

ESSAY

Art and Architecture: A Bahá'í Perspective*

Fariburz Sahba

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Abstract

Art is the indigenous offspring of a society; its distinctive music, literature, drama, visual arts, and architecture emerge in its maturity. This essay explores the spiritual significance of the relationship between traditional and new forms of artistic expression from the author's experience as an architect. To Bahá'ís, creating a work of art is equivalent to an act of worship. In the Bahá'í Era, artists will find a new dimension of abstract truth. However, mastery of any branch of the arts requires a rigorous discipline not generally appreciated. If artists are in advance of the mass of their contemporaries. They must try to open others' eyes to the world which already stands revealed before them. When the full implications of the Bahá'í Revelation for art are grasped, artists will turn towards the Bahá'í Faith, seeing in this religion a new gateway into spiritual worlds.

Résumé

L'art est le rejeton naturel d'une société; la musique, la littérature, le théâtre, les arts visuels et l'architecture qui la distinguent émergent durant sa maturation. Le présent essai explore l'importance spirituelle du rapport entre les formes traditionnelles et nouvelles de l'expression artistique d'après l'expérience de l'auteur comme architecte. Créer une oeuvre d'art équivaut, pour un bahá'í, à un acte d'adoration. Durant l'ère bahá'íe, la vérité abstraite revêtira pour les artistes une dimension nouvelle. La maîtrise d'un art quel qu'il soit nécessite une discipline rigoureuse, un fait souvent méconnu ou sous-estimé. Si les artistes sont en avance par rapport à leurs contemporains, ils doivent s'efforcer de faire voir aux autres le monde qui se révèle déjà à eux. Lorsque l'impact de la révélation bahá'íe pour les arts sera pleinement perçue, les artistes se tourneront vers cette religion, y voyant une nouvelle voie permettant d'explorer des mondes spirituels.

Resumen

El arte es el resultado autóctono de una sociedad; su música característica, literatura, drama, artes visuales, y arquitectura emergen a su madurez. Este ensayo sondea el significado espiritual de la relación entre modalidades tradicionales y nuevas de expresión artística, recopiladas de por de observación propia del autor en calidad de arquitecto. Para los bahá'ís, la creación de una obra de arte equivale a un acto de adoración. En la Era Bahá'í los artistas encontrarán una nueva dimensión de verdad abstracta. No obstante, la maestría de cualquier ramo de las artes requiere una disciplina rigurosa no comúnmente reconocida. Si los artistas se adelantan al cuerpo de sus contemporáneos, tienen entonces la obligación de procurar abrir los ojos de sus prójimos al mundo que ante ellos ya queda revelado. Cuando el significado completo de la Revelación Bahá'í se efectúe, los artistas se valdrán de la Fe Bahá'í, viendo en esta religión un nuevo medio de acceso a los mundos espirituales.

Art is the indigenous offspring of a society: that is to say, it originates from within that society, rather than being something that comes to it from outside. If we compare society to a rose, then art is like the fragrance of that rose. The time we are most sensible of this fragrance is when the rose is in its fullest bloom. So long as the flower is in bud, its fragrance remains concealed and cannot be perceived by us. Shoghi Effendi, in a letter on his behalf to the American National Spiritual Assembly dated 21 September 1957, confirms that "distinctive music, literature, art, architecture, etc. [are] the flower of the civilization and [do not come] at the beginning of a new Revelation ..." (*The Compilation of Compilations* 8).

At the same time, we know, as Shoghi Effendi tells us, that art is an expression of the outpourings of the Holy Spirit. Since Bahá'ís believe that the outpourings of the Holy Spirit vouchsafed in each religious Dispensation are in essence one, the classification of art into Islamic, Christian, or Bahá'í is superficial. Such categories are for

convenience of reference, but the reality that lies behind them is the same. Something either is art, or it is not; either it strikes in us a responsive chord, or it does not. These categories and classifications are the work of human beings—classical and modern, conservative and avant-garde, Christian and Islamic—all are factitious artificial designations. A collection of words either is or is not a poem; the form in which it is cast is immaterial.

Among the most eloquent illustrations of this point is Bahá'u'lláh's use of quotations from the poetic works of Mawlaví. Can such quotations not be said to constitute Bahá'í poetry? There is much bequeathed to us by the poets of old that may justly be considered Bahá'í poetry, since it not only accords harmoniously with the letter of the sacred writings but also is imbued with the outpourings of the Holy Spirit. What I mean here by Bahá'í art is art that draws its inspiration from the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. These teachings of course have their basis in previous Dispensations, and those artists who were ahead of their time grasped something of these divine realities already in the age in which they lived. Assuredly, Bahá'í artists will have before their gaze these same realities in a more ample and perspicuous form, and, as they grow ever more familiar with them, will progress accordingly and exert an increasingly potent and far-reaching influence.

In the Bahá'í Faith, art enjoys a very elevated position. Reading the Bahá'í writings, we find that the rank of art parallels that of religion. In view, then, of its high distinction and exalted spiritual station, we may readily appreciate that our predicament in approaching the subject of Bahá'í art is comparable to surveying a beautiful panorama by gazing through the eye of a needle. For the moment, we can say no more than that it is a breathtaking and entrancing prospect but that we are incapable of visualizing it in detail. Shoghi Effendi states in one of the letters on his behalf dated 23 December 1942:

We cannot possibly foresee, standing as we do on the [threshold] of Bahá'í culture, what forms and characteristics the arts of the future, inspired by this Mighty New Revelation, will have. All we can be sure of is that they will be wonderful.... (*Lights of Guidance* 413)

The Dimensions of Art

In the field of the plastic and architectural arts, only four dimensions have so far been identified. The “two-dimensional arts” like calligraphy and painting are executed on a flat surface and displayed in two dimensions. Once art assumes a third dimension—acquires an element of depth, that is—it changes into sculpture, which has a range of possibilities and aesthetic considerations all its own. The fourth dimension in art is that of time and movement. Consider what realms are opened when a two-dimensional representation becomes three-dimensional. And when the dimension of movement is added, a whole new world comes into being, as if an inanimate statue had all at once sprung into life. When the fourth dimension is added, it is as though a body of still water, possessed of the three dimensions of length, breadth, and depth, were brought into motion. The movement and brilliance, beauty and freshness it thus acquires create a whole new world of experience and sensation—a world that could not have been imagined while the water remained in its three-dimensional state. With the addition of each new dimension, the theories and notions applicable to the previous dimensions are turned completely upside down. It is my belief that the Bahá'í conception of art goes beyond these four dimensions.

I do not wish to be understood in too linear a sense, as if maintaining that the three-dimensional arts are inherently superior to the two-dimensional arts, and the four-dimensional to the three-dimensional. Clearly, it is possible for a two-dimensional canvas by a talented artist to be almost palpably imbued with life and motion, just as it is, conversely, possible for a poorly conceived sculpture or a badly choreographed dance to be singularly lacking in these qualities. Without becoming involved in a complex discussion of the concept of “dimension” in the various arts, I simply wish to make the point that the addition of each new dimension, however this be accomplished, opens the artist to a whole new world of possibilities. According to my understanding on the basis of my readings of the Bahá'í writings, the Bahá'í artist perceives a yet further dimension. A fifth dimension will, I believe, be added to the World of art, and future artists will, as they become sensible of this new dimension, turn eagerly towards the Bahá'í Faith, for they will see this religion as a new gateway providing access into spiritual worlds. I would like to attempt a definition of this fifth dimension, aware as I am that, in our present state of unknowing, any such attempt must be as inadequate and out of place as that of a small child's endeavoring to define the nature of the soul.

In order to discuss this new dimension, we must first decide upon a name for it. I suggest that we might refer to it as the “Spiritual Dimension” or the “Dimension of Necessary Relations.”

In my opinion, a true artist does not so much describe or convey feelings, as create them and call them into being. However much someone may tell me that a certain spectacle is “beautiful,” merely repeating that it is beautiful does not make it so. Instead of describing a certain sensation or inspiration, the artist should, I feel, seek rather to elicit or provoke it. It is we, the spectators, whose task it is to discern the elements of beauty in any picture we may see; and even if the picture be not particularly beautiful in itself, we may still sense the underlying beauty of

the artist's vision. It is we, the spectators, who must form our own relationship with a particular work of art, and it is in relation to us, the spectators, that such a work fulfills itself and achieves its consummation. A true poet or painter prepares the terrain upon which we, the spectators, then enter.

Only in relation to the viewers does the work of any artist have real meaning. When we read a beautiful piece of poetry, we enter imaginatively into the world depicted by the poet. The poet's words do not restrict and limit us, but rather allow us to move with them—even on occasion to outpace the poet. To take another example, when we look at a painting such as Van Gogh's celebrated *Sunflowers*, we do not see simply sunflowers; rather, as we contemplate the canvas and, as it were, move beyond its surface, we find our imagination stirred, and, almost involuntarily, we set to pondering the true relation of flower to sun, of flower to wind and sun and moon, and so forth. It is this element of art that I refer to as the "Dimension of Necessary Relations."

The Bahá'í artist makes of his or her work in reality a mirror of self, which the artist sets before the mirror of our soul and of our imagination. From these two images a third, transcendental image takes form, an image that derives completely neither from the artist nor from ourselves, but which represents an abstract truth—a truth that goes beyond the [our dimensions of the physical world.

The spectator's involvement in a work of art is a matter of supreme importance. Imagine, for example, in the realm of architecture a plain bare room that is for the moment shut off from the outside world—like a square box with us inside. This room is the creation of an architect and has physical reality. Inside it, we are bound both physically and mentally; whichever way we look, we see before us only wall and are arrested at that point. But if there be a single aperture in one corner of the room admitting natural light, the very instant this light penetrates the room, we, its occupants, find ourselves set free. Passing through this aperture in our imaginations, we roam beyond it, and picture to ourselves a farm, for instance, with a tree and greensward, animals at pasture, and farmhands laboring. One person may see a cascading waterfall, another may see something else; but whatever the case, we are no longer confined by these four walls: imagination is set in motion—and all because of the light admitted by that aperture.

Now, returning to the example of water, picture a plain glass of water—water composed of hydrogen and oxygen, but confined to the limits of the container. I spoke of the beauty of water when the fourth dimension of movement was added to three-dimensional still water, and a whole different refreshing spirit comes into being. I see a fifth dimension where this water attains its highest expression, as in a mighty river roaring, its forces splayed against rocks and trees and the firmament, and the pinnacle of its glory is displayed as it descends over a waterfall and a cloud of water droplets refracted in the light of the sun becomes a beautiful, heavenly rainbow. The rainbow is the same water that was in our glass, but it has attained a different reality in relation to the realities of things, has been "liberated," has been transfigured by the sun, and has entered into a relation with all other things. It has established a relation with the light, the air, and the wind, and thereby attained the fullest limit of its perfection. If one were to ask blind persons for a definition of water, they would doubtless use such terms as "wet" and "fluid," "potable" and "liquid." But if these blind persons were to gain sight and see a rainbow for the first time, they would be filled with wonder and astonishment, and perhaps exclaim, "O God! What a marvelous work Thou hast created! I had not known water; this is the reality of water—beauty, perfection, light!"

The Task of the Bahá'í Artist

In my view, the task of a Bahá'í artist is to open the eyes of earth-bound people, insensible of this fifth dimension (the "Dimension of Necessary Relations"), to the beauty of the rainbow. To expose the water to the light. To bring the water into relation with the light and with ourselves. To connect the reality of the water to our own reality, and to place them side by side. How beautiful in this regard is the following statement by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, affirming the interrelatedness of life:

...religion is the [necessary relations inherent in] the realities of things. The Manifestation—that is, the Holy Lawgiver—unless He is aware of the realities of beings, will not comprehend the [necessary relations inherent in] the realities of things.... (*Some Answered Questions* 158)¹

"Love is ... the vital bond inherent, in accordance with the divine creation, in the realities of things" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 27). And again, in a tablet to Shaykh Muhammad-Hasan, Nizamu'l-'Ulama', recently translated from the Persian, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "... true order and law are the necessary relations inherent in the realities of things, demanded and necessitated by the nature of creation. If thou art able, do thou promote this order and promulgate this heavenly law." Yet again, addressing one of the American believers, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "Thou hadst asked about fate, predestination and will. Fate and predestination consist in the necessary [relationships inherent] in the realities of things. These relationships have been placed in the realities of existent beings through the power of creation..."

(*Selections* 198).² Notice in what terms ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has spoken of “love,” “religion,” “order and law,” and “fate and predestination” in these quotations. In the Tablet to Dr. Forel, too, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “Now concerning nature, it is but the essential properties and the necessary relations inherent in the realities of things” (*Auguste Forel and the Bahá’í Faith* 20).³ And again in the Tablet to the Hague, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks of “wise souls who are aware of the [necessary relations inherent in] the realities of things ...” (*Selections* 297).⁴

In my view, then, the role of art in the Bahá’í context consists of apprehending and unveiling the “necessary relations inherent in the realities of things.” The Bahá’í artist, in other words, is a person who understands the Baha’i Faith and is sensitive to the realities of the spiritual world. The Bahá’í artist knows the ecstasy of love and has observed in life the workings of fate and destiny, the interplay between free will and pre-ordination. The Bahá’í artist is an intimate of nature’s mysteries and a keen observer of the unfoldment of God’s Great Plan. Consider! If we could but communicate this conception of art to those who are still distractedly attempting to define it, then all the divergencies and incompatibilities among their various schools of thought would be resolved by these luminous utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and practitioners of the arts would realize what wonderful worlds of inspiration had been opened up before them.

In pondering these holy utterances, we realize that the artist is ill effect a true believer. This artist-believer sees already the rainbow in a glass of water, because she or he knows the “necessary relations inherent in the realities of things.” He or she knows the relation of light to sun, of the human being to light and sun, and, setting these in relation to each other, sets before our gaze a rainbow and opens our eyes to the “highest paradise” of all things.

In this same connection, the Bahá’í artist has the ability to effect a spiritual conquest, establishing as she or he does a relation with the human heart. It is most important for us to understand and bear in mind the significant role Bahá’í artists, by virtue of the relationship they establish both with the human heart and with the world of nature, can play in attracting the world’s attention to the Bahá’í Faith. To return to the same analogy of the mirror used above, consider the following statement of the Báb:

... verily God desireth that your hearts should become mirrors unto your brethren in the Faith, so that ye find yourselves reflected in them, and they in you. This is the true Path of God, the Almighty, and He is indeed watchful over your actions. (*Selections from the Writings of the Báb* 56)

Shoghi Effendi, in a letter to an individual believer dated 17 February 1933, says the following:

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions. (Qtd. in *Conservation of the Earth’s Resources* iii)

Necessary Relations

Shoghi Effendi tells us with great clarity that we cannot be Bahá’í in our hearts alone but that we must look to and appreciate the “necessary relations inherent in the realities of things.” Many years ago, when I first journeyed to India and was occupied in studying the architecture of that country, I set out at dawn to visit the Taj Mahal. The air was enchantingly fresh and fine. It being the rainy season, the heavens were all in motion and presented a stirring array of vivid and ever-changing colors. The scudding clouds and shifting play of light among them were indescribably beautiful. Always, when one visits historical sites in India, one attracts a train of followers bent on offering their services as guides. On that occasion, a poor barefooted man had fallen in behind me and was importuning me to let him show me around the Taj Mahal. For a time I resisted his entreaties, but finding my repulses of no avail, I finally permitted him to do as he proposed.

After a short preamble devoted to the review of various circumstances eventuating the construction of the Taj Mahal, he spoke of the love of Shah Jahan for his wife Mumtaz Mahal, and of a variety of other matters too. As I listened to him, I was filled with astonishment that such a person, who had in all probability repeated his narrative hundreds of times, should yet be able to discourse about the Taj Mahal with such ardor and enthusiasm and that even after the passage of so many years, both he and others should feel so intimately connected to the building as almost to regard it as a living being. Historically speaking, my guide’s narrative was not precise, but to me the true significance of his words lay in the sensation they conveyed that this building had a special place in his heart and was in a manner connected to him.

The Taj Mahal was constructed according to Iranian architectural principles by an Iranian architect during the Safavid period, but, in my opinion, it does not exhibit the same perfect harmony of proportion found in other

Islamic structures, many of which in fact far surpass it in beauty. How is it then that this particular structure is dearer to people's hearts than all those others, attracting to it droves of visitors from all parts of the world and India throughout the whole course of the year? That very morning, as my self-appointed guide was going through his narrative, it came to me that architecture is not simply a question of beauty and proportion, but rather of the establishment of a direct connection with the human heart—a connection that transcends mere philosophical, artistic, and architectural considerations. The abiding popularity of the Taj Mahal resides in this—that it has established just such a direct connection with people's hearts.

It is this question of establishing a direct connection with people's hearts which will, I believe, constitutes the primary concern of future Bahá'í artists, no less in the fields of music and poetry than that of architecture. The history and legend of this building, the feelings of those who labored to build it, passing from mouth to mouth, from heart to heart, have become embedded in the tablet of the human heart—their only proper home—and left their lasting imprint there. Such is the effect of all true artistic labor.

Of course, it must be borne in mind that in order truly to appreciate a work of art we need a certain amount of knowledge and familiarity with artistic theory. It is said that the Russian leader Khrushchev, while visiting an exhibition of the works of Picasso held in Russia, commented to the artist: "I don't understand your work." "Do you enjoy the work of Pushkin," Picasso asked him, "and read it with understanding?" "Naturally," replied Khrushchev, "I derive great pleasure from it." "May I inquire," Picasso asked again, "how it is that you understand his works and read them with such pleasure?" "I read them and enjoy them!" Khrushchev exclaimed, nonplussed. "Aha! You *read* them," persisted Picasso, "but what did you do to be able to read them?" "I learned reading and writing at school," stated Khrushchev simply. "So," said Picasso, "you see how many years you labored and studied to be able to enjoy the works of Pushkin! Assuredly, you didn't start reading poetry with the works of Pushkin. No doubt you commenced with simpler poetry and gradually became familiar with the work of Pushkin, so that now with all your accumulated experience you are in a position to read it with enjoyment. But have you undergone a similar training in the field of painting? And how, without such training, can you hope to understand an art-form which has evolved through many centuries of development before arriving at the present point?"

The modern Iranian poet Nímá Yúshjí (once the focal point of considerable controversy and criticism but now accepted in both East and West as a distinguished and influential figure who played a leading part in the contemporary transformation of the Iranian literary scene and who initiated a new trend in Persian literature) has described in one of his articles how certain imperceptive and narrow-minded critics would, within the space of a few minutes, preemptorily dismiss from consideration the work he had completed over a period of half a century. This is a most important point. Each branch of the arts, to be mastered, requires of the student a rigorous discipline of reading, understanding, care, study, and arduous application, albeit not everyone can easily appreciate this fact. We should be on our guard not to judge too severely the work of Bahá'í artists, for undoubtedly it will be of a novel and perhaps unprecedented character.

The Art of the Future

'Abdu'l-Bahá states: "There will be a new art, a new architecture, fused of all the beauty of the world of the past, but new" (*Star of the West* 6: 30–31). If we were to show the greatest masterpieces of the finest Persian calligraphers to some Iranian youth who have grown up abroad knowing nothing about their national artistic heritage, they would be quite incapable of appreciating them, lacking as they do the basic apparatus for this purpose.

Forbear, if wise men's words perplex thee, to repine;
Thou graspest not their aim? Say then: "The fault is mine!"⁵

We must be aware that, if artists are in the vanguard of their contemporaries, their task is to do whatever lies in their power to open others' eyes to the world which already stands revealed before the artists. There can be no doubt that true art will eventually find its proper place and leave its special impression on people's hearts. The poet Háfiz, for instance, is known and his works relished by all Persians, but this has only come about after the passage of many years. All kinds of artistic works are produced, and it is our spiritual duty to encourage and recognize the value of artistic talent; then, whatever is true and genuine will inexorably assume its rightful and enduring place, while what is of only specious or superficial merit will gradually disappear.

If artistic activity were discouraged and no efforts were exerted in this area, how would it be possible for "true Bahá'í art" to emerge? Take the case of Islamic architecture in Iran. The Táríkháníh of Dámghán is one of the first mosques ever built in the country. In outward appearance, this structure is a virtual replica of a Zoroastrian fire-temple, lacking the beautifully proportioned features of later Islamic buildings. Nevertheless, any

survey of the mature Islamic architecture of Iran invariably commences with a consideration of the *Tárikháníh* of *Dámghán*; it does not all at once launch into a description of the mosques of Ardistan or *Shaykh* Lutfu'lláh.

The very first Bahá'í House of Worship was that at 'Ishqábád (Russian Turkistan). In style, this House of Worship bears a close and undeniable resemblance to a mosque. Of course, it also exhibits certain original and beautiful features of its own, but nevertheless the Islamic influence is so predominant that most who saw a picture of it would automatically assume it was a mosque. However, in the second Bahá'í House of Worship at Wilmette, Illinois, USA, although the architectural influences of the age are still in evidence, we witness a prodigious and unprecedented leap forward towards a freer, less conventional style of building, and the net result is extraordinarily dignified and impressive. Doubtless in the future, when Bahá'í architecture attains its full maturity, many beautiful and majestic Houses of Worship will be erected; but however grand or numerous these may become, they will never form the starting-point for any survey of Bahá'í architecture: rather, that honor will be reserved for those first pioneer structures at 'Ishqábád and Wilmette.

This same principle is true in all the other fields of art. If today we do not recognize the value of our artists and provide them with encouragement and support, then we will deprive the arts from attaining in future to their full maturity, for the development of mature artistic expression is a necessarily gradual process, one that can be neither forced nor rushed.

Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us:

Strain every nerve to acquire both inner and outer perfections, for the fruit of the human tree hath ever been and will ever be perfections both within and without. It is not desirable that a man be left without knowledge or skills, for he is then but a barren tree. Then, so much as capacity and capability allow, ye needs must deck the tree of being with fruits such as knowledge, wisdom, spiritual perception and eloquent speech. (Qtd. in *Excellence in All Things* 2)

In a tablet addressed to a Bahá'í painter, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

I rejoice to hear that thou takest pains with thine art, for in this wonderful new age, art is worship. The more thou strivest to perfect it, the closer wilt thou come to God. What bestowal could be greater than this, that one's art should be even as the act of worshipping the Lord? That is to say, when thy fingers grasp the paint brush, it is as if thou wert at prayer in the Temple. ("Extracts from the Writings and from Letters of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice on the Arts and Architecture" 1)

Often, in discussions on the state and development of Bahá'í art, one hears it stated that the time has not yet arrived for Bahá'ís to concern themselves with art and its advancement, and that "Now is the time for teaching" the Bahá'í Faith. What proponents of this view seem not to realize is that artists are potentially some of the most effective of all Bahá'í teachers, inasmuch as almost no one is better situated than they to proclaim the Bahá'í Faith. Observe how even now, in Eastern Europe, Bahá'í youth, many of whom have still not acquired a deep and mature understanding of the Bahá'í Faith, have nevertheless been able, through their musical performances and poetry recitals, so to touch people's hearts as to win many new recruits. Another notable example in this area is the well-known Canadian Bahá'í painter Otto Donald Rogers, member of the Continental Board of Counsellors and member of the International Teaching Centre, who ranks among the most prominent of North American painters. Having been present at various of his lectures in different parts of the world, I have heard him discourse about the Bahá'í Faith for hours at a stretch before large gatherings of artists and intellectuals.

In the art of poetry, the element of rapport is especially important. A true poet will open the portals of our imagination and lead us into worlds of vision. We often find, when telling a child a story, that hardly have we pronounced the opening words—for example, "Once upon a time, there was a lion"—than the child herself takes over the narrative, saying (to continue the same example), "It was big. It lived in a jungle." Artists, like storytellers, take us back to the pure world of childhood and stimulate us to give free rein to our imagination. This point can be illustrated from the work of a gifted Iranian poet who was ahead of his time and whom I had the honor to know very well. Tragically, unable to withstand the assault of time's misfortunes, his sensitive soul departed this world far before the usual span. The value of Suhráb-i-Sípíhrí's distinctive contribution to Persian art and letters has now been fully recognized. I have selected certain portions from a poem of his called "Water's Footfall,"⁶ in which the different "worlds" I have spoken of are, I feel, almost palpably present:

I'm from Kashan.
Things aren't so bad for me.

I've a crust of bread, a modicum of understanding, a
particle of taste.
I've a mother who's better than a tree-leaf, friends better
than the running water,
And a God in this vicinity:
Within these gilly-flowers, beneath this stately pine,
In the awareness of the water, in the law of plants.
I'm a Muslim.
My qiblah⁷ is a crimson rose;
My place of prayer a fountain; my mohr⁸ the light.
The prairie is my prayer-mat.
I perform my ablutions with the rattling of the
window-panes.
In my prayer the moon swims, the spectral shadows glide
Rock is visible from behind my prayer:
Each atom of my prayer has crystallized.
I recite my prayer when the wind sounds the adhán⁹ atop
the minaret of the cypress tree.
My Kaaba is beside the water's edge.
My Kaaba is beneath the locust-trees.
My Kaaba is like the breeze: it moves from bower to bower,
it moves from town to town.
My "Black Stone" is the brilliance of the flower-bed.

* * *

I'm from Kashan.
I'm a painter by profession.
From time to time I make a coloured cage, and sell it to you
so that the melody of the anemones imprisoned in it may
refresh the heart of your solitude.

* * *

I'm from Kashan, but
My town is not Kashan.
My town has been lost.
Hectic and feverish,
I've built a house on the other side of the night.
In this house I'm close to the dank obscurity of the
vegetation.
I hear the sound of the flower-garden breathing,
And the sound of darkness pouring off a leaf,
And the sound of brightness coughing from behind a tree,
The sneeze of water from every cleft of rock,
And the dripping of the swallow from the roof of spring.

* * *

I'm close to where the earth begins,
I take the pulse of roses.
I'm acquainted with the sodden destiny of water, the
custom of the tree.

* * *

My spirit flows in the direction of the new in things.
My spirit from sheer longing is sometimes seized with
coughing.
My spirit has no formal occupation:
It counts the drops of rain, the chinks between the bricks.

* * *

Let us read no book in which the wind is still,
Nor any book in which dew's skin is dry,

Nor any book in which the cells lack depth.
 Let us not wish that any fly should flit away from nature's
 finger-tip,
 Nor any leopard exit out creation's door.
 And let us know that were it not for worms, creation would
 be incomplete,
 And were it not for claws, the law of trees would be
 deranged,
 And were it not for death, our hands would grope in search
 of something.
 And let us know that were it not for light, flight's living
 logic would be otherwise.
 And let us know that before coral, there was a vacuum in the
 thinking of the ocean.
 And let us not ask where we are:
 Let us smell the fresh petunias in the hospital.
 * * *
 It is not for us to understand the "secret" of the crimson
 rose:
 Perchance our task is this,
 To float in the "spell" of the crimson rose.
 * * *

Has not this poet discovered the "necessary relations inherent in the realities of things"? To me, his statement that "my spirit flows in the direction of the new in things" seems fully consistent with this conception of the rôle of art. Any artistic creation in which the "dew's skin is dry"—which is not living, in other words—is devoid of spirit. Bahá'í artists, in accordance with the definition suggested above, are at once intoxicated lovers and true believers; but however spectacular their achievement, they win remain humble and self-effacing knowing that what they have perceived is but the fragrance of the rose, that it has not originated with the artist, and that it therefore does not belong to the artist but rather to the whole of creation. This is a most important point. In a way it is the moral of Saadi's famous line: "No thought of self hath he whose love is true." A true artistic work is one which, like the fragrance of the rose, is wafting in the very air we breathe. Look again at this beautiful statement from Suhráb-i-Sípihrí's "Water's Footfall": "From time to time I make a coloured cage, and sell it to you / so that the melody of the anemones imprisoned in it may / refresh the heart of your solitude." Observe how in his verses the poet has succeeded in creating for us a wordpainting—a "coloured cage," the melody of whose "imprisoned" flowers refreshes the heart of our solitude.

In bringing back art to people's daily lives, it is important for us to keep open the doors of our hearts and to preserve in ourselves a readiness both to receive and to learn. In this connection, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says in a tablet:

O thou true friend! Read, in the school of God, the lessons of the spirit, and learn from love's Teacher the innermost truths. Seek out the secrets at Heaven, and tell of the overflowing grace and favour of God.

Although to acquire the sciences and arts is the greatest glory of mankind, this is so only on condition that man's river flow into the mighty sea, and draw from God's ancient source His inspiration. When this cometh to pass, then every teacher is as a shoreless ocean, every pupil a prodigal fountain of knowledge. If, then, the pursuit of knowledge lead to the beauty of Him Who is the Object of all Knowledge, how excellent that goal; but if not, a mere drop will perhaps shut a man off from flooding grace, for with learning cometh arrogance and pride, and it bringeth on error and indifference to God.

The sciences of this world are droplets of reality; if then they lead not to reality, what fruit can come of illusion? (*Selections* 110)¹⁰

Elsewhere, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

All Art is a gift of the Holy Spirit. When this light shines through the mind of a musician, it manifests itself in beautiful harmonies. Again, shining through the mind of a poet, it is seen in fine poetry and poetic prose. When the Light of the Sun of Truth inspires the mind of a painter, he produces marvellous

pictures. These gifts are fulfilling their highest purpose, when showing forth the praise of God. (Qtd. in Lady Blomfield, *Chosen Highway* 167)

And elsewhere, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, addressing a Bahá’í painter, has the following advice to offer:

As to your art, it is one of the teachings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that art is identical with an act of worship, and you must go on with your art and improve in it; and through this very Cause you will be able to make great progress in your art, for you will be helped from above. Say, “I have two arts, one physical, the other spiritual. The physical one is that I draw the images of men; my spiritual art is that I draw the images of the angels, and I hope that at last I shall be able to draw pictures of the perfections of God. My physical art will at last end, but my spiritual art is everlasting. My physical art can be done by many, but my spiritual art is not the work of everyone.” (*Star of the West* 6:30–31)

The task facing would-be Bahá’í artists is an extraordinarily challenging and difficult one, requiring of them years of effort, perseverance, and arduous application if they wish to become exponents of that true art described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The process may perhaps be likened to that of excavating an underground spring: long periods of strenuous exertion and gruelling labor are necessary to dig down to the level of the spring; but when at last the spring is reached, its waters gush forth spontaneously in a constant, liberal stream. Assuredly, however, Bahá’í artists will, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá assures us, be assisted in their efforts through confirmations from the realm on high.

In many countries of the world today such as the former East Bloc countries, China, Japan, and Iran—countries whose cultures reached their zenith many years ago and which are now subject to the relentless incursions of Western material civilization—acute anxiety and bewilderment prevails over how best to protect and to preserve their unique artistic and cultural traditions. Nowadays, for example, one has less the sense of China in Beijing than in the Chinese quarter of Vancouver, for in present-day Beijing it is difficult to discover any of the distinctive features of native Chinese art and architecture. One of the most crucial considerations in respect to teaching, then, is that in countries like this, there is perceptible a deep yearning after some authentic and original means of connecting their past to their present and their future, for no longer can they cling solely to their time-honored ways and traditions, and pretend that the ever-swelling tide of Western cultural developments does not exist.

The age, the century, the materials, the methods—all have changed. Domes in ancient buildings were partly an expression of the architectural exigencies of their age; whereas, the sophisticated resources now at our disposal have opened up for us unprecedentedly rich and varied possibilities. Some are under the impression that among the requirements of the Bahá’í House of Worship is that it should have a dome. However, Shoghi Effendi has explicitly stated that the dome is not an essential feature of the Bahá’í House of Worship. In effect, it is merely because people are habituated to think of sacred buildings as having domes, that this feature has until now been retained in the House of Worship, but Bahá’í architects will in future devise different designs for the House of Worship, some of which may well omit the dome.

As already mentioned, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us: “There will be a new art, a new architecture, fused of all the beauty of the world of the past, but new” (*Star of the West* 6:30–31). We must realize that Bahá’í art is no mere empty recitation of the past glories of different cultures, but something vibrant, original, and new. It is in fact that very agency which all these countries with venerable cultural traditions of their own are seeking—an art and culture that is both original and new, but which preserves the authentic spirit of their own native art and culture. Wherever I went during my trip to China, I found that whenever I mentioned these ideas, people became imbued with hope and optimism. On one such occasion, a student I encountered had the following to say: “I’ve noticed that Bahá’ís discover the true gem inside each person, and then point it out to them.” I told him in reply that Bahá’u’lláh said the purpose of his mission was to “bring forth the Mystic Gems out of the mine of man.”¹¹

The Temple is Built

When foreigners go to a developing country, they often impress a sense of the country’s backwardness upon those they meet, who are thus made to feel inferior and underprivileged. When Bahá’ís visit such a country, they make every effort to point out the distinctive beauties and positive elements in its culture to those they meet, who are thus made to feel optimistic both about themselves and about their country’s future. The motif of the lotus flower, which I incorporated into my design for the Bahá’í Temple in India, was not my own invention. The design is in fact widespread throughout India, and one may see numerous examples of it almost anywhere one travels in the country—in pictures on temple walls, in the decoration on domes, everywhere. All I did in effect was to adopt this

already existing motif, look at it from a fresh angle, and then give it back to the Indian people in a new and different form.

On the subject of the Indian Temple, perhaps our biggest problem was that it was precisely in India that we wished to construct a House of Worship. In a country where virtually every hill is crowned by a beautiful temple, the people will not in fact accept just any building for such a purpose. How then could we invite them to sit down and pray in some newfangled modern structure dreamt up by a foreigner? While still engaged in my research preparatory to fixing on a design for the House of Worship, I paid a visit to a Hindu temple then under construction and inquired of the building workers how it had been designed and by whom. "Our temples have no architect," they told me. "So who designs these buildings?" I asked them. "The high priest," they informed me. "It's a religious exercise." Upon my requesting to meet the priest who had designed the temple they were building, the workers told me that he devoted half his day to worship and the other half to work. The Hindus believe that as a result of inspiration received during worship, the priest sees in his mind's eye the form the temple will take. The more complex the design, the further the priest is considered to have progressed in the spiritual realms before conceiving it. They hold that the first form to present itself to the priest's mind during contemplation is that of the globe, so any dome in this form they regard as an embodiment of the first stage of progress in the spiritual realms and an evidence of the relatively limited imaginative ability and spiritual powers of its designer.

A further difficulty for us was that, since to the Indian mind a dome constitutes the distinguishing feature of a mosque, any structure we erected incorporating this feature would automatically be identified as Islamic. The House of Worship, then, had, on the one hand, to be completely original and modern in conception, in token of the recency and newness of the Bahá'í Faith; and, on the other hand, to forge a connection with people's hearts, so that they might have a sense of its belonging to them. Now that the House of Worship has been constructed and is drawing hosts of visitors from all religions, it has attracted widespread attention throughout Asia for the success with which it has realized these two aims.

The unique Bahá'í approach to world art and culture is a facet, I would suggest, of that fundamental appreciation of the "necessary relations inherent in the realities of things" which I have already discussed at some length. Such an approach has the potential to generate unprecedented worldwide receptivity to the Bahá'í Faith. It may well be our distinguished Bahá'í artists who in future play the major part in communicating Bahá'u'lláh's healing message to the generality of humankind. How important, then, for us fully to recognize the crucial role of the arts, and to provide for them accordingly.

Notes

1. The phrase "necessary relations inherent in the realities of things," is taken from Shoghi Effendi's translation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet to Auguste Forel and is used throughout this essay as a rendering of "*ravábit-i-darúríyyi-i-mumba 'ith az haqá'iq-i-ashyá*." The published text in *Some Answered Questions* reads: "the essential connection which proceeds from the realities of things."
2. See note 1 above. The published text in *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* reads: "the necessary and indispensable relationships which exist in the realities or things."
3. The Tablet to Auguste Forel was first published in *The Bahá'í Magazine: The Star of the West* 14.3 (June 1923): 101-9.
4. See note 1 above. The published text in *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* reads: "the essential relationships emanating from the realities of things."
5. The lines are from the celebrated Persian poet Háfiz.
6. The following translation takes cognizance of that published in David L. Martin's *The Expanse of Green: Poems of Sohrab Sepehry* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press/UNESCO, 1988) 163.
7. Prayer-direction, toward which the faithful turn in prayer.
8. A clay seal Muslims place on the ground before performing the namáz (daily prayer) to mark the spot where they will lay their heads during prostration.
9. The call to prayer.
10. Retranslated in *Compilation of Extracts from the Bahá'í Writings on Bahá'í Education* 9 as "The sciences of this world are bridges to reality; if then they lead not to reality, naught remains but fruitless illusion."
11. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 13.

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