

The Importance of Arts in Life: Poetry

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Art is not something separate from life, but basic to life — that is, life as a human being and not just as an animal. Art is not a luxury, but a necessity. In my case, since the Japanese language is so difficult for me, I use the universal language of art as a means of communication. I use it to make new friends and to say to their hearts what is difficult to communicate to their intellects. The message of all my paintings is this: God gave us a beautiful world. But how inadequate words are for saying this! Pictures work better. In order to paint the beauty I see, I need to see clearly, see to the heart of things. This is why I also think that the "artist's eye" can help other people see more clearly too.

芸術とは生活から切り離されたものではない。根底を成すものである。動物ではなく、一つの人格を持った私たち人間の基盤といってもよい。贅沢な趣味であるどころか、必要不可欠なものである。私自身について言えば、万国共通の言葉である芸術は考えや思いを伝える手段としてなくてはならない。というのも日本語でやり取りするのは私には非常に難しいためだが、芸術を媒介とすることで、新しい友達ができ、知覚に訴えることが難しいものを心に伝えることができるようになる。私が描く絵のメッセージは一つ：神は美しい世界を私たちに授けてくださった、これしかない。けれどもこれを言葉にしても、的確とは程遠くなるばかりである。絵画は言葉に勝る。目に収めた美しいものを絵画として表すためには、対象となるものを鮮明に、かつ核心に至るまで見つめなければならない。その意味で、「芸術家の目」を通して物事を描けば、一般の人々が世界をよりはっきりと見えるような手助けになると思っている。

1. What would happen if there were no arts in the world?

Personally, I feel that if there were no arts in the world, there would not be human beings either. Art is basic to what makes us human. As beings created in God's image, we reflect (as best we can) His attributes. He is the Creator, so we must be creative.

Art has set us off from the animals since the beginnings of our life as humans on this planet. Even our cousins the Neanderthal buried their dead with flowers. Think of the cave paintings at Lascaux; think of all the beautiful pottery left us by the people of the Neolithic and Bronze Ages— so graceful in all its forms.

Here's how basic art is: one of the Bahá'í prayers begins, "O my Lord! Make Thy beauty to be my food." Beauty is as important to the soul as food is to the body. Without it, we wither.

Of course, the prayer says, "**Thy** beauty—which means God's beauty. But where is this to be found? Certainly in His holy words and in the exemplary lives of His Prophets and chosen ones. But also in this gorgeous world of creation. I try to bring some of it into my life by the potted plants on my veranda, by the front door, on my table. But I also get out when I can. I walk, and look carefully, and think, and write poems, and take photographs ... and sometimes I stop and sit down to sketch. To do this refreshes my soul.

Then I can share my refreshed soul with others, both in being a better and kinder friend and in sharing my art work ... and perhaps, by so doing, help refresh the souls of those who see my paintings or receive my notecards.

2. What are the characteristics of the medium you use to express yourself artistically? What influence does your specialty have on the human spirit?

There are many truths for which words are an inadequate means of expression. They can better be expressed by saying, "Look!"... and then **showing**. The other day as my husband was walking home from the subway, he saw two of our neighborhood shopkeepers

standing outside their doors just looking ... at the way the sunlight was streaming through the clouds. Their souls were being touched by God at that moment.

What I want to tell people about the beauty of God's creation — and our responsibility to appreciate it and cherish it — this can be expressed better in pictures than in words. My feelings about this were perhaps best expressed in a poem I wrote in Tsurumai Park in Nagoya, the city where I've lived the last 32 years:

*I wish I could show you
how the wind swishes back
and forth the willow fronds*

I guess you'll just have to use your imagination.

"Looking and seeing" is part of the artist's job. And by doing this we can help other people see too. Here's a little scene you might miss if I didn't show it to you:

*In a tree hollow
filled with last year's leaves,
this year's wood sorrel*

Wood sorrel is certainly not a weed—for God knows no weeds—but a wildflower, let's say. In Japanese, it's called *sanyasō*: "herbs of mountain and field".

3. What kinds of artistic activities are you currently involved in?

I often go to the park for sketching and photographing. Every weekend it's full of "Sunday painters" (I'm one of them) and "Sunday photographers".

Here's an enlargement of a small painting I did using one of my own photographs. This gentleman is showing his appreciation of Nature, the beautiful creation of God, by painting it, to the best of his ability, putting his heart into it.

One day this June when I was sketching in another corner of the same park, a gentleman asked if he could take my photo.

"Sure," I replied.

This is what I was sketching: some wonderful pale roses. I did it just in pencil then, since there was no place to sit down. I added the color after I got home and consulted my photo.

A little further on in the park, I found a place to sit down, in the middle of the iris pond, and the same gentleman photographed me. This little girl was fascinated: "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm mixing red and blue to get violet," I explained.

"Well, I'm three years old," she informed me.

The photographer, a Mr. Mizuno, kindly sent me the photos, and I sent a color copy of my painting to him, enclosing a brief quotation from Bahá'u'lláh: "The whole universe reflecteth His glory...." I also sent a copy of the painting to the little girl's mother, along with a photo I'd taken of them and a laminated copy of a Bahá'í children's prayer.

I still can't express myself very well in Japanese, even after all this years. I sometimes admit that I'm better at *nihonga* (Japanese painting) than at *nihongo* (Japanese language). So I use my painting as a means of communication.

One day, I also learned a little about bonsai. These are photographs my husband Gail took of me and a bonsai teacher at Nagoya's Bluebonnet Park, on an island off Nagoya Port. It was a good deal: we could choose the container and five different plants and have a lesson in how to put together and care for a *bonsai*, for a small price.

Later I sent copies of the photos and of my painting to the bonsai teacher, along with the following poem.

*This season, green upon green
though ... clean clothes on the line
won't dry*

青に青
今日のせんたく
乾かない

I also make postcards from many of my paintings. Some I sell at my art shows, but a lot are left for me to send to friends for summer greetings, get well cards, sympathy cards, thank-you cards, and so on.

4. What do you think about the concept of “Grassroots Artistic Activities”?

I think it's very sad when people think art is only for “professionals”. Art and music belong to all of us. We can all enjoy them and enrich our lives with them. We can also use art as we study to add to the pleasure of study and to reinforce the spiritual meanings — the meanings that words alone cannot convey.

For example, the kids in the Bahá'í junior youth class I teach are great at drawing pictures to illustrate the stories we read. Picasso once said, “Every child is an artist; the problem is remaining an artist once he grows up.” If we encourage art all the way through, maybe kids can keep it in their hearts.

Here are some pictures the kids made to illustrate a story from Book 3A about “contentment with the will of God.” In this story the man's mare runs away across the border. “This could be a blessing,” he says. The mare returns with a fine steed. “This could be a misfortune,” says the farmer. The farmer's son tries to ride the steed and is thrown off. “This could be a blessing,” says the father. Sure enough, war comes to the country, and many young men from the village lose their lives, but the young man, with his broken hip, is not taken into the army and survives.

Drama is an important part of Book 3A, which we're using even though the suggestions for the teacher in this book assume younger children. I've had to adapt the lessons to suit teenagers. We've made little cardboard avatars for acting out the stories, but sometimes I provide simple costumes and have the youth act the dramas out themselves.

Ruhi Book Four, which is for adults, covers Bahá'í history and has some story boards provided. I reproduced them on sturdy Kent paper and put the words, both in Japanese and in English, on the back so that each card, when it's put at the back of the pack, identifies the card at the front of the pack. In other words, it's what Japanese call a *kamishibai*. As a culminating activity after our study of the unit on the Báb this spring, the members of our study circle colored these using a set of a hundred different colored pencils. It was fun.

We also used colored pencils to color in nine-sided figures — a kind of *mandala*— after reading about different sorts of meditation. I was surprised: five people spent about an hour and a half, completely absorbed, definitely “stilling the mind.”

We did this at a women's retreat two years ago. Most of the time there were only three of us, and we read all the way through *The Seven Valleys* together in a beautiful place, with valley views from the mountain we were on. On the last day, we made collages to show the valleys we'd been reading about. I provided backgrounds, textures, templates, cutting boards and paste. All participants provided ingenuity and a sense of fun.

Learning should be a joy, not a chore, and art can help make it so.

5. Do you believe that the arts are a gift of the Holy Spirit? Would this mean that all people are endowed with artistic abilities?

I believe that all talents are a gift, but that they must be developed through training and practice. I also believe that we all have talents, but we don't all have the **same** talents. Once we discover, through our education and experience, what our own **particular** talents are, I think we have an obligation to develop them further ... and use them for the service of mankind.

In the case of visual artists, one of our obligations is to help other people **see**. Lots of people walk around with their heads down, but .. do they **see** what's at their feet?

*Russet, grey, beige, ochre,
tan, slate blue, flinty
pebbles knocked from
several strata of
many mountains,
tumbled together
in the river and
deposited on a beach,
now in the concrete at your feet*

These colors remind me of another set of colors. I was giving a lecture about poetry one day, but someone in the audience asked me about "the problem of black people in America." I said, "Black people aren't a problem; it's discrimination [*sabetsu*] that's the problem. To divide people into "black and white" is an artificial division anyway: people come in all sorts of colors, none of which are as black as this folder or as white as this paper." I listed on the blackboard some of those colors, but recently, in an art museum bookshop, I found a book that illustrates my point very well. It's called *My Favorite Colors* by Jun'ichi Nomura.

Using watercolor pencil, I've copied out some of the "people colors" I found there. They have wonderful names like "Chocolate from Bruges", "October pumpkin pie", "Santa Fe terra cotta", "a color like the sound of a clarinet", and "bunny's little bitty ears".

Human beings are all so beautiful, every one of us. Is that not art in life?