

Revisiting the Artistic Vision of Nicholas Roerich and His Dialogue with Nature

Dr. Ujjvala M. Tiwari^{1*} | Deepali Sharma²

¹Associate Professor, Director, School of Finearts, IIS Deemed to be University, Jaipur.

²Research Scholar, School of Finearts, IIS Deemed to be University, Jaipur.

*Corresponding Author: ujjvala.tiwari@iisuniv.ac.in

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ABSTRACT

There exists a primary connection between humans and nature, and this connection must be one of cooperation. In such an interaction, nature is inherently peaceful and does no harm to humans. Rather, the problem arises when humans interfere in the workings of nature, causing disruption. Nature is inherently defined by its peace and perfect harmony. When a man-made construction such as a house, a castle, or a temple is introduced into the natural landscape, it breaks this inherently existing balance. Consider an uninterrupted view of a mountain chain, and then consider a house erected in its center. While a person may construct a house to achieve peace, it is done from the perspective of a human being's benefit, while breaking the balance of nature. This is exactly the concept that defines the Anthropocene. In this paper, the idea that human manipulation of nature, such as the Himalayas, reduces its value rather than improves it will be discussed. This theory is illustrated through paintings created by Nicholas Roerich. While the term Anthropocene was coined in the year 2000, this artist foresaw its essence years before.

Keywords: Roerich, Painting, Nature, Spirituality, Anthropocene.

Introduction

Nicholas Roerich was a famous Russian artist who loved to paint mountains. He is best known for his incredible paintings of the Himalayas.

His art is full of bright, bold colours that make the mountains look magical and full of wonder. After traveling widely, he chose to live in Naggar in India's Kullu Valley. Roerich created thousands of paintings that capture the huge size and peaceful feeling of the mountains, making them feel timeless and special.

In his writings Nicholas Roerich goes to great lengths at establishing his search for spirituality within his long journeys in Central Asian mountains and in the high ranges of Himalayas all the way to Sikkim and Kanchenjunga. It is, therefore, quite natural to connect his search of spirituality within the context of nature that has been done by scholarship (Lysenko). The treatment of the subject matter in his paintings includes a diverse set of religions including new ones and ancient ones. The treatment of all the religions is done within a backdrop of mountains and nature. In all the paintings of Nicholas Roerich he paints nature as the main entity, it is not simply a backdrop in his painting.

In her writing Nina Nikolaevna Selivanova (37) says, "This peculiar understanding of nature is blended in Roerich's art with a peculiar understanding of ancient architecture. – There seems to exist a mysterious connection between ancient art and nature, an enchanting harmony of art in nature." Stressing on the fact that Roerich found a special connection with ancient architecture it is important to

note that it is within nature and natural views that these ancient remains are painted. In his diaries (Roerich) he has also extensively mentioned the degradation of nature that he seems to have witnessed and that disturbed him.

It is precisely this relationship between spirituality, ancient human civilization, and nature which makes up the very essence of Roerich's art. For Roerich, a mountain was never just an object of geology; rather, it was alive. The artist's concern about the "degradation of nature" cannot be understood simply in terms of the environment but also as spirituality. The human degradation of the earth itself through our actions was, for Roerich, a breakage of this spiritual connection. Consequently, we cannot view his works as mere landscapes and spiritual representations. It can be seen how through his massive depictions of mountains with ruins, monasteries, and paths, he repeatedly investigates this relationship. One can sense the building of tension which speaks to a world where human ambition starts reshaping the earth itself.

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical methodology based on secondary data. Relevant data has been collected from published books, scholarly journal articles and authenticated online sources concerning Nicholas Roerich's artistic practice, Himalayan themes, and visual expression.

The Anthropocene

The notion of Anthropocene is such that wherever man sets foot, he disturbs nature. Nature is in its pure form very harmonious. Nature possesses beauty and rhythm in it. But when men interfere with nature in any part of nature like the Himalayan Mountains, it does not beautify the mountains; on the contrary, it disturbs these mountains. Man disrupts nature in whichever part of it he enters, resulting in an ecological disturbance everywhere where man enters.

This happens because man views nature in its practical aspect. Man does not consider the mountain only as a mountain; instead, he looks at it as a source of minerals, something challenging to be conquered, or a place to build his retreat. Similarly, man does not see the river only as water flowing, but he sees it as a source of energy or a means of transport.

The conflict lies precisely in trying to overlay human logic on an already established natural system. Nature works on the basis of slow, intricate movements of various components in harmony for thousands of years. The human element works very quickly, with a sudden sound and one aim without considering all the intricate connections between the components that are broken by humans. Roads break the habitat into pieces, a new construction changes the way water drains, and our sounds chase away animals. Humans not only put themselves among nature but change nature completely.

This research paper focuses that this idea is already hinted at in the paintings of Nicholas Roerich. The researcher shall try to study some of his paintings and understand them through this perspective.

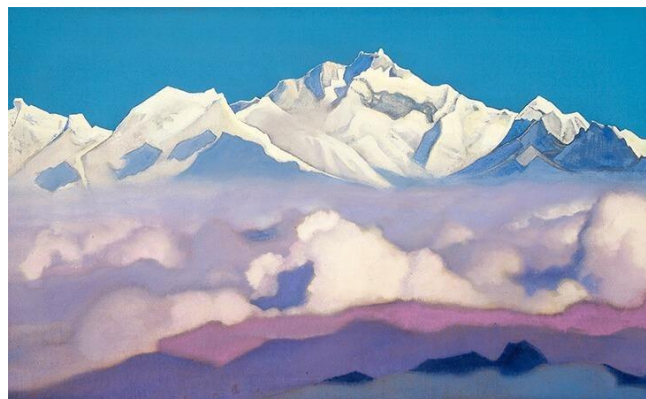


Fig. 1: Kangchenjunga, 1936

In his painting 'Kanchenjunga' (Fig. 1) painted in 1936 this mountain peak is seen in a very peaceful calm way. The mountain here is not disturbed by human activity, there is no trace of any construction or any house or any bridge. Nature is still in its pure and serene form.

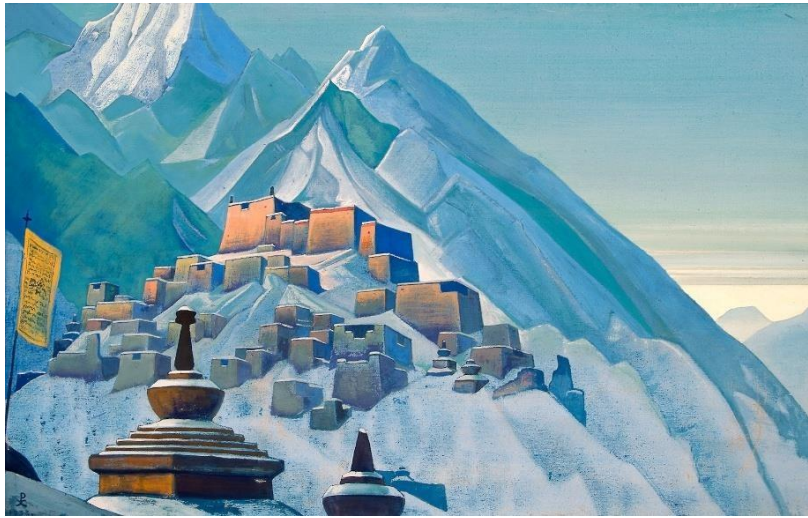


Fig. 2: Tibet Himalayas, 1933

Compare this painting to another painting 'Tibet Himalayas' (Fig. 2) painted in 1933. Here there are Buddhist monasteries built in the middle of mountains that are constructed by humans and are not part of the nature in its pure form. These act as disturbances in the painting as well as in real life in nature. The tension between natural purity and human alteration, which is central to the Anthropocene discourse is already seen in a comparative analysis between these two paintings by Roerich.

The researcher attempts to take a deeper look into these two paintings. When the researcher looks at these two paintings side-by-side, it is possible to see a big question about human's place in the world. The painting of 'Kanchenjunga' shows nature as a powerful and perfect force. The mountain is primary, and its beauty comes from being completely untouched. It feels eternal and deeply peaceful, reminding us of a world without human interference.

In contrast, the 'Tibet Himalayas' painting shows a world where people live alongside these giant mountains. The monasteries are a clear sign of human presence. This creates a kind of tension. These buildings are an intrusion in the pure form of nature. Roerich might be showing that while humans change the landscape, and when they do this, they do not respect nature and end up harming it. He makes us think about the relationship between humanity and the planet.

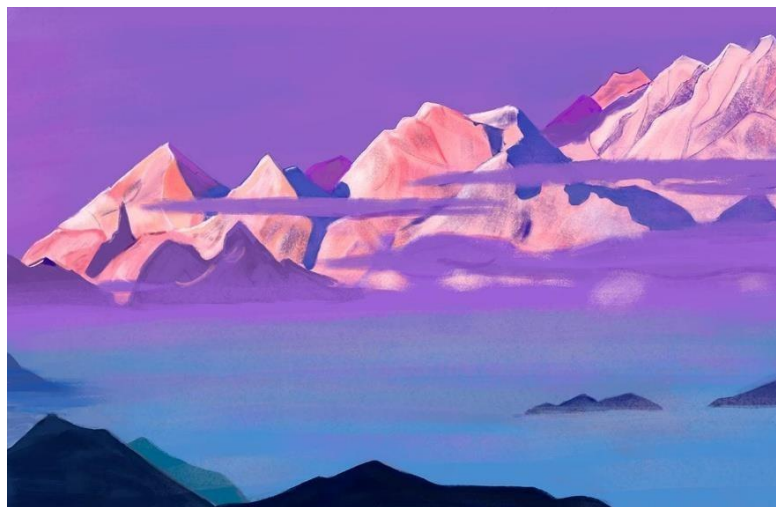


Fig. 3: The Pink Mountains, 1933.



Fig. 4: Sacred Mountains (Way to Kailash), 1933.

In another set of paintings, 'The Pink Mountains' (Fig. 3) and 'Sacred Mountains (way to Kailash)' (Fig. 4) both painted in 1933, this difference is quite evident. In the 'Pink Mountains' nature sheds its own natural colours and is undisturbed by any human activity. On the other hand, the sacred mountains have an impression of human presence in the form of an inscription. The surface of the rock and the shape of the rock is no longer the way it used to be, it has lost its natural form and is now functioning as a base for the human need. It was the need of human beings to write that inscription. Humans wrote that inscriptions for themselves and not nature. In the process in which humans wanted to find peace for themselves nature is transformed. And this transformation does not help nature, unfortunately it is a step towards its destruction. The inscription serves a purpose for the humans but fails to serve any purpose for nature. There is a clear dialogue between serenity and disturbance in the two paintings, as in many others by the artist Roerich. It seems that his art seems to mirror the ecological imbalance caused by human intervention. One painting there is nature in its own way without any interference from humans and then there is another painting with clear human presence. It is not a coincidence that Nicholas Roerich decided to create his paintings in both these ways. It is very much possible that while one painting shows nature with its own power the other painting is portraying the unwanted interference within the same context and the same natural view.

"The Pink Mountains" have a mysterious, dreamy, and sacred aura created by soft shades of pink, purple, and blue. The mountains appear to be unattainable and eternal as if they exist in another reality. They are portrayed in harmony, as a flawless world where the nature appears whole and complete. There is an extraordinary stillness in the painting – total peace.

On the contrary, "Sacred Mountains (way to Kailash)" has a much closer, tangible, and human character. The man-made inscription shatters the timeless stillness of the rock and makes the landscape become the background of a human activity. Thus, the mountain ceases to be a part of nature and becomes an element of human existence. With this one act the artist changes our perception completely. While "The Pink Mountains" is a tribute to the nature itself, "Sacred Mountains" is a proof of how humans turn everything into the object of their activity and belief.



Fig. 5: Everest, 1936.



Fig. 6: Star of the Morning, 1932.

Again, in another pair of paintings, “Everest” painted in 1936 (Fig. 5) and “Star of the morning” painted in 1932 (Fig. 6), there is a clear demonstration of this difference. In “Everest” the mountain is shown in its full magnificence, unconquered by any kind of interference. And in “Star of the morning” the very form of the mountain tops gets changed because of human activities – constructions made to satisfy their needs.

In “Everest” the picture is entirely dedicated to the magnificence of the mountain. Its form is grand and natural. Sharp peaks and slopes are emphasized with bold lines. The composition reflects the dominance of the forces of nature. The whole canvas is occupied by the mountain which takes up the majority of the space. There are various shades of brown and red color on one hand and shades of blue, white, grey and black on the other, possibly depicting deep shadows. The colors demonstrate the remote and untamed character of pure wilderness. It is a nature's domination.

There is a difference in the representation of the mountain form in the ‘Star of the Morning’. The natural form of the mountain is not represented anymore because it has become modified by structures built upon it. While the mountain in ‘Everest’ had very pronounced lines that reflected its sharpness and wildness, the new form of the mountain has smoother and gentler lines that reflect how manmade forms dominate nature.

The use of light and color in ‘Star of the Morning’ adds to the contrast established in the paintings. While ‘Everest’ is represented by cold and impersonal light that highlights its harsh naturalness, the buildings of the second painting are highlighted by warm and optimistic light. Light

seems to come both from the sky and human beings, highlighting human dominance over nature. These human elements are relatively small compared to the mountain but are carefully positioned to form another focal point. As such, there is an interesting balance or even tension where the sublimity of the mountain becomes shared with the human intervention through human actions. All the above comparisons involve paintings as metaphors for coexistence, pointing to early artistic solutions to problems of the Anthropocene.



Fig. 7: Mount of Five Treasures (Two Worlds), 1933.



Fig. 8: Karga, 1933.

Finally, the comparison is made between two additional sets of paintings “Mountain of five treasures (two worlds)” (Fig. 7) and “Karga” (Fig. 8), created in 1933. Once again, the two paintings together convey the spirit of the Anthropocene – the transformation of the Earth from a natural world into a man-made one.

“Mountain of Five Treasures (Two Worlds)” is another example of the usual landscape of Roerich – it is full of mystic greatness. The high and majestic peaks prevail on the canvas painted in sublime blues and radiant whites; such colors create an impression of something divine or unearthly. This is the nature as a temple – the world of great power and spiritual significance, which is not affected by any human activities. The very title of the picture, including the words “two worlds”, means the dualism of the depicted world – the physical mountains and the other world they stand for. Such picture reflects the idea of the planet before the Anthropocene era – the world ruled by its ancient and powerful powers, while the humanity is only the respectful observer of it.

On the other hand, 'Karga' features a humanized landscape, which is mountainous and immense, but rather than the spiritual meaning, the human meaning prevails here. The presence of fortification ruins, rocks, which are turned into something human made, the presence of human history and legends – all these facts indicate that there is a lot of human history behind these mountains. These are not only mountains anymore; rather, it is an archive of the history of human settlement and culture. This painting is grounded in human reality because of its earthy colors and the rocky terrain. It speaks about the beginning of the Anthropocene, within the canvases of this artist.

In such a way, both paintings tell an interesting story: on the one hand, the picture shows the sacred land and untouched, and on the other hand, the painting shows the historical land and humanized.

As can be seen, the preceding analysis demonstrates that Nicholas Roerich's works of art foreshadow the central idea of the Anthropocene – the idea of human activity being the dominant force on our planet.

The works of Roerich can be viewed as a conversation between two worlds – a world of unspoiled nature and a world tainted by human interference. The paintings of 'Kanchenjunga', 'The Pink Mountains', and 'Everest' illustrate a picture of nature which is in all its majesty, independence and complete peace. It portrays the image of a mountain which exists eternally and infinitely lyrical and free from any use or meaning for humans. It stands for the pre-Anthropocene conception.

However, the paintings of 'Tibet Himalayas', 'Sacred Mountains (way to Kailash)', 'Star of the Morning', and 'Karga' contain human interference – monasteries, inscriptions, different mountain forms. All these are seen as disturbances which spoil the rhythm and silence of the nature.

Conclusion

Nicholas Roerich lived from 1874 to 1947. The term "Anthropocene" was coined much later, in the early 2000s, and yet the researcher sees a glimpse of this concept already in his works. This is the greatness of this artist that he was able to hint at a very new idea at such an early stage.

The majority of paintings by this artist analyzed within the context of this research paper may be viewed as the disturbances that humans created within nature. The constructions and inscriptions depicted by Nicholas Roerich in his mountain landscapes may be seen as reflections of the Anthropocene in the artistic practice, which stands for humanity's intervention into nature.

Nicholas Roerich also perceived nature as a perfect and harmonious one. In his expeditions in the Himalayas, the painter did everything in order not to disturb nature. The respect to nature in its pure and harmonious state was a part of the worldview of Nicholas Roerich. This may also be traced from his paintings.

It lies at the core of the whole life-long activity of Nicholas Roerich as a painter. Pure landscapes painted by him become a kind of baseline – a reflection of an ideal world in its harmonious state. Nature depicted in them is full of spirituality and eternity, and it seems to be a sort of truth.

At the same time, however, paintings of his that incorporate human structures and/or markings are not merely documentation of his journey. They are considered profound critiques of the way humans have interacted with their environment. By inserting a manmade construction into an immensely old and vast landscape, he is able to emphasize the extent of our meddling. Even the smallest of inscriptions, the faraway monastery, serve as symbols of the human impact on nature. He demonstrates that, despite our best intentions, there is no way for us to remain untouched once we enter the natural world.

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