

were to unite in a meeting, they would fill the largest banquet hall. Over and over again we have tried to pay him this tribute, only to be put aside with a deprecating smile and an apologetic word. Only once or twice has he permitted himself to be made the guest of honor in this way.

In paying this brief tribute through THE ART WORLD I speak, I am sure, for all my fellow beneficiaries. Here then is my toast: To William Dean Howells, Dean of us all! May the sunshine and the flowers of the South send him back to us in renewed health and increasing honor!

*Hamlin Garland*

## A PERSIAN REFORMER'S VIEW OF ART

By JULIET THOMPSON

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IT was in his prison at Acca, a Turkish penal colony on the coast of Syria—in that famous old city which once was Ptolemais and later St. Jean d'Acre—that Abdul Baha first talked with me of art.

"Art is diviner than we have ever dreamed" Abdul Baha said to a friend of mine. To me he said "Art is an act of worship."

This statement, opening up a new vision of the power of art and of its real function, is all the more remarkable in that it was made by one who is already regarded by millions as the prophet of a new age—the leader of a new world-religion, the Bahai Movement, which, originating in Persia about the middle of the last century in the teaching of Baha'o'llah, Abdul Baha's father, has during the past seventy years spread its message of reform throughout the whole world—its object "The Most Great Peace."

Because of the dominant note of reform in the Bahai teaching, reaching out from the fundamental basis of spiritual renewal into all expressions of life—international, national, governmental, scientific—cruel efforts were made by the conservative element of Persia to stamp out the movement; many Bahais were put to death and the leader Baha'o'llah, his wife and children and a number of followers were sent as prisoners into exile. Abdul Baha became a life-prisoner at the age of eight and remained in captivity fifty-odd years until set free in 1908 by the Young Turk Party.

Years ago a distinguished scholar, an Englishman, visiting Baha'o'llah and his son in Acca, wrote these impressions:

"Persian Muslims will tell you that the Bahais bewitch or drug their guests, so that these, impelled by a fascination which they cannot resist, become similarly affected with what the aforesaid Muslims regard as an incomprehensible madness. Idle and absurd as this belief is, it yet rests on a basis of fact stronger than that which supports the greater part of what they allege concerning this people. The spirit which pervades the Bahais is such that it cannot fail to affect most powerfully all subjected to its influence. It may appal or attract—it cannot be ignored or disregarded. Let those who have not seen disbelieve me if they will, but should that spirit once reveal itself to them, they will experience an emotion which they are not likely to forget."

I should hardly dare to say how true I found this to be! Nor is it within the province of this article to describe the effect on my heart of the spiritually free lives of that little band of exiles—the great Abdul Baha, his family and the few devoted followers who have survived the sufferings of the

prison life. But I should like to write of things relating to beauty, and to start with making the reader feel the utter charm of the place itself, the beauty that blooms everywhere around that group of beautiful lives.

In the great open inner court and on two sides of the picturesque old palace which for some years—since better days dawned for the once closely confined Bahais—has been Abdul Baha's prison, he has planted gardens, where flowers grow in such profusion as to seem tangled, where peacocks walk and slim date-palms lift high their plumed heads. The old house, too, though devoid of comfort, furnished with little besides divans, had something enchanting about it—apart from that rare atmosphere of an unbroken, an impregnable peace—something in the mere look of it . . . I remember one huge old hall, where the family often gathered for tea while little birds flying through the high arches of the windows hopped about, picking up crumbs. A stone floor, sunken in places, and dark stone walls; two parrots on stands in a corner with their gaudy notes of color, red and green, orange and blue, in the grayness. All the residents of the house wore the flowing Oriental dress, the men, turbans, sashes and the *aba*, with a long white undergarment; the women loose gowns, veils covering their braided hair.

One night, with the spell of the place upon me, I sat on the roof of this wonderful house with Monever Khanum, Abdul Baha's youngest daughter, a little Persian princess, (for Abdul Baha is of high rank) with a beautiful head held like a queen's, with eyes like stars and a spirit poised above the world—and yet simple and girlish and possessed of a strong sense of humor!—a *girl*, with whom, in spite of the strangeness of her birth and situation and the unusualness of her spiritual detachment, one could feel wonderfully at home!

It was a clear night. Across the bay of Haifa old Mount Carmel was a long dim shadow on the sky. Immediately below on our right lay the strong double seawall, part of the fortifications of grim old Acca, and beyond, the Mediterranean. Looking down to our left, we saw the heads of the date-palms in the court and a little distance away, the minaret and dome of the Mosque, pale blue in the starlight.

I seemed to be very far away from earth—dangerously close, in fact, to that "incomprehensible madness" referred to by the scholar I have quoted—when Monever Khanum herself brought me back!

"Juliet" she said "the Master" the title given to Abdul Baha in the East "wants to talk to you about your art. He told me so today. He said, 'Juliet is

neglecting her work. I want to talk to her about it.'"

So the next day he called me with Monever to his room—that simple, comfortless, beautiful little room, hardly larger than a cell, with its divan, its little black bed, the four slender posts decorated, Oriental fashion, with a painted vine, and the stone water-jug in the window!

Abdul Baha has a majesty transcending that of a king—the majesty of the prophet. Nowhere in the world can one find a more nobly sculptured head. In his dress, too, there is a feeling for beauty—aside from the grace of line of the Eastern garments—an inevitable sense of color—his *abas* are of bronze, or a warm gray-green, or cream-white; sometimes he dresses in black and white.

When Monever and I were seated, he began to speak in Persian, his daughter translating.

"As to your art" he said, after a little preliminary, "you must go on with it and improve in it. Give great attention to it and work always, that you may reach the high summit of perfection. You must remember that art is identical with an act of worship. It is an act of worship. *Work* is an act of worship. In your work you will be helped from above."

He then went into detail, urging me to paint in oil (at that time I confined myself to pastel) that I might not be "limited to one medium." I began to say that I was now more interested in the great sociological work going on today, when he interrupted with a laugh; "You do your own work!" He concluded:

"You have two arts—one physical, the other spiritual. With your physical art you paint the images of men; with your spiritual art you paint the images of the angels and at last I hope you will be enabled to paint the perfections of God. Your physical art will at last end, but your spiritual art is everlasting. Your physical art can be done by many, but your spiritual art is not the work of every one! Your physical art makes you dear to men, but your spiritual art makes you dear to God. Therefore, work to perfect *both of them!*"

At another time, when I was engaged on work of great importance, I said to Abdul Baha: "Pray for me that I may be inspired."

He replied: "As you are working only for the sake of God, you will be inspired."

Here again, as in his talk in Acca, in his statement to me that art was an "act of worship" Abdul Baha sounded the key-note of his teaching:—that the spiritual power is the active principle of life—that if we recognize and realize this, opening ourselves to its inflow, making ourselves channels of the creative force of the universe "working only for God" or, in other words, for *serviceableness*, then inspiration, which Abdul Baha defines as a "connection between our souls and the *True One*" will be set free into our world, and "art"—and all things!—"will be diviner than we have ever dreamed." Kipling has said part of this in another way—

And each for the joy of the working,  
And each in his separate star  
Shall paint the thing as he sees it  
For the God of things as they are.

Great art is not merely an intellectual product. It is not slavist imitation or the mere "copying of sections of nature" or sections of external per-

sonality! Great art belongs to the transcendent realm of spiritual vision and spiritual emotion, and is an expression of the apprehension of *divine* beauty and inner significance. We have lingered too long on the threshold of mere physical Beauty, making mere heavy reproductions of its outer aspect. Let me give you a definition by Baha'o'llah of the creative power in man:

"Upon the Sun of Truth depends the training of the people of the country of thought. It is the Spirit of Reality and the Water of Life. All things owe their existence to it. Its manifestation is ever according to the capacity and coloring of the mind through which it may reflect. For example: its light when cast upon the mirrors of the wise gives expression to wisdom; when reflected from the minds of artists it produces manifestations of new and wonderful arts; when it shines through the minds of students it reveals knowledge and unfolds mysteries."

He says also: "The Reflective Faculty (or the Mind) is the depository of crafts, arts and sciences. Exert yourselves, so that the gems of knowledge may appear from this ideal mine and conduce to the tranquillity and union of the different nations of the world."

Again this "working for God" for the expression and bringing about of the Divine Order in the world is made the aim of creative work. The artist appears, in this conception, not as a more or less arrogant unit, but as a servant of humanity, the sensitive recipient and transmitter, in forms of beauty, of a power from the world of spirits to the world of men. How interesting that Baha'o'llah has defined the mind as the *reflective* rather than the active faculty! When the inner mind learns the secret of cleaving an opening through its objective cover and lying in the sun of the realm of divine knowledge, then we will have an art, a science undreamed of now! And this has to do with spiritual freedom, with the overcoming of fear and doubt and mental limitations in absolute reliance on that *Reality*, the inspiration of Spirit!

Baha'o'llah, indeed, tells us that in this era, on the threshold of which we are now standing, the day of Universal Peace, "new and wonderful sciences and powerful arts" will appear. And he further says: "The savants and artists have great rights among the people of the world."

This seems to foreshadow a time when again the world's seers will be recognized as the servants of the people and will be set free by some form of pension from the financial stress which so fatally handicaps that sensitive instrument, the creative faculty.

Beside his direct allusions to art, the utterances of Baha'o'llah are full of light for the creative worker. For example take this:

"O questioning lover! If thou dost soar in the holy atmosphere of Spirit, thou wilt see the True One so manifest above all things, that thou wilt find naught else save Him!"

When the eye of the artist perceives the *souls of things* he will paint with a new emotional power.

I think it will interest the reader to hear of a lesson in color which I received from Abdul Baha. It was in a hotel, where a room was hung with poor little canvases, painted in a low key. Suddenly, starting up, he walked round the room point-

ing to each picture in succession repeating in English the word mud, mud, mud! I had always painted in a low key myself, but from that moment I saw with clear eyes that in the days to come, in the "divine art" that is to be, we will use, not earth-colors, but rainbow colors!

While I was painting the portrait of Abdul Baha, which, by the way, under some extraordinary influence, I did in three hours, I asked for a criticism. Consider that Abdul Baha had been shut away from the world all his life. He had gone into prison a little boy of eight and come out at sixty-four. Surely the talk of studios had never reached him! But these were the actual words of his criticism: "Clean up the color!" I could have imagined it was my friend Albert Sterner speaking!

Another incident which may be of interest: While Abdul Baha was in New York, I went with him one day to the Natural History Museum. When we entered the room of Aztec art Abdul Baha immediately exclaimed: "This is like the Egyptian art, only

these things are better." He then pointed out to me certain details which showed Persian influence.

"They say" I remarked "that before a great catastrophe there was connection between Asia and America."

"Assuredly" he replied "previous to a great cataclysm there was such a connection."

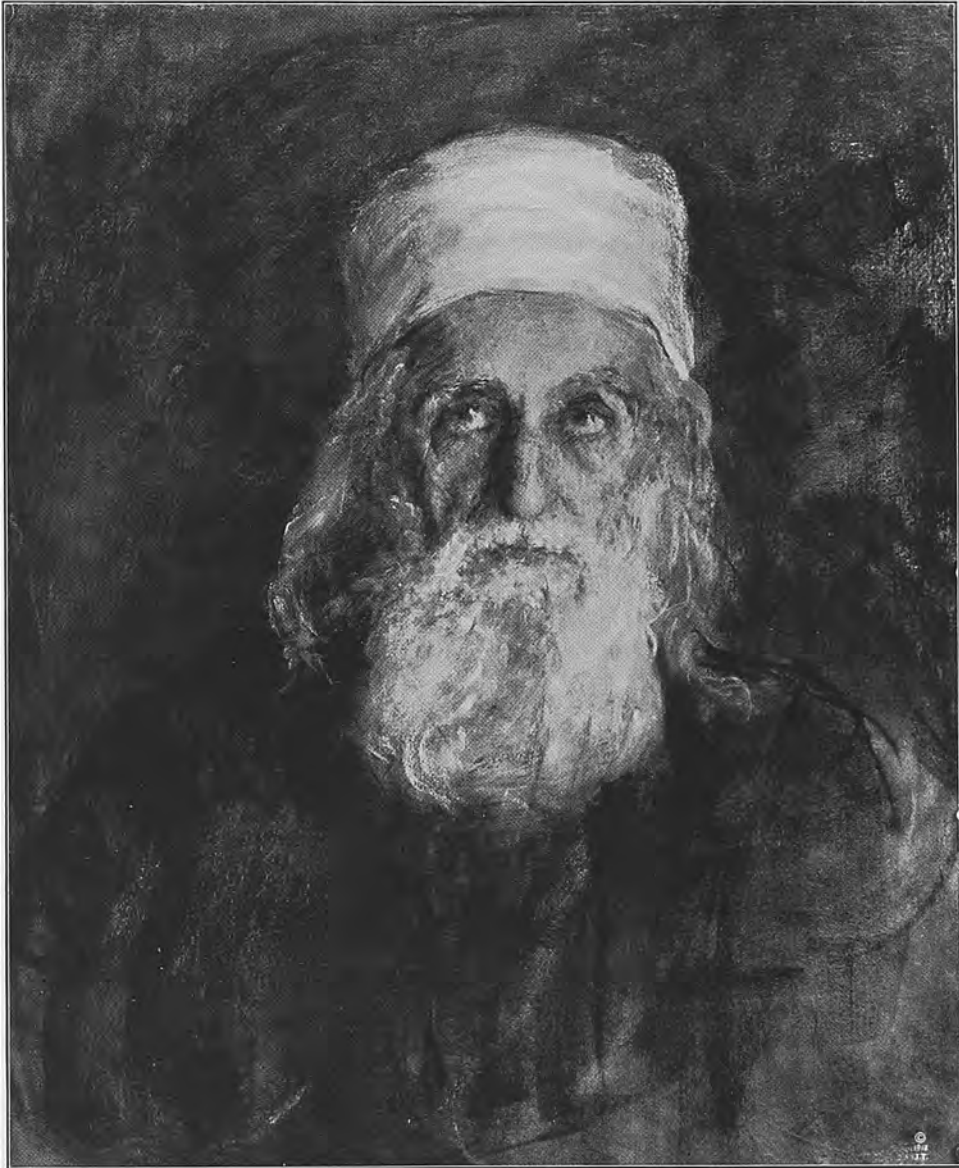
Is not this rather a new conception of the Prophet? Have we ever thought of the prophets of old as many-sided beings, interested in all the aspects and activities of life and denying the spirit to none of them?

In driving around Boston one day with a distinguished Syrian artist Abdul Baha remarked on the flatness of the roofs of our houses.

"Why do they not build their houses with domes?" he said.

I myself think that it is because we of the West are as yet spiritually domeless! When the structure of our being is completed by the spiritual development, then will we build in beauty!

*Juliet Thompson*



ABDUL BAHA  
PAINTED BY JULIET THOMPSON

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