

## A FEW WORDS ABOUT NICHOLAS ROERICH'S SWEDISH CONNECTIONS

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### **Abstract**

The paper attempts at tracing the connections of Nicholas Roerich with Sweden as exemplified by his participation in the Baltic Exhibition at Malmö in 1914 and his great individual art exhibition at Stockholm in 1918. The author is a free-lance researcher in the life and works of the Roerich family.

### **Key words**

Nicholas Roerich, Baltic Exhibition of 1914, Gummesson Gallery.

### **Abstrakt**

Artykuł podejmuje próbę prześledzenia związków Mikołaja K. Rericha ze Szwecją na przykładzie jego udziału w Wystawie Bałtyckiej w Malmö w roku 1914 i wystawy indywidualnej w Sztokholmie w roku 1918. Autorka podkreśla, iż właśnie w trakcie pobytu w Skandynawii w latach 1916-1919 Mikołaj Rerich stał się artystą znanym i cenionym w skali światowej, nie tylko rosyjskiej. Artykuł wiąże się tematycznie z obszerniejszą pracą Autorki (przyjętą do druku) na temat pobytu Mikołaja Rericha i jego rodziny w Finlandii.

## Słowa kluczowe

Mikołaj K. Rerich, Szwecja, Wystawa Bałtycka 1914, Galeria Gummesona w Sztokholmie, wystawa indywidualna Rericha w 1918 roku.

This brief paper was first presented at the International Anthropological Conference titled *The Swedish Traditions, Customs, And Esthetic Sensitivity on the Example of the Hälsingland Region Culture*, held at the Chair of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Szczecin on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015. It was continued by a more detailed paper on Nicholas Roerich's stay in Finland<sup>1</sup>. It turned out that more data was available on Roerich's stay in Finland, while the Swedish cultural institutions contacted via internet when I was preparing this paper were clearly unfriendly and unwilling to help, hence the brevity of this paper which is more of a communicate, really.

Nicholas Konstantinovich Roerich (1874–1947) was one of the painters of the Russian Silver Age<sup>2</sup> who gained international fame. He is not well known in Poland, maybe not yet. Not repeating what is also included in the paper on Roerich's stay in Finland I will only say that the artist lived in Scandinavia in the years 1916–1919, and it was in that period that he became a star of international, not only Russian importance.

The first Swedish trace in Roerich's biography is his participation in the Baltic Exhibition<sup>3</sup> at Malmö in 1914. The exhibition opened on May 15<sup>th</sup>; it was originally supposed to close on September 30<sup>th</sup>, but it was slightly prolonged until October 4<sup>th</sup>. The exhibition was overshadowed by the outbreak of the First World War. Let us remember that Germany declared war with Russia already on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1914, and the Russian army entered East Prussia that same year. This meant that on the day of the exhibition's opening two of participating states were at war with each other, something that throws a lot of interesting light on the exhibition. The three main topics of the exhibition were industry and industrial achievements, craftsmanship, and general arts.

The Baltic Exhibition at Malmö was a regional rather than truly international venture, as only four states participated in it: Sweden, Denmark, Russia, and Germany. The exhibition was accompanied by the Baltic Games, international swimming competition.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper, currently in the press, was presented at the international conference *Obszary fennistykki: język –kultura – naród (Diverse Areas of Finnish Studies: Language – Culture – Nation)* held at the University of Gdańsk on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017, commemorating the centenary of Finland's independence. It also contains a complete list of Roerich studies by my husband Piotr Klafkowski and myself.

<sup>2</sup> This is the common name of the period of Russian culture at the turn of the XIX/XX centuries that was characterized by enormous flourishing of visual arts, music, literature, science, and philosophy. It is sometimes stated that the Silver Age began in 1898 (with the first volume of the journal „Мир искусства”) and came to an end in 1934 when the so-called socialist realism was introduced in the USSR as the only method of artistic expression allowed by the state.

<sup>3</sup> Most of the information on the Baltic Exhibition comes from the English-language Wikipedia, entry „Baltic Exhibition”, accessed October 1st, 2015.

The Russian art at the exhibition was represented by the following painters:

- Valentin Serov 1865–1911, one of Russia's most famous portrait painters, 39 paintings exhibited;
- Nicholas Roerich 1874–1947, painter, stage designer and one of the pioneers of Russian applied art, 28 paintings exhibited;
- Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin 1878–1939, a well-known symbolist, 7 paintings exhibited;
- Vassily Kandinsky 1866–1944, the pioneering abstract painter, 5 paintings exhibited;
- Martiros Sasian 1880–1927, the creator of Armenian national school in painting, his works remind one very much of Nicholas Roerich, particularly when showing mountains;
- Aleksandr<sup>4</sup> Golovin 1863–1930 who, like Roerich, was also a noted stage designer.

These names appear in the few reference sources on the Baltic Exhibition that are at my disposal. It is possible Russia was represented by more painters than the above.<sup>5</sup>

The Russian contribution to the exhibition created great interest in Sweden, and I think it is here we can look for the origins of Roerich's subsequent international fame. Due to the outbreak of the First World War several of the paintings remained at Malmö, and the question of their return to Russia remains controversial<sup>6</sup>. The Russian sources stress that the participation of Russia in the Baltic Exhibition was the first foreign exhibition of Russian paintings from private collections organized by the Russian Artists Association.

The second, and probably much stronger Scandinavian appearance of Roerich was his great individual exhibition held in Stockholm from November 10<sup>th</sup> until 30<sup>th</sup>, 1918. The inviting side and the organizer was the Gummeson Gallery, at that time one of the most important artistic institutions in Scandinavia. Carl Gummeson, a well-known bookseller and collector of modern art, founded the gallery in 1912; among the artists who had their exhibitions there we should note Vassily Kandinsky and Andy Warhol. The Gallery was closed on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009, and its collections moved to Swedish National Museum. Unfortunately, when I contacted that Museum asking for information during the preparation of this paper, it proved unwilling to provide any information, insisting it is not their job. The one thing I have been able to find out is that the only Roerich painting in the former Gallery was passed on to the Stockholm Museum of Modern Art; the Swedish National Museum is interested only in the artists born until 1870, and Roerich was born in 1874. The painting in question was in all likelihood bought by Gummeson himself in or around 1918.

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<sup>4</sup> The Russian version of the name Alexander.

<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly, the Swedish-language Wikipedia, entry *Baltiska utställingen 1914* (accessed 1.07.2017), does not give any details about the participating artists or a more detailed description of the exhibition. The above list is quoted from the internet source given in the next footnote, same date of access.

<sup>6</sup> According to the English-language Russian internet page *forum.artinvestment.ru* (accessed 1.07.2017) some 40 paintings by the Russian painters still remain in Malmö, 26 of these hidden from view and kept in the museum magazine on the order of the museum's directors fearing Russian claims.

Roerich's exhibition was a very large one, featuring 105 paintings and drawings<sup>7</sup>. The titles of the paintings are too general to determine whether any of them have been closely connected with Sweden.

From Sweden this exhibition went on to Denmark, where it was presented in Copenhagen in the early 1919, but so far I have not been able to find out more about it.

Roerich's exhibitions and activities in Finland, briefly sketched in 2015, are now discussed more fully in the paper mentioned in footnote 1 above.

It seems interesting that Roerich never had an exhibition in Norway, though he was greatly interested in ancient Norwegian art and stage-designed the performance of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* in Petersburg in 1912. In what is probably Nicholas Roerich's best-known book, *Altai-Himalaya*, Sweden and Finland are mentioned very briefly and only in the context of meeting Swedish missionaries in Sinkiang and Finnish ones in Sikkim<sup>8</sup>. In Roerich's less-known collection of brief sketches *Звучание народов* [*Zvučane narodov*] Sweden and Finland are not included<sup>9</sup>.

There is one more connection between the Roerich family and Sweden: Yuri N. Roerich (1902–1960), Nicholas Roerich's elder son who became one of the most famous Orientalists of the XX century, was a close friend of the Swedish explorer and writer Sven Hedin (1865–1952)<sup>10</sup>.

Another Scandinavian connection of the Roerichs is the still-unexplained etymology of their name. Several biographies and popular works on Nicholas Roerich suggest that the name "Roerich" (Russian pronunciation: "Ryorih") derives from alleged old Scandinavian expression "roe rikt" which is supposed to mean "rich in glory"<sup>11</sup>. Other sources suggest the Latvian or German origin of the family, but the etymology of the name remains a mystery. Aleksandre Andreyev<sup>12</sup> summarizes the researches by Ivars Silars<sup>13</sup> that indicate the Roerichs descended from the van der Ropp family, a German family in Russian-ruled Latvia. However, let us remember that there was an 8th century Slavic-Scandinavian trading post in today's Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Germany, that was called Reric or Rerik, so there seem to be more possibilities.

Nicholas Roerich has authored a large number of paintings connected with ancient Scandinavia, but these focus on the Vikings and their art, and cannot be ascribed to any modern Scandinavian country in particular. This is again different in the case of his Finnish paintings, which are clearly just that, Finnish, not Scandinavian or "Nordic".

The fame of Roerich's later Indian and Himalayan paintings has somewhat pushed aside the works he created during his brief stay in Scandinavia. As far as I know, the only researcher working in this field is Elena Soini.

<sup>7</sup> The complete list is given by E. Soini [Е. Соини] 2001, pp. 155–158.

<sup>8</sup> *Altai-Himalaya*, pp. 209–210 and 382–383.

<sup>9</sup> See Н. Рерих. *Зажигайте сердца*, pp. 137–154.

<sup>10</sup> Yuri Roerich wrote a detailed paper titled *Sven Hedin*, published in the third volume of the *Journal of Urusvati Himalayan Research Institute*, 1933, pp. 1–16. Let us note that Sven Hedin is mentioned three times in *Altai-Himalaya*, see pp. 163, 246 and 379.

<sup>11</sup> See Decter 1989, p. 13 as an example.

<sup>12</sup> A. Andreyev. *The Myth of the Masters Revealed. The Occult Lives of Nikolai and Elena Roerich*. Eurasian Studies Library vol. 4, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014, pp. 2–3.

<sup>13</sup> D. Savelli, A. Andreyev (Eds), *Rerixi, mify i fakty*. Sankt-Peterburg: Nestor-Istoria, 2011. pp. 8–29.

I hope to be able to find out more details on Roerich's exhibitions and possible influence in Sweden and Denmark. At the moment I can only refer the reader to my forthcoming paper on the Finnish episode in Roerich's life and art, which is more detailed.

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