

**1999 Bahá'í Conference on Social and Economic Development for the Americas**

**THE USE OF THE ARTS  
IN THE  
BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY**

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## THE USE OF THE ARTS IN THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

*It is certain that with the spread of the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh a new era will dawn in art and literature. Whereas before the form was perfect but the spirit was lacking, now there will be a glorious spirit embodied in a form immeasurably improved by the quickened genius of the world.*

(Letter of 2 January 1932 from Shoghi Effendi to an individual)

### I. Introduction

Reports from around the Bahá'í World confirm that the use of the arts in the Bahá'í Community has increased and is meeting with success in pursuing the mandate from the Universal House of Justice to advance the process of entry by troops. This exciting evolution will gather momentum as it initiates further widespread experimentation in the implementation of projects.

What will remain a new challenge for some time to come is the use of the arts, not only for proclamation but also for the work of expansion and consolidation, as called for by the House of Justice in the Four Year Plan. Analysis of field work will be of great value in devising new strategies and in developing material for courses on the use of the arts. While the Training Institutes may offer such courses, providing knowledge and skills, there are other avenues that may prove highly effective in raising up human resources for this field of service. It may be that creating Bahá'í inspired agencies dedicated to the use of the arts, to building a bridge between the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and the world of art theory and practice, will prove to be a fertile field for the design of projects and the training of believers. Such agencies would have wide public appeal and attract significant support; contemporary society is more likely to accept spiritual teachings when expressed through the arts. (1)

Experience gained directly by each local community is vital in adapting approaches to local conditions and eventually building within each national community artistic formats that are effective in reaching the people of that cultural climate. The use of the arts for expansion suggests that this is a means whereby souls can be so attracted to Baha'u'llah and His Mission that they will spontaneously enlist themselves in the Bahá'í movement. The use of the arts for consolidation suggests that community development and the evolution of its institutions, such as the 19 Day Feast, can be assisted by the application of artistic process.

The history of art is an astonishing account of the inter-relationship of cultural expression and community values; the values that inspire civilisation derive from religious truth. Art has a fundamental role to play in the evolution of community since artistic form is not simply the ornament of society but is an important measurement of the progress made in reaching the ideal. The creation of models of profound beauty have by their very order educative effect; art becomes in time a common experience of unity in the culture of a whole population.

Art is a phenomenon, one of the mysteries of the human soul, its practice stemming from observation of creation itself. To use art effectively something of its nature, its *modus operandi*,

must be understood. It is a language and if that language is to be spoken (applied) its vocabulary and potential for compositional structure needs to be realized. This does not mean that the Baha'i community must rely exclusively on professionals, but it does mean that in the field of this endeavor, as in all constructive effort, knowledge, inspiration and skill quicken a healthy evolution.

This paper will present notations and brief commentary on the nature of art as a creative dynamic and raise questions about its application as a supportive process in advancing the larger process of entry by troops. Until more Bahá'í field experience is gained, a discourse of this kind by its very nature can only be considered tentative.

## **II. General Observations**

Evolving the Cause of God on earth through the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh calls forth all the ideal forces of creation. The arts are one such force, and when they serve the high purpose of giving praise to God their relevance to humankind, tutored or untutored, is assured. In addition to contributing to the Bahá'í programs of proclamation, propagation and consolidation, there is an opportunity, unique in this epoch of the formative age, for Bahá'í artists to take a lead in the maturation of each of the artistic disciplines. Throughout the long history of the plastic and performing arts as well as literature, association with the advent of a Divine Educator renewed the spirit, form and content of all artistic expression. This renewal transcends theory and rhetoric, taking each discipline or combination thereof to the field of action where it is put to the test in service of the new vision.

The development of our spiritual, social and intellectual life, as called for in the Bahá'í Sacred Writings, anticipates a highly effective educative process: the arts are a vital part of this process. In today's art world the phrase "cutting edge activity" is used, meaning experimentation with a host of familiar themes re-inventing the manner of presentation. New content of social significance is sought to intensify experience, raise consciousness and convert those who are passive to active participation in the drama of life. The human condition is presented with all its pathos, and in the best examples a longing for an elevated dematerialized world is sensed.

The modernists are not far removed from the position of the German philosopher, Hegel (1770-1831), who asked, " ... what is the true content of art and with what aim is it to be presented?" He answered, " a common view is that it ought to offer us, through our senses, all that finds a place in human experience, all that can arouse and animate the heart and mind of a human being, whether he be cultured or uncultured," and, further, " to draw the human heart through the whole significance of life by means of external representations of its innermost movements, is what, from this perspective, constitutes the peculiar and pre-eminent power of Art." Hegel finally connects the use of art as a servant of religion, " ... on the one hand, it may appear that such works are products of idle fancy or chance. On the other, they seem sometimes to originate in the highest of human impulses, supplying what seems to be an absolute need of man and being wedded in this respect to the most universal religious interests and world perspectives of entire epochs and peoples." (2)

To draw the human heart through the whole significance of life is clearly one objective of Bahá'í deepening programs. The House of Justice said, "The Holy Word has been extolled by the Prophets of God as the medium of celestial power and the wellspring of all spiritual, social and material progress." (3) In training courses designed with a clear focus, understanding the significance of life translates into sacrificial service to the Cause. Book One of the Ruhi Institute course material provides an example. The first section in the course draws the participant to a realization of the power of the Creative Word of God. In the second part, the need to give voice to these words in prayer is established, and in the third a desire to serve develops from Bahá'u'lláh's explanations of the purpose of life and death. (4) While reflection on the Sacred Writings will teach the human heart the significance of life, re-enforcement of this educative process results from presenting the same content in a number of formats.

Within the various disciplines of art a great diversity of approach in presenting the teachings is possible; the effort to work out these approaches is confirmed in the lessons learned. Art as a formal language has a proven power of penetration since it engages all senses simultaneously. A well-conceived work of art, noble in its structure and tender in its poetry, is highly effective in conveying knowledge and generating spirit, as Hegel says, by means of external representations. However, expressive purpose cannot be divorced from clarity of thought, good research and planning; the reason art evokes the spiritual is because it is produced by the mind which we know is a spiritual entity. Works which have the power to move deeply those who come in contact with them have achieved significant form, a unity which is greater than the sum total of its constituent parts. This Bahá'í understanding of unity was reinforced by the philosopher Teilhard de Chardin who wrote that as the unity becomes more profound a higher degree of life is obtainable. (5) Artistic presentations of the Bahá'í Teachings which achieve such a high degree of unity are capable of raising in the public mind a desire for the elevated experience of life which is the promise of the Bahá'í Community.

In the work of the Faith ego-centred activity needs to be avoided; projects making use of the arts require a full measure of collective effort. It should be noted in this regard that the need for collaborative effort in projects does not imply that individual artists should be discouraged from pursuing individual expression as they are moved to do. Art is a form of scholarship and the House of Justice has said, with regard to scholarship, that some practitioners may be moved to work collectively and others will prefer to work alone.

We can be confident that art and its evolution as a system of thought and action in Bahá'í community development will succeed beyond all expectations. This activity is like a template, one essential step in the making of a new creation. Sustained activity will overcome any limitation which restrained religious communities of the past; today we advance the process of entry by troops with the complete authority of God! It was the responsibility of the religious authorities of the past to call down to earth a divine atmosphere within which the people could aspire to God; now this mandate has been transferred to those who recognize Bahá'u'lláh. It follows that in our time any use of the arts by religious orders of a past dispensation is seen by the public simply as culture. In contrast, Bahá'í inspired artistic presentations, however hesitant, are experienced as a spirited sign of a progressive religious movement. People everywhere will

come to associate these expressions of the Bahá'í community with the unfolding of God's purpose for humankind. Present day artists are hastening that day.

Whatever the form of presentation, themes must be adopted which satisfy the longing of people to know the purpose of life and their place in it. Four themes of prime importance are: advancing proofs of the existence of God; the need for religion; progressive Revelation and the immortality of the human soul. Effective communication of the above will confirm the seeker and believer alike, increasing knowledge for the successful teaching of others. These great matters of concern are of such dramatic impact that imaginative presentations can be devised and staged; within the spiritual environment thus created souls individually and even collectively will be moved to the recognition of the existence of a new day in human history and will arise to enlist under the banner of light held aloft by the Blessed Beauty, Bahá'u'lláh.

### **III. Applications**

For the Bahá'í there is no question that the arts and the artist constitute an important element in society; the Bahá'í Writings have established this understanding. However, the application of art as a creative dynamic at the local level is at an early stage of development. At the international level we have a number of inspiring examples such as the Bahá'í Temples, which have become in a dramatic manner beacons of light, silent teachers attracting a constant flow of humanity. All those who have experienced these spiritual metaphors, have come away sensing that the Bahá'í Faith is the religion of the future. Can local projects using the arts to advance the Cause become as influential at the grassroots level? By local projects in this context is not meant buildings but activities to proclaim the Faith, particularly projects which attract and confirm new adherents and consolidate Bahá'í community life.

For the community there exists a question, one that will have many fruitful results as answers are sought: how can such a complex system of thought called art, having evolved over the centuries into a number of distinct disciplines, contribute to the Bahá'í agenda in ways that uphold the sacred nature of the Cause while giving due regard to the integrity of the art form and the creativity of the artist? In addition to the Temples we have other examples to examine wisely. Two which demonstrate a Bahá'í program being served, while upholding individual artistic accomplishment, are the Mount Carmel building and landscape project and the 1992 World Congress Program. Each demonstrates a magnificent marriage of art and the plans of the Faith. In considering these two projects as a creative dynamic, much can be learned about the use of the arts for local application. Setting aside the distinct characteristics and methods of the various artistic disciplines involved, such as architecture, music, drama and the graphic arts, we can observe that they demonstrate in common the ability to inculcate spiritual principle in the artistic form (metaphor) and achieve a unity profound enough to call down confirmation from On High. Such an achievement is of particular importance at the local level, because here a bridge must be built, strong and beautiful, for the multitudes to make their journey across. When Bahá'í institutions and individuals gain a deeper understanding of creativity, the motivation to apply it, to experiment with artistic process, is increased. Further, once such a movement is underway, solutions to problems, such as a perceived lack of trained artists deepened in the teachings or of professional experience on the part of those who are engaged in designing and facilitating

projects, can be found. It may be found that too insistent an application of professionalism dampens the spirit of enterprise and spontaneous innovation. If some of the dynamics of this process are simply set in motion at the grassroots level, the natural capacity and talent of the people will carry it forward and the necessary learning for its continuance will take place. The Universal House of Justice in its Ridván Message 153, which sets the framework for the Four Year Plan, gave this wonderful guidance, " ... at the level of folk art, this possibility can be pursued in every part of the World, whether it be in villages, towns or cities." (6)

During the Fourth Epoch of the Formative Age it is evident that the Supreme Body is guiding the institutions of the Faith toward a greater maturation; that maturation is clearly one that results from the application of process. The phrase, line of action, is an encouragement to think in terms of a process. A line of action has a clear objective, is sustained over time and moves forward by the interaction of a number of activities. Such a movement is a creative dynamic; by its very nature it "learns as it goes", gathering momentum along the way, constantly inspired by the confirmation it attracts. We may tend to see our projects which make use of the arts as isolated events rather than interconnected elements of a pattern which continuously unfolds.

The Bahá'í reader of this paper might now say, " Yes, art is a creative dynamic which needs application in the work of the Cause, but how is this to be done?" Neither the adoption of a standard methodology nor the blind copying of a model is likely to be successful. We cannot generalize this work, it must have a specific life in a given community which takes into account local plans of growth (vision) and resources.

#### **IV Designing metaphors of artistic merit for propagation and consolidation**

To give an answer to the question of how to apply the use of the arts in specific ways, it will serve our purpose best if the tendency to invent a theory or apply a singular methodology is set aside. Rather, we should look to factors of creation which can be set in relation, one to another, and thereby generate metaphors. Each presentation (project) made for an audience is in effect a metaphor, how potent it is in moving its public depends on how deeply felt the relationships are. A leading art critic once said that all art is simply a set of relationships, and a great work is a set of deeply felt relationships.

For the Bahá'í Program a fundamental relationship occurs as a result of the juxtaposition of an artistic discipline, or combination of disciplines, with the Creative Word of God itself. The themes and concepts expounded in the Sacred Writings represent multiplicity and 'Abdu'l-Bahá has assured us that multiplicity is the greatest factor for co-ordination. To understand how central this is, we need to consider the nature of the metaphor as artistic language.

The educator Luis Simpson has defined a metaphor as a process of comparing and identifying one thing with another, and as we see what things they have in common, we see the general meaning they have. Complex themes that would be difficult to communicate by other means are sensed quickly within the moment of poetry. The ability to see one thing in relation to another is almost a definition of intelligence. Thinking in metaphors (and having them presented) is a tool of intelligence, perhaps the most important tool. For example, the institution of the 19 Day Feast

is in a very real sense a metaphor: we experience the spiritual, consultative and social portions in relationship one with another and we draw a common experience from the whole. Even power can be drawn from such a metaphor. " If this feast be held in the proper fashion," 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "the friends will, once in nineteen days, find themselves spiritually restored, and endowed with a power that is not of this world." (7).

One example of a Feast as a metaphor that comes to mind is the following: a mirrored ball was suspended from the ceiling and a spot light turned on it, small points of light flooded every wall and object, including the community members gathered. A further relationship was made between the background music and passages from the Sacred Writings which made repeated use of the analogy of light to spiritual understanding. The consultative portion was concerned with enlightenment by means of a spiritual enrichment program the community was developing. During the social portion the youth presented a dramatic dance movement symbolizing the forces of light dispelling the darkness.

There is a wide latitude for experiments of this kind, but at the same time it is important to be watchful that the dignity of the Faith is upheld and due reverence shown. Theatrical effects for their own sake, isolated from an intelligent presentation of some aspect of the Teachings, would not achieve the intended purpose. The Universal House of Justice has given the following guidance: " Bahá'ís endowed with artistic talent are in a unique position to use their abilities, when treating Bahá'í themes, in such a way as to disclose to mankind evidence of the spiritual renewal the Bahá'í Faith has brought to humanity through the revitalization of the concept of reverence."(8)

Fariborz Sahba, architect of the terraces on Mount Carmel, in a lecture called 'art and architecture' gives another example that illustrates the poetry of relationships. He said to think of a glass of water, composed of hydrogen and oxygen. This water is the same as that found in a bubbling brook, but how different is its condition, its relationships as it moves over the rocks. Again, this water is the same as that found in a rainbow, but here the water has attained its highest paradise. It remains water but has been liberated, transfigured by the sun, and has entered into a relationship with other things, with light, space and the wind. If one were to ask a blind person for a definition of water they might use such terms as liquid, wet and fluid, but if a blind person were to regain sight and see a rainbow for the first time in their life, they would be filled with wonder and astonishment and perhaps exclaim, " O God! What a marvellous world Thou hast created! This is the reality of water – beauty, perfection, light!"

One further example comes to mind. During the closing afternoon of a public conference on the Bahá'í Teachings it was felt that a moving demonstration of unity in diversity was needed, however, this had not been planned and would need to be created on the spot. Four individuals came forward, a Native American with a hand held ceremonial drum, a young woman trained in classical music with her flute, a youth from a rock-band with his electric guitar. They were joined by a fourth individual who in a very clear voice began reciting from the Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh. What followed was a spontaneous juxtaposition of contrasting sounds held together by the common thread of the Creative Word. It had not been rehearsed, it was an intuitive collaboration, a melody of diverse sounds stimulating the outer senses, moving along with the

words, sometimes giving emphasis to the words and at other times, expressing an independent sense of joy as if suddenly animated by the spirit of the words. The outer and inner senses entered into a relationship and the common faculty seemed to be the Holy Word, the medium of celestial power.

‘Abdu'l-Bahá has given many explanations of the dynamic resulting from the relationship of things such as found in the Tablet of Dr. Forel where he states that, " ... by nature is meant those inherent properties and necessary relations derived from the realities of things." (9) The relationship of the outer and inner senses as described by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, gives us one of the most inspiring definitions of process which all activities of life, including artistic process, are engaged with. The five outer senses, sight, hearing, smell, taste and feeling are set in a relationship to the five inner senses; imagination, which conceives things; thought which reflects upon realities; comprehension which comprehends realities and memory which retains whatever man imagines, thinks and comprehends. The intermediary between outward and inward powers is the common faculty. (10) Perhaps this common faculty carries the very content of what has been described as a metaphor.

The development of metaphors comes about by giving form to diversity, it is a movement animated by love which draws the participants close to Bahá'u'lláh. This is described in the beautiful language of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá: " ... for any movement animated by love moveth from the periphery to the centre, from space to the Day Star of the Universe. Perchance thou deemest this to be difficult, but I tell thee that such cannot be the case, for when the motivating and guiding power is the divine force of magnetism it is possible, by its aid, to traverse time and space easily and swiftly." (11)

One further note about the design of metaphors needs to be made concerning artistic language. Each artistic discipline has had a long history in the evolution of its particular form of expression. The richness of these languages needs to be appreciated and applied. In any presentation on stage which makes use of visual effects and structural props, drawing from the great lessons of master painting, sculpture and architecture, will intensify the overall effect of the presentation. The stage is like a painter's canvas and therefore harmonious as well as contrasting colors, textures, light effects and three-dimensional structures all combine for dramatic effect. Beauty is a question of relationships, of proportion, and much of the power of a metaphor is simply the pure beauty of a rich language displayed in all its intensity. Traditional forms and practice are elements of a living art and can be incorporated in ways that link the common experience of people to new concepts, concepts which might otherwise be difficult for them to understand or accept. Linkage with the past is often the best entry point for the future.

It is understood that metaphors have the power to educate; art is a form of knowing. Abdu'l-Baha has explained that the four methods of acquiring knowledge are: by the senses, by reason, by tradition and by the bounty of the Holy Spirit. The first three, while essential, are liable to error, but as to the fourth: " This is through the help of the Holy Spirit which comes to man, and this is the condition in which certainty can alone be attained." (12) It is interesting to note that in the design of anything of an artistic nature these four methods are employed, the outer senses,

rational order (composition), tradition (incorporating artistic language of cultures) and fourth, inspiration which comes as a result of application of art with purity of motive.

Beyond the actual design of presentations to serve the interests of the Faith is perhaps an even larger challenge; a climate of creativity must exist supported by the institutions, the community and the individual believer. The use of the arts requires a large measure of encouragement, courage and experimentation. It represents a new maturity in utilizing talents and capacities which exist within the community members and those who are friends of the Faith, who would willingly lend their expertise and support if approached. Although in the early days of the Faith art was associated with the development of the Cause, for example in the great works of Mishkín-Qalam and in the accomplishment of architects in expressing the spirit of the Cause in buildings, these models, that of the calligrapher and the architect, had historical precedent. Of course, the dramatic stage, music and other graphic arts also have historical precedent; what is now at issue is the universal application with the participation of local communities of art as an integral factor in building a spiritual community, as set forth by the Central Figures of the Faith. It is probable that calling upon the grassroots at this early stage to use the arts to further the Kingdom of God on earth is without precedent. One could cite civilizations of a classical period whose social and religious order were served by artistic expression, but this cannot be compared with the task facing today's Bahá'í Community in creating a broad spectrum of experiments in the use of the arts, thereby providing the kind of learning necessary to enable this resource to make an effective contribution to the unfolding of God's Plan.

Jean Gebser, one of the most creative and stimulating thinkers of modern Europe, has made an exhaustive study attempting to integrate the most advanced knowledge of this age with the spiritual sources of the past. In tracing mankind's path through the archaic, magic, mythic and rational phases in his book, The Ever Present Origin, he concludes this gigantic passage through time by declaring that a new and entirely unique age, characterized by unity, by the elimination of opposites, in possession of all the distinctive qualities, the truth, real facts and circumstance is upon us. It is an age when the ever-present quest of past civilizations to call to the community the presence of the Creator, can be fully manifested! It is an age of oneness and openness, therefore its spiritual, social and intellectual expressions permit light and vision to pass through. (13)

The Bahá'í Cause is the new age, its endeavors the guiding force of evolution; let us hope that in the use of the arts diverse presentations will possess such beauty and clarity, such intoxication that the light of Bahá'u'lláh will pass through to the multitudes who are waiting.

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## References

### Note: See Related Source Material:

**Compilation:** The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith, Bahá'í World Centre Research Department; shared with all National Spiritual Assemblies by the Universal House of Justice, 19 August 1998.

- (1) See statement, The Evolution of Institutional Capacity for Social and Economic Development, prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development, 28 August 1994, for guidelines on Bahá'í inspired agencies.
- (2) On the Arts, Milestones of Thought, by G.F.W. Hegel, abridged and translated by Henry Paolucci, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., Inc. 1979. pp. 1-10.
- (3) See Letter to all National Spiritual Assemblies from the Universal House of Justice; 10 July 1989; concerning literacy.
- (4) See Reflections on the Life of the Spirit, Ruhi Institute. Book 1, second edition. Published July 1995 by Palabra Publications.
- (5) See The Phenomenon of Man, Teilhard de Chardin (New York: Harper and Row, 1959; London: William Collins Sons and Co., Ltd.) p. 165.
- (6) See Ridván 153 Message, The Four Year Plan. Messages of The Universal House of Justice. Palabra Publications, published May 1986; p.37.
- (7) See Letter from The Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh 27 August 1989, concerning the institution of the Feast.
- (8) In a letter from the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 24 September 1987.
- (9) See Tablet to Dr. Forel, Bahá'í World, volume XV, p.39.
- (10) See Some Answered Questions: 'Abdu'l-Bahá; collected and translated from the Persian by Laura Barney, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1964, reprinted 1968, p.245.
- (11) See Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, World Centre Publication, 1978, p. 197.
- (12) See Some Answered Questions, supra, pp. 341-343.
- (13) See The Ever Present Origin, by Jean Gebser; authorized translation by Noel Borstad, with Algis Mickunas. Ohio University Press, Athens. Revised and corrected printing, 1991. ( With reference to the Arts see pp. 454-527, *passim*.)