

THE EFFECT OF REVELATION ON ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

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The themes and processes of visual art are the same as the themes and processes of all constructive evolution. This paper is an attempt, however tentative, to understand the vast themes in the Bahá'í Revelation and how they are reflected in the making of art. These themes are in essence one theme, and great difficulty is experienced in isolating them from the whole and in returning them to the whole. The themes are: man as an instrument; the desire for order and beauty; the use of materials; the element of light; the principle of unity; the balance of polarities—relationships; the part and the whole; energy and power; total configuration and mobility through faith.

Whoso hath searched the depths of the oceans that lie hid within these exalted words, and fathomed their import, can be said to have discovered a glimmer of the unspeakable glory with which this mighty, this sublime, and most holy Revelation hath been endowed.¹

In reality man does not create, but he has the capacity to reflect the attributes of creation.

Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form
When within thee the universe is folded?²

Universal attributes are reflected by degree through many instruments. The unique capacity of the individual is of great interest because it places emphasis on certain qualities at the sacrifice of others. The combination of many individual interests and abilities educates us to understand the whole. It is an individual and collective responsibility to perfect the capacity of each man to its highest degree. The level to which we perfect the instrument will determine the clarity of the song we hear.

This intelligence of man is the intermediary between his body and his spirit. When man allows the spirit, through his soul, to enlighten his understanding, then does he contain all creation; because man, being the culmination of all that went before and thus superior to all previous evolutions, contains all the lower world within himself. Illumined by the spirit through the instrumentality of the soul, man's radiant intelligence makes him the crowning-point of creation.³

It should be understood that the instrument, however important, is not greater than the song. There are many instruments, but the melody is eternal. The melody or theme can use any instrument, even those instruments not yet fully developed.

O Brother! Not every sea hath pearls; not every branch will flower, nor will the nightingale sing thereon. Then, ere the nightingale of the mystic paradise repair to the garden of God, and the rays of the heavenly morning return to the Sun of Truth—make thou an effort,⁴

It is within the nature of man to desire order. Order in an absolute sense seldom occurs in the changes and chances of the contingent world. Absolute order is a condition of the divine world, and although man can sometimes catch a glimpse of it, it remains just beyond the reach of his activity. Man's continual effort to bridge this gap results in his contributions to an ever advancing civilization. The fact that man functions best at the edge of his limitations tells us that mankind is the arrowhead of evolution. Man's nature contains all the conditions that have lesser expression, or degree, in other kingdoms beneath his station. He transcends, if fully conscious, the limitations of the mineral, plant and animal worlds while processing aspects of each. Man stands at a unique, exciting point in

creation. He shares aspects of the other material parts of creation, but the new reality of the rational intellect, or soul, makes of him, a bridge between the material level of creation and the divine world of creation.

He stands with one foot in each of these worlds. The Kingdom of God is within. This is why, in his search to understand the material existence, he is able to reach toward divine reality and continually reshape known material and elements to express new content. The intellect of man sees the gap between these two worlds. By means of this perception, he is able to organize and make relationships. He is compelled by this realization, and his yearning for new composition leads him to transformation. He is willing to be converted. With each breath taken between these worlds, he achieves another degree of totality. He experiences another degree of the beauty of the whole. Beauty and order are one reality. Often the beauty experienced in nature creates the desire in the artist to arrange form in new ways, in a new order. The opposite is equally true; we see order in a work of art and the selected order of the art teaches us to see beauty in nature. It is of great significance that the Bahá'í Faith is working toward a new World Order while simultaneously fostering the beauty of the individual and the distinctive quality of Bahá'í life. Bahá'u'lláh is referred to as a Divine Architect as well as the Blessed Beauty.

On the plane of the phenomenal world, whenever we wish to create something of beauty, the use of material is required. Material substances must yield to shape and form and become composition. This composition must attract and reflect qualities and ideas. Materials in themselves, when compared to the ideas which they reflect, have no life of their own. Materials are raw substances which, of course, originate from the mineral, plant or animal states. They have life in those kingdoms but do not possess consciousness or the rational intellect. The work of art which is being shaped, if it is to speak with power and authority, if it is to have movement and inspiration, must progress beyond the material and reflect man at his highest state. The sensual quality of materials is important to art, involving the senses and educating the intellect. Matter is a part of compositional development, but it is not the content of art. The sensual world originating from the material plane of existence is transcended in a great composition. The artist takes materials, which in themselves are basic and simple, and encourages them to take on new qualities and meanings of a higher order. In essence, the materials transcend their limitations and through ordered composition reach a state that, to many artists, reflects a divine state.

Composition cannot be realized by matter alone; its fundamental elements must be acted upon by principles. It is the action of the principles upon elements and material that makes composition. Principles are a kind of energy. The relationships of matter, form and energy are as fundamental to art as they are to all creation. Elements and principles are defined here in a universal sense. They are not confined to the means and methods of art, rather they are ever present factors in the creation and can be seen reflected in a multitude of conditions and compositions of nature.

Indeed, the diverse experiences that man has had with a variety of measurements of material, elements and principles have led to the development of the various disciplines. Diversity of experience with universal criteria has led to mathematics, to the sciences and humanities as well as to the arts. Matter which composes elements and is energized by principles must have interrelationships, links must be created between the parts leading to wholeness. A condition of beauty is to be whole, to have totality. A complete order is manifest.

Art is a set of relationships, the object of which is unity. Relationships can only be made if there are differences in the quality or condition of one thing in comparison to another. It is essential to understand that in order to experience a sense of totality, a capacity to make use of variety must be developed. It is through diversity that unity is created. In a composition all individual parts are beautiful and complete in themselves but are interdependent with other parts to create the whole image. Without this interrelationship of diverse parts in a single order, no message of any importance or degree of profundity is possible. It is evident that unity is the most important principle. Unity, like order, must have its highest expression in the divine world, and when it is attained in the material world, it attracts (reflects) a divine message. This is the content of Art. Unity is the central part of a bridge between the intellect and the attraction of a higher reality.

A prime condition of beauty is wholeness, and this unity must be attained in order to advance from limitation. Beauty, however, cannot be seen or unity experienced without light. Illumination is the key to the perception and attainment of unity. When unity is attained, beauty is experienced. With the marriage of light and unity, the condition of man is elevated. In art, light is the central element, and unity is the central principle.

The Bahá'í Faith, when seen as a work of art, is far superior to any work conceived of by man. To experience the Bahá'í Faith is to live as a part in a new global composition. The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh 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 if it had consciousness. What would it be like to know you were an important, even if a small, link in a series of elements which, unified, formed a composition which elevated all those who experienced it? The experience of being a Bahá'í is an answer to this question. The Faith manifests beauty and overwhelms the

imagination with its scope which includes the entire planet and all its peoples. The central purpose of all Bahá'í activity is to foster unity, and that unity is possible because of the element of light, that is, illumination from divinely inspired teachings. It may be felt that unity and harmony do not need to be created because they exist as a reality in creation. There are many realities of creation, however, which are not seen by man and as a result not achieved in the society. The Bahá'í Faith through the illumination of divine teachings will light the reality of man.

When we realize that each man reflects all creation while at the same time being only a part of creation, we will accept diversity as a means for unity. Society must learn how to use its diversity. Without a universal plan to use diversity, diversity fosters division, differences and conflict rather than unity. The hearts of men will be connected when we realize there is only one source of light and illumination, the Divine Source. Individualism will then no longer be squandered freedom, but rather freedom to become a significant part of a whole order, a World Order.

To be a rich part of a great work of art is a profound and fulfilling existence. To be a rich part in isolation from a whole composition, even if that were possible, would be the death of individualism. The artist knows that the part becomes rich when interrelationship is established. Interrelationship produces the total configuration. Total configuration, once established, further enriches each individual part. A unified whole which evolves out of maximum diversity attracts to itself new messages, or put another way, unity is confirmation. Each degree of unity, therefore, becomes confirmed while simultaneously its confirmation is an invitation to achieve a higher level of unity. This is the force of evolution in all creation and at all stages.

Acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith, therefore, is the recognition that the unities achieved by man in the past, while confirmed, were really invitations to greater unity. Thus the unity of the family, of the tribe and of the city-states were all confirmed by the contributions each of these unities made to civilization but were at the same time steps toward unity as a country and unity as a nation. National unity has been greatly confirmed by unprecedented contributions to civilization; however, never before has the call to a higher degree of unity been stronger. This great confirmation has produced a great invitation. Nations are now called to become parts of a World Order. As in a work of art, the part in isolation will not attain true greatness, so the longer the nations resist world unity, the more impossible it becomes to attain new national identity.

In every age and cycle He hath, through the splendorous light shed by the Manifestations of His wondrous Essence, recreated all things, so that whatsoever reflecteth in the heavens and on the earth the signs of His glory may not be deprived of the outpourings of His mercy, nor despair of the showers of His favors.⁵

The relationship between part and whole in composition takes on a new meaning when we consider the function of energy or the use of power. Energy is, of course, dissipated if it cannot be contained. If we direct our attention everywhere, we have in fact directed it nowhere. This realization helps us understand why Buddha, Moses, Christ and now Bahá'u'lláh are needed as Manifestations of God. They manifest, as points of spiritual authority, the power and attributes of God. God is everywhere, and mankind is in great danger of being nowhere in his relation to God unless he gives his attention to a single Manifestation of God. This power of God flows from age to age, from Manifestation to Manifestation. This is Progressive Revelation.

... He hath manifested unto men the Day Stars of His divine guidance, the Symbols of His divine unity, and hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own Self. Whoso recognizeth them hath recognized God.⁶

The power of God cannot be contained indefinitely at anyone point. When such an attempt is made, as it has been in history, fragmentation and disunity occur. As long as mankind resists acceptance of the new Manifestation and hopes to hold power in the old form, division will continue. Thus, we now see a proliferation of denominations, sects and philosophies. While each holds some truth, none has the power to bring about the unity of mankind.

In art, power or energy is used to maintain the vitality of the whole composition. Containment of energy in the work of art is vital to its life and presence in space. This aliveness comes about because the limitation or boundary of the work is accepted and all power occurs within it and relates back to it. The flow of energy through all points in the work provides for the equalization of forces. This equalization is a balance between the static and the dynamic. The space between the static and the dynamic is at rest. In a great work of art, a sense of peace is evident and is referred to as the timeless element. This attractive condition is created by the flow of energy and the containment of energy in the whole. Power in the whole is contained because all points allow its passage to all other points. If one point, while receiving power attempts to hold this power, it becomes, rather than a point of harmony, a

place of aggression. When the many parts all attempt to contain power, power is no longer directed, and fragmentation occurs. The power needed for the unity of creation becomes the power for disunity. Destruction rather than construction results. If nations could understand the use of power, static and dynamic forces would be in balance and peace would result.

I have attempted to describe the movement of energy once it has entered a composition. I have also indicated my firm belief that the Source of all energy is God and that this power is concentrated from age to age in the Manifestation of God and thereby continuously reaches mankind. The acceptance of this gift requires our openness to it. The human kingdom, unlike the lower kingdoms, possesses free will and can therefore reject the gift. To reject power, or to fail to use it for the good of the whole, is to reject the only means of our transformation. How is it possible to be open to power?

The process of art, like that of organic growth, depends on openness to energy. Plants are so constructed as to receive benefit from that which is outside their own composition. Moisture enters the composition itself and becomes a part of the system. Light is a major factor as it creates fundamental changes in the plant itself. In the pursuit of beauty, a similar receptivity is required. The artist describes, forms and constructs the composition, but other aspects of the work are implied, or designed to invite power from the outside. In all poetry or in any form of communication, space occurs between what is designed and what is invited. In all things of beauty, the concrete and the ambiguous occur simultaneously in time and space. If the structure becomes too closed, there is no receptivity to forces from the outside. The composition becomes rigid, ingrown and incapable of attracting transforming influences.

Religion is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore it must be living, vitalized, moving and progressive. If it be without motion and non-progressive it is without the divine life; it is dead. The divine institutes are continuously active and evolutionary; therefore the revelation of them must be progressive and continuous. All things are subject to re-formation. This is a century of life and renewal. Sciences and arts, industry and invention have been reformed. Law and ethics have been reconstituted, reorganized. The world of thought has been regenerated.⁷

In the Bahá'í Faith, there is great mystery in the vast multitude of suggested but hidden meanings. There is profound mystery because there is a profound structure or composition to invite it. The world administrative order of Bahá'u'lláh is a great composition of unimaginable beauty. Beauty is divine message attracted through the unity of opposites. Maximum unity grows out of maximum diversity.

In the creation of art, this theme of opposites or polarity is of prime importance. The artist makes use of contrast; the light on one hand and the darkness on the other; the hard edge and soft edge; the static and the dynamic. The content of the work is not expressed at one pole or at the other, rather it arises out of the interplay between the two. As in music, the message is not in the sound or the silence but in that space which contains both. Also, in dance, the message is not movement or stillness but in the space which contains both movement and stillness.

This theme is beautifully expressed throughout Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, and the following example demonstrates how we are taught a message through the juxtaposition of polarities. He speaks of "solidity" and "fluidity" being combined, of the "restlessness" He evinced causing the feet of those who are devoted to be "steeled."

I bear witness that in His person solidity and fluidity have been joined and combined. Through His immovable constancy in Thy Cause, and His unwavering adherence to whatsoever Thou, in the plenitude of the light of Thy glory, didst unveil to His eyes, throughout the domains of Thy Revelation and creation, the souls of Thy servants were stirred up in their longing for Thy Kingdom, and the dwellers of Thy realms rushed forth to enter into Thy heavenly dominion. Through the restlessness He evinced in Thy path, the feet of all them that are devoted to Thee were steeled and confirmed to manifest Thy Cause amidst Thy creatures, and to demonstrate Thy sovereignty throughout Thy realm.⁸

The Administrative Order is very precise in its design and structure. It is concrete form at its very best, but like all works of art, its compositional order is open and receptive. It is open because its composition, while structured, is freed from rigid dogma, theology, closed form and the predictable. The evolution of the Bahá'í Faith is realized through continual change while the composition maintains its essential laws and principles and institutions. Precise application of principle and law creates a new openness and a real freedom. Individuals fortunate enough to apply these to their daily lives find themselves free to explore real individuality. The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, while perfect and complete in its structure, is open to all invitation, open to all uniqueness. It is receptive to all the

capacities that are attracted to it, and because of the profound nature of its composition, it is best able to utilize diversity. As time passes, it will, without doubt, attract and utilize all progressive activity. The Bahá'í Faith, therefore, holds maximum potential for beauty, the nature of which man has never before experienced.

The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed.⁹

The order it seeks to establish is absolute in its practical aspect and absolute in its beauty. It invites the collective and individual life of mankind to become a work of art. A world composition attracting divine content is its God ordained destiny. It is understandable that the central figures of the Faith are referred to as Divine Architects of a World Civilization while simultaneously Bahá'u'lláh is referred to as the Blessed Beauty.

In art, the young artist is often unable to give himself to the creative act which alone can transform the work and the artist. We fear that if we give ourselves to evolutionary process, we will lose our identity, our individuality. The opposite is true. When we sacrifice our immediate likes and dislikes to an order greater than ourselves, we are surprised to find in ourselves a depth of individuality we had not dared to hope for. When we are young, we are too conscious and yet not conscious of the unconscious, that is, not conscious of divine mystery. Later we learn that when we give ourselves to that which is greater than ourselves, and in so doing, apply universal principles and elements, we obtain our true individuality. Our message is the byproduct of our motion in that higher order. Like the artist, we discover our content by acting out divine elements and principles. We become the manifestation of the principles in our own unique way when we apply them and move with them.

Through the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, it is now possible to weld together into one global composition, the diversity that exists on the planet. The Revelation contains within it a new administrative order with new institutions and a covenant which contains the flow of energy and power. I talked about light being the single most important element of art, and I spoke of unity being the single most important principle. Light illuminates diversity; that diversity attains unity through an order whose vitality is maintained by the flow of energy.

The purpose of God for the composition of this planet is unity, the connection of all the hearts of men into one heart, into one glorious praise of its Creator. Such a glorious praise echoed from every corner of the globe will fill the administrative order with energy and will attract to itself the long promised Kingdom of God on earth. Such a Kingdom will raise a civilization incomprehensible to us in the present state of our development, based on another kind of unity, a unity stemming from the purpose of God for mankind. Indeed, this principle was observed even in the early stages of man's history in more primitive and less abstract forms.

The first Revelation from God to mankind was that of the kingdom of nature. Man was in nature, a part of nature and an observer of nature. He was therefore able to learn, in a rudimentary sense, all the principles and elements which had their counterparts in the divine world. This evolution has continued, and this education progressed to the point in history where we now stand, where it is possible and necessary to bring into closer harmony these two parallel lines, the material existence and the divine realities. These two lines can become one line, one World Order, containing within it the essence of the Kingdom of God and reflecting everywhere the attributes of God. This is light from the Divine World. This is illumination, and it parallels that kind of light found in works of art which illuminate all the divergent and diverse characteristics of the individual ingredients while at the same time establishing the oneness of their total vision. When we come into this light, stand in it, absorb it, we find ourselves able to apprehend the richness, the complexity and subtlety of ourselves, the professions and our fellow Bahá'ís.

I have tried to explain that the diversity of elements in art and in life are illuminated by light and that the object of art is unity, which attracts divine content. Thus, art could be said to have the same objective as Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation—Unity.

It is possible for an individual to move without necessarily knowing his final destiny. To have such mobility requires faith. In the case of art, it requires faith in the discipline of art. In the Bahá'í Faith, mobility is created because the individual has faith in the composition as delineated by Bahá'u'lláh. He, therefore, is able to act within the new Administrative Order even if he is unable to comprehend in any kind of complete sense the final outcome. The civilization which will be raised when the Kingdom of God is established on the earth is unfathomable to us, and yet, we must act and move as if we knew at every point of our action, what we were doing. The artist is confronted with this same task; although he knows the basic ingredients of art and he knows something of the method, he nevertheless cannot create any kind of content in his work without action, without mobility. He cannot sit down and figure out every move that he is going to make between the beginning of the painting and the final composition. He is called upon to act, to think, to invent, to design simultaneously with the hope of reaching

understanding. In the Bahá'í Faith, we realize a parallel situation, because in the Faith the head and the heart must function in harmony. The heart is mobility. We have to move with and yet be ahead of our understanding. It is only when we give ourselves to the evolutionary process of the Faith and apply its principles, that we can speak in this new language, that we discover who we are and what our message is. We become happy because we observe our individuality appearing as a product of active participation in an order greater than we could ever imagine. This is, as I see it, the central means by which an individual becomes an artist and the central means by which an individual becomes a Bahá'í.

Every soul who occupies himself in an art or trade—this will be accounted an act of worship before God. Verily this is from no other than His great and abundant favor!¹⁰

Notes

1. Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í World Faith*. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), p.10.
2. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1954), p.34.
3. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Reality of Man*. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), p.12.
4. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1954), p.38.
5. Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í World Faith*. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), p.29.
6. *Ibid.*, p.21.
7. *Ibid.*, p.224.
8. *Ibid.*, p.71.
9. *Ibid.*, p.35.
10. *Ibid.*, p.195.