

The Artist in the Baha'i Community

Brid MacConville Tanaka

In trying to articulate what it means to be an artist in the Baha'i community, I was tempted to just 'sound off' and air my views on the subject. As I started the process of working out what views I wanted to air, I realized that I had only a vague understanding of what Baha'u'llah wanted me to be as an artist. And so it began to dawn on me that if I wanted to say anything about the role of the artist in the Baha'i community, I really needed to deepen myself on what it says in the Writings about art.

I would like to share what I understand our Divine mandate to be, and at the same time I have also sought the views of Baha'is more learned than myself and will attempt to convey some of their ideas on this subject. The learned Baha'is whose ideas I have borrowed from are distinguished in their field, namely, Counsellor Donald Rogers, Gordon J. Kerr, Ludwig Tuman and the late Daniel Jordan.

The best place to begin to gain an understanding of the artist's role in Baha'i life is to go to the source. Therefore I would like to share with you some quotations from the Writings of our faith.

"Arts, crafts and sciences uplift the world of being, and are conducive to its exaltation. Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone."¹

"It is made incumbent on every one of you to engage in some one occupation, such as arts, trades, and the like. We have made this- your occupation- identical with the worship of God, the True One."²

"The acquisition of sciences and the perfection of arts is considered as acts of worship. If a man engages with all his power in the acquisition of a science or in the perfection of an art, it is as if he has been worshipping God in the churches and temples."³

What an extraordinary gift Baha'u'llah has given us! To be part of this revelation is to be asked to acquire knowledge and, through knowledge, the perfection of our art is counted as worship. This is a revolutionary change from times past. It is a redefinition of art in terms of God's purpose for man.

'Abdu'l-Baha has talked about this revolutionary change brought about by the advent of the Manifestation of God for this age. He outlines what is expected of mankind in order that we may be subject to this universal reformation.

"What a wonderful century this is! It is an age of universal reformation...Sciences and arts are being molded anew. Thoughts are metamorphosed. The foundations of human society are changing and strengthening...All conditions and requisites of the past unfitted and inadequate for the present

time, are undergoing radical reform...The morals of humanity must undergo change. New remedy and solution for human problems must be adopted. Human intellects themselves must change and be subject to the universal reformation.”⁴

Let’s look at the redefinition of art that these revolutionary changes have brought. Baha’u’llah states that it is incumbent upon us to acquire knowledge and states again that it is incumbent upon us to engage in some occupation, such as arts. Incumbent means that it rests upon a person as a duty. Baha’u’llah is telling us that it is our duty to engage in occupations such as the arts. It is our duty to gain knowledge. It will be counted as worship. Another gift! How blessed we are as artists!

Now let’s go back to what ‘Abdu’l-Baha said we need to do to allow ourselves to be subject to these changes. He said that in this new age human intellects must change and must rid themselves of “*conditions and requisites of the past*” because they are “*unfitted and inadequate for the present time.*”

This set me thinking about the nature of the conditions and requisites of the past that we need to rid ourselves of in terms of our understanding of art and artists in the Baha’i Faith. What immediately springs to mind is the image we have had in the past of artists as eccentrics—at times viewed as seers, at times as entertainers—in both cases living on the periphery of society and not subject to its norms.

In these times we still tend to think of artists as eccentrics or as dabblers in a pastime which has little or no practical use or value. If people do pursue the arts seriously as a career, they bring to it the competitiveness of the marketplace. There are very few artists who see it more as a calling, who perfect their art, and who are able to serve humanity by teaching others what they know. The cellist YoYo Ma and the violinist Isaac Stern, two classical musicians who are of world class stature and who spend their energies to help younger musicians perfect their art, come to mind.

Now we Baha’is who are artists have new standards which we must adhere to and thus pave the way forward for others to follow. We must live our lives in accordance with the Baha’i Teachings and thus banish the image of being outside moral standards. We have to follow our mandate and not look to the old world crumbling around our feet, to know what it is we have to do.

Our mandate asks that we acquire knowledge. We have a tendency in the Baha’i Faith to think of knowledge as only worthy if it is in the realm of the sciences, This view excludes artists from holding an accepted and valuable role within the Baha’i community. Inability on the part of the community to understand and value the artists among us denies the definition of art in terms of God’s purpose for man, as laid down by Baha’u’llah.

To be knowledgeable in art leads us into the sacred realm. The twin components necessary to be truly in the creative process, reflection and meditation, deepen the religious experiences of love, joy, devotion, vision, praise and celebration. ‘Abdu’l-Baha tells us that all great works of art are witness to the power of the Spirit and that this power working through the soul of man, enables him to perceive the Divine reality of things.

“By the power of the Holy Spirit, working through his soul, man is able to perceive the Divine reality of things. All great works of art and science are witness to this power of the Spirit.”⁵

Through art we come closer to God and the beauty, majesty and power of His creation. We feel its mystery and our souls become more united with their Creator. We thus gain a deeper knowledge of ourselves, of our lives, and bridge the gap between mind and heart, releasing the potential within us for transformation.

‘Abdu’l-Baha explains that imagination is one of the five inner powers of the human mind. He describes the mind as the root and the imagination as the branch which bears the fruit of our action and achievement in this world. He has said that the stage is the pulpit of the future and that music is a ladder for the soul. He related that one of the significant memories of His childhood was seeing a play about the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn. He was so moved that it had a profound impact on Him for the rest of His life.

Art helps us to develop images to feed the soul—images which are vital in the soul’s journey of transformation. The purpose of Baha’u’llah’s revelation is transformation of the individual, to unite the soul with its Creator. Through art, individuals experience knowledge of their own being and thus come closer to God. This is because art works on an emotional, physical, and spiritual level, deeper than thought alone. There are many reports by educators and healers of the therapeutic influence of art; here we see that art acts as a starting point for conscious expression of the subconscious mind. We would all do well to integrate art into our lives, to provide a dimension to our Faith which would revitalize our spiritual energies and provide the fuel we need to be a part of the ongoing process of transformation.

If we view art in this light we can begin to see its importance in Baha’i education and in teaching the faith to non-Baha’is. It can be a balancing point between the rational and the spiritual—looking inwards as a lifeline to the soul and giving the soul language in outward and rational forms.

One of the definitions of knowledge is a certain understanding, not an opinion. Knowledge of this deeper dimension which we as artists seek will be as “*as wings to man’s life and a ladder for his ascent.*”

As mankind becomes more and more influenced by the teachings of the Faith, art will assume a key role in reaching the masses of hungry souls. In a letter written to a Baha’i who had staged a pageant in 1932, Shoghi Effendi wrote;

“Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalizing especially among the mass of people.”⁶

If artists who are Baha’is attempt to reflect however inadequately the qualities of and attributes of God, they will do much to draw the body of mankind into that “wondrous ocean”.

“Although now is only the very beginning of Baha’i art, yet the friends who feel gifted in such matters should endeavour to develop and cultivate their gifts and through their works to reflect, however inadequately, the Divine spirit which Baha’u’llah has breathed into the world.”⁷

The artist is above all responsible to God and to His Manifestation, for the service he aspires to render. The artist is also responsible to society of which he is a part and to whose spiritual life his work is addressed. He may of course be also responsible to Baha’i institutions if he is working on a project under

their auspices. These are all spiritual roles which require that the artist continually deepen in the Writings and become a channel for the Holy Spirit. The resulting creation of the artist will attract, edify and inspire souls through embodying divine truth and its beauty in metaphorical forms.

So far so good in our attempts to understand our roles as artists in the service of the Baha'i Faith. We now need to address our place within the Baha'i community. If we strive earnestly to follow the mandate Baha'u'llah has set down for us, we can play a unique part in Baha'i community life. In order to do that, however, there needs to be a greater acceptance within our community of those souls with artistic leanings and sensitivities.

One of the main principles of the Baha'i Faith is unity in diversity. We are all deeply attracted and committed to this principle but sometimes it is one of the hardest to put into practice. While we may superficially tolerate different temperaments and the gifts that they offer, we more often than not snub or dismiss those gifts because they do not conform to our personal taste.

Working together in Baha'i community is not always a matter of personal taste, as we all know! We find ourselves struggling to build a community with personalities very different from our own, all with our own unique history and life experiences. Whereas in our old world communities we group together with others of a like mind, similar taste and shared interests, in the Baha'i community we struggle to find harmony within our wide diversity.

If we could look to art once again we would find myriad examples of harmony building, through the juxtaposition of diverse elements. In music the sharps and flats, major and minor chords, patterns of rhythm, all contribute to the harmonic whole. In dance the message is not in the movement or stillness alone, but in the space which contains both. In painting there is a set of relationships, of light and dark, variety of tone, hue and texture, the object of which is unity in the completed work. In order to experience a total image the capacity to make use of variety must be developed. Without this interrelationship of diverse parts in a single whole, no message of any importance is possible. In his essay *The Effect of Revelation on Artistic Expression*, Counselor Donald Rogers talks about this set of relationships and writes:

“The World Order of Baha'u'llah is a work of art conceived by God and given to man to create. Man will take on the attributes of this creation to the degree he participates in its construction. I have often tried to imagine what one small part, detail or unit of a great masterpiece of art would feel like if it had consciousness. What would it be like to know you were an important, even if a small, link in a series which, unified, formed a composition which elevated all those who experienced it? The experience of being a Baha'i is an answer to this question.”⁸

Our administrative order is a work of harmony as long as we allow diversity and strive for a balance between the static and the dynamic, the artistic and the scientific. Art can be a key to universal participation and through art we can share excitement and a vision about the future. In our conferences and gatherings, sharing through music, song, dance, drama and participative forms of learning we can discover the power of unity and build a positive experience of community.

I would like to leave you with two further quotes. The first quote is from Baha'u'llah in reference to the way in which He has instructed us to treat craftsmen.

“The people of Baha should not deny any soul the reward due to him, should treat craftsmen with deference, and, unlike the people aforetime, should not defile their tongues with abuse.”⁹

The second quote I would like to share with you and with which I will end this talk, is a quote from Thomas Moore, psychotherapist and one-time monk, who writes on the subject of care of the soul.

“Becoming the artists and theologians of our own lives, we can approach the depth that is the domain of soul. When we leave art only to the accomplished painter and the museum, instead of fostering our own artful sensibilities through them, then our lives lose opportunities for soul...Fine art, like formal religion, is at times quite lofty, while soul in any context is lower case, ordinary, daily, familial and communal, felt, intimate, attached, engaged, involved, affected, ruminating, stirred, and poetic. The soul of a piece of art is known intimately, not remotely. It is felt, not just understood...Without soul, religion’s truths and moral principles might be believed in, perhaps, and discussed, but they are not taken truly to heart and lived from the core of one’s being.”¹⁰

References

- ¹ Baha’u’llah. *The Third Tajalli from the Book of Effulgences. (Tajalliyat) Writings of Baha’u’llah*. 1986. New Delhi: Baha’i Publishing Trust, India.
- ² Baha’u’llah. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*. In *Writings of Baha’u’llah*. (p. 26-27) 1986. New Delhi: Baha’i Publishing Trust, India.
- ³ Baha’u’llah. *Baha’i World Faith*. (p.195). Wilmette: Baha’i Publishing Trust, USA.
- ⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Baha. *Baha’i World Faith*, (p.228-29). Wilmette: Baha’i Publishing Trust, USA.
- ⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Baha. *Paris Talks*, (p.85) 1969. London: Baha’i Publishing Trust, England.
- ⁶ Shoghi Effendi. *Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, October 10, 1932*. Helen Hornby(ed). *Lights of Guidance*. 1988. New Delhi: Baha’i Publishing Trust, India.
- ⁷ Shoghi Effendi. *Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi*.1937. Helen Hornby(ed). *Lights of Guidance*, 1988. New Delhi: Baha’i Publishing Trust, India.
- ⁸ Rogers, Otto Donald. *The Effect of Revelation on Artistic Expression*. 1982. Baha’i Studies #10. Ottawa: Association for Baha’i Studies Publication.
- ⁹ Baha’u’llah. *Tablets of Baha’u’llah*. (p. 51-2). Wilmette: Baha’i Publishing Trust, USA.
- ¹⁰ Moore, Thomas. *Care of the Soul*. 1992 (p. 290-291) New York: Harper Collins.