This is the more so in that precisely here, in his archaic and exotic themes, he is perhaps not altogether true to the fundamental tendency of his painting and thus to his own creative duty — not altogether true to himself, of course, in that case, if in such works he was seeking external verisimilitude, that is, a certain connection with actuality, though even

by way of contrast. Because Roerich's experience as an artist, and the very essence of his genius are such that his creative duty commands his art to serve life's **vision** alone, unalloyed and without relations, both where the human soul recognizes itself in recollection, and where it hearkens to the breathing of the passing hour, and where it has a presentiment of itself. And in serving this fundamental tendency of his art, Roerich is so strict toward himself that, while being an artist of delicate colors, he often, and perhaps too deliberately, denies himself, and openly struggles with the lure and temptation of an external play of colors, when this cannot be justified by the inner necessity of the creative image. For Roerich's path, in accordance with all the inner marks of his painting, proceeds not by way of a colorful closed meadow, with its rainbow reality and oblivion, but, like the path of all cognitive art, leads to the open mountain passes, to the stern spaciousness of a dreamless, alertly guarded thought about the eternal, and of a prayerfulness before the mysterious miracle of the world.

Roerich's importance is by no means exhausted by the great attainments of his painting. The same inner experience upon which are founded the original being and significance of his works connected his creative activity with unbreakable bonds to the general spiritual structure of our time. In the realm of his lines and colors he was stubbornly preoccupied with the solution of the same important tasks as were next in turn both in literature and in music and in all contemporary art. But since this art itself was only the living reflection and most active portion of the profound wave of fire which has seized the whole contemporary soul in its struggle for a new consciousness of the world and a new will, Roerich, in asserting his figures, was taking part in the creation of the whole structure of our inner life, in the asserting of it in terms of the new thought and spirit. And if in this rebirth of the fullness of life some solid footholds were reached, as a depth and freedom for further possibilities, as a strength of feeling and a clarity of understanding; and if in this life new spiritual rights and a new inner duty of man were set up, a certain portion in this general attainment belongs indubitably also to Roerich. In the particular aspects of painting, as he, among very few, labored over its new tasks, he took upon himself the most difficult part: to reveal the inner elements of the art of colors, as this had to be asserted on the new spiritual level.

It is possible to make the erroneous proposition that Roerich's art is too contemplative and consequently too much divorced from life. But it is contemplative only in the measure that contemplation constitutes the immediate and fundamental necessity of human creativity. But if this is so, then it has risen from the hidden depths of life itself, closely tied to it, as a vigorous offshoot from its eternally youthful will, as its liberating force. Having underlined this radical connection of Roerich's painting with the immediate tendency of life, it remains only to add that an artist has no better crown than this participation in the spiritual exploit of his time.

"Vnutrennyje primety tvorčestva Roericha", *Roerich*, Petrograd, 1916; translated by W. Edward Brown.