In New York: Haunted by Spirits

You must teach others to search for My World
– the World of the Knowing Spirit.

Agni Yoga, Leaves of Morya’s Garden, I, 15.

Nothing draws people together into
such intimate soul-to-soul relationship as psychic quest.

Arthur Conan Doyle, The Land of Mist

Nikolai Roerich was 46 and Elena 41 when they came to America. It was 3 October 1920, Sunday, when the SS Zealand which took them across the Atlantic dropped anchor in the New York harbor. When they disembarked, they hardly realized that they were stepping into the New World that would soon change their lives completely and irrevocably by transforming them both into entirely new personalities, mystics and gurus, who would herald the New Era and offer ailing humanity their spiritual remedy, Agni Yoga.

Upon their arrival, the Roerichs put up at the first-class Hotel des Artists. The hotel was in fact an apartment house where apartments were designed so as to be suitable for well-to-do artists. Each of them had a spacious, double-height studio room, with large windows, to provide the optimal conditions for artists. The Roerichs had rented an apartment in this hotel, but three months later they moved to a cheaper place, the Beaux Art Hotel, and thence, in the fall of 1921, into a poorly furnished apartment at the West End Arena and 103rd Street.¹ They were badly in need of money at that time, despite the bright prospects the artist’s arrangement with Robert Harshe had promised them.

Their first impressions of the “City of the Yellow Devil” as the proletarian writer Maxim Gorkii dubbed New York were neatly expressed in Yuri Roerich’s letter to Vladimir Shibaev:

¹ See Louis Horch, History of Institutions and Roerichs, handwritten manuscript, Amherst Centre for Russian Culture (Massachusetts), Box 1–36, folder 10.
On October 3, in the morning, we began to draw nearer to New York. From afar New York looks like a medieval city. By its character it resembles Russian and Swedish cities. There’s a lot of life [in it]. The famous skyscrapers decorate it with their monumental forms. At nighttime the lights of signboards and advertisements flare up all over the city. It’s worth taking a walk down Broadway, this realm of light, in the evening. The bustling crowds, the glowing lights against the dark sky make a nightmarish impression. One feels that the city is still young and has not yet taken on a form of its own like Paris and London.²

Yuri (George) however soon left New York for Cambridge, Massachusetts, having joined the department of Indian philology at Harvard. As for Sviatoslav, who was now a full 16, he enrolled in Columbia University to study architecture but after an academic year there he left this school for the more prestigious Harvard and he also attended classes of sculpture at the University of Massachusetts.

The family would stay in America for a period of less than three years, until May 1923 when they sailed to Europe and from there finally off to India. In general, the Roerichs had been faring quite well during this time, as compared to other Russian artists who had immigrated to America after the Bolshevik revolution. The famous composers S. Rachmaninov and S. Prokofiev had already settled in the United States and they were followed in later years by a host of other artists (painters, sculptors, men of letters etc.), such as S.A. Sorin, S.Y. Sudeikin, G.V. Deriuzhinskii and B.I. Burliuk, to name a few. After the turmoil and chaos of revolutionary Russia they found America a relatively quiet haven of refuge, though many of them now faced another problem, that of adapting themselves and their artwork to American cultural standards and the art market. Luckily for Nikolai Roerich, his artistic work as a painter and theatre designer was widely advertised in the American press, thanks to Harsche, so he found a ready audience for his visionary art when he came to New York.

In early December Roerich’s first exhibition opened at the Kingore Gallery on Fifth Avenue, and he could have hardly wished for more. The exhibit was a big success. Among the 175 paintings displayed were some of Roerich’s old masterpieces and his new works, executed in Karelia and Finland, such as his ‘Treasure of the Angels’, ‘Pagan Russia’, ‘Ecstasy’, ‘A Viking’s Daughter’, ‘The Call of the Sun’, sketches from his Heroica and Dreams of the East series as well as his scenery designs. A catalogue of the exhibition with an introduction written by an art critic Dr. Christian Brinton was printed to introduce Roerich and his art to