Nikolai Roerich’s Petersburg period, until 1916 when he moved to Finland, was extremely productive. He managed somehow to combine his great creative efforts as a painter and stage designer, under Elena’s guidance, with his uninspiring office work for the Society of Encouragement of the Arts. The latter was obviously a drudgery which had burdened him so much in the beginning that he was about to give up his prestigious post with all its benefits. Yet he carried on along his chosen thorny path.

The artist produced one painting after another working feverishly in his studio and in the open air. Thematically his canvasses focused on the same subject – the idyllic Old Russian world, the Northern Saga, which fully captured him. The titles of these paintings executed in the style of “heroic realism” speak for themselves: *Guests from Foreign Lands* (*Zamorskie gosti*), *Building a town* (*Gorod stroyat*), *The Slavs on the Dnieper* (*Slaviane na Dnepre*), *The Polovtsians’ camp* (*Polovetskii stan*), *Ilya from Murom* (*Ilya Muromets*, the classical Russian folklore hero or *bogatyr*). *Zamorskie gosti* (1901) depicted a group of Vikings (*Variagi*) aboard their decorated wooden ship sailing to the unknown Russian lands and further to Constantinople or Tsargrad as the Slavs called it in those days “for trade and for service” was one of his best. The Viking theme really spellbound him – suffice it to say that Roerich would subsequently produce over a hundred of variants of the same canvas as well as a separate “Viking” series.

In many of his paintings of this period Roerich, according to his modern critics, sought to incarnate his innermost dream of a world where people live in harmony with nature. This world looked perfectly real due to many historic and ethnographic details present in the paintings, still it was a dream world which had never existed before, and the artist who created it so masterly was only a simple-hearted dreamer and visionary who wanted to captivate the public with his dreams and visions.

According to art critic L.V. Korotkina, in his paintings depicting the pagan Russia, Roerich “succeeded in reflecting the spirit of the epoch, having
poeticized it with his artistic vision. The artist saw in the past “the golden age” of humanity. This beautiful image of the distant past seemed to him an ideal model for the future.¹

Roerich’s other masterpiece from his Petersburg period is his large-sized (3 by 4 meters) “The Treasure of the Angels” (Sokrovistche angelov, 1904–1905). Originally this was a sketch of the mural designed to decorate the burial-vault of Prince Tenishev at the request of his widow Princess Maria Klavdievna Tenisheva, the famous arts patroness and collector, however it was not used to this end and remained as a separate work. The painting executed in soft dark violet and goldish colors showed, in the foreground, a winged archangel with a bright halo around his head standing next to the Tree of Life with the birds of paradise sitting on its branches (on the right) and a huge dark monolith inscribed with mysterious characters (on the left). Behind the archangel, at some distance, there is a host of haloed angels with pikes standing in ranks amidst the paradise garden. Further up, in the background, rise the bulky crenellated walls encircling the Heavenly Jerusalem, which strikingly resembles a medieval Russian town. Roerich himself explained the meaning of the painting as follows: “the angels guard the precious Foundation-Stone of the World, in which both good and evil is concentrated; the symbols of these are written on the Stone”.

The idea of the Sacred Stone – the Stone of Wisdom or the Stone of Life – making the focus of the painting goes back to the early medieval European legend or myth of the Holy Grail, the Chalice into which Joseph of Arimaphea allegedly had gathered Christ’s spilled blood. This legend inspired the German poet Wolfram von Eschenbach to write his famous romance Die Sage von Parzival. However the Holy Grail, according to Eschenbach, was not the Chalice but the Wandering Stone, Lapis Exilis, which fell down from heavens or, as another German legend has it, was carried to the earth by angels and possessed some miraculous powers.

To obtain this magic relic was Parsifal’s supreme goal:

“Ich will von keiner Freude wissen
Muss ich des Grales Anblick missen...
Es sei mein einz’ges Streben,
Fortan mein ganzes Leben”.

(I don’t want any joy
Until I see the Grail.

¹ Korotkina 1985, 105.