2013

The Transcendent as Theatre in Roerich's Paintings

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It would not be an exaggeration to say that much of Russian artistic culture in the first two decades of the 20th century was theatricalised.\(^1\) The work that Russian painters did in the theatre was intimately integrated and synthesised with all of the other elements of a production. Many artists of the World of Art Movement were instrumental in revolutionising the theatrical arts in Russia at the invitation and under the direction of Sergei Diaghilev. Following the pioneering steps of Konstantin Korovin, many artists, including Nicholas Roerich, Alexander Benois, Leon Bakst, Mstislav Dobuzhinski and later the...
avant-garde painters Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov and Kazimir Malevich, among others, incarnated in their work a synthesis of the arts with music at its heart. They combined composition, visual design and colour with word, movement and music to express a fundamental unity between the arts that not only transformed opera and ballet as evidenced by the success of the Ballets Russes in Europe, but also transformed their painting.

Russian painters expended enormous creative energies to transform the theatre through the prominent introduction of painting as the significant unifying element in the synthesis of the performing arts. The argument might be made that when the artists returned to their art form outside of the theatre, they could not remain entirely within the same boundaries, personal or aesthetic, that were in place before they began their collaborations. The innovative spirit that characterised their collaborative work in the theatre was too permeating an influence to leave behind. Something of the dramatic, the musical, the movement of dance, the costuming and the notion of their synthesis remained with them. How this synthesis found expression in their painting outside of their theatrical work is an important question, particularly in the case of Roerich who continued to work on theatrical productions even in the later years of his life. To some degree, the theatrical remained within the aesthetic laboratory of those painters and significantly affected their artistic expression. For Roerich, it seems to have provided a means of discovery that transformed his work into a form of theatre beyond the stage, and that suited the expression of his worldview.

The age of the miriskussniki, as the World of Art painters were called, was being en-acted, mis-en-scened on the stages of Europe through the genius of their sense of the ornamental in the decorative and graphic arts and of the symbiotic relationship that existed when they were brought into synthesis. In the words of one of the chief ideologues of the World of Art, Dmitri Filosofof, after the group accepted Stanislavsky’s invitation to collaborate at the Moscow Art Theatre, the ‘World of Art’ became the ‘World of the Theatre’. Nekhlyudova adds that ‘the ‘set designer’ or, more accurately, the ‘dekorativist’ becomes synonymous with ‘major artist’...; it always meant ‘a grand style’ and ‘complex content’. The collective efforts of the miriskussniki modernised and legitimised theatrical design and decorative art (sets and costumes) to the point of raising them to the level of an art form itself. Through painting, the miriskussniki also brought ancient and primeval
Slavic myths to the fore, as well as connections between Russian art, past and present. This was particularly true of Roerich’s work. As Syrkina notes:

‘Roerich’s artistic work in the theatre is invariably linked with his painting. The two are bound together by that general circle of interests, ideas and themes, as well as those particularities of the way he thinks in images, all of which come together as one in him as a historian, an archaeologist and an artist—a unique interpreter of ancient eras.’

As Roerich began his work in the theatre one can see the boundaries between easel painting and set design begin to evaporate in his work, and his focus on set design becomes more and more central to his painting. After his successful collaboration with Stravinsky on the Rite of Spring in 1913, Roerich departed noticeably from a strictly Slavic and Russian historical narrative as his primary framework. His focus shifted to what can be called an esoteric narrative that was informed by his enduring interest in the East. His departure from Russia’s historical narrative, appropriate as it was for his earlier work, signals the appearance of what appears to be a new non-Russian transcendental narrative. His earlier intuitive archaeological understanding of the roots of Russian culture facilitated this shift to a study of the origins of Eastern culture.

He did not find himself in the theatre, nor did he, as Syrkina writes:

‘...seek to discover himself in the theatre. He already knew his amplitude and it immediately defined his place. The historical epic beginnings of his painting as never before took effect on the heroic repertoire, the attraction to the monumental could not but arrive with him on the musical stage....’

It might be said, however, that it was during the course of his work on more than fifteen theatrical productions that he may have discovered the final dimension that complemented his work and imbued it with the fullest possible expression of his vision.

Once Roerich had achieved success through his work with the ‘Russian Seasons’ in Europe, the idea of synthesis remained a creative principle and became a distinct quality of his paintings for the
remainder of his life. Such a characterisation of his work provides a way of understanding it not only within the context of his artistic acculturation and contributions as a member of the World of Art but beyond it. Yakovlevna refers to this in her observation that 'Roerich comes out of an age that is being re-created on the stage.' Integrating themselves and their work into the theatre, artists were acting on their intuitive aesthetic sense and not on the theories of theatrical design. There is nothing theoretical in the native aesthetic response of an artist's work because there is nothing theoretical about an artist's aesthetic sense and act of creativity. That is all external to the creative act itself, which is intuitive.

Roerich distinguished himself among his contemporaries by the accomplished quality of the paintings he completed for his theatre designs. Scholars note that when Roerich was working on designs for a theatrical piece, whether for opera or ballet, he typically produced easel paintings that were considered masterpieces in their own right. One scholar writes that Roerich's 'sketches' for set or costume designs can be seen as such only 'provisionally' or 'conditionally' since the boundary between easel painting and theatrical decorative art all but disappears in his work. This symbiotic fusion of easel painting and theatrical decorative art in his painting, as Yakovleva concludes, is one of the particular characteristics of Roerich's oeuvre.

The notion of 'theatricalisation' provides a more grounded entry into the painter's mind to discover the prism through which his ideas were filtered and found final expression in paintings. Theatricalisation is the act of making theatre of something, of
dramatising or focussing the spotlights, as it were, on the crucible of human existence where various contours of life emerge as most significant. As the meaning of images emerges, it is acknowledged within the painting itself as something common to all human beings. In the course of ‘theatricalisation’, the epiphanies of the process of self-understanding are singled out with the purpose of rendering a particular service to humankind and the cosmos. In his work, Roerich is pre-occupied with capturing those, seemingly, random epiphanies that occur in moments of identification with Beauty Itself or ultimate Reality. As Diotima explained to Socrates in Plato’s ‘Symposium’, from that moment on, true virtue can exist and the process of transforming the world can begin because images themselves have become superfluous. For Roerich, the very nature of this moment is dramatic: it is the ultimate goal of human existence. It is an ecstatic event when a human being ‘stands outside’ of him/herself, prior to the conditionality of forms.

Human evolution and the development of human culture as part of the evolution of the cosmos were central to Roerich’s scholarly interests as an archaeologist. As a painter he seemed compelled to monumentalise moments in which evolution coalesces in time. Monumentalism was an important device of Roerich’s early period, a time when his paintings captured historically mythical features of ancient Slavic culture and memorialised them. Gradually as he began to include elements of eastern esotericism, the nature of that monumentalism changed. His interest in the conscious evolution of the cosmos became more pronounced, and by the mid-1910s that interest became a fundamental theme of his paintings. Dramatic images of that process, reaching one’s full potential through moments of transcendence and ecstasy, began to dominate his work. Combining spectacular mountain views and lavish, other worldly colours, Roerich evoked the context or philosophical landscape of those moments. He explores and emphasises the fundamentally ontological and archetypical nature of the human and aesthetic processes, and enables us to consider the relationship between the two.

Roerich regarded the extraordinary setting of the Himalayas as an integral part of the monumentalisation of the experience of becoming one with that which, from his point of view, is prior to all other events of human existence. Druzhinkina concludes that ‘[Roerich] successfully
synthesised the legends that come from the depths of time with a vital sense of reality, of the landscape of the exotic natural beauty of the East and he fused them into the new artistic reality of his own creative work. Known as the ‘Abode of the Gods’, the Himalayas play a significant role in the depiction of the theurgic moment when the divine and human are combined and all human endeavours, including art itself, become a divinely-human instrument of cosmic evolution. From this point until the end of his life in 1947, the transcendental process of human realisation became the cornerstone of his aesthetic.

As an artist whose life’s work can be considered an important vein of Russian cosmism and as a practitioner of an esoteric school of yoga, Roerich redefined the role of humankind as coincident and coefficient with the cosmos rather than as dominant. He moved from a specific traditional scientific approach of archaeology to an approach that was ‘scientific in another way’ of transcendental philosophy. He verified this role with images from ‘the other side’. A contemporary writes that '[Roerich’s] images of the world...serve only as the plastic means to tell people some secret: an ancient secret of the spirit that is in communion with or complicit with other worlds’ which Dostoevsky’s Alyosha Karamazov and Father Zossima experience. He concludes that:

‘...in the works of the latter period...the themes were as before – ‘Roerich themes’, but one could feel that the main attention of the artist was focussed on the search for...[a] decorative exterior [which] combined with a petrified form and a mesmerised determination of a sense of direction, perhaps, gave his later works a particular edge of fantasy...Nevertheless, one misses the ‘former’ Roerich, less affected and theatrical and more submerged in his element.’

Undertaking a study of Nicholas Roerich and his work must take into account some of the criticism that has shadowed his work from the beginning of the 20th century to the present day. The character of that critique has evolved from what has been called the ‘Benois complex’. Essentially, this ‘complex’ is, at best, a rather dismissive attitude toward Roerich’s work that began with statements as early as the 1910s by Alexander Benois. This complex has coloured the dominant disposition of many western critical approaches to the artist’s work. While it is no surprise that the generally universal apotheosis which the
painter enjoys in Russia is met with scepticism in the West, the ‘Benois Complex’, as the name implies, is more often than not an automaticity in response to the specific nature of Roerich’s work.

What some critics consider problematic in Roerich’s work is that his prolific repetition of what might be called transcendental moments in generalised images tends to profane those images and robs them of an intrinsic aesthetic fullness and meaning that they might otherwise possess. Within the context of world painting that question might have some true relevance. However, within the context of Russian art, it begs the question of what art’s purpose or mission is.

As one of the leading artists in the World of Art movement and a pioneer in Russian art history as well as a self-appointed arbiter of Russian art, Benois held very strong views about what was admissible as art and what was not. A harsh critic of individualism as heretical in art, Benois withholds from Roerich the designation as a St. Petersburg artist, but, instead, puts him and his ‘Muscovite’ sense of art in a class with V. Vasnetov. However, he acknowledged that Roerich sometimes succeeds at climbing to significant heights and his current works are filled with a vigorous epic spirit.

Echoing Benois’ critique of Roerich’s ‘endless visions’ and ‘painterly meditations’, a Russian art historian recently wrote that ‘after 1920, Roerich’s work no longer belongs to Russian culture. It is worth noting that it barely still relates to art.’ Even John Bowlt, a preeminent scholar of early 20th century Russian painting, suffered a momentary lapse when he succumbed to the ‘Benois Complex’ as recently as the early 1990s.

His role in the development of Russian culture is considered formidable. Torn from the roots of a worldview ineradicably bound to the transcendent by more than seven hundred years of Russian Orthodox traditions and the art of iconography, Russian painting would be unrecognisable. Roerich’s work possesses the deepest, most primal elements of that Russian artistic character and reflects those traditions. He devoted his life to the principle of creating a perfect world in concert with all other worlds. He was convinced of the power of art and a consciousness of beauty to effect such a transfiguration. Criticised for the overt and overly philosophical qualities of his work from the beginning, he did not relinquish his vision.

Given the limited discussion of Roerich’s work in western scholarship, one might conclude that many western critics, particularly
specialists in Russian culture and art, concur with Benois and for this reason choose largely to ignore the artist’s work. Whatever validity it may have, Benois’ point of view ignores the fact that Roerich’s paintings from approximately 1915 until the end of his life were essentially a part of his own yogic practice of Agni Yoga rather than some nod to the ‘fashion’ of esotericism, as Bowlt suggests. Dedicated to the ‘cosmic’ notion of art as something sacred and thus purposed towards the expansion of human consciousness and humankind’s evolution toward perfection, Roerich produced an oeuvre intended to serve humankind on this path. His was a sacred art as practiced in the Great Eastern tradition and must be considered in that context. Addressing the complexities of research on the occult or the esoteric in Russia, one must acknowledge stumbling blocks inherent in western criticism that we as western observers have assimilated in the course of our own western acculturation in the ‘rational’. One can conclude that the Russian proclivity for the esoteric and toward an eastern and theosophical worldview is not something that can be ignored in
a culturological study of Russian culture, no matter what cultural or intellectual artifacts are the object of that study. So rather than struggle with or dismiss what is inherently a part of the ‘non-rational’ Russian heart as it spontaneously arises in the images of Roerich’s work, we might consider his theatricalisation of the transcendent as a natural
way of perceiving and accommodating that as crucial to understanding the aesthetic of his work.

Inspired by Utopian hopes, many of the important political and social figures in early 20th century Russia were, as Stites calls them, ‘revolutionary dreamers’. Among those dreamers were the artists of the period who, avant-garde or not, carried on the long Russian tradition of creating art that directly affected fundamental changes in their society and, ultimately, its re-creation. In his own unique way, Nicholas Roerich was also a ‘revolutionary dreamer’. His utopian vision was from an esoteric rather than exoteric point of view. Rather than engaging in social daydreaming, Roerich entertained what might be called transcendentental visions.

When seen within the context of the sweeping tide of the Russian avant-garde in all of the arts, particularly in painting, of the second and third decades of the 20th century, with its deconstructive mode of fragmentation and rejection of conventional modes of form and colour, Roerich’s canvases seem to be an anomaly. However, if, as Mikhail Epshtein defines it, the avant-garde ‘represents an anti-art’ that displaces art from its rightful sphere with some other force or power which then takes its place, we might also argue that Roerich’s work is merely a representation of an extreme at the other end of the spectrum from Malevich and other Russian avant-garde artists.

Considering the spiritual foundation of Roerich’s work beginning in 1915, one might argue further that since ‘the avant-garde is the artistic assimilation of precisely those zones of existence which are invisible, intangible and ineffable, Roerich’s paintings could be seen simply as the articulation of the invisible, the intangible and the ineffable, which is, after all, the specific character of art, particularly the art of the avant-garde.’ Both extremes of the avant-garde were ‘spiritual’, that is, both were attempting to realign humankind with some higher truth, whatever it might be called, whether it was the divine, a cosmic consciousness, etc. Roerich, however, seems to have been sitting on the edge of imagination, not picturing either the divine or the truth as sought by humankind or even the conditional reality in which it lives. His focus seems always to be on the space between the two, and his intention was to bridge the gap between them. His artistic eye is preoccupied with the etheric heights imaged in the Himalyas where one might experience the transcendence to
pure energy and consciousness, or where those who have experienced it, visually or psycho-physically, are poised on the edge of the precipice of their psycho-physical existence savouring their vision and the experience of it. However impenetrable those images might seem, their ‘logic’ derives apparently from the painter’s decision to place his aesthetic expression at the service of such experience.

The most powerful principle that drove the development of both idea and form in Russian painting of the last half of the 19th century was the artist’s ‘consciousness’ as part of the intelligentsia of the civic and moral responsibility to ameliorate the condition of the Russian people through the creative and regenerative process of art. Even though the miriskussniki attempted in vain to establish the primacy of art for art’s sake at the beginning of the 20th century, the idea of art as purposed to transform humankind was maintained as a part of the aesthetic in the work of the majority of artists outside that small circle. From 1905 to 1917 it was reaffirmed with a vengeance. It can be said that Kazimir Malevich and Pavel Filonov, two of the most dynamic proponents of modernism in Russian painting, pursued this principle in their highly experimental work. They were both intent on changing the world, and most particularly their own Russian world, through their work. Malevich chose the path of the geometrisation of all form, Filonov—the anatomical autopsy of all form. The work of Roerich stands in sharp contrast to that of Malevich and Filonov. Although Roerich did not pursue experimentation in form to the degree that the Russian avant-garde did, from approximately 1915 until his death his work was another kind of experimentation that is no less significant in philosophical and formal terms in the history of Russian painting. As one of the artists whose work defined and inspired the exploration of the landscape of Russian cosmism for more than one generation of painters, Roerich was concerned not only with the renewal and regeneration of Russia’s life potential through his work as were the artists of the 19th century, but also, and more broadly, with the evolution of the entire cosmos and man’s role in it. Roerich’s main concern was not art itself, but what art as Beauty does to ‘consciousness’, how it alters, clarifies, and expresses ‘consciousness’ of the Beautiful. His work is a measure not of the effects that art may have directly on the cosmos in order to change or somehow ‘reorder’ it, but, rather, it is a measure of how art alters and clarifies ‘consciousness’ in humankind. Human ‘consciousness’ would then have to go about the arduous task of reordering itself within the cosmos.
In a much broader sense of ‘theatricalisation’, one could say that Roerich’s life was a theatre. He was on stage with high-level Bolsheviks and high-level American political figures, and roamed the Mongolian deserts in search of a New Russia. He played a role necessary to gain the needed support for his visions to become reality. There is the necessity for an inherent non-conventionality to remain focussed on the visions of an unconditional nature while dealing forcefully with the details of conventional life. So argue scholars who repeatedly appeal to our sense of this when tracing what might be considered by some to be the more questionable contours of Roerich’s life after the October Revolution.

Roerich was, indeed, every bit as much a visionary as was any self-professed and self-obsessed avant-garde Russian artist of the pre- and post-Revolutionary period. However, there was a difference. That difference is what makes Roerich unique. Whether one finds Roerich’s work convincing intellectually may not be as important as finding it perceptually enthralling as one merely engages its ethereally attractive qualities. After all, it was Malevich who defined ‘perceptual feeling’ as supreme in art.18

End Notes

1. V. Petrov-Stromsky, Tsyxacha let russkogo iskusstva: istoria, estetika, kul’turologia (Moskva, 1999), 304.
5. ibid, 80.
7. ibid, 10-11.
10. Sergei Makovsky, Silueti russkikh khudozhnikov (Moskva,1999), 92.
13. V. Petrov-Stromsky, Tsyxacha let russkogo iskusstva, 304.
14. There are two rather good studies by western critics of the occult in Russia that warrant mentioning here. The first of its kind was The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture, ed. Bernice Glazer Rosenthal (Ithaca, 1997) and the second was ‘The Occult Revival in Russia Today and Its Impact on Literature’ by Birgit Menzel in The Harriman Review, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 2007), 1-14. Each breaks new ground in the scholarship on this topic.
17. ibid, 166-169.