

## THE ART OF NICHOLAS ROERICH

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In the year 1974, we of the Nicholas Roerich Museum in New York City celebrate the Centenary of a great artist. Strangers who come into our museum for the first time are affected by the color, beauty, and vibrancy of the paintings. They may not be familiar with the style, but there is something about the consistency of the work and the artist's point of view that is undeniable, and sets the visitor to wondering who this man was, what kind of person, what point of view can be focused in a lifetime to create such a body of work, because what we have here in the museum is only a small part of the grand total of about 7,000 paintings that Nicholas Roerich created, and the paintings are only a portion of the work that this great man accomplished in his lifetime.

Nicholas Roerich was more than just a painter, and in understanding his paintings and his work as an artist, it helps to know more about his activities and aspirations. He was responsible for some quite remarkable achievements in areas other than that of painting.

Thus, people coming to the Nicholas Roerich Museum in New York ask the questions "Why a Museum?" "Who was Roerich?" "Where does he fit in the history of art and in relation to other artists?" "How do we compare him with Picasso; how do we compare him with Matisse; how do we compare him with Rembrandt?"

There is tendency in our culture to categorize everybody, to put each man into a slot - a convenient cubbyhole where, at a moment's notice, we can refer to him and have the comfort of knowing that he fits some where between so-and-so and so-and-so and "this" is what we expect of him! Roerich defies such categorizing. He is a man who created his own style. If one looks at his paintings

today and tries to equate them with modern art or with the classic or more ancient styles of painting, it doesn't work. Though he derived a tremendous lot from all of these - the artistic heritage of the Western and the Eastern World - he cannot be placed in any of these cubbyholes. He truly created his own world. Claude Bragdon aptly described the singular and personal position that Roerich holds as an artist: "In the history of the finer arts, certain individuals have appeared from time to time, whose work has a unique and profound quality, which differentiates them from their contemporaries, making it impossible to classify them in any known category and to ally them with any school, because they resemble themselves only and one another, like some spaceless and timeless order of initiates. Such were Leonardo, Rembrandt, Durer, Blake and in other fields, Beethoven, Balzac, Rodin. Roerich in his life, in his character and in his art reveals himself as a member of this fraternity."

The other overwhelming quality underlying Roerich's work is a singular kind of purpose and striving. Here at the museum, particularly in the paintings of the Himalayan period, we see this striving to express a spirituality in nature and to link that spirituality with man's own spirituality and with man's own striving to perfect himself. This idea is very basic to Roerich's art and life, and the more one studies the man, the more one recognizes the basic spirituality of his life and purpose and sees in it the expression of a great soul a remarkable human being - whose expressions can only be matched by examples such as Leonardo or Rembrandt. He was a painter. He was an archeologist. He was an explorer. He was a writer. He was a pan-humanist, a great philosopher, a poet, a friend of kings, emperors, presidents and hermits, from the lowest to the highest.

Nicholas Roerich was born in Russia, in St. Petersburg, in 1874. His father was an eminent attorney and he grew up on the family estate which, interestingly enough, was called Iswara, a Sanscrit word meaning, among other things, Ashram or sacred dwelling. Even in that early age, there was a certain orientation towards the Eastern mysticism that we commonly associate with the artist. His father, like most fathers, was quite anxious that his son should follow in his footsteps and also become a lawyer. With that purpose, in 1893 Roerich simultaneously enrolled in the university and the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg.

As a young boy, on his father's estate, he very early showed a great interest in the heritage of the particular area of ancient Russia in which he grew up. He used to go out with a shovel, and dig around in the mounds and come up with ancient artifacts which he linked to his own forebears and the early settlers of that particular countryside. The name Roerich is a very ancient one in Russia since it can be traced back to the



From a painting by Nicholas Roerich

KANCHENJUNGA

earliest pioneers in that part of the world, to a famous, almost mythological but quite real hero, by the name of Rurik, who was invited in 862 to rule over the tribes inhabiting the area that was later to become Russia. He accepted the invitation and founded a dynasty from which many of the Russian princes claimed descent. In all of Roerich's earliest paintings one finds an expression of this tremendous interest in his own past, in the heritage of the Russian people. One finds paintings of Nordic boats, the old camping places of the great chieftains, and so forth. In the words of the writer Alexei Remizov: "The memory came back to him as in a dream, and he told us about the seas where he used to sail with his ships of Warriors; about the giants and the serpent and the nayadas, about the Terrible Angel and about how Russia was being built and how the treason of the Russian Princes opened to the foe the gates of the Russian land."

In 1897 just prior to leaving the Academy of Art, he painted a now famous painting, "The Messenger," which was bought by a Mr. Tretyakov - a wealthy art patron of Moscow - and placed in his private collection (now known as the Tretyakov Gallery - one of the great museums of Russia). This resulted in a great deal of prestige for Roerich, and his work immediately became of great interest to collectors, and people who wrote about the arts. The painting itself is very interesting because it has a lot of the mystery, forboding and portentousness of his later work. It's not just a landscape - it's an epic landscape, a design for a great play to be enacted there. This quality is carried into his later works. The earlier themes are repeated and we have many with the strong Nordic feeling and subject matter. In the words of Michael Babenstchikoff: "He tells us of the first days of human existence on the earth, of man's struggle with the dark powers of nature. He describes the customs and habits of our forefathers with a vibrant emotion and with such an abundance of details, that the power of the past completely overcomes us." And Nicholas Roerich himself, though striving with tremendous strength and passion into the future, believed that the man who didn't understand the past could not think of the future.

In 1902-1904 Roerich took an extended tour through Russia. It was a voyage of discovery, wherever he went he found the ancient artifacts and ruins which to him represented the national heritage. He was shocked to find these ancient monuments, old churches; city walls and remnants falling. In some places people were not even aware they existed. As an archeologist he realized what they should symbolize to Russia, and he knew the importance of them to students of archeology and the history of man. Roerich was determined to have them preserved and properly looked after. To this end he painted an extraordinary series of paintings which, oddly enough, ended up in this country in the Oakland Museum in California. Not too many years ago, one of our Museum members discovered them there and after a lot of hard work and correspondence succeeded in having them loaned to the museum. Since then, they have been purchased by a Trustee of the museum and are shown at

frequent intervals. They are interesting in terms of Roerich the artist because they show an earlier style of painting and are executed in oil. He later used tempera almost exclusively as a medium of work.

Roerich was also painting murals at this time: In 1907 he completed a very large and beautiful mural in the church of the Holy Spirit in Talashkino, near Smolensk (partly destroyed in the war and now restored) and a mural for the Kazan railways in Moscow. He was rising to his own as artist of rank and reverence, recognized throughout the world as a man of consequence, a painter of importance, a philosopher and humanitarian. In 1909 and 1910, Roerich visited Italy, Germany, Holland, and England. It was at this time that he designed for Diaghilev sets for "Prince Igor." At the same time, he held exhibitions in Paris, London, Brussels, Rome and Zurich. His work became quite known and was received by many of the major museums of these countries.

Starting with "Prince Igor", he had a very full career as stage designer, a career that in many men's lives would have been enough to satisfy them, but in the life of Roerich, a man of so many facets, was only a small aspect. He designed sets for "Peer Gynt", "Princess Maleine", for the Moscow Art Theatre, and for virtually all the operas by Wagner and many operas by Rimsky-Korsakov, Moussorgsky, Maeterlink and others. He designed these at the time when Alexander Benois, Bakst, Natalie Gontcharova and Picasso were designing for Diaghilev. He moved in the company of the best artists, modern and traditional, of that period, painting in his own personal, inimitable style. It was at this time that he did what became his most famous design for the theatre, the decors and costumes for Stravinsky's ballet, "Le Sacre du Printemps," which was presented in Paris. As the eminent art historian and writer Barnett Conlan wrote about production: "When Roerich designed the settings for the 'Rite of Spring' in 1912, his style was at time the most advanced, and it is a question if any other painter could have approached the heart of the subject with so much insight. Not only did he give the outer sense of spring - the great spaces and the growing light, the hard green landscapes caught up by the evening glow, but he also gave that inner sense of the sharp, chill sap rising through the pores of the earth, all the acid activities of the fresh vegetation as shrill in its movements as the east wind. The colors were hard and clear, the forms rough and primitive, and what was infinitely old a circle of ancient rocks, seemed to have again come round on the ring of time and pointed to the future. The most modern technique of today could not have done more, not half as much."



So we see how the work of Roerich helped to make this such an extraordinary occasion. In 1920 he designed the decor and costumes for the "Snow Maiden" for

Covent Garden, and also for "The Czar Saltan" and "Sadko." In 1920 Roerich was invited by the Director of the Chicago Art Institute Dr. Robert Harshe, to come to America with his paintings and exhibit his work throughout the country on an extended tour of twenty-nine cities that was to last for a year and a half. He brought over four-hundred paintings, which is quite a collection. It was an immense success, and the artist was received in this country by the leading patron and museum directors with the same degree of reverence and importance that he had received in Europe. Olin Downes, the noted critic, wrote at this time, "Roerich's paintings are so great because of their affirmation, their great surety, in this restless day. His work reminds me of the expression of Renan that 'all the world's reveries nestled around his heart.' In the midst of our modern society, so positive and so limited, he gives to his fellow-artist a prophetic example of the goal they must reach — the expression of the Inner Life."

In October of 1920 Roerich arrived for the opening of his tour which started here in New York City at the Kingore Gallery. He spent the summer of 1921 on the island of Monhegan in Maine, and painted a series known as the "Ocean Series." In these works it is interesting to see the Roerich style of painting applied to the coastland of Maine. They have a quality of his early work — very forbidding in a sense, and with that look of destiny about them that characterizes Roerich's paintings. He remained in this country for a period of about two years and during that time made many friends and founded several institutions, including the Master Institute of United Arts here in New York. The trustees of that institution founded in 1923 the Roerich Museum in New York City.

A very important phase of his activity was the founding of cultural associations bearing his name in many important cities of the world. The most important of these foundations are: The International Society of Artists—Cor Ardens; Corona Mundi (International Art Center) 1922; the Urusvati Himalayan Research Institute in Naggar, Kulu, India.

The fundamental doctrine underlying all the above educational institutions founded by him is best summarized in his own words:

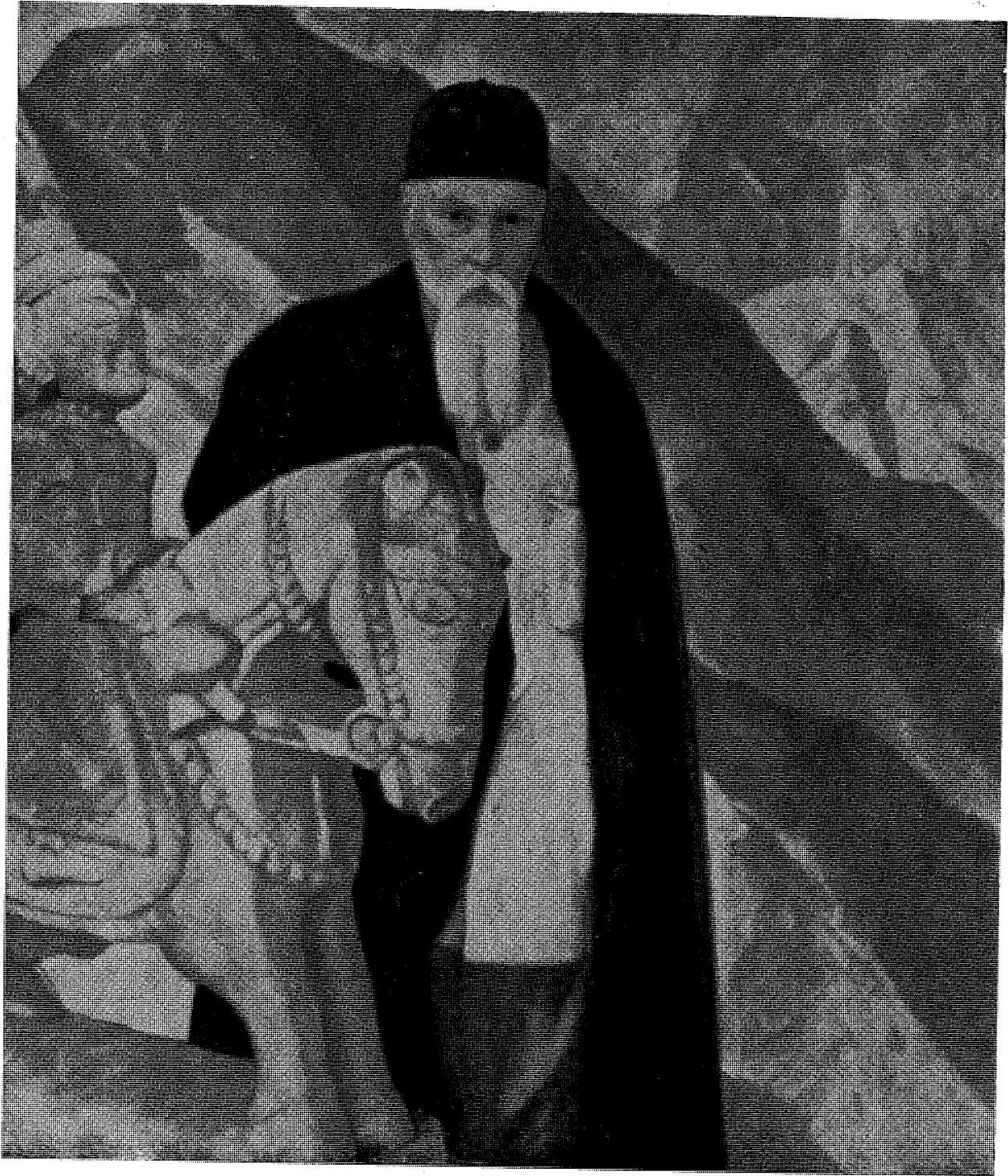
"To educate does not mean to give a record of technical information. Education, the forming of world consciousness, is attained by synthesis, not by the synthesis of misfortunes, but by the synthesis of perfection and creativeness. The true knowledge is attained by inner accumulations, by daring, for the approaches to the One Knowledge are manifold...The evolution of the New Era rests on the cornerstone of knowledge and beauty."



In 1923, with his two sons, George and Svetoslav, Roerich set out on the first of his expeditions to Asia. His idea was to penetrate into the hidden recesses of the Himalaya,

a region that had been beckoning him since he was a small boy on his father's estate in St. Petersburg, where, hanging on one wall, was a picture he afterwards discovered was the holy mountain Kanchenjunga. Roerich was later to paint this mountain with much reverence and great success. For five years the Roerich expedition traveled all over India, Tibet, Sikkim, Mongolia, Chinese Turkestan, Altai and so forth.

During the course of it he also studied the ancient relics of the Himalayas, the Eastern religions, the cultures of the people, the languages. His son Svetoslav was by that time becoming a painter himself and his son George, a scientist. Between them they constructed a multifaceted expedition during the course of which many things were explored and discovered. Wherever he went, Roerich's inner belief in life and humanity and in the destiny of man was reinforced. Wherever he went he found the ancient philosophical and religious Eastern beliefs echoing his own inner knowledge. We find this duality of man's destiny and his striving toward it a dominant theme – an all pervading subtext. In these paintings the great Himalayan range became a fitting symbol for a concretion perhaps, of the artist's lofty concepts, of man's relationship to Cosmos. During the time of the expedition, he made a few trips back to the United States and other parts of the world for one purpose or another, sometimes to coordinate things he had started for a new school, a society, or perhaps a new structure of some kind. In 1929 the family returned from the expedition and settled in the Kulu Valley in the Himalayan foothills. There they founded the Urusvati Himalayan Research Institute, which was organized to study the results of the exploration and discoveries made during the expedition. George Roerich has written about this institute: "The buildings of the Institute were erected on a mountain ridge at an altitude of 6,500 feet. From 1930 to 1939 scientific work and explorations were conducted under the guidance of the artist, until the events of the Second World War brought about a temporary halt to those activities. "The Himalayan Research Institute had two departments: botanical and ethnological-linguistic. The latter was also concerned with exploring archeological sites. Each year, at the beginning of the summer when the mountain passes were open, the expedition squads went their way toward the Tibetan Highland and into the high mountain zone of the Himalayas. In October they returned to the main base of the Institute in Kulu and spent the winter months in working on the materials collected." J. K. Nag, a prominent Indian writer wrote about Roerich at this time: "There lives on the roof of the world a unique figure—a genius that has so ardently worshipped Beauty—a genius that has so passionately loved art and culture. He is the world famous painter, the great Nikolai Konstantinovich Roerich—a towering personality of this century. Besides his genius in art, Roerich is one of the ardent enthusiasts for world peace. He dreams of an international peace through art and beauty. He says 'Art is to create beauty, through beauty we gain victory, through beauty we unite and through beauty we pray'". And indeed, at that time Roerich dreamed of peace, and dreamed also of a plan.

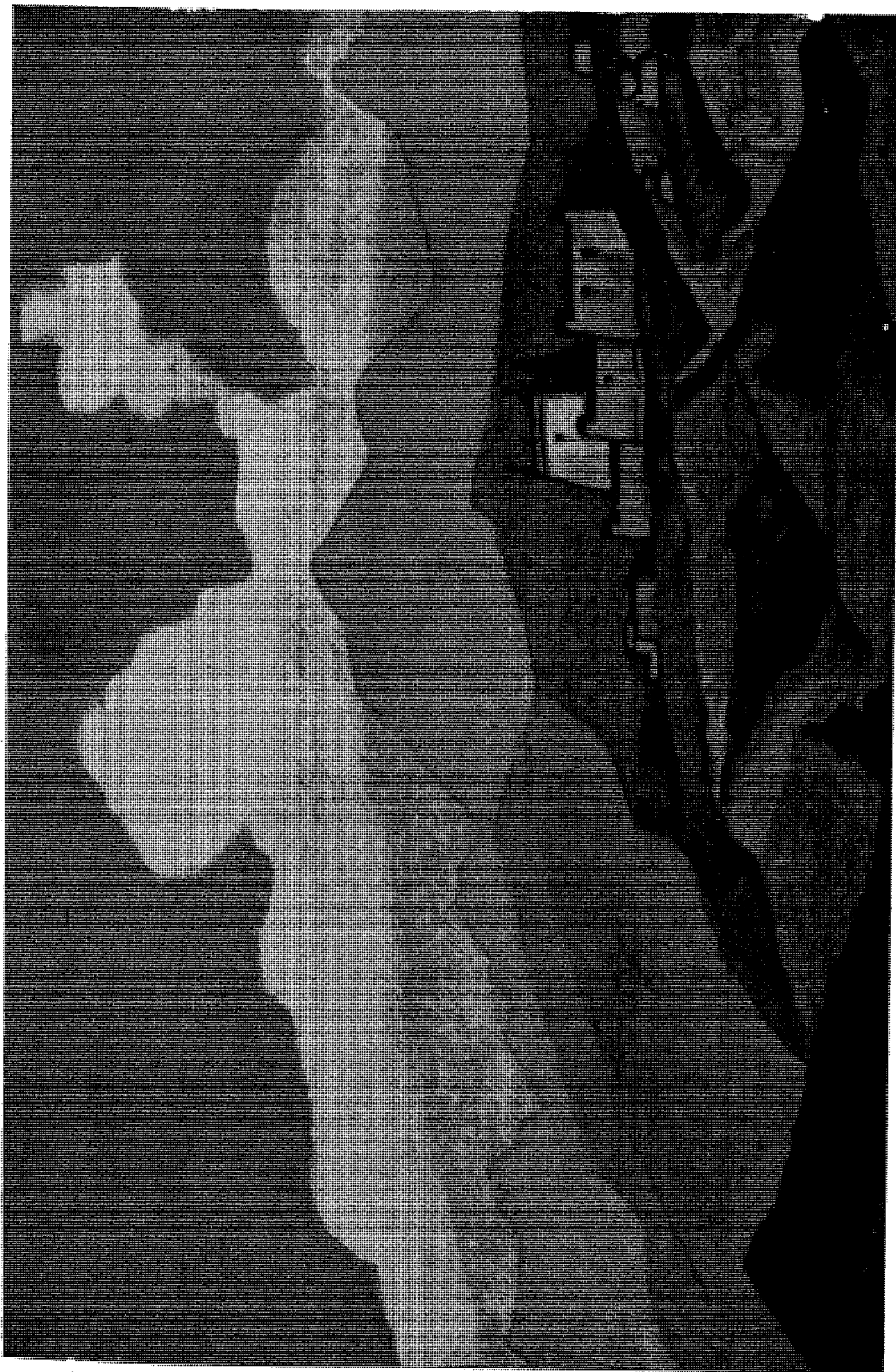


From a painting by Svetoslav Roerich

NICHOLAS ROERICH



*Kailash*



From a painting by Nicholas Roerich

CLOUDS OVER DWELLING

for preserving all of the great treasures of man's creativeness and cultural institutions throughout the world in times of war. To this end, he founded the Roerich Pact and Banner of Peace. In a booklet published by the Committee, which describes in considerable detail the purpose and aspirations of those ideas that Roerich created, we read: "The Roerich Pact and Banner of Peace was created and promulgated by Nicholas Roerich, for the protection of treasures of human genius. It provides that educational, artistic, religious and scientific institutions, as well as all sites of cultural significance, shall be deemed inviolable, and respected by all nations in the times of war and peace.

"The Banner of Peace is the symbol of the Roerich Pact. This great humanitarian ideal provides in the field of mankind's cultural achievements the same guardianship as the Red Cross provides in alleviating the physical sufferings of man.

"The design of the Banner of Peace shows three spheres surrounded by a circle in magenta color on a white background. Of the many national and individual interpretations of this symbol, the most usual are perhaps those of Religion, Art and Science as aspects of Culture which is the surrounding circle, or that of Past, Present and Future achievements of humanity guarded within the circle of Eternity."

Thus, in the Pact, and in the ancient and revered symbol of the Banner, are symbolized all of Roerich's most cherished, most passionate hopes and visions for man.

On April 15, 1935 the Pact was signed in the White House in the presence of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, by the representatives of twenty-one governments of North, Central and South America.

During the last years of his life, Nicholas Roerich lived in the Kulu Valley painting and writing abundantly. During all the years of the Second World War he sought endlessly to find ways to peace, and wrote to people all over the world pointing out the directions in which mankind could seek it.

Nicholas Roerich died on december 13, 1947 in the Kulu Valley.



