

Networking Our Vision of the Core Concepts of Art

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Friends, over the last few years it has become clear to the entire Bahá'í community that art has the potential to render a vital service to the teaching work of the Faith and to the spiritual enrichment of Bahá'í community life. The Universal House of Justice has made the use of art one of the notable features of the Four Year Plan, and Shoghi Effendi, as far back as 1932, indicated that the arts could do much to spread the spirit of love and unity.¹

It is most fitting, then, that art be included in a conference on social and economic development, not only with performances for the upliftment of the participants, but also as a subject of consultation in its own right. For the potential of art is far-reaching. It has the ability to attract and edify, to broaden vision, to touch the heart, to strengthen divine morality, to spiritualize the sentiments and galvanize the will of humanity. It can interact with and support virtually every facet of social and economic development. Though artists commonly work as individuals, the fact remains that art's field of influence is eminently social.

We have reached a point where a sizable number of local communities are beginning to turn to artists and a substantial number of artists are beginning to emerge and respond to the call for their services. Yet, we have barely begun to scratch the surface of art's full potential for service. I propose that the fulfillment of this potential will not come about from the isolated efforts of individual artists, however gifted. It will come about only as a result of a deeply effective and large scale collaboration, nationwide, between institutions, communities, artists, and the media.

To begin networking communities and artists appears to be the next logical step. But there are two aspects to networking – outer and inner. The "outer" involves establishing the physical means of communication and coordination among artists and institutions. (This can be done through web sites, databases, and the services of various institutions dealing with the arts at a grassroots, regional or national level.) "Inner" networking involves establishing a shared understanding and vision of art which will serve as the indispensable basis for communication and collaboration.

Core Concepts. As a community we have not yet reached such a shared understanding and vision. If you ask any five Bahá'í artists and five Bahá'í non-artists what their views are regarding the essential nature of art, its highest purpose, its practice, and the role of artists, you will receive ten different answers, sometimes contradictory, radiating in all directions from the vague central point of agreement that art should be of service to humanity. This situation may be due in part to the lack of a published statement, backed by an institution, that summarizes the core concepts of artistic practice from a Bahá'í perspective.

A growing number of people are coming to the conclusion that our lack of consensus in this area, our lack of a shared understanding and vision, has prevented and will continue to prevent us from collaborating on a scale that could bring about the fulfillment of art's wonderful potential. While we build up an "outer" network of contacts

and referrals, then, it is absolutely essential that we also network our "inner" understanding of the nature and role of art.

In this regard it may be helpful to make another distinction. We can think of the features of artistic practice as falling into two groups -- primary and secondary. On the one hand, the primary features are the core: they are fundamental to the concept and practice of art in a Bahá'í context. They will be as valid in the future as they are today, as relevant in the East as they are in the West. They can provide that unity of vision that will serve as a basis for more effective collaboration between artist and community, nationally and even worldwide.

On the other hand, the secondary features of artistic practice provide for diversity. For example, on the secondary level we find the culture that an artist's work reflects, the styles artists use, their attitude to tradition and change, whether they lean more to the established or the innovative, the classical or the popular, the local or the international, the abstract or the figurative, the symbolic or the literal. In all such secondary areas, the principle of unity in diversity embraces a wide variety of approaches to art. All of them should be welcomed and respected, for they make up the natural diversity of artistic expression in the Bahá'í community and enhance our ability to represent and attract the interest of all segments of society.

However, if we are to have unity as well as diversity, we need to have a consensus about the core -- the essentials of artistic practice at the primary level. On this level, there are several key points that distinguish the perspective found in the Bahá'í teachings. About these basic points we should be clear and agreed. As a first step toward "networking our vision," then, I would like to humbly offer a summary of these essential, primary features as I understand them, in the hope this will serve as a point of departure for consultation and eventually lead to a consensus. It is written with the general public as well the Bahá'í community in mind.

TOWARD A SPIRITUAL, WORLD-EMBRACING PERSPECTIVE ON ART

I. The Nature and Powers of Art

Of all the gifts a bountiful Creator has bestowed on the human soul, the capacity to create through the arts is one of the most stirring and rewarding. Artistic creation is a human reflection of one of the names of God, the Fashioner.² It takes its place alongside the many divine attributes reflected in the soul, which together endow humanity with powers that remind us we are created in the image of God.

All human activity is creative in one way or another. One of the distinguishing features of artistic creation is that it gives rise to a work which serves to communicate between the artist and others. Art works communicate in many ways and on many levels. Whether or not artists consciously intend to do so, their works manifest and convey beliefs, values, perceptions, attitudes and feelings, which together constitute the artist's vision of life. This accounts for the tremendous influence art can have upon the public.

Though the different kinds of art vary widely in their mediums and their ways of acting, what they have in common is their ability to affect the human spirit. The world of spirit is the

common domain of all art forms. A work of art, then, is best appreciated in the light of its intended effect on the spiritual life of the receiving public. If the work is in a design art (such as architecture) or a craft (such as carpet weaving), it is best appreciated in terms of its intended effect on both the spiritual and the worldly/material life of the public.

The arts play a variety of roles in society, ranging from light entertainment to emotional and physical therapy. In their highest role, however, the arts seek to promote spiritual growth by ennobling and uplifting the individual soul and the collective life of humanity. It is in this role that they fulfill most completely the basic mandate given to all arts and sciences: to worship and glorify God, to become "a means of access" to God, to "result in advantage to man," "ensure his progress and elevate his rank."³

This role has three main facets -- mystical, moral, and social. Some art forms lend themselves more to one facet than to the others. And some, such as music, lend themselves to all three. The principal aims and highest aspirations of the arts may be described as follows:

-- On a mystical plane, to impart spiritual knowledge, attract the souls to the beauty of the All-Glorious, and fan the flame of divine love;⁴

-- On a moral plane, to "represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations", foster a desire for moral excellence and obedience to the divine teachings, and "be a source of comfort and tranquillity for troubled souls";⁵

-- On a social plane, to promote social well-being, foster world unity, and raise the consciousness of humanity's oneness.⁶

Moreover, art can promote the formation of praiseworthy character. It can disseminate the fragrance of divine teachings. Through its unifying influence, it can strengthen the bonds of harmony and fellowship, and can reinforce throughout the world the sense of common identity shared by the human family. Art can stir yearning for the Kingdom, strengthen faith in God, help instill fear of His justice and hope for His mercy.⁷ It can galvanize the will to act, to obey His commandments and live in harmony with His teachings, which are the source of our spiritual growth. In so doing, art assists us to attain the very purpose of our existence: to know, to love, and to worship God.⁸ All this is implied in its role of *ennoblement*.

Each profession in society renders a service that benefits a particular aspect of human life. The farmer and the doctor, for example, seek to benefit the human body -- the one by providing food and the other by healing. Artists who are spiritually aware address their work directly to the human soul, for that is where art finds its true theater of action. The sights, sounds, words, gestures and forms of an art work are picked up by the senses and transmitted via the nervous system to the soul.⁹ The soul uses the brain as a tool to perceive and evaluate the art work's cognitive and emotional content. But it is in the soul that the art work is truly experienced and registers its impact.¹⁰

Art, then, can have a transforming effect on both the person who creates or performs it, and the public who receives and interacts with it. In its highest expression, art's spiritual power can, and should, be employed to promote the world's unity and peace, society's spiritual health, and

the individual's personal growth. No longer dismissed as a mere recreation and pastime, art should be recognized as one of the most powerful tools for the education and development of humanity. Having such a wide range of potential benefits, the arts should be integrated into the very core of the curriculum for primary and secondary education -- both public and private, nationwide and worldwide.

II. Religion and Art

The essence and common foundation of religion is a body of spiritual and moral teachings revealed by the Messengers of God, the founders of the world's major religions.¹¹ Throughout history, and in all known civilizations, art has been intimately tied to this body of spiritual and moral teachings. The reason for the intimacy is that art, when quickened by a divine spirit, reflects the creative process set into motion by the Word of God. Art then attempts, in its humble way, to reinforce the spiritual and social handiwork of the Almighty. The bond between art and religion is natural, vital, and timeless.¹² In its highest role, art becomes a handmaiden of divine truth.

We need to distinguish, though, between religion and religious community.¹³ Religion is a body of divine teachings revealed by God. The community is simply a body of people who attempt to practice the teachings. The bond between artist and religion is different from the bond between artist and community. Religion provides a world view and a vision of life that envelops, guides, and motivates all arts and sciences. It is at the heart of the role of artists to turn to this divine vision of life and aspire to reflect its beauty in their work. But they are not similarly obligated to the religious community. The community should not expect the artist's work to be limited by its devotional tastes. In their service to humanity, artists are, on the whole, free to embody their Faith's teachings in their own way.

As a result, spirituality will be present in any art work that reflects a world view inspired by divine teachings. To be considered spiritual or religious, a work of art does not need to make explicit references to a religion. Nor does it need to have a specifically religious use. Artists may choose to manifest their beliefs directly or indirectly, openly or by implication. Both ways are legitimate, and under the right circumstances, they can be equally appropriate and effective.

III. The Scope of Art

Our time has been called "the century of light" and the dawning of the "Cycle of Glory." Humanity's consciousness is spreading to take in the whole earth, and the oneness of the human family is gradually establishing itself in people's minds and hearts. It is a time for traditional rivalries, discords, prejudices and parochial interests to be left behind. It is a time for the spirit of all-inclusive love, respect, and unity to animate every field of service.

In the sphere of the arts, this new spirit calls for us to abandon all customary attitudes, concepts, and terms that have tended to provoke personal rivalries, to exalt one art form, one creative approach, or one culture over the others. It calls for us to set all cultures and art forms on an equal footing. And it calls for us to redefine traditional categories in spiritual terms, with

enough breadth to take in the world's wonderful diversity.

Range of Art Forms. Art forms may be divided into two major groups. The two have equal validity, rank, and dignity.¹⁴ The group that addresses itself to the human spirit, on the one hand, includes the arts referred to in the Occident as "fine arts," as well as other, similar art forms. On the other hand, the group that addresses itself simultaneously to the human spirit and to human needs on a worldly plane includes design arts and crafts.

The terms currently used to refer to these two major groups are problematic because they reflect the social biases of earlier centuries. (Painting, in the West, is a "fine," "elegant," and "major" art. Rug-weaving and pottery have been called "utilitarian" and "minor" arts.) Moreover, traditional terminology fails to acknowledge the spiritual nature of the arts concerned. So it is proposed to use the recent term, "seraffic arts," for the first group, and "seraffo-donnich arts" for the second.¹⁵

"Seraffic" refers exclusively to arts whose primary aim is to foster spiritual ennoblement, and which operate by yielding a product (such as a poem, a song, a painting); this product serves as a kind of communication in which the attractive power of spiritual attributes is manifested, thereby drawing the participant into a process of discovery and growth. The seraffic arts include poetry, painting, music, drama, dance, puppetry, film, sculpture, photography, wall mosaics, hung tapestry, and others.

"Seraffo-donnich" refers to any art which operates simultaneously on a spiritual and a material/worldly plane. That is, art which involves the making of goods addressed equally to humanity's spiritual life and to its material, intellectual, or social needs on a worldly level. The seraffo-donnich arts include the crafts (such as calligraphy, jewelry, rug-weaving, pottery) and the design arts (such as urban design, architecture, interior design, garden and landscape, dress design, and industrial design).

When both groups of art – seraffic and seraffo-donnich – are taken into account, we see that the term "artist" implies a very wide range of practitioners.

Range of Approaches and Styles. It is important to acknowledge that a wide variety of art styles and approaches to artistic creation also share equal validity. One kind of variety is produced by the range of styles reflecting the different cultures of the world, which can be called "Geographical Diversity."

Another kind embraces classical art, folk art, traditional forms, and contemporary approaches – a range we can collectively refer to as "Historical Diversity." Proponents of classical and traditional art styles emphasize the value of approaches and methods that have passed the test of time. Proponents of contemporary art often emphasize the need for discovery and innovation, for personal expression unrestrained by traditions. In a balanced, world-embracing perspective, we can recognize the merits of both without disparaging either one.

Yet another kind of variety of styles stems from the uses of art in venues ranging from solemn to light, from reverential to entertaining. This can be called "Usage Diversity." Again, the

full range is valid and to be respected.

One of the hallmarks of the new age that civilization is entering is the shift toward a more inclusive, world-embracing attitude on the part of both artist and public. Artists throughout the world have the right to adopt any style or approach to artistic creation, without fear of criticism for being either too outmoded or too innovative, and without the crippling humiliation of representing a supposedly "backward" and "inferior" culture.

Indeed, there is now a growing tendency for artists to regard the entire world, past and present, as their cultural inheritance. This leads them to feel free to draw on the heritage of more than one culture or time period, to work in more than one style, and to shift at will from one to another. In the past this multifaceted approach has been branded with the rather disparaging term, "eclectic." Today, it should be recognized as a normal feature of creative work in a multicultural world, and would be more appropriately called "the Global Approach."

Rights of Individuals. Historically, and worldwide, women and artists representing minority cultures have had limited access to the infrastructure of artistic promotion, in comparison with men and with artists representing a majority culture. As a result, civilization as a whole has been deprived of the enormous contribution they might have made. To correct this wrong, prejudices toward women and minority artists need to be overcome so they can gain full access to systems of artistic education, production, publicity, distribution, and remuneration.

IV. The Practice of Art

The Artist's Role. The Bahá'í teachings call on every individual, in relation to society, to strive to be "a source of social good", "a cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage". They exhort the individual "so to live and act as to enrich and illuminate the world".¹⁶ This applies to artists as much as other individuals. In their response to this call, the highest objective to which artists may aspire is to render a spiritual service, which consists in seeking to help ennoble the human soul through their creations. The works that artists offer to humanity are a kind of communication that manifests spiritual attributes. By the beauty of these attributes the soul is attracted and stirred, the knowledge of divine realities is imparted, attitudes to life are spiritualized, morality is strengthened, and service is rendered to the cause of spiritual growth.

In the highest form of service, then, the artist may be regarded as one who inspires love for the beauty of the All-Glorious; a reinforcer of the divine handiwork; a spiritual educator; an exponent of a divine vision of life; an agent of spiritual, moral, and social well-being; a promoter of the oneness of humankind and of world unity.

Spiritual Responsibility. Any vocation that can exercise such wide-ranging, far-reaching effects on the quality of society's life inevitably carries certain responsibilities. Since the effect of art is mainly spiritual, the nature of the artist's responsibility, too, is spiritual. And it is weighty. The artist can exert an influence, for better or for worse, on the development of the soul itself; an influence that can aid us to draw nearer to our Creator and in that measure assist us to fulfill the very purpose of our existence. The responsibility looms even larger when we consider that a single artist's influence can be extended, through the mass media and world communications, to touch the lives of thousands and potentially even millions of people around the

world.

To whom are artists responsible? They are responsible above all to God for the service they aspire to render to humanity, as this is service to the divine Kingdom and a form of worship. They are also responsible to society, of which they form a part, and to whose spiritual life their work is addressed. If working for hire, they are, naturally, responsible to the person or body who gives the commission. And they may be responsible to a specific institution if they are working on a project under its auspices. Far from acting as ropes that bind and restrict the freedom of artists, such responsibilities are in reality the very arteries that connect them with the tissues and organs of society, enabling them to contribute, to receive, and to participate as a cell in the collective life of the body of humanity.

What are artists responsible for? The spiritual role outlined above appears to carry with it responsibilities in several areas. First, artists would seem to be responsible for continually enriching their understanding of the Sacred Word. For how can art realize its role of spiritual ennoblement and upliftment unless artists draw their vision of life from its ultimate Source? The more artists understand, feel, and live the divine teachings, the better they can serve as a channel for the bounty of the Holy Spirit. The more the mirror of an artist's heart is free of the dust of worldly attachments, and is turned toward the Kingdom above, the better it can reflect in his or her creations a celestial light.¹⁷

Second. Since all occupations should be regarded as a form of service to humankind, artists are responsible for viewing their vocation, too, as a kind of service; and for seeking to practice it in ways that would ennoble and enhance the spiritual life of humanity.

Third. The nature of art's role appears to place upon artists the responsibility of aspiring to make their creative work a living example of divine teachings and virtues. Only when an art work embodies divine precepts and spiritual qualities can it produce in the participant's soul an experience that would tend toward ennoblement.

This may involve an open declaration of beliefs, but it can be more effective when subtler, indirect means are used. One of the distinctive features of art is that it is able to attract, edify, and inspire the soul by example (as distinguished from open assertion), and this by embodying divine truths, spiritual attributes, and their corresponding beauty in forms that are metaphorical. In this connection we should keep in mind that every aspect of art, even the energy of a painter's brushstroke, can serve as a spiritual metaphor.

Fourth. The experience which a work of art engenders in a person's soul depends on that person's sensibility, receptivity, judgement, and previous experience. Artists cannot be held responsible, then, for the variable experiences produced by their work in the hearts of participants, for the experience is heavily influenced by what the participants bring to it from their own background.

However, artists are responsible for their attitude to the public, and for the spiritual quality of the experience that they hope and *intend* to produce within the participant. Specifically, the responsibility of artists is to take care that the beliefs, values, attitudes and emotions that are manifested in their art, on the one hand, and those they intend to stimulate and reinforce in the

participant, on the other, vibrate in harmony with the divine teachings. This is the best artists can do to make it likely that the experience their work engenders in the soul of the participant will have an ennobling effect.

This responsibility does not interfere with freedom of expression. Though it calls on artists to be guided by the divine teachings and to embody the same in their work, they are free to achieve that embodiment in their own way. Under such conditions, the artist's vocation would involve both voluntary compliance to spiritual ideals, and great latitude for individualized artistic expression.

Knowing the Light by Darkness. When artists voluntarily comply with spiritual ideals, the resulting art works are not necessarily serene, harmonious, delicate and blissful. They may be and they may not be. There is room for pain, conflict, discord and suffering in a spiritually inspired art. It is legitimate for art to portray the workings of humanity's darker and lower nature, provided the latter is presented in its proper relation to humanity's higher, spiritual nature. What is important is not only the subject matter of an art work but the way it is treated; not only its content but also, and especially, the effect such content is intended to have on the knowledge and the feelings of the participant.

It is not enough for art to merely display the workings of humanity's lower nature. If it is to be edifying, the portrayal needs to be placed within a spiritual context, within the framework of God's purpose in creating humankind. For it is only against such a framework that darkness can be perceived as the lack of light, evil as the absence of good. Only against such a framework can the viewers, listeners or readers of a work of art measure their own potential and be stimulated to grow spiritually. In other words, if artists refer in their work to the darker as well as the brighter side of human nature, they should try to do so in such a way as to engender within the participant's soul an experience that will aid him to journey on "the road which leads to divine knowledge and attainment."¹⁸

In an art work, if negative attributes such as injustice and greed are presented in the light of divine teachings, they will be recognized as but the relative lack of the spiritual attributes of justice and altruism. If beauty is regarded as a power of attraction inherent in spiritual attributes, then it is possible for art to be beautiful even when its subject matter is superficially unappealing; to be edifying even when its subject matter is apparently base.

Artist and Community. The Bahá'í social ideal guarantees that artists, as individuals, can serve society without their initiative or creativity being stifled. This ideal involves "a social system at once progressive and peaceful, dynamic and harmonious, a system giving free play to individual creativity and initiative but based on co-operation and reciprocity."¹⁹ The attitude which such a relationship would call for on the artist's part, then, is one of loving service to the entire body of humankind.

Society and artists have mutual rights. We have, on the one hand, the undoubted right of artists to express themselves. On the other, we have society's right to expect that the products of artists seek to promote the moral, social, and spiritual well-being of the public.²⁰

The flowering of art in an emerging world community depends not only on the dedicated

efforts of artists, but equally on society's support. This should not be surprising. For any vocation to function well, society needs to provide some kind of infrastructure. Scientists rely on a vast web of government agencies, companies, universities, laboratories, banks, equipment manufacturers and others to bring a single product to market. Similarly, the great achievements of artists in past centuries were often facilitated by a social and cultural infrastructure.

This infrastructure was composed of a network of institutions and organizations, both public and private, which educated artists, offered them a coherent philosophy of art, sought their spiritual services, commissioned their works, and provided the means for public performance, distribution, and remuneration. It is probably safe to say that for most artists today, such a well-integrated infrastructure is hard to find, when it exists at all. As its parts are pieced together, and as the demand grows for the spiritual services of artists, we will eventually see a new Renaissance surpassing even the most inspiring achievements of history.

References

¹ “Art can better awaken...noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people.

We have to wait only a few years to see how the spirit breathed by Bahá'u'lláh will find expression in the work of the artists.” From a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 10 October 1932.

² “Through the mere revelation of the word ‘Fashioned,’ issuing forth from His lips and proclaiming His attribute to mankind, such power is released as can generate, through successive ages, all the manifold arts which the hands of man can produce.” *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXIV, p. 141-2 (1952 ed.)

³ “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... ..By the one true God! If learning be not a means of access to Him, the Most Manifest, it is nothing but evident loss.” *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 110.

“Of all the arts and sciences, set the children to studying those which will result in advantage to man, will ensure his progress and elevate his rank.” *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 168.

⁴ An example of the service the arts can render on the mystical plane is given in this passage, where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to music as a means of helping to draw the souls toward the radiant Source of divine love:

Thank thou God that thou art instructed in music and melody, singing with pleasant voice the glorification and praise of the Eternal, the Living. I pray to God that thou mayest employ this talent in prayer and supplication, in order that the souls may become quickened, the hearts may become attracted and all may become inflamed with the fire of the love of God. *Bahá'í Writings on Music*, p. 3.

- ⁵ As expressed by the Universal House of Justice: "...music, art, and literature...are to represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations and should be a source of comfort and tranquillity for troubled souls..." *Bahá'í World*, Vol. 18, p. 358.
- ⁶ On this theme, Bahá'u'lláh wrote: "The source of crafts, sciences and arts is the power of reflection. Make ye every effort that out of this ideal mine there may gleam forth such pearls of wisdom and utterance as will promote the well-being and harmony of all the kindreds of the earth." *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 72.
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá, too, wrote that such powers should be employed for the attainment of human unity: "The truth is that God has endowed man with virtues, powers and ideal faculties... How shall we utilize these gifts and expend these bounties? By directing our efforts toward the unification of the human race. We must use these powers in establishing the oneness of the world of humanity." *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 62 (1972 ed.)
- ⁷ "Therefore...set to music the verses and the divine words so that they may be sung with soul-stirring melody in the Assemblies and gatherings and that the hearts of the listeners may become tumultuous and rise towards the Kingdom of Abhá in supplication and prayer." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 378.
- ⁸ "I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee." Bahá'u'lláh, Short Obligatory Prayer.
- ⁹ "In the world of existence physical things have a connection with spiritual realities. One of these things is the voice, which connects itself with the spirit... A certain kind of melody makes the spirit happy, another kind makes it sad, another excites it to action. All these feelings can be caused by voice and music, for through the nerves it moves and stirs the spirit." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Writings on Music*, p. 7.
- ¹⁰ "Now concerning mental properties, they are in truth of the inherent properties of the soul, even as the radiation of light is the essential property of the sun." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 337. See also His explanation on the faculties of the soul, *Paris Talks*, p. 86.
- "If we are caused joy or pain by a friend, if a love prove true or false, it is the soul that is affected. If our dear ones are far from us -- it is the soul that grieves, and the grief or trouble of the soul may react on the body." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 65
- ¹¹ "Religion...is not a series of beliefs, a set of customs; religion is the teachings of the Lord God, teachings which constitute the very life of humankind, which urge high thoughts upon the mind, refine the character, and lay the groundwork for man's everlasting honour." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 52-3.
- ¹² The intimate connection between art and religion is revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "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.”
Mirror of the Divine: Art in the Bahá’í World Community, p. 45.

- ¹³ The Universal House of Justice draws this distinction between religion and religious community: “...true religion, far from being the product solely of human striving after truth, is the fruit of the creative Word of God which, with divine power, transforms human thought and action.

A Bahá’í, through this faith in, this “conscious knowledge” of, the reality of divine Revelation, can distinguish, for instance, between Christianity, which is the divine message given by Jesus of Nazareth, and the development of Christendom, which is the history of what men did with that message in subsequent centuries... A Bahá’í scholar conscious of this distinction will not make the mistake of regarding the sayings and beliefs of certain Bahá’ís at any one time as being the Bahá’í Faith. The Bahá’í Faith is the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh: His Own Words as interpreted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Guardian.” From “The Challenge and Promise of Bahá’í Scholarship”, *Bahá’í World*, Vol. 17, p. 195.

- ¹⁴ A memorandum from the Research Department to the Universal House of Justice, included in a letter from the House of Justice to an individual, states: “In relation to the possible hierarchical ranking among the different categories of arts, the Research Department has, to date, been unable to locate any clear evidence to support this idea... With regard to the importance of the arts in general, the Writings indicate that they all derive their creative impulse from the operation of the Will of God...” Given in *Mirror of the Divine: Art in the Bahá’í World Community*, p. 276-7.

- ¹⁵ These two categories and their terms follow the lead of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who distinguished between vocations that are oriented more toward the divine or worldly, material or spiritual: “...In this new century the attainment of science, arts and *belles lettres*, whether divine or worldly, material or spiritual, is a matter which is acceptable before God and a duty which is incumbent upon us to accomplish.” *Bahá’í World Faith*, p. 377.

“Seraffic” is derived from two sources: one is the Arabic word *sarofa*, one of whose meanings is to ennoble, to elevate. Related to it is *saraf*, meaning elevated place; nobility, eminence, dignity; honor. The other source is the Hebrew word *serafim*: one of the highest-ranking angels that guards God’s throne (and in Christianity, angels of the highest and most noble order); angels of knowledge and wisdom. “Donnic” is derived from Arabic *dunya*, meaning world; life in this world (as distinguished from the next); earthly things or concerns. A “participant” is one who view, listens to, reads, or in some other way interacts with an art work.

- ¹⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 2-3. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í Year Book*, Vol. 1, p. 12.

- ¹⁷ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, CXXVIII, p. 277.
 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá described the creativity of artists as a reflection of the Holy Spirit in the mirror of the artist’s mind:

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. (Quoted in *The Chosen Highway*, p. 167.)

- ¹⁸ “...Things are often known by their opposites. Were it not for darkness, light could not be sensed. Were it not for death, life could not be known. If ignorance did not exist, knowledge would not be a reality. Night and day must be in order that each may be distinguished.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 82.

“Man must walk in many paths and be subjected to various processes in his evolution upward. ... If evil deeds were unknown, how could you commend good actions? If sickness did not exist, how would you understand health? ... Briefly, the journey of the soul is necessary. The pathway of life is the road which leads to divine knowledge and attainment. Without training and guidance the soul could never progress beyond the conditions of its lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 295-6.

- ¹⁹ The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of Universal Peace*, p. 3.

- ²⁰ See the Universal House of Justice, *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, 6th, 7th and 8th paragraphs from the end.