

**‘MOUNTAIN MUSE’- AN EXPLORATION TO HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS AND
ETERNITY**

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Abstract

This research paper is a visual exploration to the mighty and ageless mountains especially the ‘Himalayas’ and the journey of four prominent painters who devoted their lives painting the magnificent moods of the mountains discovering, exploring and demystifying the layers of mysticism, mystery and the heights and depths human consciousness in search of eternity and sublime divinity. It throws ample light on the monumental work these artists created by sharing a single muse that is the mountains. It captures the richness of their precious contribution to the world of art. It is heartening to note that their muse was our own Himalayas which opened new vistas for the creative people to explore and it is sincerely hoped a new generation of artists will be inspired and motivated enough to further carry forward this spiritual exploration in quest of peace and harmony for the mankind.

Keywords: Shan Shui, Himalayas, Nicholas Roerich, Altai Himalaya, Roerich Pact and Banner of Peace, Bireswar Sen, Abanindranath Tagore, Nandlal Bose, Wash Painting, Taiken, Arai Kampo, Serbjeet Singh, Himalaya Darshan, Satwant Singh.

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Introduction

The enigmatic and myriad moods of mountains have always been a source of wonder and delight for the mankind with mesmerizing and enchanting glimpses of snow-covered peaks, roaring waterfalls, cascading brooks and rivers meandering in the valleys covered with bounties of flora and fauna. The faces of rugged rocks and boulders hiding behind the lonely clouds and the divine light falling on their contours presents a picture of an old hermit sitting deep in meditation and in the layers of his lap covered under the heavy and mysterious silvery fogs umpteenth number of species of birds and animals lie cosily in deep slumber. The moods of the mountains change with the change of the season. Each moment presents a million hues and tints as light plays hide-and-seek. Sometimes the mountains appear as unconquerable monarchs- angry and furious and on the other moment these mountains shower their love and affection on the living beings like a kind old nanny in whose lap the civilizations blossom and flourish. It offers habitats to millions and turns hostile to the others who try to ravage her modesty. Both love and wrath of the mountain is insurmountable. Since ages our forefathers worshiped them as divine entities realizing fully their power and splendour and sought refuge in the lap of nature, where the realm of solitude reigns and divine wisdom touches their innermost soul. Hermits, saints, Gurus, adventurers and seekers of sacred and pious consciousness have always nurtured a desire to make their abode in the pristine and mystical cloak of mountains where the resonance of the 'Divine Creator' can be felt and their egos, pride and follies are sucked out of their psyche. In India, we refer to mountains as the 'Abode of Gods'. God has infused an ineffable spirit in the mankind which acts as a catalyst to conquer the unconquerable and courageously visit the unknown and uncharted terrains of cerebral landscapes. Perhaps the mighty mountains offer this opportunity in plenty to test the strength and perseverance, the Homo sapiens possess. The winds of wisdom flow through the woods and peaks like ethereal aroma and no doubt countless philosophers, writers and artists have been flocking to the mountains to relish the source of enlightening power, each quenching his/her thirst from the spring of knowledge to gain salvation and immortality.

'Shan Shui': A Journey into Mysticism

Since 5th century A.D, generations of *Shan Shui* master artists and thinkers derived strength from the mesmerizing and mystical beauty of rocks and mountains covered with mists and

fogs- to bask in the glow of ethereal beauty, divinity and infinite wisdom. Their basic philosophy was to go beyond the physical to the metaphysical which directly connects one's soul to the almighty- 'The Ultimate Creator'. These Chinese artists produced countless black and white ink drawings and paintings where one is astonished to find the deftness of their brushwork which had the power to create thousands and thousands of shades in black and white on handmade paper and they were able to capture the vast mountain ranges in a few delicate brushstrokes. In Chinese philosophy as well as in other great civilizations which developed in different parts of the world, mountains are always revered as sacred places and seen as the home of the immortals as they are close to heavens. When Chinese painters work on a *Shan Shui* painting (**Plate No.1**), they do not try to present an image of what they have seen in nature, but what they have thought about nature. It is immaterial whether the colours and shapes look like the real object or not.¹ They employ certain symbols to capture the undercurrents of composition like harmony, balance, texture, rhythm, lines and forms adding a rare meditative and magical charm.

To capture the essence of *Shan Shui* painting, eminent Chinese author- Ch'eng Hsi says that, "*Shan Shui painting is not an open window for the viewer's eye; it is an object for the viewer's mind. Shan Shui Painting is more like a vehicle of philosophy.*"²

Nicholas Roerich- 'The Hermit of Himalayas'

In tune with these lofty thoughts, artists who dedicated their whole lives in capturing and savouring the nectar of creative essence, which flows from the metamorphosis of mind and eternal beauty- a true blissful journey into pious and sacred visual enlightenment, the name that comes to our mind is Nicholas Roerich, though born in Russia in 1874, reached India in 1923 and made his way to 'Himalayas' where in that ageless land, amid the snows of Himalayan range, he sought to turn his thoughts to the Eternal. By the end of December, he was already in Sikkim on the southern slopes of the Himalayas, and it is clear by the speed with which he reached the mountains that the Himalayas were where his interest lay. His team was mesmerised with the heavenly beauty of the Himalayas. Roerich wrote about his first Central Asiatic Expedition in his Book- 'Heart of Asia' and he creates for the reader a vivid account of the wonder of the land and its people. However, the images are nowhere as vivid as in the 500 or so paintings that resulted from the trek. In Kanchenjunga, Sikkim Pass, His Country, The Great Spirit of the Himalayas (**Plate No.2**), and the Banners of the East

series, we can see philosophical concepts and ideas giving birth to visual images, and the splendour of the Northern India providing the physical setting.³

Nicholas Roerich writes in his famous travelogue- '**Altai Himalaya**':

*"India, we know the depths and the fineness of thy thoughts.
We know the great OM which leads to inexpressible heights.
We know thy great guiding spirit. India, we know thy ancient wisdom,
thy sacred scriptures in which is outlined the past, present and the future.*

*And we shall remember thee with the same tremor
as the most precious first flower on the spring meadow."*⁴

Nicholas Roerich fully understood what India stands for and was awestruck with the majestic beauty of the Himalayan range. He found himself deeply immersed in the fathomless philosophical reservoir of wisdom. It was a turning point in his life. As at all important turning points in the world's history, there have appeared great artists whose destiny was to illuminate Life, by giving form and colour to the spiritual tendencies of their time. Nicholas Roerich's work comprises around 7000 paintings and sketches; stage decorations, designs and costumes produced for the most claimed theatres and opera houses in Europe and the U.S.A.; great number of books, countless articles and essays. No doubt, Nicholas Roerich was referred to as an 'Apostle of Beauty', 'Messenger of Culture', 'mighty Warrior of the Spirit' and 'Master of Himalayas' by some of his eminent contemporaries.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote in his letter to Nicholas Roerich:

"I have keenly followed your most remarkable achievements in the realm of Arts and also your great humanitarian work for the welfare of the nations of which your Peace Pact idea with a special Banner of protection of cultural treasure is a singularly effective symbol. I am very glad indeed that this Pact has been accepted at the League of Nations and I feel sure that it will have far-reaching effects on the cultural harmonies of nations."

Rabindranath Tagore accorded his great appreciation to this Russian artist who chose to undertake his quest for peace, harmony and promotion of creative journey from the Himalayas- 'The Crown of India's Mystic Fervour'. This was indeed an honour for the India's rich civilization which through centuries has infused a sense of missionary zeal in the minds of seekers who are ready to devote their passion for the betterment of humanity. Roerich had a wider canvas beyond painting the Himalayas. He fully endorsed that young people should be motivated to take the task of protection of cultural heritage and philosophy

right from the beginning. Novel ideas and cultural values should be preserved in this universe he felt.

George Roerich- Son of Nicholas Roerich and Tibetologist further elaborates that, *“In this far valley of Kullu blend keen mountain air and warm southern sun. Here, too, wondrously blend races, languages, religions, arts and the natural phenomena of many diverse climes, to create anew a veritable paradise alike for the scientist who looks only to the present and for him who reckons man’s and Nature’s story in thousand- year units. On this spot, but no less on Asian sites within quick attainment, have the ages left more profound strata of the past then remain uninvestigated elsewhere on the globe.”*

In his book titled ‘Nicholas Roerich-the Master of the Himalayas’ (2003) renowned author Barnett. D. Conlan writes, *“His soul is attuned to the heights of Himalayas and is in accord with their sublime majesty. He shares their stability, reflects their serenity, enjoys their breadth of vision. Here his artist soul vertibaly penetrates to the inmost secrets of the primeval forces that underlie the manifested world. Something of these profound conceptions are transmitted to the world at large in his gorgeous creations of line and colour.”* Nicholas Roerich had a firm belief that the prerequisite for cultural development and preservation is peace. Once the peace is maintained around us then only we can interact with the ‘Higher Sublime’. And his works presents deep attainment of spiritual, energetic experience and act as an active mediator between the painter and the viewers in realizing the invisible subtle world.

Nicholas summed up in ‘Roerich Pact and Banner of Peace’ (1935):

*“In Beauty we are united,
Through Beauty we pray,
With Beauty we conquer.”*

In most of his paintings done in Tempera on board there is a sense of drama, the urgency of a message to send or receive, a traveler to greet, a mission to perform, a path to travel. The towering mountains stand for the spiritual goals that humanity must set for itself. Ushering in a new dawn he reminds people to carry the banner of light to defeat the host of darkness. His prominent paintings include: ‘Study of Mountains-I’, ‘Buddhist Monk returning from Lahaul’, ‘Rohtang Pass’, ‘Shery Monastery in Ladakh’, ‘Study of Mountains-II’, ‘Study of Mountains-III’, ‘Command of Rigden Djapo’ (**Plate No.3**), ‘Padma Sambhava’, ‘Dorje- the Daring One’, ‘Milarepa’, ‘Krishna’, ‘Palden Lhamo’, ‘The Greatest and Holiest

of Tangla', 'Warrior of Light', 'White Stone', 'Mount of Five Treasures' (**Plate No.4**) and 'Path to Shambhala'. Nicholas Roerich-the Hermit of Himalayas died in Naggar, Kullu on December 13, 1947. His body was cremated and its ashes buried on a slope facing the mountains he loved and portrayed in many of his works.

Bireswar Sen- 'A Mystic of Mountains'

Bireswar Sen who was born in 1897 at Calcutta, as a young boy he started dabbling in water-colours and both his father Rai Bahadur Salieswar Sen, a Professor of English Literature at Calcutta University and his grandfather Yajneswar Sen, a solicitor, were delighted to find an artistic spark in him. His father had a large library of books on art and the young boy was initiated to the world of art which further triggered in him a desire to be an artist. Slowly but steadily, he was introduced to the fine nuances of art specimens and the stalwarts of art like poet and artist- Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore and Gaganendranath Tagore-the painter. Nandlal Bose known as the 'Master Moshai' and the Japanese painter- Okakura Kakuzo, were amongst the several other artists active at that time and there was a constant exchange between Indian artists and Japanese artists. This resulted in transforming the Indian art scene and numerous styles and experimental works were created. Each artist investing his/her own artistic sensibilities and a free flowing stream of creativity flowed through the length and breadth of Bengal. Enthused with restless spirit for experimentation, Bireswar Sen at the age of twenty-one got his Bachelor's degree and had a chance to meet and interact with the icons of Indian art Abanindranath Tagore and his pupil Nandlal Bose and made an impression on them.

In a letter of testimony appreciating the effort of this gifted young artist Abanindranath Tagore writes that he had met this lad barely six years or so but was impressed with his desire to learn more and more. In turn, Bireswar Sen consider Abanindranath Tagore as his mentor and guide from whom young Bireswar learnt valuable lessons in skilful handling of mediums and how to attain dexterity and versatility in art. Through this learning process, this young artist soon attained considerable control over 'Wash Painting' which he learnt from Gaganendranath and others who had picked up this form and style from the Japanese masters like Taiken and Arai Kampo.⁵

Besides painting, he was interested in English literature too and started his teaching career at a college in Patna. In his earlier works, he was attracted to figure painting and

painted a few themes found in English literature and in Mughal history. But soon, he diverted his attention to drawings depicting vast expanses of land and gently flowing rivers of Bengal. This generated an interest in him to seek and explore the vistas of Bengali landscape till he met 'Nicholas Roerich' - the Great Russian Painter, who was also a designer, a seeker and a visionary par excellence. Roerich made Naggar in Kullu his permanent abode where he campaigned for preservation of culture, languages and spread the message of peace and serenity. Bireswar soon lost interest in English literature and started teaching art at School of Arts and Crafts at Lucknow. His sustained interaction with Roerich stirred a kind of a silent revolution in Bireswar's mind. He started looking at the 'Himalayas' with newly acquired vision which gave him immense peace and joy where solitude and the mystic mists covering the mountains moved him deeply.

The pristine and the tranquil beauty of majestic Himalayas overwhelmed his soul and he started reading the Himalayas as a wonderful book where each contour of the rocks and mountains presented a joyous chapter. As he had mastered the art of water-colours painting, he chartered a new coast for his unending quest for finding sublime beauty and wisdom in Himalayas and soon painting after painting, he bared his soul in monumental yet very small in size water-colour paintings on paper to the astonishment of all. In his miniature water-colour paintings as small as 2.5 x 3.5 inches, he started depicting human figures in all together new *avatar* keeping in mind the proportions and the scale as compared to the lofty mountains (**Plate No.5**).

Dr. M.S. Randhawa- a renowned art lover and art connoisseur says that "from amongst his (Bengali) contemporaries, he is perhaps the only one who has successfully resisted the lure of romanticism and mythology. Though he is a clear thinker and a rationalist yet his pictures possess a mystical air and convey sentiments of a true lover of nature. In Bireswar Sen, India has found the finest interpreter of the grandeur, mystery and beauty of her Mountains. He has paid homage to the sublime peaks, awesome gorges and thundering rivers of the Himalayas in countless landscapes. His love and devotion for the Himalayas is the secret of his success as a mountain painter." Dr. M.S. Randhawa further quotes the statement of Bireswar Sen: "*I am still a primitive man offering oblations to the undying spirit of the ever-lasting hills.*"

"....In the background of mighty mountains his figures grew smaller and smaller as merely symbols. With a gentle stroke of the brush he creates a woman carrying a pitcher, a shepherd smoking a pipe, a sadhu draped in saffron, microscopic shepherds, horsemen, cattle, horses

and goats. An astonishing achievement in his nature water-colours often made people wonder whether he uses a lens to create such microscopic figures of humanity and animals. This indeed was an unparalleled achievement, a breakaway from bold and powerful thick strokes of Roerich.....' (excerpts from an essay titled 'The Art of Bireswar Sen' written by Dr. M.S. Randhawa in the book titled- 'A Quite Passion'- Nature and Man in the Art of Bireswar Sen published in 2012).

Bireswar Sen's precious water-colour paintings soon became a raise with rich and powerful aristocratic classes who collected them in large numbers(**Plate No.6**). Rulers and Maharajas of several Indian states like Patiala, Travancore, the Countess of Lytton, Maharani of Coochbehar and many art lovers and artists acquired his works for Museums and art galleries. His outstanding masterpieces include: 'Bless Us, All highest', 'The Sadhika in Meditation', 'Victory of Light', 'Tibetan Dzong', 'Forest Glade', 'Pilgrims to the Himis Monastery', 'Golden Glory', 'The Pinnacle', 'Dawn at Gopeswar' and 'The Hermit's Cave'.

Serbjeet Singh's Lens and Brush:

Artist Serbjeet Singh who was passionately in love with the Himalayas always considered himself as a 'Pilgrim' to the profoundly sacred persona of the Himalayas. The sight of each peak, rock, rivulet or a waterfall mesmerised his heart and soul and he cherished to absorb the serenity, tranquillity, the innocence, the silence and the strength of the majestic mountains. His tryst with mountains started at young age. He was born in 1925 and had immersed himself fully in capturing the moods, the wisdom and the scent of Himalayan air throughout the duration of his life. He was not only a renowned artist but also a celebrated film-maker whose first feature film- 'The Avalanche' won President's Award in 1964. This film was filmed on locations at 18000 feet and its music was provided by the great musician- Pandit Ravi Shankar. During a span of fifty years, he produced 400 documentaries on sociology, history, arts and culture and tourism related to the Himalayas. Another epoch-making work was his highly applauded 26 episodes Serial titled 'Himalaya Darshan' which was well received in India as well as in other countries and this resulted in attracting tourists from across the world to the Himalayas in great numbers. His special interest was to explore Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh and he became a household name in Europe and America. In 1994, the then Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh- Sh. Virbhadra Singh gifted his

remarkable works to the people of Himachal Pradesh after an exhibition of his paintings at the Shimla Town Hall. These paintings have found a permanent place in a Museum.

Bombay film industry was so enthralled to see the scenic beauty of Himalayan towns in Himachal Pradesh that other film-makers from Bollywood flocked to the locations in Dalhousie and Chamba and popular feature films like '1942-A Love Story', 'A Himalaya Putra' and 'Dil' were filmed on these locations. 'Bill Aitken'- a Scottish born, naturalised Indian travel writer and a mountain lover writes, *"The secret of Serbjeet Singh's ongoing excellence as a painter (he is now in his 80s) lies in the embracing of four-letter word 'life' (or perhaps more accurately, larger than life!). Totally dedicated to his craft from the tender age of ten- when he sold his first painting to an angrez memsahib for Rs. 25 in Dalhousie- now, at 82, his book of sketches done during the Indo-Pak War is priced on the international market around rupees 25 lakhs. The same mastery of line and colour are evident both and it is his unfailing talent to transmute artist's materials into the golden realm of deathless art that makes any visit to his Gulmohar Park home so energising"*.⁶ Serbjeet Singh never ceased to adopt new art materials and technologies and was especially excited to try acrylics on canvas and high-tech Japanese pens for sketching.

Unlike the fugitive palettes that have plagued works of art in the past, the new metallic colours stay for true two millenniums and it was refreshing to find someone learning new techniques even in his advanced years. Since the time, he started closely examining the minute details, textures and contours of the Himalayan slopes, woods and rocks, his ferment desire was to capture it sincerely and truthfully adding a few compositional changes here and there and one could see the dry desert and its rugged rocks gleaming like silk emerging with ever present silvery mists. The vast expanse of river originating from the Ladakh region looks like a silky ribbon flowing in the mighty gusts of Himalayan wind. In the painting titled 'Dhaulagiri', the imminent harsh planes one often encounters in the mountains has been delicately touched and softened with light blue tones and this effect leads to a divine experience and an air of bliss touches one's consciousness. His prominent paintings on Himalayas include 'Indus in Ladakh', 'Ladakh Motor Highway' (**Plate No.7**), 'Gompa at Karsha', and 'Zanskar' (**Plate No.8**).

Satwant Singh- 'The Gusts of Mountain Muse':

Artist Satwant Singh has achieved a mastery over drawing and has great proficiency in handling mediums such as water-colours, pen and ink, acrylic, oil colours and mixed media. He has even created many terracotta sculptures and a large number of such works are in the permanent collection of various museums and private collectors all over the world. Satwant Singh was born at 'Shimla' - the Queen of Hills, Himachal Pradesh in 1948. As a toddler, he picked up charcoal and started drawing on the walls of his house. As he grew up, he used to roam about with a sketch-book in his hand in the mountain slopes and gorges and his heart was filled with joy seeing the unparalleled scenic beauty of Shimla hills. He sketched every tree, rock, waterfall, brook, lonely paths in the woods, terraced fields and the tall deodar and pine trees. He discovered secret heavenly places where he could find the hidden treasures of rare varieties of flora and fauna- pomegranate trees, mushrooms and *Banafsa* flowers. He was deeply fascinated with the native folks, their dresses and the shepherds with sheeps and goats and observed the rams specially who according to him looked and behaved like human beings. **(Plate No.9)** Ladybirds, Red Robins, Koels and jet-black Ravines filled him with curiosity. Houses made of wood and slates shimmering with dewdrops and ever-changing drama of light and dancing clouds filled his heart with merriment. Lonely clouds perched on the hill-top raised many wonderful questions in his mind. Each glade of grass and bush became his companion. At heart, he feels once a Hillman is always a Hillman. The love these hills gave him, he never betrayed it and faithfully depicted the essence of hills, rocks and boulders filled with exciting textures, shapes and forms. From the very beginning, we find depiction of transparent rocks, birds flying in merriment, sheeps grazing lazily in the meadows and powerful and protective robust ram keeping watch on the flock. He strived hard to unfold the mystery and mysticism in the solitude and how gently and calmly the hill folks engage themselves in their daily chores. Mountains for him are like his Mother's lap, where he feels safe and happy as it showers bounties of affection like a caring mother who caresses his forehead with a gentle hand. **(Plate No.10)** He created thousands of drawings and water-colour paintings to capture the enigmatic moods of the hills. Even after living in plains for over 55 years at Chandigarh, his works still offer glimpses of hill contours. He is a recipient of scores of awards and honours and has organised more than sixty solo shows of his works and participated in more than four hundred prestigious art exhibitions in India and abroad. He dedicates all his creativity to the hills.

Conclusion

The mountains as muse have inspired a large number of artists and they in turn have respectfully offered their artistic creations at the feet of ‘Mother Nature’ who propelled their hearts and minds to unravel the mysteries about human consciousness demystifying the enigmas and sublime divinity. Each artistic endeavour resulted in exploration of not only physical charm of the mountains but also explored the realms of human perception and the unfathomed perseverance and grit of human spirit.

Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 6



Plate 7



Plate 8



Plate 9



Plate 10



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