

Streetscapes/The Master Apartments; A Restoration for the Home of a Russian Philosopher

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY
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THE seasoned New Yorker is used to spurious stories about unusual buildings. But if someone tells you their Art Deco apartment house was built by a Russian philosopher-explorer-painter as his personal museum, and that it has the first corner windows in New York, don't laugh -- because they're talking about the Master Apartments at 103d Street and Riverside Drive, built in 1929 for the charismatic Nicholas Roerich.

The co-op is now beginning a facade and lobby restoration of the building from which Roerich's museum and followers were evicted in 1938.

Nicholas Roerich was born in Russia in 1874. As a student he was noted for his impressive demeanor and intense gaze. He was a furious and talented worker in painting, church architecture, mosaics and set design. Working with Serge Diaghilev and Igor Stravinsky, Roerich designed the sets and costumes for the revolutionary ballet "Le Sacre du Printemps" in Paris in 1913. His paintings tended toward natural and historical scenes with deep, rich colors and flat surfaces reminiscent of textile and carpet design.

Roerich was attracted to ancient and Eastern philosophies, and became convinced that art and life should be intertwined. He came to the United States in 1920 as a second choice -- he couldn't get into India -- but found a ready audience here for his energy and vision.

In 1921 Roerich began a school, the Master Institute of United Arts, financed and directed by Louis Horch, who housed the school in a mansion he owned at 310 Riverside Drive. The stage designer Lee Simonson, the composer and critic Deems Taylor and the choreographer Michel Fokine were among the faculty.

The energetic Roerich worked for the protection of art and cultural treasures in wartime, and established Corona Mundi, an exhibition and exchange center for art of all cultures. Simultaneously he developed a following through his extensive writings on philosophy and religion.

Roerich matched his giant personality with giant production -- by 1928 he had produced 3,000 paintings, most of which were housed in the Nicholas Roerich Museum, which was part of the 310 Riverside Drive building.

In 1928 Harvey Wiley Corbett, a skyscraper advocate, designed a new 27-story building for the Roerich operations: a square base with a chunky tower diminishing in size as it rose to a point. The old mansion was torn down. Roerich missed the laying of the cornerstone of the Master Apartments -- he was traveling in Tibet -- but surely he was pleased by the ambitious program: 24 stories of income-producing apartments above 3 floors devoted to his own activities that contained galleries, conference rooms, theaters, exhibition halls and two libraries.

ALTHOUGH Roerich kept an apartment there, he was typically off on Asian expeditions for exploration, painting and writing. Few artists would be as indifferent to their own one-man museum.

The exterior of the building is a vigorous Art Deco, with patterned brickwork and a change in color rising from purple to white at the top. Like other designs by Corbett, the principal decoration is the massing, a successful sculpture job yielding one of the most picturesque skyline ornaments in New York. Some period observers cite the corner windows as the first in New York, although the critic for the magazine *Architecture* singled them out as a gimmick.

The Master Apartments opened in October 1929; the stock market crashed shortly afterward, and before long Roerich's influence also declined. A court-appointed receiver took over in 1932 and charged Louis Horch with mismanagement, but Horch regained control of the building in 1935. In the same year the Internal Revenue Service accused Roerich of tax fraud, and there were some who considered him a charlatan.

In 1938 Horch ousted Roerich loyalists and established the Riverside Museum on the three floors; it remained in operation until 1971, with Horch owning the building.

Now the cooperative, which was established in the late 80's, is planning a multi-year renovation campaign for the exterior and the lobby that Doug Johnson, the building manager, said will cost at least \$350,000. Persistent leaks will be addressed with repointing and brick replacement, but it is unfortunate that the co-op cannot afford a moderate cleaning; dirt conceals most of the original color contrast.

The lobby will be renovated by the firm of Beyer Blinder Belle/Tom Lee Interiors with replacement fixtures and vinyl wall covering.

But it's a pity no one was curious enough to do a paint analysis to determine the original color: could the carefully stepped Art Deco surfaces really have been off-white, as they will now be painted?

AND what of Roerich? Apparently unperturbed, he continued his Asian explorations, going to the Gobi Desert in the 30's on behalf of the Government to look for drought-resistant grasses. He settled comfortably in India, continuing to write and paint, and died there in 1947. His supporters later relocated the Nicholas Roerich Museum to a rowhouse at 319 West 107th Street, where Roerich's works are displayed in a museum that few New Yorkers have heard of but that everyone should visit.

The curator, Daniel Entin, said that Roerich's religious and philosophical writings were suppressed for decades in the Soviet Union, but that in recent years "hundreds of Roerich organizations have sprung up around Russia."

"People come from all over," Mr. Entin said as a Lithuanian family was beginning a tour. "It never stops."

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