

Arts, Importance of in Promoting the Faith

by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and Universal House of Justice

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The 1996 Ridván message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World called attention to the importance of the arts, especially the graphic and performing arts and literature, in the proclamation, expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í Faith. This compilation is intended to enlarge upon this concept. While there are many references to “the arts” in the English translations of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the appearance of the term “arts” in many such passages can be misleading because the meaning of the original word often includes a broad range of activities such as industrial pursuits and trades. The extracts in this compilation have been chosen because they focus mainly on the graphic and performing arts and literature.

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

The Sun of Truth is the Word of God upon which dependeth the education of those who are endowed with the power of understanding and of utterance. It is the true spirit and the heavenly water, through whose aid and gracious providence all things have been and will be quickened. Its appearance in every mirror is conditioned by the colour of that mirror. For instance, when its light is cast upon the mirrors of the hearts of the wise, it bringeth forth wisdom. In like manner when it manifesteth itself in the mirrors of the hearts of craftsmen, it unfoldeth new and unique arts, and when reflected in the hearts of those that apprehend the truth it revealeth wondrous tokens of true knowledge and discloseth the verities of God's utterance.

(Translated from the Persian) [1]

We have made it lawful for you to listen to music and singing. Take heed, however, lest listening thereto should cause you to overstep the bounds of propriety and dignity. Let your joy be the joy born of My Most Great Name, a Name that bringeth rapture to the heart, and filleth with ecstasy the minds of all who have drawn nigh unto God. We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not, therefore, as wings to self and passion. Truly, We are loath to see you numbered with the foolish.

(The Kitab-i-Aqdas, paragraph 51) [2]

They who recite the verses of the All-Merciful in the most melodious of tones will perceive in them that with which the sovereignty of earth and heaven can never be compared. From them they will inhale the divine fragrance of My worlds – worlds which today none can discern save those who have been endowed with vision

through this sublime, this beautiful Revelation. Say: These verses draw hearts that are pure unto those spiritual worlds that can neither be expressed in words nor intimated by allusion. Blessed be those who hearken.

(The Kitab-i-Aqdas, paragraph 116) [3]

Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instil new life into every human frame, if ye be of them that comprehend this truth. All the wondrous works ye behold in this world have been manifested through the operation of His supreme and most exalted Will, His wondrous and inflexible Purpose. Through the mere revelation of the word “Fashioner,” 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. This, verily, is a certain truth. No sooner is this resplendent word uttered, than its animating energies, stirring within all created things, give birth to the means and instruments whereby such arts can be produced and perfected. All the wondrous achievements ye now witness are the direct consequences of the Revelation of this Name.

(Published in “Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1983), LXXIV, pp. 141-42) [4]

The soul that hath remained faithful to the Cause of God, and stood unwaveringly firm in His Path shall, after his ascension, be possessed of such power that all the worlds which the Almighty hath created can benefit through him. Such a soul provideth, at the bidding of the Ideal King and Divine Educator, the pure leaven that leaveneth the world of being, and furnisheth the power through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest.

(“Gleanings”, LXXXII, p. 161) [5]

Every word of thy poetry is indeed like unto a mirror in which the evidences of the devotion and love thou cherishest for God and His chosen ones are reflected. Well is it with thee who hast quaffed the choice wine of utterance and partaken of the soft flowing stream of true knowledge. Happy is he who hath drunk his fill and attained unto Him and woe betide the heedless. Its perusal hath truly proved highly impressive, for it was indicative of both the light of reunion and the fire of separation.

(Lawh-i-Maqsud, published in “Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1995), pp. 175-76) [6]

From the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

O musician of God!... The songsters of fellowship that abide in the gardens of holiness must pour forth such a triumphant burst of songs in this age that the birds in the fields may wing their flight in a transport of delight; and in this divine festival, this heavenly banquet, they should play the lute and the harp, and the viol and the lyre in such wise that the people of east and west may be filled with exceeding joy and gladness, and be carried away with exultation and happiness. Now it behoveth thee to raise the melody of that heavenly lyre and to perform music on that celestial lute, thus causing Barbud¹ to return to life and Rudaki² to be solaced and Farabi³ to become restless and Ibn-i-Sina⁴ to be guided to the Sinai of God. Upon thee be salutation and praise.

(Translated from the Persian) [7]

I earnestly hope that thou wilt memorize all the Persian poems revealed by the Blessed Beauty and wilt sing them in a voice of incomparable sweetness at Bahá’í meetings and gatherings. The day is not far distant when these poems will be set to Western music and the sweet accents of these songs will reach the Abha Kingdom with exceeding joy and gladness.

(Translated from the Persian) [8]

The art of music must be brought to the highest stage of development, for this is one of the most wonderful arts and in this glorious age of the Lord of Unity it is highly essential to gain its mastery. However, one must endeavour to attain the degree of artistic perfection and not be like those who leave matters unfinished.

(Translated from the Persian) [9]

O nightingale of the rose-garden of God! Singing melodies will bring animation and happiness to the world of humanity, the hearers will be delighted and joyful and their deeper emotions stirred. But this gladness, this sense of emotion is transitory and will be forgotten within a short time. However, praise be to God, thou hast blended thy tunes with the melodies of the Kingdom, wilt impart solace to the world of the spirit and wilt everlastingly stimulate spiritual feelings. This will last forever and endure the revolution of ages and centuries.

(Translated from the Persian) [10]

O servant of Bahá! Music is regarded as a praiseworthy science at the Threshold of the Almighty, so that thou mayest chant verses at large gatherings and congregations in a most wondrous melody and raise such hymns of praise at the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar to enrapture the Concourse on High. By virtue of this, consider how much the art of music is admired and praised. Try, if thou canst, to use spiritual melodies, songs and tunes, and to bring the earthly music into harmony with the celestial melody. Then thou wilt notice what a great influence music hath and what heavenly joy and life it conferreth. Strike up such a melody and tune as to cause the nightingales of divine mysteries to be filled with joy and ecstasy.

(Translated from the Persian) [11]

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 paintbrush, it is as if thou wert at prayer in the Temple.

(Translated from the Persian) [12]

Among the greatest of all great services is the education of children, and promotion of the various sciences, crafts and arts. Praised be God, ye are now exerting strenuous efforts toward this end. The more ye persevere in this most important task, the more will ye witness the confirmations of God, to such a degree that ye yourselves will be astonished.

(Translated from the Persian) [13]

O bird that singeth sweetly of the Abhá Beauty! In this new and wondrous dispensation the veils of superstition have been torn asunder and the prejudices of eastern peoples stand condemned. Among certain nations of the East, music was considered reprehensible, but in this new age the Manifest Light hath, in His holy Tablets, specifically proclaimed that music, sung or played, is spiritual food for soul and heart. The musician's art is among those arts worthy of the highest praise, and it moveth the hearts of all who grieve. Wherefore, O thou Shahnaz,⁵ play and sing out the holy words of God with wondrous tones in the gatherings of the friends, that the listener may be freed from chains of care and sorrow, and his soul may leap for joy and humble itself in prayer to the realm of Glory.

(Published in "Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), paragraphs 74.1-74.2) [14]

Wherefore, O loved ones of God! Make ye a mighty effort till you yourselves betoken this advancement and all these confirmations, and become focal centres of God's blessings, daysprings of the light of His unity, promoters of the gifts and graces of civilized life. Be ye in that land vanguards of the perfections of humankind; carry forward the various branches of knowledge, be active and progressive in the field of inventions and the arts. Endeavour to rectify the conduct of men, and seek to excel the whole world in moral character. While the children are yet in their infancy feed them from the breast of heavenly grace, foster them in the cradle of all excellence, rear them in the embrace of bounty. Give them the advantage of every useful kind of knowledge. Let them share in every new and rare and wondrous craft and art.

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, paragraph 102.3) [15]

O ye recipients of the favours of God! In this new and wondrous Age, the unshakeable foundation is the teaching of sciences and arts. According to explicit Holy Texts, every child must be taught crafts and arts, to the degree that is needful. Wherefore, in every city and village, schools must be established and every child in that city or village is to engage in study to the necessary degree.

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, paragraph 109.1) [16]

O thou son of the Kingdom! All things are beneficial if joined with the love of God; and without His love all things are harmful, and act as a veil between man and the Lord of the Kingdom. When His love is there, every bitterness turneth sweet, and every bounty rendereth a wholesome pleasure. For example, a melody, sweet to the ear, bringeth the very spirit of life to a heart in love with God, yet staineth with lust a soul engrossed in sensual desires.

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, paragraph 154.3) [17]

O thou bird of pleasing tones! Thy little book of poems, which were very sweet, was read. It was a source of joy, for it was a spiritual anthem and a melody of the love of God. Continue as long as thou canst this melody in the gatherings of the beloved; thus may the minds find rest and joy and become in tune with the love of God. When eloquence of expression, beauty of sense and sweetness of composition unite with new melodies the effect is ever great, especially if it be the anthem of the verses of oneness and the songs of praise to the Lord of Glory. Endeavour your utmost to compose beautiful poems to be chanted with heavenly music; thus may their beauty affect the minds and impress the hearts of those who listen.

(Published in “Tablets of Abdul-Bahá Abbas”, (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1930 printing), vol. I, p. 59) [18]

O thou honourable one! 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!

(“Tablets of Abdul-Bahá Abbas”, vol. III, p. 512) [19]

The first condition of perception in the world of nature is the perception of the rational soul. In this perception and in this power all men are sharers, whether they be neglectful or vigilant, believers or deniers. This human rational soul is God's creation; it encompasses and excels other creatures; as it is more noble and distinguished, it encompasses things. The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul.

(Published in “Some Answered Questions” (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984), chapter 58, p. 217) [20]

From Utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

What a wonderful meeting this is! These are the children of the Kingdom. The song we have just listened to was very beautiful in melody and words. The art of music is divine and effective. It is the food of the soul and spirit. Through the power and charm of music the spirit of man is uplifted. It has wonderful sway and effect in the hearts of children, for their hearts are pure, and melodies have great influence in them. The latent talents with which the hearts of these children are endowed will find expression through the medium of music. Therefore, you must exert yourselves to make them proficient; teach them to sing with excellence and effect. It is incumbent upon each child to know something of music, for without knowledge of this art the melodies of instrument and voice cannot be rightly enjoyed. Likewise, it is necessary that the schools teach it in order that the souls and hearts of the pupils may become vivified and exhilarated and their lives be brightened with enjoyment.

(Published in “The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912”, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 52) [21]

An actor mentioned the drama, and its influence. “The drama is of the utmost importance.” said ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “It has been a great educational power in the past; it will be so again.” He described how as a young boy he witnessed the Mystery Play of Ali’s Betrayal and Passion, and how it affected him so deeply that he wept and could not sleep for many nights.

(Published in “‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London: Addresses and Notes of Conversations” (Oakham: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1987), p. 93) [22]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá said...: “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.”

(Lady Blomfield, “The Chosen Highway” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1954), p. 167) [23]

It is natural for the heart and spirit to take pleasure and enjoyment in all things that show forth symmetry, harmony, and perfection. For instance: a beautiful house, a well designed garden, a symmetrical line, a graceful motion, a well written book, pleasing garments – in fact, all things that have in themselves grace or beauty are pleasing to the heart and spirit – therefore, it is most certain that a true voice causes deep pleasure.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words to Mrs. Mary L. Lucas, as quoted in “A Brief Account of My Visit to Acca” (Chicago: Bahá’í Publishing Society, 1905), pp. 11-14) [24]

From the Writings of Shoghi Effendi

Such a chaste and holy life, with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness, involves no less than the exercise of moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations. It demands daily vigilance in the control of one’s carnal desires and corrupt inclinations. It calls for the abandonment of a frivolous conduct, with its excessive attachment to trivial and often misdirected pleasures. It requires total abstinence from all alcoholic drinks, from opium, and from similar habit-forming drugs. It condemns the prostitution of art and of literature,⁶ the practices of nudism and of companionate marriage, infidelity in marital relationships, and all manner of promiscuity, of easy familiarity, and of sexual vices. It can tolerate no compromise with the theories, the standards, the habits, and the excesses of a decadent age. Nay rather it seeks to demonstrate, through the dynamic force of its

example, the pernicious character of such theories, the falsity of such standards, the hollowness of such claims, the perversity of such habits, and the sacrilegious character of such excesses.

(Published in “The Advent of Divine Justice” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1990), p. 30) [25]

From Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

Shoghi Effendi wishes me to acknowledge the receipt of your letter dated October 27th 1931, together with the accompanying music of “The Lonely Stranger” sent through.... He sincerely hopes that as the Cause grows and talented persons come under its banner, they will begin to produce in art the divine spirit that animates their soul. Every religion has brought with it some form of art – let us see what wonders this Cause is going to bring along. Such a glorious spirit should also give vent to a glorious art. The Temple with all its beauty is only the first ray of an early dawn; even more wondrous things are to be achieved in the future.

(11 December 1931, to an individual) [26]

He wishes to start a new section in “The Bahá’í World” devoted wholly to poems written by Bahá’ís. Though it may be a humble beginning it is a start for great future achievements. Shoghi Effendi wishes thereby to encourage those who are talented to give expression to the wonderful spirit that animates them. We need poets and writers for the Cause and this is undoubtedly one good way to urge them on. Some of the poems are written by very youthful persons yet they ring so true and give expression to such thoughts that one should halt and admire. In Persia the Cause has given birth to poets that even non-Bahá’ís consider as great. We hope before long we will have similar persons arise in the West.

(2 January 1932, to an individual) [27]

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.

(3 April 1932, to an individual) [28]

Shoghi Effendi wishes me to acknowledge the receipt of your letter dated May 18th 1932. He is very glad to know that you have liked “The Dawn- Breakers”, for his greatest reward is to see that this work, which has cost him much labour and anxiety, is helping the friends to understand better and more fully the spirit that animates the Movement and the exemplary life of the heroic souls that ushered it into the world. The Guardian sincerely hopes that by reading this book the friends will be stirred to greater activity and a higher measure of sacrifice, that they will obtain a deeper realization of this Cause whose spread and ultimate victory is entrusted to their care. As some who have read the book have remarked, no one can become familiar with those lives and not be inspired to follow in their way.

It is surely true that the spirit of those heroic souls will stir many artists to produce their best. It is such lives that in the past inspired poets and moved the brush of the painters.

(20 June 1932, to an individual) [29]

Shoghi Effendi was very much interested to learn of the success of the “Pageant of the Nations” you produced. He sincerely hopes that all those who attended it were inspired by the same spirit that animated you while arranging it. It is through such presentations that we can arouse the interest of the greatest number of people in the spirit of the Cause. The day will come when the Cause will spread like wildfire when its spirit and teachings

will be presented on the stage or in art and literature as a whole. Art can better awaken such 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. What you and some other Bahá'ís are attempting are only faint rays that precede the effulgent light of a glorious morn. We cannot yet value the part the Cause is destined to play in the life of society. We have to give it time. The material this spirit has to mould is too crude and unworthy, but it will at last give way and the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh will reveal itself in its full splendour.

(10 October 1932, to an individual) [30]

The Guardian values the hymns that you are so beautifully composing. They certainly contain the realities of the Faith, and will indeed help you to give the Message to the young ones. It is the music which assists us to affect the human spirit; it is an important means which helps us to communicate with the soul. The Guardian hopes that through this assistance you will give the Message to the people, and will attract their hearts.

(15 November 1932, to an individual) [31]

What Bahá'u'lláh meant primarily with “sciences that begin and end in words” are those theological treatises and commentaries that encumber the human mind rather than help it to attain the truth. The students would devote their life to their study but still attain no where. Bahá'u'lláh surely never meant to include story- writing under such a category; and shorthand and typewriting are both most useful talents, very necessary in our present social and economic life.

What you could do, and should do, is to use your stories to become a source of inspiration and guidance for those who read them. With such a means at your disposal you can spread the spirit and teachings of the Cause; you can show the evils that exist in society, as well as the way they can be remedied. If you possess a real talent in writing you should consider it as given by God and exert your efforts to use it for the betterment of society.

(30 November 1932, to an individual) [32]

Your poem dedicated to Nabil deeply touched me.... I would also welcome any other poems from your gifted pen on any phase or episode recounted in Nabil's immortal narrative. You are rendering the Cause unique and notable services. Be happy and persevere in your high endeavours.

(6 August 1933, in the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi, appended to a letter written on his behalf to an individual) [33]

In regard to the main question you have raised in connection with the singing of hymns at Bahá'í meetings: He wishes me to assure you that he sees no objection to it whatsoever. The element of music is, no doubt, an important feature of all Bahá'í gatherings. The Master Himself has emphasized its importance. But the friends should in this, as well as in all other things, not pass beyond the limits of moderation, and should take great care to maintain the strict spiritual character of all their gatherings. Music should lead to spirituality, and provided it creates such an atmosphere there can be no objection against it. A distinction of vital importance should, however, be clearly established between the singing of hymns composed by the believers and the chanting of the Holy Utterances.

(17 March 1935, to an individual) [34]

As to your question concerning the advisability of dramatizing Bahá'í historic episodes: the Guardian would certainly approve, and even encourage that the friends should engage in such literary pursuits which, no doubt, can be of immense teaching value. What he wishes the believers to avoid is to dramatize the personages of the

Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that is to say to treat them as dramatic figures, as characters appearing on the stage. This, as already pointed out, he feels would be quite disrespectful. The mere fact that they appear on the scene constitutes an act of discourtesy which can in no way be reconciled with their highly exalted station. Their message, or actual words, should be preferably reported and conveyed by their disciples appearing on the stage.

(25 July 1936, to an individual) [35]

The Guardian was also pleased to know of your deep interest in music, and of your desire to serve the Faith along this line. Although now is only the very beginning of Bahá'í art, yet the friends who feel they are gifted in such matters should endeavour to develop and cultivate their gifts and through their works to reflect, however inadequately, the Divine Spirit which Bahá'u'lláh has breathed into the world.

(4 November 1937, to an individual) [36]

...you raise the question of what will be the source of inspiration to Bahá'í musicians and composers: the music of the past or the Word? 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; as every Faith has given rise to a culture which flowered in different forms, so too our beloved Faith may be expected to do the same thing. It is premature to try and grasp what they will be at present.

(23 December 1942, to an individual) [37]

Music, as one of the arts, is a natural cultural development, and the Guardian does not feel that there should be any cultivation of "Bahá'í Music" any more than we are trying to develop a Bahá'í school of painting or writing. The believers are free to paint, write and compose as their talents guide them. If music is written, incorporating the sacred writings, the friends are free to make use of it, but it should never be considered a requirement at Bahá'í meetings to have such music. The further away the friends keep from any set forms, the better, for they must realize that the Cause is absolutely universal, and what might seem a beautiful addition to their mode of celebrating a Feast, etc., would perhaps fall on the ears of people of another country as unpleasant sounds – and vice versa. As long as they have music for its own sake it is all right, but they should not consider it Bahá'í music.

(20 July 1946, to a National Spiritual Assembly) [38]

...he wishes to call your Assembly's attention to a very important matter, and that is the Greatest Name. To the western eye, untrained in the art – the most highly developed art of the East – of calligraphy, nearly every Greatest Name, if it embodies the salient points, is the Greatest Name. But to an Oriental it may appear a monstrosity.... The exact proportions are what must be maintained. The Greatest Name must not be stretched out – or up – to fill an oblong space or a circle.

(22 December 1948, to a National Spiritual Assembly) [39]

It was a Canadian, of French extraction, who through his vision and skill, was instrumental in conceiving the design, and delineating the features, of the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkar of the west, marking the first attempt, however rudimentary, to express the beauty which Bahá'í art will, in its plenitude, unfold to the eyes of the world.

(1 March 1951, from a postscript by Shoghi Effendi appended to a letter written on his behalf to a National Spiritual Assembly) [40]

Music is one of the arts, and the Prophets of God do not teach the arts; but the tremendous cultural impetus which religion gives to society gradually produces new and wonderful forms of art. We see this in the different styles of architecture and painting associated with the Christian, Muhammadan, Buddhist and other civilizations. Music, too, has grown up as an expression of the people.

We believe that, in the future, when the Bahá'í spirit has permeated the world and profoundly changed society, music will be affected by it; but there is no such thing as Bahá'í music. All it says in the teachings about music is that it can influence the heart and soul of man very deeply, and have an extremely uplifting effect.

(3 February 1952, to an individual) [41]

As regards the matters you raised in your letter: In the teachings there is nothing against dancing, but the friends should remember that the standard of Bahá'u'lláh is modesty and chastity. The atmosphere of modern dance halls, where so much smoking and drinking and promiscuity goes on, is very bad, but decent dances are not harmful in themselves. There is certainly no harm in classical dancing or learning dancing in school. There is also no harm in taking part in dramas. Likewise in cinema acting. The harmful thing, nowadays, is not the art itself but the unfortunate corruption which often surrounds these arts. As Bahá'ís we need avoid none of the arts, but acts and the atmosphere that sometimes go with these professions we should avoid.

(30 June 1952, to a National Spiritual Assembly) [42]

From Letters Written by and on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice

Publicity itself should be well-conceived, dignified and reverent. A flamboyant approach which may succeed in drawing much initial attention to the Cause may ultimately prove to have produced a revulsion which would require great effort to overcome. The standard of dignity and reverence set by the beloved Guardian should always be upheld, particularly in musical and dramatic items; and photographs of the Master should not be used indiscriminately. This does not mean that activities of the youth, for example, should be stultified; one can be exuberant without being irreverent or undermining the dignity of the Cause.

(2 July 1967, by the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies) [43]

...we feel that it will be helpful to you to know that songs whose words are the primary Writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh or 'Abdu'l-Bahá are all quite fitting for the devotional portion of the Feast. Indeed, the Persian chants are such songs, out of a different tradition; they are a way of giving music to the holy Word, and each person who chants does it in a way which mirrors his feeling and expression of the Words he is uttering. As for songs whose words are poetic and the composition of persons other than the Figures of the Faith, these may be desirable but in their proper place.... Inasmuch as the spirit of our gatherings is so much affected by the tone and quality of our worship, of our feeling and appreciation of the Word of God for this day, we would hope that you would encourage the most beautiful possible expression of the human spirits in your communities, through music among other modes of feeling.

(22 February 1971, by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [44]

Your understanding that the portrayal of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh in works of art is forbidden is correct. The Guardian made it clear that this prohibition refers to all the Manifestations of God; photographs, or reproductions of portraits, of the Master may be used in books, but no attempt should be made to portray Him in dramatic or other works where He would be one of the "dramatis personae". However, there can be no objection to symbolic representation of such Holy Figures, provided it does not become a ritual and that the symbol used is not irreverent.

(3 December 1972, by the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [45]

While it is quite true that individual artists such as Mark Tobey and others have undoubtedly been inspired and influenced by their love for the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, it is far too early in the Bahá'í Dispensation to talk about the influence of the Faith on the arts in general. Indeed the beloved Guardian himself has pointed out that there is, as yet, no such thing as Bahá'í art although there is no doubt from statements in the writings that a wonderful efflorescence of new and beautiful arts may be anticipated in the future.

(17 January 1973, by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [46]

The beloved Guardian made it clear that the flowering of the arts which is the result of a divine revelation comes only after a number of centuries. The Bahá'í Faith offers the world the complete rebuilding of human society – a rebuilding of such far-reaching effect that it has been looked forward to in all the revelations of the past and has been called the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. The new architecture to which this revelation will give birth will blossom many generations hence. We are now merely at the beginning of this great process.

The present time is a period of turmoil and change. Architecture, like all arts and sciences, is undergoing very rapid development; one has only to consider the changes that have taken place in the course of the last few decades to have some idea of what is likely to happen during the years immediately ahead. Some modern buildings have, no doubt, qualities of greatness and will endure, but very much of what is being constructed now may be outgrown and may appear ugly but a few generations hence. Modern architecture, in other words, may be considered a new development in its primitive stage.

(18 July 1974, by the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [47]

The House of Justice feels that at this time in the development of the Faith its primary responsibility is the preparation and prosecution of teaching plans designed to achieve the objectives set forth in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets of the Divine Plan and that theories in arts and sciences should be developed under the auspices of those who are well-versed and expert in those fields.

(25 January 1977, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [48]

The prohibition on representing the Manifestation of God in paintings and drawings or in dramatic presentations applies to all the Manifestations of God. There are, of course, great and wonderful works of art of past Dispensations, many of which portrayed the Manifestations of God in a spirit of reverence and love. In this Dispensation however the greater maturity of mankind and the greater awareness of the relationship between the Supreme Manifestation and His servants enable us to realize the impossibility of representing, in any human form, whether pictorially, in sculpture or in dramatic representation, the Person of God's Manifestation. In stating the Bahá'í prohibition, the beloved Guardian pointed out this impossibility.

(9 March 1977, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [49]

The same destructive forces are also deranging the political, economic, scientific, literary, and moral equilibrium of the world and are destroying the fairest fruits of the present civilization.... Even music, art, and literature, which are to represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations and should be a source of comfort and tranquillity for troubled souls, have strayed from the straight path and are now the mirrors of the soiled hearts of this confused, unprincipled, and disordered age.

(10 February 1980, by the Universal House of Justice to the Iranian Bahá'ís throughout the World; published in "Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996), p. 435)

[50]

Generally speaking, works of fiction which the writers hope will help to promote knowledge of the Cause of God will fulfil this purpose better if they are set against the background of particular events or developing processes in the Cause of God, and not used to portray the actual historical events themselves and the figures taking part in them. The reality of the actual events and the actual personages is so much more convincing than any fictional account. In this connection the Guardian's secretary wrote on his behalf:⁷

He would not recommend fiction as a means of teaching; the condition of the world is too acute to permit of delay in giving them the direct teachings associated with the name of Bahá'u'lláh. But any suitable approach to the Faith, which appeals to this or that group, is certainly worthy of effort, as we wish to bring the Cause to all men, in all walks of life, of all mentalities.

(23 September 1980, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [51]

Your letter ... concerning art has been received, and the Universal House of Justice has instructed us to commend you on your plan to use your artistic talents to express the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. It warmly encourages you in this pursuit.... In response to your request for guidance on the best ways to approach artists in teaching the Faith, it can be said that in addition to those methods which attract people generally, artists will be responsive to art. When the sublime teachings of the Faith are reflected in artistic work, the hearts of people, including artists, will be touched. A quotation from the Sacred Writings or description of the art piece as it relates to the Writings may provide the viewer with an understanding of the source of this spiritual attraction and lead him to further study of the Faith.

(21 July 1982, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [52]

With the evolution of the Bahá'í society, which is composed of people of many cultural origins and diverse tastes, each with his conception of what is aesthetically acceptable and pleasing, those Bahá'ís who are gifted in music, drama and the visual arts are free to exercise their talents in ways which will serve the Faith of God. They should not feel disturbed at the lack of appreciation by sundry believers. Rather, in knowledge of the cogent writings of the Faith on music and artistic expression ... they should continue their artistic endeavours in prayerful recognition that the arts are powerful instruments to serve the Cause, arts which in time will have their Bahá'í fruition.

(9 August 1983, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [53]

Your letter ... requesting guidance in the matter of visual representation of the personages connected with the Heroic Age of the Faith has been received. The Universal House of Justice wishes you to know that there is nothing in the instructions of the Guardian, nor of the House of Justice, .. to prohibit artists ... to make drawings of Letters of the Living in surroundings, or participating in events, which are historically accurate. Obviously, in addition to accuracy, it is important to uphold the dignity of the personages being portrayed.

(5 October 1983, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [54]

Architecture at this time, in common with all aspects of our civilization, is going through a period of rapid development, with tastes changing from decade to decade. No one can be certain whether a building which is built now in a current style will still appear beautiful in the eyes of the people fifty years hence. For the World Administrative Centre of the Faith, therefore, the beloved Guardian chose the classical Greek style of architecture. This is a mature style, very beautiful, which has persisted for some 2,000 years. It would not be correct, however, to deduce from this that the classical Greek styles are particularly Bahá'í architecture.

(3 September 1984, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [55]

Rejecting the low sights of mediocrity, let them scale the ascending heights of excellence in all they aspire to do. May they resolve to elevate the very atmosphere in which they move, whether it be in the school rooms or halls of higher learning, in their work, their recreation, their Bahá'í activity or social service.

Indeed, let them welcome with confidence the challenges awaiting them. Imbued with this excellence and a corresponding humility, with tenacity and a loving servitude, today's youth must move towards the front ranks of the professions, trades, arts and crafts which are necessary to the further progress of humankind – this to ensure that the spirit of the Cause will cast its illumination on all these important areas of human endeavour.

Moreover, while aiming at mastering the unifying concepts and swiftly advancing technologies of this era of communications, they can, indeed they must, also guarantee the transmittal to the future of those skills which will preserve the marvellous, indispensable achievements of the past. The transformation which is to occur in the functioning of society will certainly depend to a great extent on the effectiveness of the preparations the youth make for the world they will inherit.

(8 May 1985, by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'í Youth of the World) [56]

The House of Justice wishes to encourage you in the writing of your book but reminds you that the Guardian clearly stated that at this early stage of the Dispensation there is no such thing as Bahá'í art, music, architecture or culture. These will doubtless emerge in the future as a natural outgrowth of a Bahá'í civilization. The Guardian's own predilections in such matters should never be regarded as laying the foundations for such developments. As clearly indicated by his rejection of the design submitted to him for the Temple in Kampala ... he did not feel that the general modern trend of architecture current at his time was suitable for a Bahá'í House of Worship, but this in no sense implies that he instituted a pattern of his own.

His choice of the classical style for the structures on Mount Carmel was, according to Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhiyyih Khanum, on the grounds that it was beautiful and befitted the area, and that it had withstood the test of time. You should, therefore, take care not to indicate or make it possible to infer that the Guardian laid down the early beginnings of Bahá'í art forms. He made beautiful gardens and buildings utilizing what was available and, as in the case of the superstructure of the Shrine of the Báb, engaged experts who could produce befitting designs under his guidance.

(23 June 1985, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [57]

With reference to music and fine arts, you are, of course, free to include them as curricular subjects in Bahá'í schools. Many of your fellow National Assemblies, keenly aware of the Bahá'í Writings concerning music and the arts, incorporate such instruction and materials as they find possible at this stage of Bahá'í community development. Much work by devoted and talented teachers needs to be done to stimulate, collect and publish the useful music now emerging in the Bahá'í world, and to utilize it systematically in the schools...

In accordance with our Teachings, music and the arts are to be encouraged, and they add immeasurably to the vitality and spirit of the community. Your Assembly's thoughts and efforts are valued, and you are remembered in the prayers of the House of Justice.

(20 August 1985, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [58]

Regarding the use of symbolism in art, the following extracts from letters written to two individuals by the House of Justice may provide the answer you seek:

We see no objection to the use of natural phenomena as symbols to illustrate the significance of the three Central Figures, Bahá'í Laws, and Bahá'í Administration; and we also appreciate the suitability of using visual symbols to express abstract concepts. (29 July 1971)

Your understanding that the portrayal of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh in works of art is forbidden is correct. The Guardian made it clear that this prohibition refers to all the Manifestations of God; photo- graphs, or reproductions of portraits, of the Master may be used in books, but no attempt should be made to portray Him in dramatic or other works where He would be one of the “dramatis personae”. However, there can be no objection to symbolic representation of such Holy Figures, provided it does not become a ritual and that the symbol used is not irreverent. (3 December 1972)

You sometimes provide detailed written descriptions of the symbols you use in your paintings; as a practice this could introduce an aspect which could be unduly interpretive of Bahá'í concepts, ultimately detracting from rather than enhancing your artistic efforts. Symbolism is the stuff of art, but artists rarely interpret the symbols they use, leaving it to observers of their works to draw their own conclusions, sometimes with no more than hints from the titles given such works.

The titling of a piece of art is the artist's prerogative; the only objection would be to the use of an irreverent title for a piece intended to represent a Bahá'í subject.

As to your question about an artist's executing a “painting which is a contemporary illumination of a passage of the Holy Writings”, the House of Justice feels artists should not be inhibited by Bahá'í institutions from creating a variety of calligraphic renderings of the Holy Writings or of the Greatest Name. However, such efforts should be in good taste and not assume forms that lend themselves to ridicule. Regarding the commonly used symbol of the Greatest Name, the House of Justice advises that great care be given to the accurate representation of the Persian calligraphy, since any deviation from an accepted representation can be distressing to Iranian believers.

(23 February 1987, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [59]

The policy formulated by the House of Justice to discourage the reproduction of photographs of paintings of the Master for distribution does not imply any judgement of the quality of a painting. There is a wide variation in the quality of the artistry with which paintings of the Master are carried out. The House of Justice does not wish to show preference for one painting over another; it chooses rather to adopt this general policy as a means of ensuring that appropriate respect is accorded to representations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and that there is no distribution of photographic reproductions of those paintings which are of poor quality.

An important distinction is made between publication of photographs of paintings in books and magazines, which is not prohibited as it is subject to some degree of judgement by the publisher, and their publication as separate items, which is discouraged by the House of Justice. More generally, the House of Justice feels that one of the great challenges facing Bahá'ís everywhere is that of restoring to the peoples of the world an awareness of spiritual reality. Our view of the world is markedly different from that of the mass of mankind, in that we perceive creation to encompass spiritual as well as physical entities, and we regard the purpose of the world in which we now find ourselves to be a vehicle for our spiritual progress.

This view has important implications for the behaviour of Bahá'ís and gives rise to practices which are quite contrary to prevailing conduct of the wider society. One of the distinctive virtues given emphasis in the Bahá'í Writings is respect for that which is sacred. Such behaviour has no meaning for those whose perspective on the world is entirely materialistic, while many followers of the established religions have debased it into a set of rituals devoid of true spiritual feeling.

In some instances, the Bahá'í Writings contain precise guidance on how the reverence for sacred objects or places should be expressed, e.g., restrictions on the use of the Greatest Name on objects or on indiscriminate use

of the record of the voice of the Master. In other instances, the believers are called upon to strive to obtain a deeper understanding of the concept of sacredness in the Bahá'í teachings, from which they can determine their own forms of conduct by which reverence and respect are to be expressed.

The importance of such behaviour derives from the principle expressed in the Bahá'í Writings, that the outward has an influence on the inward. Referring to "the people of God" Bahá'u'lláh states:

Their outward conduct is but a reflection of their inward life, and their inward life a mirror of their outward conduct.

It is within this framework that the Universal House of Justice wishes you to view the concerns which have been expressed over the past several years. 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 its revitalization of the concept of reverence.

Questions of artistic freedom are not germane to the issues raised here. Bahá'í artists are free to apply their talents to whatever subject is of interest to them. However, it is hoped that they will exercise a leadership role in restoring to a materialistic society an appreciation of reverence as a vital element in the achievement of true liberty and abiding happiness.

(24 September 1987, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [60]

The House of Justice is pleased to learn of the success you are achieving in your profession. It advises you to view this professional activity within the context of service to the Faith and the promotion of the proclamation and teaching work. Your musical achievements will enable you to reach a wide range of people and ultimately to proclaim the Message of Bahá'u'lláh to them through the expression of its values in your music. You can also make valuable friendships for the Faith among the influential people you will meet as your business continues to develop. These considerations might well guide you in the decision now before you concerning the area in which you should reside. Bahá'í artists who achieve eminence and renown in their chosen field, and who remain dedicated to the promotion of the Faith, can be of unique assistance to the Cause at the present time when public curiosity about the Bahá'í teachings is gradually being aroused.

(30 June 1988, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to two individuals) [61]

It is permissible to use selections from the Holy Writings as lyrics to be accompanied by musical compositions and to repeat verses or words. The following quotations provide further clarification concerning these matters.

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

No doubt prayers and parts of the Tablets, "Hidden Words", etc., will be suitable, but he does not feel it would be advisable to abridge any given part, in other words to leave out parts of a paragraph or a meditation and foreshorten it in this manner. (From a letter dated 3 July 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

In response to a question from a believer concerning minor alterations of words for the sake of correct accent or the addition of a word for the sake of perfect meter, the beloved Guardian stated the following:

Slight alterations in the text of the prayers are permissible, and I would advise you to give a musical form to the revealed word itself which I feel will be exceedingly effective. I will pray that the Beloved

may inspire you to accomplish this great service to His Cause. (In the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi, appended to a letter dated 8 April 1931 written on his behalf to an individual believer)

Regarding the question of setting verses from the Bahá'í Writings to the melodies of existing pieces of music, assuming that there is no copyright or legal restriction involved, one should bear in mind that such music may carry with it associations of the original piece, either in lyrics or in mood, and may not meet the requirement to treat the Sacred Texts with dignity and reverence.

(6 December 1989, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [62]

There is no objection to the interpretation of a prayer in the form of movement or dance if the spirit is properly reverential, but preferably this should not be accompanied by reading the words.

(4 January 1990, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [63]

The House of Justice is pleased to learn of your teaching activities and your continued devotion to the Cause of God in spite of difficulties you have experienced as a musician. With regard to your questions: the Bahá'í Teachings obviously do not condone the mistreatment of musicians or other artists, nor are artists expected to sacrifice their free will to the whims, or even the strongly held opinions, of other Bahá'ís. As for the tensions and difficulties arising between your teaching the Faith through music and your parallel need to be self-supporting, it is suggested that you yourself will need to set your own limits in this regard. We find, for example, the following guidance in a letter dated 26 February 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer:

The advice that Shoghi Effendi gave you regarding the division of your time between serving the Cause and attending to your other duties was also given to many other friends both by Bahá'u'lláh and the Master. It is a compromise between the two verses of the "Aqdas", one making it incumbent upon every Bahá'í to serve the promotion of the Faith and the other that every soul should be occupied in some form of occupation that will benefit society. In one of His Tablets Bahá'u'lláh says that the highest form of detachment in this day is to be occupied with some profession and be self-supporting. A good Bahá'í, therefore, is the one who so arranges his life as to devote time both to his material needs and also to the service of the Cause.

(15 February 1990, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [64]

Your sincere desire to use theatre as a means of spreading the tenets of the Faith among the people is commendable and it is the hope of the House of Justice that your devoted efforts in this field may bring satisfaction to yourselves and benefits to the community; however, as you yourself have stated, you are conscious of the difficulties and potential pitfalls of Bahá'í theatrical endeavours at this time and in the atmosphere of intolerance prevailing in your country, which make it essential not to produce plays which may arouse public antipathy or the indignation of religious fundamentalists.

(9 April 1990, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [65]

...traditional dances associated with the expression of a culture are permissible in Bahá'í Centres. However, it should be borne in mind that such traditional dances generally have an underlying theme or a story being represented. Care must be exercised to ensure that the themes of such dances are in harmony with the high ethical standards of the Cause and are not portrayals that would arouse base instincts and unworthy passions....

As for choreographed dances whose purpose is to reinforce and proclaim Bahá'í principles, if they can be performed in a manner which portrays the nobility of such principles and invokes appropriate attitudes of respect or reverence, there is no objection to dances which are meant to interpret passages from the Writings;

however, it is preferable that the motions of a dance not be accompanied by the reading of the words. The principle which must guide the friends in their consideration of these questions is the observance of “moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations”.

(20 June 1991, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [66]

There is no objection, of course, to the use of the phrase “Bahá’í artist” but at this point in time in the Bahá’í Dispensation we should not use the term “Bahá’í art”, “Bahá’í music”, or “Bahá’í architecture”.

(12 March 1992, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to two individuals) [67]

The medium of a novel offers a great deal of latitude for an author to elaborate ideas and areas of thought hitherto unexplored. You should be careful, however, not to ... give interpretations that may not be correct if the Faith and its Teachings are to be explicit in the novel. If, on the other hand, there is no clear connection to the Faith in the novel, you would be free to use your imagination in exploring any ideas which have as their source the principles of the Faith.

(15 February 1994, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [68]

In all their efforts to achieve the aim of the Four Year Plan, the friends are also asked to give greater attention to the use of the arts, not only for proclamation, but also for the work in expansion and consolidation. The graphic and performing arts and literature have played, and can play, a major role in extending the influence of the Cause. 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. Shoghi Effendi held high hopes for the arts as a means for attracting attention to the Teachings. A letter written on his behalf to an individual thus conveys the Guardian’s view: “The day will come when the Cause will spread like wildfire when its spirit and teachings will be presented on the stage or in art and literature as a whole. Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people.”

(21 April 1996, by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the World) [69]

In much of the region, insufficient attention has been given to the education of children. Far more extensive programmes should be initiated in those countries where the need exists, to ensure that Bahá’í children are nurtured, encouraged to acquire trained minds, illumined with a sound knowledge of the Divine Teachings, well- equipped to participate in the work of the Cause at all levels and to contribute to the arts, crafts and sciences necessary for the advancement of civilization. Such programmes, when open to all children, Bahá’í or not, offer a potent means of extending the beneficial influences of Bahá’u’lláh’s Message to the wider society.

(21 April 1996, by the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá’u’lláh in Australasia) [70]

Notes

1. Peerless Persian musician: A singer, player and inventor of many ancient musical instruments who lived at the court of Khosrow-Parviz of the Sasanian dynasty about 600 A.D.
2. “Father of Persian poetry” (d. A.D. 940).
3. Renowned Muslim scholar; author of a treatise on music (ca. A.D. 870-950).
4. Physician/scientist/philosopher known in the west as Avicenna, one of whose major works devotes a section to music theory (ca. A.D. 980-1027).
5. Shahnaz, the name given to the recipient of this Tablet, is also the name of a musical mode.

6. The Universal House of Justice, in a letter dated 15 March 1972 written on its behalf, has elucidated this phrase of the Guardian in this manner: “As to your question about the prostitution of arts and literature’ we understand by this, using art and literature for debased ends.”

7. 23 March 1945, to an individual.

8. A newer authorized translation of this passage is found in “Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1997), paragraph 74.2 (see item [14] of this compilation).