

Baha'i Art: Fact or Fiction?

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Bahá'í Art: Fact or Fiction?

Inder Manocha

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While Bahá'í scholars proliferate and disseminate the

fruits of their labours, the Bahá'í artist is left

cudgelling his brains about the nature of his contribution.(1)

Neither as academic nor as moraliser, he similarly tries to poach insights

into his Faith, while ultimately failing to deliver it seems. This Faith

has already acquired, at least in the West, a tradition of what might be

called Bahá'í "folk songs". A solitary individual, strapped

to his guitar, will play dimly-evocative melodies for audiences encouraged

to echo, or at least mime, lyrics in various appropriate places. Excursions

on to the stage have triumphed in entertainment value, but have arguably

evinced less discretion for artistic quality. The kind of display which

might be appropriate for morale-boosting during times of crisis is not

perhaps conducive to the fostering of a critical dramatic culture in our

community. Given the compelling vision our Cause offers to a decaying

civilisation,

what promises to be a unique theatrical-spiritual experience may only warrant

that label in the hope that its like will never be seen again.

The question has been begged, to the point of becoming a professional

mendicancy, "what is Bahá'í art?" Perhaps all we are in fact

asking is: what existing conventions and forms (or variations thereof)

can be used to promote the Bahá'í vision? The more pressing

question, arguably, is what aspect of that Bahá'í vision

would communicate most meaningfully to Western audiences? It is a question

that needs to be begged as much as any in the interests of Bahá'í

art.

The vision that permeates the meditations and prayers set down by Bahá'u'lláh

offer a sense of both crisis and victory. The Fire Tablet articulates the

idea of tests as the safekeepers of mercies and wisdom. The writings of

His beloved son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, distinctly portray the soul waning

under a self-imposed isolation and angst.

O my Lord, my Beloved, my Desire! Befriend me in my loneliness
and accompany in my exile. Remove my sorrow. Cause me to be devoted to
Thy Beauty. (Bahá'í Prayers, No.70)

The literary genius of the Guardian testifies to the struggle, the fight
that humanity has picked with itself, appearing almost as a magnified
reflection

of the anguished soul depicted by his grandfather.(2)

The morale-boosting we receive from the individual pens of the chief wordsmiths
of our Faith issues from a battle for glory, from the fire that tests the
gold, which allows the soul its spiritual quantum leap. As witnesses to
this uniquely human struggle, it is, arguably, the responsibility of Bahá'í
artists to listen to the many strains of our Literature, to realize the
fine edge that separates spiritual glory from abasement, the animal from
the noble, and to invite an audience to witness the compelling power of
faith in its often lonely attempt to maintain these distinctions.

It is this focus on the soul, the individual spirit, despite its stronger
moorings in Oriental culture, that possesses the greatest relevance for
the communication of Bahá'í art to an atomised Western society.

Indeed, the Existentialist tradition that has, either directly or indirectly,
informed much of post-World War Two theatre in Europe is founded in attempts
to make contact with the self, and, in so doing, to move from an intellectual
relationship to it to a single identity with it. Revealing the underside
of the battle for identity, while keeping in tact the sense of struggle,
the words of Samuel Beckett not too distantly echo the potentially endless
labours undertaken in "The Valley of Search": "Fail. Fail again. Fail better."

The "angry young man" of 1950's Britain, the creation of a very angry young
John Osborne, described the individual as both wanting to disassociate
himself from and conquer the dislocated post-colonial Britain around him.(3)

It depicted the individual attempting to locate his needs and fears amidst
the forces of change, at once constructive and destructive. The characters
carved from the eternal silence by Harold Pinter reflected another dislocation,
that of certainty from memory and communication, highlighting the larger
question-mark over the possibility of meaningful human relationships, other
than those devised for self-protection or gain. Bahá'í artists,
cognisant of the historical processes at work in their age as outlined
by the Guardian and conscious of the inner spiritual death that has questioned
an ultimate meaning of existence, have a tradition to build on and eventually
to redefine. It is now an opportunity for the Bahá'í artist
to present his version of the individual - as complex, as layered - in
the context of a godless universal psyche whose only claim to unity is
that it is collectively undergoing history's greatest existential crisis.(4)

The individual has always occupied a significant place in the history
of religion and, indeed, in history itself. Heroism and martyrdom will
always call upon our remembrance of individuals. But in the central texts
of our Faith, the individual has been given the right to choose for himself

his allegiance to God's Word. This is, surely, the beginning of the human drama awaiting its realisation by the Bahá'í artist. It is, as *The Seven Valleys* depict so intensely, an overwhelming experience that may never end for our divine tests and trials are themselves without respite. The mythological ambience of this Text only serves to confirm the location of its story in every human being. The story of the awakening spiritual consciousness is a deliverance from time, where the moment occupies infinity and where an eternal journey can be dissolved into seven footsteps of integrity. In defiance of the dimensions of time and indeed space, it can only be the soul, in its transcendent quality, that exists and moves on. In the almost surreal preoccupation of the soul for the Object of its desire, in its very search for what is beyond it, the human journey must itself assume the qualities of its objective. If transcendence is the essence of man, it is, not surprisingly, the essence of great art. What Bahá'í art can, in turn, suggest is that existence need no longer be a distilled version of art; rather the latter's bold passions and profound subtleties are the very substance of genuine living. In the most fundamental tradition of art, the Bahá'í artist can present his version of what it is to be alive. The skill lies in identifying the vicissitudes of the spiritual journey as "real life" experience.

It has been declared that with the triumph of Reason "reality" was finally allowed to emerge from behind the veil of delusion, for religion had finally been toppled. The Age of Reason deposed the Age of Treason. However, if the "fact" is that God is dead, the truth is that He is not buried, or rather those symptoms of human disorientation for which He was held culpable, such as existential anxiety, fear, and, above all, self-deception, have persisted. Within the seemingly self-sufficient routines of daily life exists the mistrust for ultimate meaning and purpose, but this itself has bred a paranoia engendering alienation, avarice and emotional damage. "The death of God" has required a replacement. It has only produced a greater self-centredness and, as a result, has further confused the distinction between fantasy and reality, as ideologies such as fascism have displayed, and as the increase in crime since World War Two, noting their nature (rape in particular), has underlined. The desire to live through, but not in, this "real life" tragedy provides the source of departure into "The Valley of Search". It is the moment we project the needs of our soul - alone, detached, shutting "the door of friendliness and enmity upon all the people of the earth" (*Seven Valleys* 5) - reflecting the discovery of true "individualism". In keeping with the nature of tests as the bestowals of guidance, it suggests the conversion of our forced alienation from others into the independent investigation of truth. It is, in fact, the source of Bahá'í art: both for the artist as a self-conscious individual and for the substance of his work.

The artist knows something about the solitary struggle. His voyage embarks upon the waters of often unconscious experience, invariably caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of indecent exposure and the over-inhibited

articulation

of fears and desires. This excursion he must undertake alone, for only then, as in the silence and solitude of bringing himself to account, can he draw from himself his truths and lies. It requires an honesty that allows any truth in art, and without which no endeavour can merit the distinction "Bahá'í". If the Bahá'í is to express his vision of his Faith, he must undertake the process of discovery with the same honesty his Faith demands of him in all things. It involves an admission in his work of the complex and complicated kind of moral decay that Shoghi Effendi took pains to outline; for admission of this is an admission of the need for this Faith, and only then, after the context of the struggle is set out, can any resolution be offered. Without the inclusion of "evil" any moral point is lost.

Moreover, in the absence of even the suggestion of evil, human nature is not only simplified, but misrepresented. In the tradition of the greatest tragedies, the story of love and hate, good and evil, is not the balancing of alien opposites, but of two sides of the same coin. Its potency is not revealed through either emotion fighting the other as a war against a foreign power, but through a civil war between familiar and longtime bedfellows. At some points, as in Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia, love and hate seemingly fuse in the same heart.⁽⁵⁾ Importantly, this interrelationship between good and evil suggests a larger dimension of "human nature": its inconsistency and fickleness which breed self-deception. The Master points to this in His description of man's love for man in Paris Talks (179-181). Indeed, much of art demonstrates the qualities of man through his struggle with his own elusive (some might say illusory) nature. It is a struggle; but much of the beauty of Man, in art and religion, as artist and Prophet, is borne out by his suffering.

A Bahá'í vision does not have to involve a complete picture of all the dimensions of its Faith. It can involve part of that vision, elaborate on an aspect, even if that aspect describes the debilitating affects of society or existential confusion. We are, as the Guardian has elsewhere advised us, to present our Faith in congruence with the susceptibilities and sensitivities of our audience. A play demonstrating the oneness of humanity may leave a largely individualistic and self-directed Western audience cold, if not frozen. A piece on an aspect of Bahá'í history may be of intellectual interest, but the spiritual connection may be lost for lack of characters or motivations with which an audience can profoundly relate. History, or the past, only instructs when reflecting the concerns of the present. A Western audience may feel more sympathetic to an expression of the tensions of the individual's plight, involving a more focused exploration of faith, or the need for God, in a culture that has attempted His assassination - what this faith gives, what it demands, as we teeter on the fine line between reality and illusion, in the often unconscious search for the permanent, in this kingdom of names.

It is, then, the Bahá'í artist whose role it is, as the spiritual night-watchman of an increasingly shadowy age, to lead his peers through the Seven Valleys. This obligation is not a thin veil masking a simple-minded arrogance, but rather an immediate reflection of art as worship and service.(6) James Joyce declared the role of the artist as one who "creates the uncreated conscience of the race."(7) This is not tantamount to supposing that an artist, Bahá'í or otherwise, can assume a self-appointed prerogative to proffer answers. In fact it suggests that his obligation is to ask the right questions. The power of art, in its essence, is the power of suggestion.

The suggestion of this Revelation is a powerful and original one. In the context of the struggle, good and evil still co-habit, but their balance is awry. It is not, in fact, a balance at all. For in his description of the dual processes of integration and disintegration, Shoghi Effendi indicates that the latter process is an inexorable decline.(8)

Evil is increasingly exposed for the sham it is. For any self-styled ruler of the human heart must leave a legacy to its followers; but with every fresh perversity it uses to contort the human spirit, evil is clearly seen in this age as leaving only chaos and confusion. Despite its firm grip, it is indeed the mere absence of light. Resolution is found in revolution - but in the throwing down of arms - borne from a stripping of the attire of materialism, in all its aspects, and the learning of spiritual passion. But, in distinction from pure philosophy, this does not mean that the Bahá'í dispensation has simply established new ideas; rather, it has generated the charge of a new spirit, a spirit that has indeed upset Man's ordered life including his internal balances. As "The Valley of Love" declares in quoting from a Persian mystic poem:

A lover is he who is chill in hell fire;

A knower is he who is dry in the sea. (Seven Valleys
9)

The art of this dispensation must, somehow, be infused with, and depict, this new spirit. It must describe the new bounties and capacities without which such a transformation is inconceivable, which the Master assures us are awaiting our capture in this age of maturity.(9)

It must depict not just the struggle of good against evil, but the "new" human spirit that will necessarily insure the victory of all that is good. The literature of despair has done a thorough job in reflecting the deterioration

of this age. The challenge is now to locate and immortalize the existent means for its rebirth.

Moreover, as the Guardian testifies, the Bahá'í revelation is not simply the culmination of another Cycle of religious truth, let alone the establishment of just another dispensation. It is the supreme Day of Days.(10) The aspiration of the

different metaphors and imagery used over centuries to depict hope, salvation, enlightenment, "of which seers and poets for countless generations have expressed their vision", (11) has finally expressed itself. Mythology has come round full circle and returned to its earthly existence by becoming incarnated in His Most Great Name. This will surely instigate the first genuine universal artistic renaissance; for the advent of Bahá'u'lláh, as the fulfilment of so many religious/ cultural symbols, will require a reassessment of, and new direction to, very many artistic traditions. Artists, as held in the hope of all great romantic calls for a just society, must lead the revolution in consciousness and expression. How will the Bahá'í artist suggest this transformation? No matter. He has no choice. His perspective has suddenly changed.

If the broken heart has been the centrepiece and source of inspiration (or desperation) of art throughout the ages, the fracturing of the human soul must surely, in this godless culture, assume its place as a symbol of the human condition. And it is our final duty, perhaps, to acknowledge the connections between art and faith. Art, like religion, has the power to enlighten and convert. Artists, like the Prophets, have their disciples. Both require on the part of their audience an act of confession, a demonstration of humility. Indeed, to appreciate art, to internalise religious truth, requires the acceptance of levels of consciousness, worlds of insight and expression at first unrecognised. They both possess the capacity, and reveal the human need, to embrace the world in all its nuances and ambiguities, and to give back a vision in the hope that it is shared by others. Perhaps most importantly, art and religion, by their very necessity, attest to the difficulty of living. Given this, Bahá'í art cannot deem itself an exception, comprising both these forms of self-consciousness. And it is the courage of the artist and of the characters that populate his work to withstand the harsh illusions of this world, the sometimes permanently damaging nature of its transience, that will demonstrate to an audience the transcendence that is possessed by man. For only through the struggle can we gain release.

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End Notes

1. The author wishes to point out that the use of the masculine pronoun is in the generic sense and is not intended to exclude the female sex.
 2. Shoghi Effendi, World Order of Bahá'u'lláh 30-33.
 3. John Osborne, Look Back In Anger. London: Faber and Faber, 1957.
 4. The biological unity of the human species is recognised by the author. "Unity" in our context is meant to describe an achievement on the part of humankind, which of course biological unity is not.
 5. "Hamlet, Prince of Denmark", William Shakespeare.
 6. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith 377-78.
 7. Qtd. in "Preface" to The Creative Circle ix.
 8. Shoghi Effendi, World Order 168-70.
 9. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace 438.
 10. Shoghi Effendi, World Order 103.
 11. The Universal House of Justice, The Promise of World Peace 1.
- Responses from Sonja van Kerkhoff and Inder Manocha published in Bahá'í Studies Review 4.1 (1994)

Art in the Bahá'í Community

Editors—When I first read the article, "Bahá'í Art: Fact or Fiction,"⁽¹⁾ it just made me angry, for many reasons, the most basic being that, according to the author, art being made by Bahá'ís "is failing to deliver," or that I should be "cudgelling my brains about the nature of [my] contribution." I've thought about a response to this article for some time, and debated on whether to write it in a "detached" manner, as is usually done in Bahá'í studies journals, but then felt it would be more accurate in this case to write as the involved artist that I am.

Manocha's example of the folk singer artist is a poor one. It is the same as choosing a poor essay as an example of Bahá'í scholarship. There are many Bahá'í artists who are professionally engaged but, perhaps because they do not perform at Bahá'í events, may be perceived as not being Bahá'í artists. That is a question for the Bahá'í community to address, not for the artists, because they surely do exist. I know this because I edit a Bahá'í arts quarterly (Arts Dialogue) and I'm always having to find space for the contributions I receive, and I know that we are only touching the surface. However personally, I am very careful in general about showing Bahá'ís my art because, more often than not, they wonder where the ring stone symbol or the nine sided star is, and it is clear that they only see the arts as having an overtly didactic function. What if a doctor's profession was only valued by Bahá'ís for its didactic function? Artists are generally sensitive people, and such a comment is enough to stop many from wanting to show their art in any Bahá'í setting. So Manocha's example of the folk musician as what is often heard as "art" in a Bahá'í context has some truth in it, but this is because that's what the Bahá'í community wants and asks for. It is not a problem of Bahá'í artists not "delivering the goods" but rather the Bahá'í community (and Manocha, though for different reasons) not being willing to invite and perhaps accept what the artists have to offer.

The author sees art as a result of the individual struggling with the unknown. There is a place for this type of art, but it is just one perspective in the arts. Not only has he dismissed the variety of quality art which is being made by Bahá'ís, but in this article there is no mention of creativity or imagination. Rather the focus is on (self) expression, and this gives a one-sided, and rather tortured, picture of the arts.

Art is so powerful in society because it works on many levels. Not merely a didactic level, nor purely an emotional level. Art is almost like magic because, while aspects of art can be explained or written about, its very nature of working both physically and spiritually means that there is always an elusive quality, whether it be the effect of a certain colour or movement, or a sense of time or space. The artist while working takes in all the influences from the environment in order to crystallise the art product. This is a transformative process and one that involves an effort, but it does not necessarily involve the suffering, loneliness and tragedy which permeate Manocha's article. Nor does it have to produce a consistent style or message.

What I have learnt from my involvement in the arts and the arts world is that the loneliness or suffering comes more from being misunderstood by those around you, than from making art. It seems to me that the issue at hand is educating Bahá'ís about the arts. And this not only means involving the arts as part of Bahá'í events but also having educational courses on the arts, just as we have educational courses on other topics. Making art is fun! Actually it is scary and uplifting when you discover another level or a new area of perception, but mainly it is fun. In the Bahá'í Writings creativity is a continual process, an on-going act of God, implying not only ongoing physical creativity but also the creation of new essences or ideas—in other words "the creation" is not a fixed environment within which we live but an ever-expanding world in both physical and intellectual senses.

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....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. In the days to come, ye will, verily, behold things of which ye have never heard before.(2)

Humans are endowed with the unique potential of being able to manifest all of the attributes of God, although in a form and degree appropriate to our contingent natures. Since creativity is seen in the Bahá'í Writings not just as an act but also as an attribute of God, humans, and most particularly believers in God, are called on to develop their creative capacities, just as they are also called on to become good and just, and to acquire knowledge.(3) This points to a rather different way in which artists might see themselves, in fact we may be so busy trying to keep up with this ever-expanding miraculous universe, scampering after our prolific Creator to pick up the sweet things She lets fall, that there is no time to give expression to "history's greatest existentialist crisis" (or, perhaps, much point).

The author wrote very beautifully about the idea of transcendence, and the plight of the lonely individual, (which I must add not all artists suffer from). Most of the article seems to indicate that artists "must depict not just the struggle of good against evil, but the 'new' human spirit that will necessarily insure the victory of all that is good." On one level we all do this. That is, aim to come to "new" understandings, and I agree with the author that "art" has a lot more to offer than depicting good against evil. However, I also feel we should be careful not to assume that art made by Bahá'ís is so very separate from art made by non-Bahá'ís. We all live in the same world, and art concerns society in one way or another.

When Bahá'ís talk about the arts, I feel, it is wisest to avoid the word

Bahá'í art, because its meaning is ambiguous. If we talk of art being made by Bahá'ís or inspired by the Bahá'í Faith this is not only more accurate, but at the same time takes away the need to then decide what Bahá'í art is or isn't. Then when we talk about Bahá'í artists or Bahá'ís who are artists, we can talk about artists who work in any medium or imagery. I'm not suddenly a non-Bahá'í when my subject matter does not contain some overt reference to the Bahá'í Faith. What I feel artists who are Bahá'ís must be careful about is not to wait for approval from the Bahá'í community. The development of the arts is a cumulative social process, and depends largely on the place which the arts are given in the life of society, but creativity and art is both a cause of, and a result of, individual spiritual growth.

Finally, the whole tone of the article was difficult for me to read "neutrally" because of the excessive use of the masculine pronoun. A footnote stating that the intention in the use of the masculine pronoun was to include both sexes, indicated to me that the issue of equality was not important enough to that person in order for them to look for a better way of expressing an idea. The issue is in making the effort to change a habit.

Sonja van Kerkhoff

Maastricht, The Netherlands

Inder Manocha replies:

Editors—As a brief response to Sonja van Kerkhoff's remarks on my article entitled "Bahá'í Art: Fact or Fiction," I will reserve my comments to the following points.

First, Ms. van Kerkhoff explains that one of the reasons for her initial anger towards my article was that I apparently suggested Bahá'í artists "should be cudgelling their brains about the nature of their contribution." A re-reading of my opening paragraph will make it clear that such an imperative slant is of her own making. What I wrote in fact was that: "...the Bahá'í artist is left cudgelling his brains about the nature of his contribution."

I do not mind criticism but I object to misrepresentation.

Second, while criticising my article for being "one-sided," I cannot help but return the comment with regard to Ms. van Kerkhoff's assessment of my remarks. For example, the objection raised in her third paragraph that: "The author sees art as a result of the individual struggling with the unknown" simply neglects my discussion of art as a means of reflecting the contradictory forces at play in society. One can hardly describe these as "the unknown"; rather, they are disturbingly palpable.

Third, given Ms. van Kerkhoff's objection to the overtly didactic (paragraph two), I find her remedy to my use of the (generic) masculine pronoun (namely, "The issue is in making the effort to change a habit") surprisingly instructive. I also wonder if she would extend her criticism and

solution to those whose station in our Faith is incalculably more elevated than mine.

Inder Manocha

London, UK

End Notes

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