

# Nicholas Roerich's Pax Cultura: "The Peace of Civilizations"

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World Constitution and Parliament Association  
India Chapter

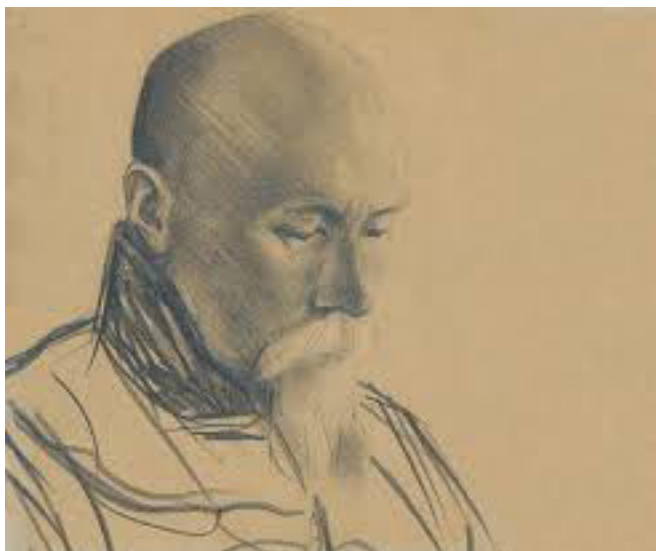
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**Nicholas Roerich**  
**1874-1947**

## **Introductory Remarks on Nicholas Roerich**

From the Roerich Museum in New York City, a brief quotation:

“Since time immemorial warriors have carried banners into war. This is the banner for peace. This ancient universal symbol is one of the world’s oldest. It’s three spheres were designated by Nicholas Roerich, the designer of the banner, as the synthesis of all the arts, all sciences, and all religions within the circle of culture. He defined culture as “the cultivation of the creative potential in man.” He believed that “the achievement of peace, through culture, is a goal to be realised through the positive effort of the human will”.

Nehru referred to Roerich as “a creative genius” and Tagore considered him “a voice for what every sensitive mind feels about the greatest of all arts—the Art of Living.”

In the troubling uncertainties of our time, we must embrace the idealism of this great Russian mystic: “Roerich emerges as an effective link between the cultural heritage of mankind and the vast creative potential of a

new era.” Our survival may depend in part on Roerich’s sublime vision of the Great Peace—“peace through culture”—never doubting that “awareness of Beauty will save the world”.

## **Nicholas Roerich's Pax Cultura: "The Peace of Civilizations"**

Though most of us have heard of Nicholas Roerich and may even have admired his paintings and his extraordinary life, few of us know the full power and relevance for our age of his unique vision of peace—"the peace of civilizations"—cherishing the world's heritage of art, science and spirituality, the common wisdom we share and that unites us. He was possessed by a dream of the Great Peace that sustained him through two world wars and which he believed could save us yet from a third and final catastrophe. He was like one of the light-warriors he painted, and his weapons were not only pen and brush, but also the Roerich Pact and the Banner of Peace.

To recount briefly a life that approaches legend: Roerich was born into the aristocracy of imperial Russia in 1874 and educated at St. Petersburg in law, history, archaeology and art, and as a young man became fascinated with his nation's ancient past, especially its archaeological record and medieval church architecture. He sought the Slavic connections to the heritage

of India and the East, and read Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Tagore and the Bhagavad Gita. He was also greatly influenced by the millenarian fervor of Russia's avant-garde, anticipating a new era after an imminent apocalypse. Though turning away from the West, toward Asia, he was at the same time attracted by the rise of the United States, especially Jazz Age skyscrapers of New York where his paintings and peacemaking were highly appreciated. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three times and is considered one of Russia's greatest Modernist painters.

Roerich left the revolutionary Soviet Union in 1918, less for political reasons than concern for cultural preservation and the advancement of the arts in the new nation. He lived first in Finland with his wife, Helena, who shared his fascination with all things Eastern. It is most significant that at this time he joined forces with the Ballets Russe (the Russian Ballet) under impresario Serge Diaghilev and worked with the famed dancer Nijinsky to design sets for Borodin's opera "Prince Igor" and Stravinsky's ballet "The Rite of Spring", a tour de force whose inaugural performance in 1913 was felt to be so 'primitive' it caused riots in Paris.

The Roerichs embraced the Theosophy of

Madame Blavatsky, as well as Agni Yoga, and shared a belief that a synthesis of the world's religions, arts and sciences—communicated through vigorous global education—would awaken humanity and guide us into an evolving culture of peace: *pax cultura*.

When a 1919 expedition to Central Asia, initiated by Tagore himself, was cancelled, they sailed for New York in 1920, the first of four visits, and where he found funding for a new archaeological expedition—at that time partially unknown to the West—to Kashmir and Ladakh, Tibet, the Tien- Shah and Altai Mountains, Omsk and Lake Baikal in the USSR, the Gobi Desert of Mongolia, and concluding in Sikkim, an incredible journey in which he hoped to uncover nothing less than humanity's mystical-spiritual roots. Boldly he took his wife and elder son, George, an expert in Oriental languages; however on the return trip they nearly perished on the Tibetan plateau awaiting a visa to enter Lhasa; it never came. In this three-plus-year journey of 15,000 miles, from 1925 to 1928, he succeeded to a great degree by indulging his artistic and scientific passions: recording prehistoric archaeology, the signs and symbols of stone carvings and cave painting, and noting the legends of Shambhala—the mythical-historical Kingdom of Peace—and



encountering prophecies of a world saviour yet-to-come—Maitreya, “Buddha of the Future”; Kalki, “the Last Avatar”; “the Imam Mahdi” of Islam—future messiahs often depicted as warriors of light riding fiery horses across the sky.

After the nearly four-year expedition, the Roerichs settled in Darjeeling founding the Urvashi Institute, but soon moved to Kullu in Himachal Pradesh, where they established the Himalaya Research Institute, and where he lived to the end of his long life. He befriended many notables of his day: Leo Tolstoy, Franklin Roosevelt, Igor Stravinsky, and in India, Nehru, the young Indira Gandhi, and Tagore whom he met in London in 1920, whose grand-niece the actress Devaki Rani married his second son, Svetoslav. Nehru said of him: “A surprisingly gifted family. Roerich was a man with extensive knowledge and enormous experience, a man with a big heart, deeply influenced by all he observed.”

As a young artist and mystic philosopher in Europe before “the Great War” (whose centennial we are currently marking), Roerich had premonitions of catastrophe; the painting “The Last Angel” of 1912 is such a vision. Similarly, in the inter-war years as fascism

and militarism reappeared in the 1930s, he responded again with powerful images, more like urgent warnings than prophecies of disaster. From the early '30s appeared four paintings: "St. Sophia—The Almighty's Wisdom"; "The Three Glaives"; "The White Stone"; and "Sacred Caves".

In the Russian Orthodox Church, Sophia is the feminine symbol of Holy Wisdom. We see a rider on a white horse in clouds of flame illuminating a city below. This vision, however, is less apocalyptic but more a dire caution to humanity to awaken before it is too late. The various architectural styles indicate that this city is a synthesis of world cultures all of which are endangered by the coming conflict. Roerich employs this most philosophical of Christian symbols to affirm the role of wisdom in resisting the momentum toward war. The rider carries the Banner of Peace with its ring of three circles representing Religion, Art and Science. By articulating the need to protect the treasures of human creativity through universal education, Roerich believed our common wisdom could transform the causes of global conflict.

"The Three Glaives" (archaic swords) also of 1932 represents a mysterious stone the artist saw in southern Tibetan which the people of the

region interpreted as “the ancient prediction of three great wars that mankind might have to endure. Two of them would devastate the earth, but the third—if it should happen—would mark the end of humanity.” Again this is not a doomsday prophecy but rather a cautionary tale. The palette is warm as clearly it is spring, snow is melting and diaphanous clouds sail in a soft blue sky. At the base of the boulder are sentinel birds ready to rise in defence, suggesting an deep power in nature guarding human destiny. It seems fair to conclude that the artist had great faith in our ability to avoid ultimate disaster.

“The White Stone” (or “Sign of Chintamani, the Treasures of the World”) of 1933 is a vision of a massive stone shining like solid silver and emblazoned with symbols: a moving horse bears on its back a sacred flame containing three globes. Around the horse are symbols of transmutation: sun and moon, a cluster of stars, a circle, green leaves, three diamonds. Under the stone is the Buddhist mantra “Om Mani Padre Hum” inscribed in Tibetan. The white horse of Mongolia and Tibet—“Erdeni Mori”—bears the spiritual treasures of the world as a gift for humanity, a horse of supreme beauty with salvific power.

“Sacred Caves”, also of 1933, represents the

Buddhist painted caves he saw in Khotan and Kashgar in the eastern deserts of China. The caves are illuminated by the rising sun and before them two lamas in red robes and yellow hats meditate in peace. On the distant mountainside is the figure of a reddish horse and rider, an image in Asian religions signifying the coming of an avatar, a new spiritual teacher for mankind.

But even before this burst of artistic energy in which he envisioned the Great Peace—a peace greater than war—Roerich's more practical side created legal and political instruments as well: a decade after World War 1 appeared the Roerich Pact, and in 1929 the Banner of Peace. His credo for the Peace Banner: "Art will unify humanity . . . Where there is peace there is culture; where there is culture there is peace." He expressed this faith in the saving powers of art when he stated: "In Beauty we are united; through Beauty we pray; with Beauty we conquer." This is a variant of Dostoyevski's famous line from his novel "The Idiot": "Beauty will save the world." But maybe only an idiot or a madman—or a mystic philosopher of the genius of a Nicholas Roerich—could imagine that art and culture alone could save the world, or embrace the absurd idea that anyone could conquer anything through Beauty, let alone the

gods of war!

As the Roerich Pact is a political effort, the Banner of Peace is an aesthetic one. The image of three spheres in a triangular formation appears in the mythologies of the world as remote as Neolithic pottery. In India it is a sign of happiness, or Chintamani (“the treasures of the world”); in China it appears in the Temple of Heaven; it appears also on Caucasian and Crusader swords, in early Russian icons, in Coptic and Ethiopian artefacts; on Buddhist banners and Tibetan jewellery, and on the mani-stones of the desert wastes of Mongolia. Because of the universality of this symbol and its vast antiquity, Roerich felt it a perfect symbol for the preservation of the world’s cultural treasures. The trinity of circles has been interpreted as Art/Science/Religion surrounded by Culture, or alternately, Past/Present/Future encircled by Eternity.

The Banner of Peace represents the protection of humanity’s cultural heritage, to be flown at designated sites, just as the Red Cross and Red Crescent banners stand for the protection of human life. A Banner of Peace Committee was established in New York in 1929, and in Paris and Bruges the following year. The Pact received support from such prominent personages as Albert Einstein, George Bernard Shaw, H. G.

Wells, and Rabindranath Tagore. Over the next six years international conferences were held in cities around the world to promote its adoption into international law. In 1935, in Washington, D.C., with President Roosevelt attending, it was signed by 21 nations (and eventually by 36). The Pact represented Roerich's four-decade-long effort to focus international attention on the preservation and protection of the world culture, through universal education, as one way toward peace.

The Roerich Pact, or as it is officially called the "Treaty on the Protection of Artistic and Scientific Institutions and Historical Monuments", was a political-legislative instrument, an attempt to create global harmony and better understanding among nations through the protection of world heritage, in peacetime but especially in time of war. It was a precursor to UNESCO's World Heritage Site program, just as the Pact had its precursors in the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907 and in the Committee of Museum Affairs of the League of Nations. The fourth general conference of UNESCO in 1949 began work on international legal regulations to preserve world heritage but even in the 1953 Brussels conference, no international law was established, and to date there is still no final global agreement.

It is critical to understand that the Roerich Pact was not just a treaty but was an expression of a new vision of government based on Higher Law Theory: one might call it a vision of the State-as-Work-of-Art. The Pact was a conglomeration of legal ideas about a new age order in which state and culture closely overlap, especially in regard to the share of the state budget for the arts (which in many countries exceeds the military budget). In governance according to Higher Law Theory, a truly new world order would be based on the ideal that the primary duty of the state is to establish and develop the spiritual unity of its citizens by carefully preserving the best specimens of national cultural legacy, and by promoting universal cultural understanding of all peoples, especially the youth, through education at all levels. It was also expected that such an “aesthetic state” would lead clearly to increased economic prosperity.

Another significant part of Roerich’s vision, and even more relevant today, was an ecological concern expressed in his 1933 article “Pain of the Planet”: “Understanding life as self-improvement for the people’s good arises where the respect of nature is assured. Therefore, the World League of Culture together with other enlightening activities must emphasise a wise

regard for nature—a source of joyful work, evolving wisdom, and creativity.” I feel certain that if Roerich had been born in 1974 (and not in 1874) he would have included the protection and preservation of nature as part of his vision of salvation-through-beauty.

The Roerich Pact and its symbol the Banner of Peace is as much a philosophical statement as it is of a world based on humanitarian law. And one day, possibly in the 15th session of the Provisional World Parliament, it would be wise to incorporate and secure Roerich’s visionary ideals into the World Constitution of the Earth Federation.

Now is the time, in our desperate era, to resurrect the Roerich Pact and help enshrine it in international law. But how many of us are mad enough—or wise enough—to believe that “Awareness of Beauty will save the world”? And if that seems much too idealistic, we can still believe that the arts are a powerful weapon indeed—one of many—peacemakers must employ in what that other Russian mystic, Leo Tolstoy, called “the war against war”, and what Roerich termed *Pax Cultura*: “The Peace of Civilizations”.



## To Him

Finally I found the hermit. You know how  
difficult it is

To find here on earth a hermit. I asked him  
whether he would show me

The path, and would he accept graciously my  
works.

He gazed a long time and asked what is the most  
loved thing that I have.

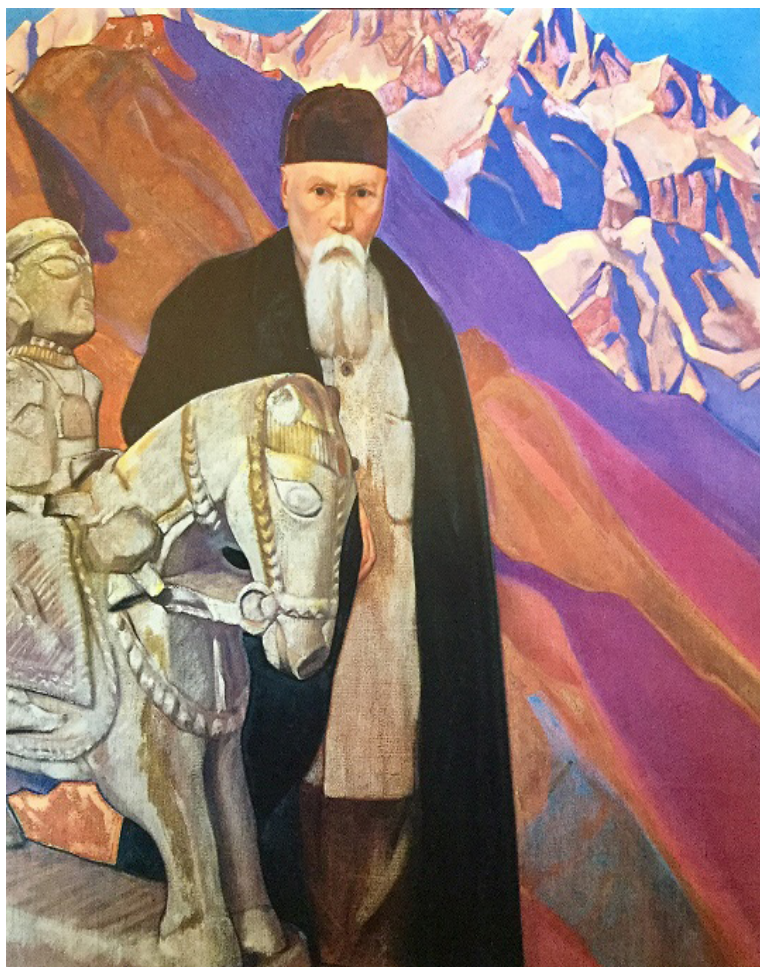
“The most beloved?” I answered. “Beauty it is.”

“The most beloved thing thou must leave.”

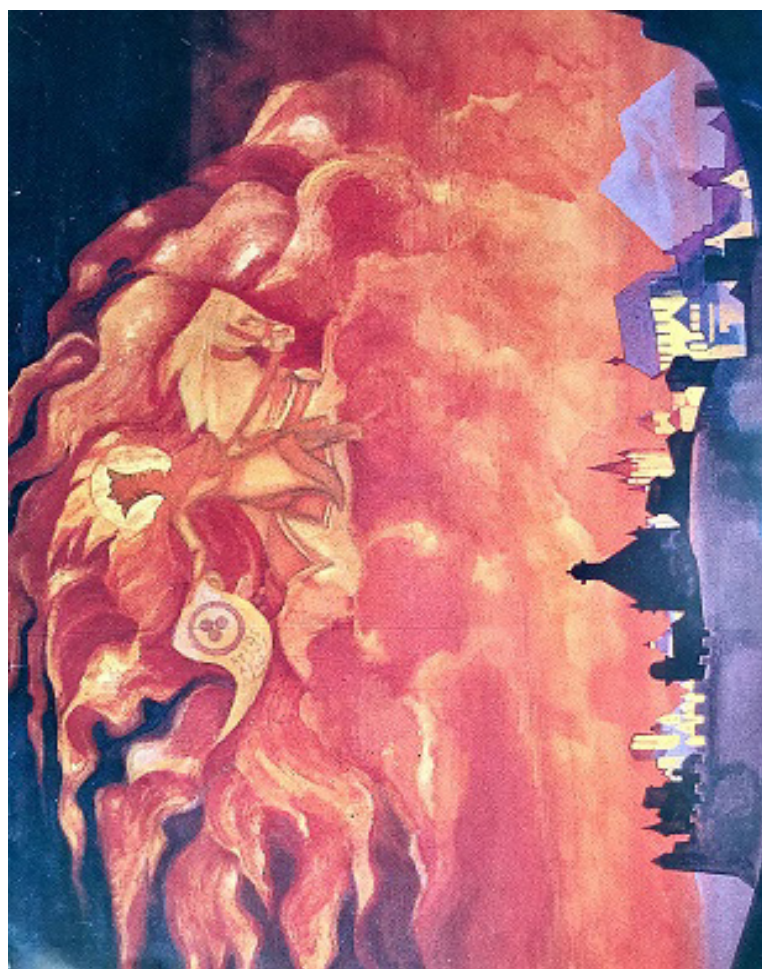
“Who commands it?” I asked. “God” answered  
the hermit.

“Then let God punish me—I shall not leave the  
most beautiful thing that will lead me to  
Him.”

- by Nicholas Roerich



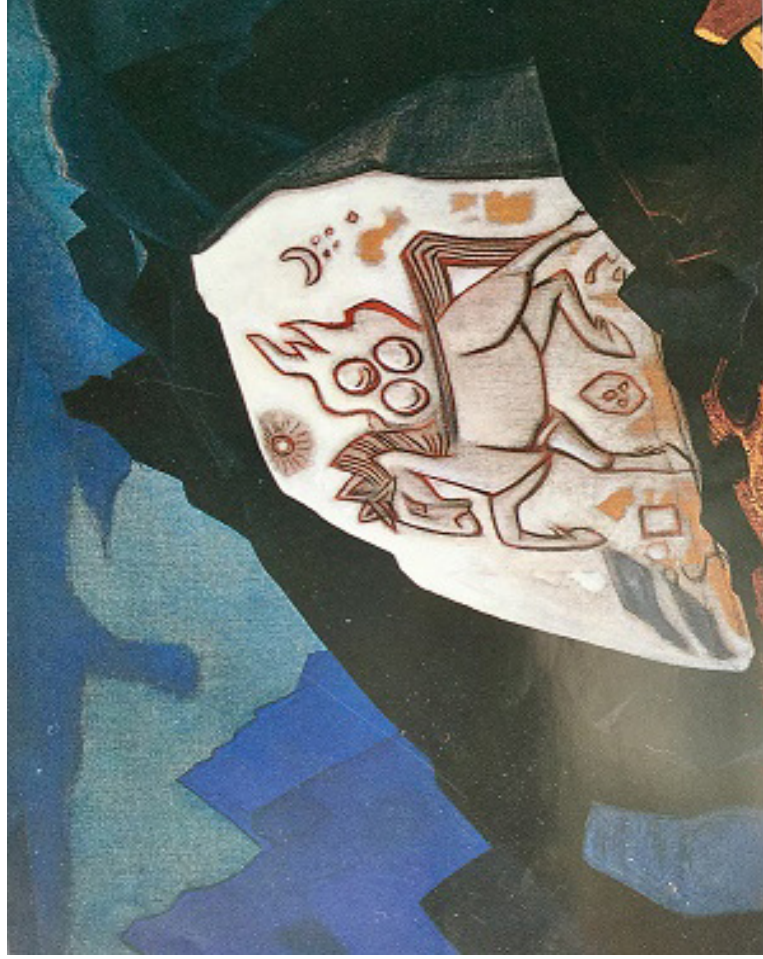
Portrait of Nicholas Roerich by his son  
Svetoslav Roerich





“Three Glaives” - Nicholas Roerich

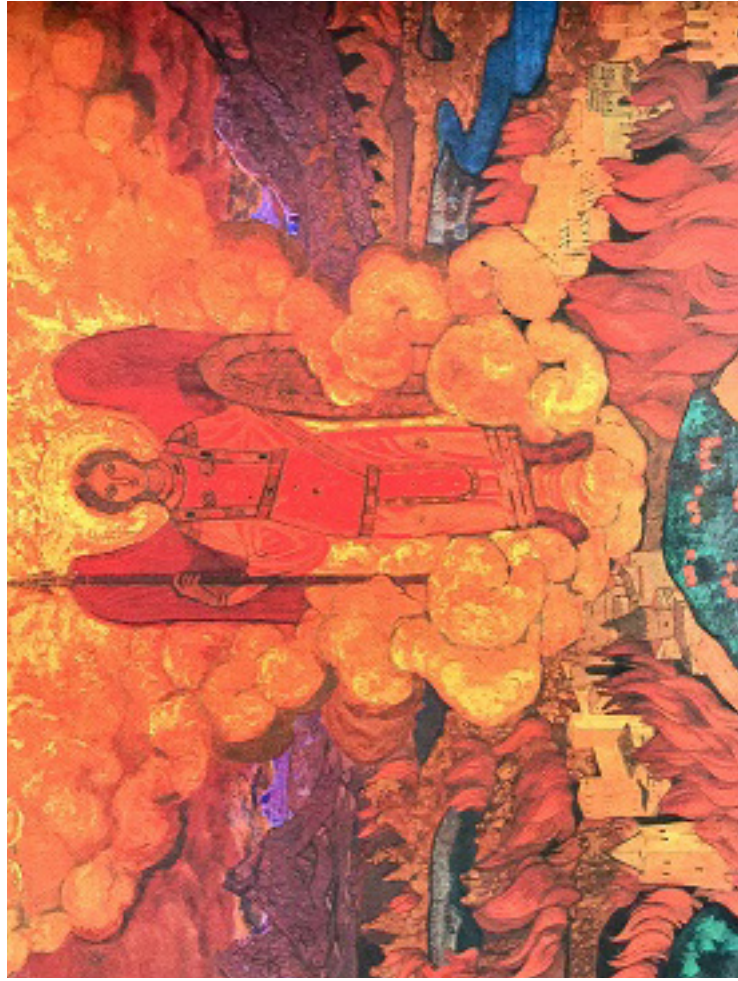




“White Stone” - Nicholas Roerich



“Sacred Caves” - Nicholas Roerich



“The Last Angel” - Nicholas Roerich



“The Warrior of Light” - Nicholas Roerich





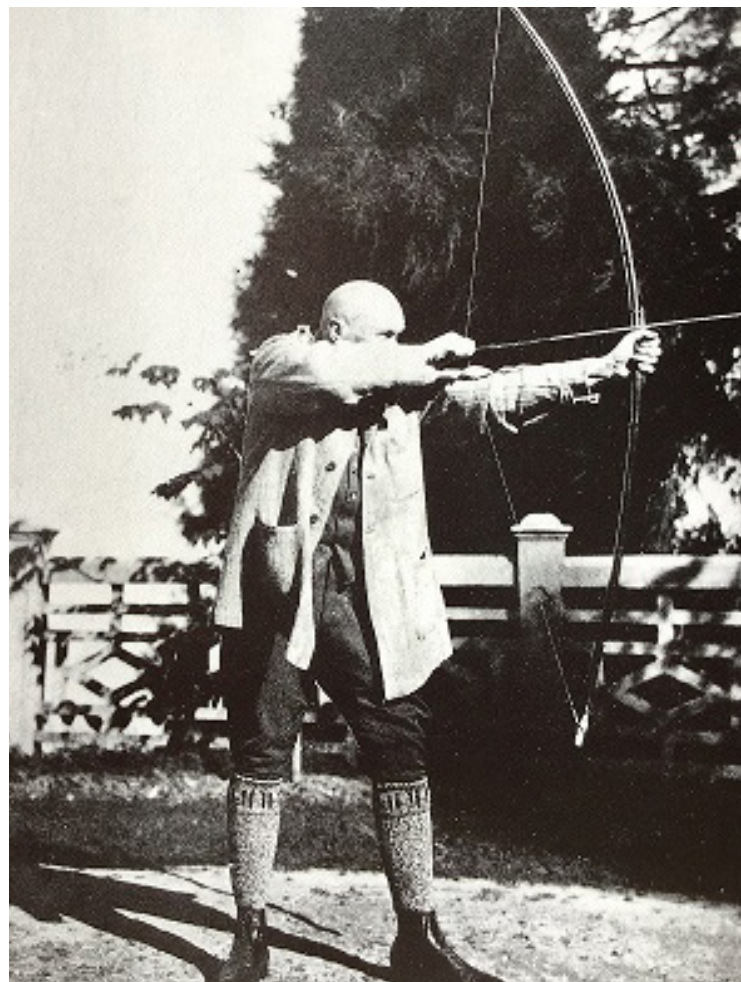
"Pilgrim of the Resplendent City" - Nicholas Roerich



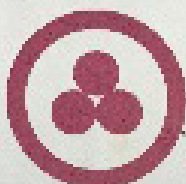
Nehru and Roerich



Pres. Roosevelt signs the Roerich Pact, 1934



Roerich in Kulu



## THE BANNER OF PEACE 'THROUGH CULTURE'

There were no medals, medals have started late in our era. This is a lesson for posterity.

The most emblematic symbol known in the world has been the Peace Banner designed by Nikolai Roerich. It is a sign of the future, as the symbol of all those who are engaged in the struggle for the peace of our world. It is a sign of the future, as the symbol of the cultural peace of our world. It is a sign of the future, as the symbol of the peace of our world. It is a sign of the future, as the symbol of the peace of our world.

Wherever the Banner is displayed, it recognizes the great achievements of the past, the present and the future. It recognizes the great achievements of the past, the present and the future. It recognizes the great achievements of the past, the present and the future. It recognizes the great achievements of the past, the present and the future. It recognizes the great achievements of the past, the present and the future.

Nikolai Roerich was a great Russian artist, philosopher, archaeologist, and explorer. He created an international peace movement, the League for Peace, and the Peace Banner. He was a great Russian artist, philosopher, archaeologist, and explorer. He created an international peace movement, the League for Peace, and the Peace Banner. He was a great Russian artist, philosopher, archaeologist, and explorer.

The Banner was created by the artist Nikolai Roerich in 1917. It is a symbol of peace and culture. It is a symbol of peace and culture. It is a symbol of peace and culture. It is a symbol of peace and culture. It is a symbol of peace and culture.

The Banner is a symbol of peace and culture. It is a symbol of peace and culture. It is a symbol of peace and culture. It is a symbol of peace and culture. It is a symbol of peace and culture.

Where there is Peace, there is Culture.  
Where there is Culture, there is Peace.  
© 1917-1947 Nikolai Roerich

Peace Banner through Culture  
by Nicholas Roerich  
(1874-1947)

**“Where there is peace, there is culture;  
Where there is culture, there is peace”**

## The Banner of Peace through Culture

Since time immemorial, Warriors have carried banners into war. This is a banner for peace.

This ancient universal symbol is one of the world's oldest. Its three spheres were designated by Nicholas Roerich, the designer of the Banner, as the synthesis of all arts, all sciences and all religions within the circle of culture. He defined culture as the cultivation of creative potential in man. He believed that the achievement of peace, through culture, is a goal to be realized through the positive effort of the human will.

Wherever the Banner is displayed, it recognises the great achievements of the past, the present, and the future. It encourages the individual to strive to fulfill his highest potential, beautifying all aspects of life; it encourages each person to take responsibility for the evolution of the planet; it signifies the peace-builder; and it symbolizes the transformation of the individual and of society. It represents cooperation- the cornerstone of the emerging planetary culture-

in all aspects of human activity.

Nicholas Roerich was a world-renowned artist, philosopher, archaeologist, and author. He created an international treaty, the Roerich Pact and Banner of Peace. It provided that the Banner fly over all historic monuments and educational, artistic, and scientific institutions to indicate special protection and respect in times of war and of peace. It acknowledged that cultural treasures are of lasting value to all people as the common heritage of humanity.

The Pact was introduced by Roerich in New York in 1929 and earned him a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. On April 15, 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt presided over ceremonies at the White House in Washington D.C., in which twenty Latin American countries joined the U.S. in signing this historic document.

Nicholas Roerich said, “Positive creativeness is the fundamental quality of the human spirit. Let us welcome all those who, surmounting personal difficulties,...propel their spirits to the task of peace-building , thus ensuring a radiant future.”

