

THE CREATIVE CIRCLE

Art, Literature, and Music in Bahá'í Perspective

Edited by Michael Fitzgerald



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BONNIE WILDER
author, teacher, and painter.

The Creative Act and the Spirit

by Bonnie Wilder

Introduction. On becoming a Bahá'í over thirty years ago, I, like most other believers, continued the process I had begun as a seeker—exploring the Bahá'í Writings as they applied to my own life. Until that time, the visual arts had always been my major focus. From then on they would share double-billing with the Bahá'í Faith. Because I was convinced that both were vital I was soon to have a new problem—time management. Nonetheless, soon after my declaration, I began a two-fold program. I continued my work as a painter, initiating a career in art education; and I began to discover and experience the never-ending facets of being a Bahá'í.

The following two-part essay is the result of my attempt to learn more about the connection between art and the Bahá'í Teachings. As I delved into personal memories and books, I discovered that spiritual insights can emerge from any unlikely setting, such as an art classroom. I also learned, as so many others have before, that teachers are often taught by their students, and sometimes when they least expect it.

From Mike to Michelangelo. At about mid-point in my twenty-year career of teaching art in the public high schools of

Houston, Mike Chisenhall made his appearance. A stocky, sandy-haired youth with freckles across his nose and a bit of defensive macho in his walk, Mike was rarely seen without a grin on his face. I soon learned his goal was to become a cartoonist. His hero was Michelangelo. He was glad that their names were almost the same.

Mike could have easily passed through my class unremembered. Over the years, I have had more than four thousand students. After the first few semesters, they seemed to fall into a few general categories. Some were talented, but not serious about developing art abilities. Others took art because the class they really wanted to take was unavailable. Some chose art because they thought it would be so easy they wouldn't have to work. (An opinion not shared by their teacher.) A great many students loved the class from the beginning. They came into the room ready to work feverishly until the bell rang, dampening their elated spirits, causing them to complain the time was too short. They were my inspiration as an art teacher, my *raison d'être*. They are, for the most part, also the ones I remember best.

Mike Chisenhall was not one of these. Because he loved cartooning so much, he was less than happy when other aspects of the art curriculum were covered. He fidgeted and talked with his neighbors. And despite his perennial happy grin, he would in due course get on his teacher's nerves. Still, I liked him. However, it was his response to a particular assignment that fixed his image on my memory.

Art education journals are replete with reasons school art programs are vital to the system. Some of the most quoted are development of manual dexterity and eye-hand coordination, improved self-image, a more balanced outlook on life, and the acquisition of skills for career and leisure time use. Another aspect, opportunity for creative self-expression, is also highly praised and is probably the most important of all. As a seasoned art educator, I accepted all of these as givens with little conscious thought.



THE STAIRS AT MAZRÁ'IM
by Bonnie Wilder, completed on her 1985 pilgrimage.

It took Mike to bring the last one into particular focus, causing me to internalize the value that creative self-expression can hold for high school students. It was also Mike who, by trusting me enough to express himself honestly, brought home how closely the creative is related to what we as Bahá'ís refer to as spiritual awareness. (I refer to the fleeting, euphoric state one sometimes feels during a visit to the Holy Shrines, in the midst of intense prayer, or when a particular state of detachment has been reached through sacrifice, and one's consciousness of self is thereby greatly lessened. Such moments of insight are often accompanied by an intense desire to give or share with others because of a felt outpouring of love.)

The assignment at hand was indeed a special one. This chosen class of third and fourth year art students appeared deserving of such an opportunity. Collectively, they were about to design a group of major graphics which would be drawn in miniature form and then enlarged and transferred to the walls of the art room—the entire room, as well as sections of the hall on each side of the entrance door. Enduring paint would be used, and the designs were expected to remain in place for years. I had never entrusted a class with such a responsibility before, and they had certainly never had such an opportunity. After seven years in the same classroom, I looked forward eagerly to a new environment, imaginative and color-charged. It never occurred to me to be afraid of what they might do.

They took to it like ducks to water. To get started, each student chose part of the room, such as a display area, a major wall, a door, or the sink alcove, and worked out a rough sketch in colored pencil to express an individual idea. With a minimum of teacher input, all sketches were reviewed and discussed. Seven designs were selected by student vote. The originator of each design would serve as group leader for the others who would assist in carrying out the individual plans. There was a design representing each of the focal points in the class environment.

During most of this process, Mike sat at the back of the room, fitfully working with pencil and paper. Still bending over the submitted sketches, I realized I had momentarily forgotten him. I looked up to ask how he was doing and noticed his face had taken on an unaccustomed seriousness. He was fidgeting again, but rather than talking with his neighbors, his attention was riveted to his work surface. Paper wads were everywhere, and he continued to push his pencil across yet another sheet. He gave me several quick glances, as though gauging my mood. His eyebrows formed question marks while he tried to muster what could pass for a smile. He was clearly very uncomfortable.

“You’re not going to like this. It’s not what you asked for. It’s crazy. Let me try something else.” As I approached he tried to hide what appeared on the last sheet of paper. I was surprised to see that the result of his considerable effort was not the cartoon I had expected. It was not even a drawing. It was a string of words.

More than mere phrases, Mike had composed a paragraph in which he summed up, in his unique way, the meaning art had for him. The total effect was so powerful and unexpected that, for a moment, I could not speak. Immediately, I knew I wanted to have the entire message on view in a prominent place, and I told Mike so. Stunned, he couldn’t believe his idea had received such quick acceptance. He answered with enthusiasm, “Yes, ma’am!” His face glowed with an almost fierce delight.

Most of the joy Mike felt came from the fact that he had risked expressing his deepest feelings about art and found a receptive audience, an experience not unlike a spiritual exchange or sharing. He was unaccustomed, I am sure, to discussing abstract concepts. In fact, I doubt if he had ever attempted communication of this kind about art before. Endowed with a small vocabulary, he was not at all the sort of student likely to be judged an “intellectual” by most people. In fact, his I.Q. was probably average. He would have been far more at home cheering at a football game than sitting in



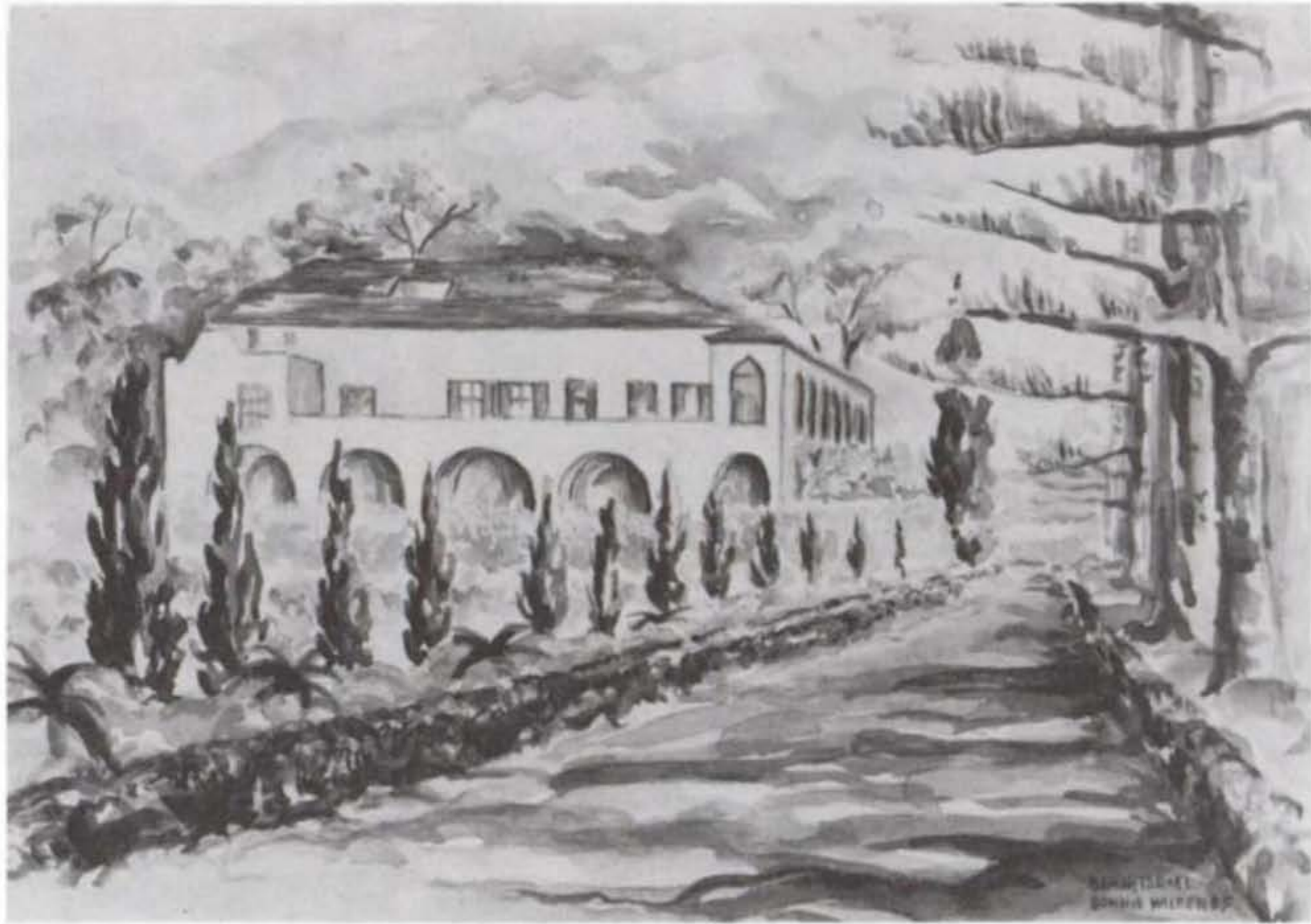
THE SHRINE OF THE BÁB
by Bonnie Wilder, completed on her 1985 pilgrimage.

a library. He had simply put down his own words, although somewhat awkwardly. What they lacked in perfection of style, they compensated for with sincerity, courage, and gut-level truth. This was a fellow not lacking in male pride whose desire to express himself had overruled caution on this occasion. Those who have had frequent contact with seventeen-year-old boys in a peer-group environment can understand what Mike accomplished.

The transformation of the room required eight weeks. At the conclusion, a reporter and photographer from a leading newspaper were on the scene to record the results in the form of a major feature article.

As we had planned, arrows proved to be an appropriate motif in many of the designs, because their symbolism easily suggested the multi-directional nature of creative output. A major attraction was the fifteen-foot rainbow which began high and narrow at the left edge of a wall to allow for audio-visual projection on the white space beneath, looped around the ever-present school clock, and widened on its downward approach to the bottom right corner of the same wall. Turquoise clouds and a yellow sun rested on the top edge of the rainbow near the center. Around the corner, nearby in the sink alcove, a huge faucet appeared, spouting a stream of water, ending in large drops above the splashboard of the counter. This six-foot design repeated the deep, rich pastel colors used throughout—pink, orange, turquoise, yellow, and lettuce green. Strong arrows pointed to the sink and the trash can, carrying the words, “Keep it clean,” as a continuing reminder to future hurrying students. Oversized lettering on the doors and display areas tied the whole together for a sophisticated, upbeat, yet unabashedly cheerful atmosphere.

It was usually as the viewer turned back toward the door to leave that Mike’s contribution was noticed. Then it took center stage. At the beginning of the project, before any of the graphics were applied to the walls, the entire room had been painted a fresh milky white. However, since Mike



THE MANSION AT BAḤJÍ

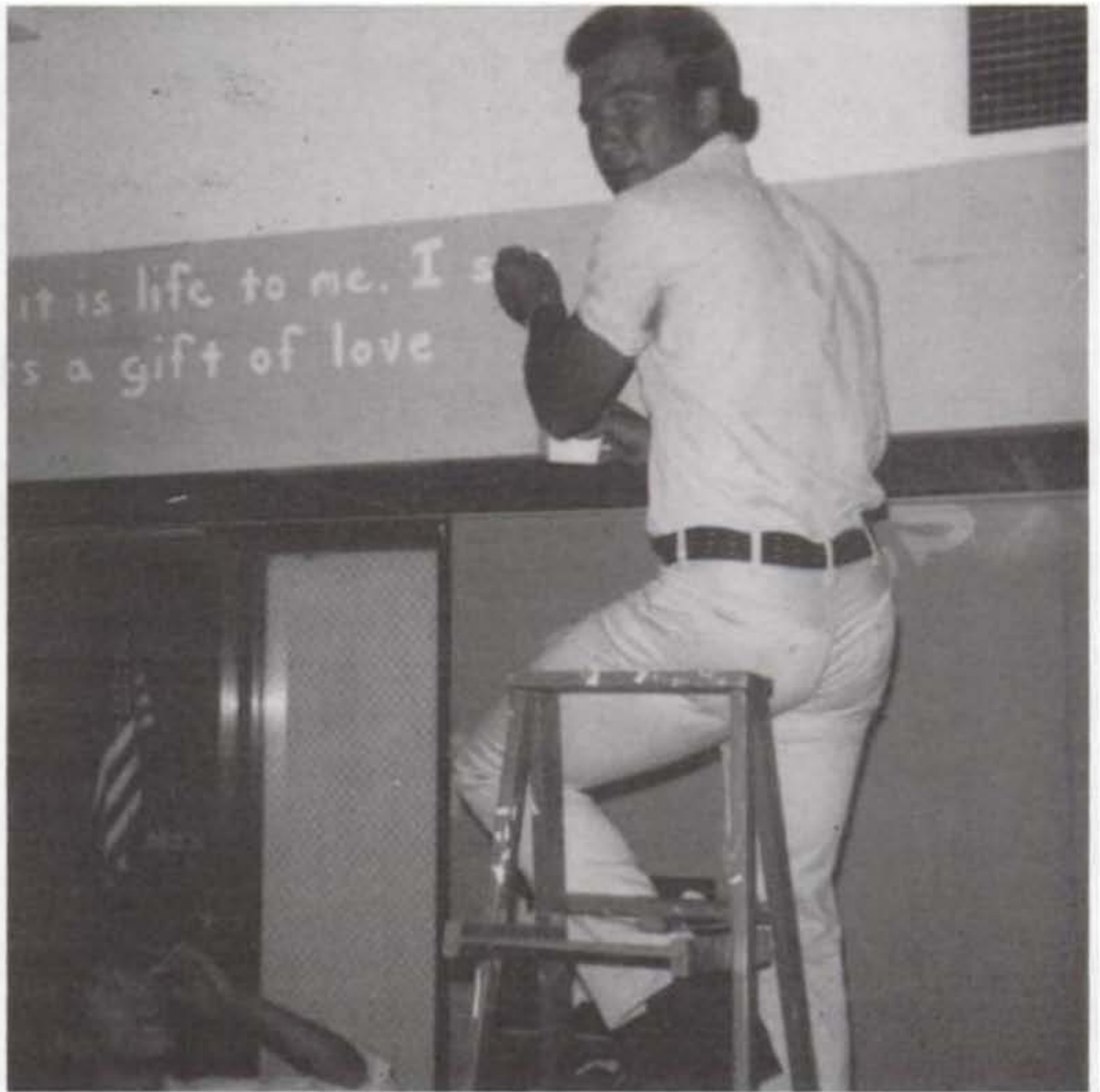
by Bonnie Wilder. One of three watercolors she completed on her 1985 pilgrimage.

planned to use white lettering, a two-foot band of deep turquoise was added across his area to provide contrast for his message, which spanned the fifty-foot length of the room in several rows of five-inch letters.

Every word had been reproduced along the top edge of the art room wall inside and above the entrance. Declining the help of any of the others, Mike had borrowed a ladder from the custodian's supply room, working relentlessly and alone to make his idea a part of the final scheme. Although the work was sometimes difficult and tedious, he never complained. In fact, he frequently borrowed time from other classes to help push the work to completion. Classmates called him Michelangelo, comparing his efforts to the Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes. He loved it.

Spiritual Glimmerings and Connections. I mentioned earlier the similarity between the creative act and a heightened spiritual awareness which Mike had brought to my attention. I share with many others the belief that these two entities are part of the same realm. Otto Donald Rogers, an artist and art professor, has expressed in an article in *Bahá'í Studies* magazine the opinion that unity, a fundamental quality of art in its highest form, is a part of the divine world. When it takes shape in the material world through an artist's composition, it attracts, and thereby reflects, a divine message.¹ Viewed in this way, the artist becomes a channel of communication between the source and the recipient. Yet, sometimes (and I have experienced this myself in my own painting), when the act of creation is complete, the artist—as though awakened from a dream—feels he is seeing the results for the first time.

History is rich with examples of artists who credit their Maker as the source of their inspiration. Mike's hero, Michelangelo, sent a stream of letters to his father and brothers with frequent references to such. He wrote in January 1507: "I think I shall be ready to cast my statue . . . pray God that it turns out well."² In March of the same year, he



MIKE CHISENHALL

expressing his feelings about art through words, rather than through images.

followed with: "Pray God that my task shall come to a good end."³ Finally, in October he concluded: "My work will bring much honor upon me. I owe all of this to the grace of God."⁴

Michelangelo, who was less known as a poet than he was as a painter and sculptor, wrote a poem entitled "The Artist and His Work" which alludes to his belief both in the immortality of art and the power of the artist to bestow life. I quote it here in part:

. . . Shapes that seem alive
Wrought in hard mountain marble, will survive
Their maker, whom the years to dust return!
Thus to effect cause yields. Art hath her turn,
And triumphs over Nature. I, who strive
With Sculpture, know this well; her wonders live
In spite of time and death, those tyrants stern.
So I can give long life to both of us
In either way, by color or by stone,
Making the semblance of thy face and mine.⁵

A lesser artist of Michelangelo's time was Leon Battista Alberti, another Italian who had similar thoughts. In 1436, he stated:

Painting is possessed of divine power, for not only, as it is said of friendship, does it make the absent present, but it also, after many centuries, makes the dead almost alive, so that they are recognized with great admiration for the artist, and with great delight.⁶

Vincent Van Gogh, the Dutch expressionist painter whose tragic life has been made legendary through song, film, and in countless books, demonstrated his high regard for religion by attempting to become a minister as a young man. His humanitarian efforts to assist the poor coal miners of Belgium, where he was sent, caused him to be judged a failure by

church officials. They were of the opinion that he was excessively concerned with the miners' welfare, which caused him to lose dignity as a minister. Because he had failed at earlier endeavors, Vincent believed them. Later in life, he brought up the subject in letters written to his brother, Theo, who supported him financially when he changed to art. In 1888, during his most intense and productive period as an artist, he wrote from Arles to Theo in Paris:

The subject (I am painting) is frightfully difficult, but that is just why I want to conquer it . . . and it does me good to do difficult things. . . . That does not prevent my having a terrible need of—shall I say the word—religion . . . [then] I go out at night to paint the stars . . .⁷

The result was one of his most well-known paintings, *Starry Night*.

In another letter during the same period, he wrote:

My dear boy, sometimes I know so well what I want . . . but I cannot, ill as I am, do without something which is greater than I, which is my life—the power to create.⁸

Over the years I've made it a point to include a few days study of both Michelangelo and Van Gogh, among others, in my beginning level art classes, hoping to give them a taste of the heroic which is often an ingredient in an artist's life. I believe once a student is captivated by this quality, he is more likely to look beyond the superficial characteristics of art works new to him, which can sometimes appear awkward to the unpracticed eye. Thus he opens himself more readily to the artist's real message. On at least one occasion, a student was brought to tears after exposure to Van Gogh.

The Bahá'í writings contain many passages which exalt the arts to a lofty rank. One of these even indicates where the artist's "power" referred to in earlier quotes originates:

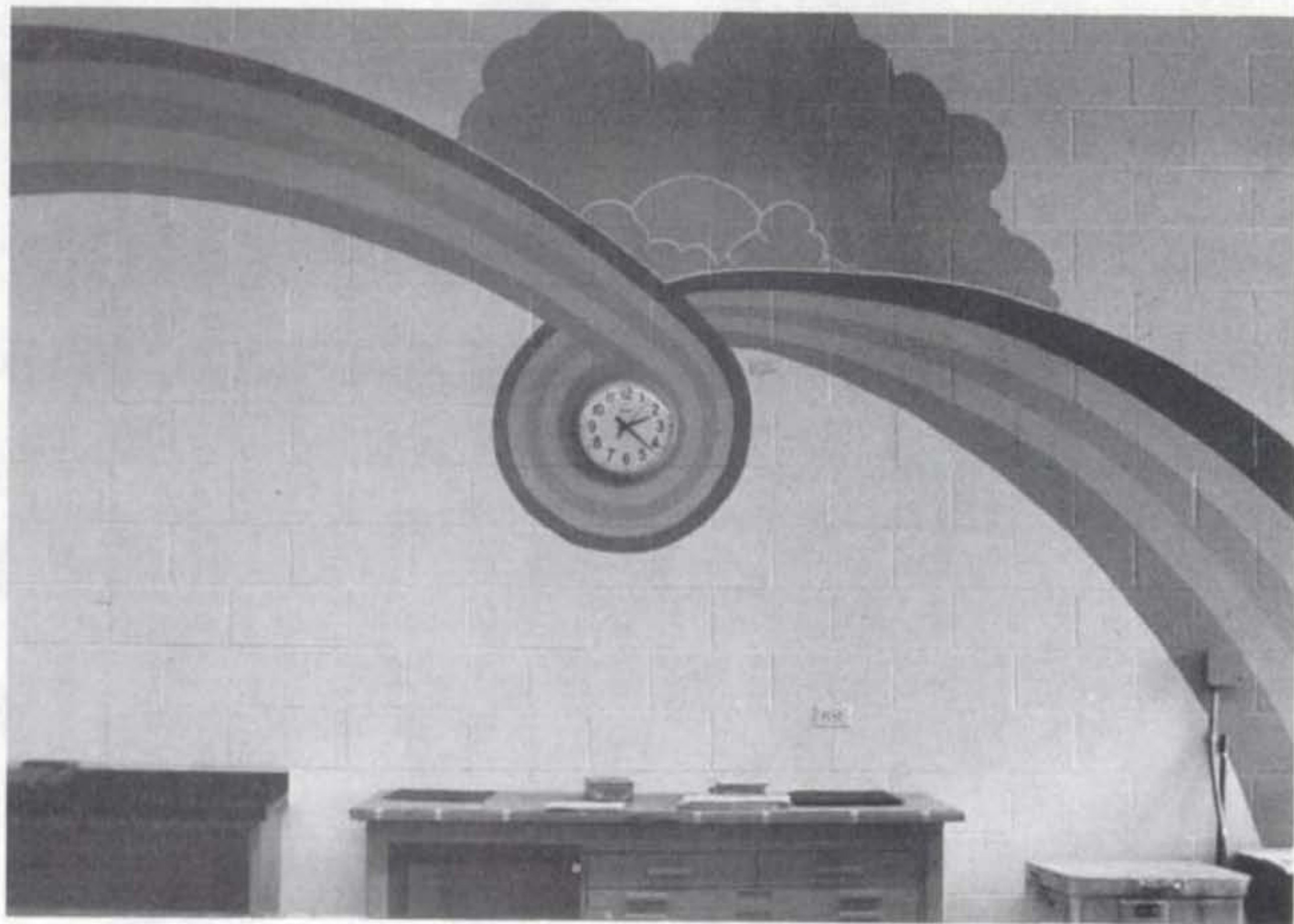
O people of Baha! The source of crafts, sciences, and arts is the power of reflection. Make ye every effort that out of this ideal Mine there may gleam forth such pearls of wisdom and utterance as will promote the well-being and harmony of all the kindreds of the earth.⁹

In seeking to define "reflection" the dictionary indicates loosely that it is a state leading to ideas or conclusions. Of all creatures on earth, only the human being has the ability to think to the extent that the process may be called reflection.

Several Bahá'í artists have documented their thoughts and experiences in the making of art, relating them to matters of the spirit. Some of these, including the American abstract-expressionist painter, Mark Tobey, and the English potter, Bernard Leach, have achieved international recognition, each leaving behind a major body of work.

Mark Tobey, who was largely self-taught, developed his talent and worldview simultaneously through travel and exchange of ideas on many continents. He also accomplished a near miracle by establishing himself as one of this country's foremost avant-garde painters without ever dwelling at length in New York, the long-accepted stage for the serious artist's debut.

Tobey learned of the Bahá'í Faith from Juliet Thompson when they were both young art students attending classes together. This was at a time when he had begun to search for other and possibly greater forces in the world than the artistic impulse. His acceptance of the Faith in 1918 marked the beginning of its influence on his work, which proved to be lasting. His unique "white writing" style emerged from his studies of oriental calligraphy, resulting in an art that blended East with West both materially on paper and spiritually in concept. Through usually small, subtle paintings Tobey speaks to the viewer in a mystical manner, mirroring his responses to Bahá'í historical events and teachings. For example, he was known to depict effects of light, perhaps of



THE RAINBOW WALL

expressed the elation students felt upon the completion of their eight-week mural project.

moonlight or city lights, and would by this imply a parallel with the spiritual world. Light is known to represent the spirit in the Bahá'í scriptures.¹⁰ The titles of some works are potently revealing in meaning such as "Conflict of the Satanic and Celestial Egos," relating to man's dual nature; "The Void Devouring the Gadget Era," referring to the pervasive materialism in our society; and what could be considered a depiction of spirituality itself, "Lovers of Light," a beautiful painting reminiscent of frost on a windowpane. Tobey's success as a painter, in which the Faith played such a great part, led him to be the first American artist to be given the honor of a solo exhibition at the Louvre Museum in Paris during his own lifetime.

Expressing himself in a second creative medium, Tobey has written poems and essays relating to the spiritual. In 1972, connecting the core of Bahá'í teachings with art, he stated:

. . . the future of the world must be this realization of its oneness, which is the basic teaching as I understand it in the Bahá'í Faith, and from that oneness will naturally develop a new spirit in art, because that's what it is. It's a spirit and it's not new words and it's not new ideas only. It's a different spirit. And that spirit of oneness will be reflected through painting.¹¹

Tobey's words connecting the spirit of unity proclaimed by the Faith with painting, can be compared with the following statement of Bahá'u'lláh:

*The light which these souls radiate is responsible for the advancement of its peoples. They are like unto leaven which leaveneth the world of being, and constitute the animating force through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest.*¹²

A resident of Switzerland at the time, Tobey attended the National Bahá'í Convention of that country held in Bern in 1962. As a pioneer to Switzerland during the Ten-Year World Crusade, I was also in attendance and had an opportunity to meet him. I remember thinking he looked something like the *Uncle Sam Wants You* posters of the Second World War, although not as formidable. The Swiss believers stood somewhat in awe of him. They described him as something of a recluse. I decided to speak to him anyway. Thinking he probably didn't wish attention drawn to himself, I was very brief. I told him I also had a deep involvement with art. He looked with interest at the small photographs of my work which I carried in my billfold, offering polite encouragement in a tone that was kind but not condescending. I was with Tobey no more than five minutes and still remember this encounter as one of the many unexpected rewards of pioneering.

The British potter, Bernard Leach, is even more well-known as a potter than Tobey is as painter. Both traveled extensively, and went together to the Orient on at least one occasion. Both incorporated elements of oriental design into their works, and both were profoundly affected by Bahá'í teachings. Leach spent eleven years in the East, traveling to Japan, Korea, and China in particular. He saw himself as a "courier between East and West," although he also visited many other parts of the world during his lifetime. One of his major accomplishments was the establishment of the St. Ives pottery works in Cornwall, England.

Leach saw his art, which began at the age of six, as only one of his "vocations." The other, initiated at about age seventeen, was his search for truth stimulated by the reading of William Blake's poetry. Through experiences he called "stepping stones of belief," he used two approaches to the gaining of knowledge: intellect and intuition. Of these he said:

The genuine artist requires and uses both all the time, and finds that to place intellect above intuition is simply to mis-

guide his footsteps: count your footsteps and you may fall down the stairs. . . . Intellect is a very good servant but a very bad master.¹³

Leach justified his remarks by referring to a statement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá which connects the word of God with the power to awaken intuition within us. He did not give the written source.

Bahá'ís know of Juliet Thompson as the artist who, in 1912, painted a portrait of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in New York. Many don't realize, however, that she was a painter of some renown who had studied art extensively in New York and Paris, exhibited frequently, and had been received at the White House to paint the First Lady, Mrs. Calvin Coolidge. Juliet was very pretty and enjoyed an active social life, although she never married. Besides being skilled at art, she was an able writer who delighted 'Abdu'l-Bahá with her ability to express herself honestly.

Juliet had a close relationship with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and he openly admitted that she was one of his favorites among those who attained his presence while he was in New York. We get a glimmering of the spiritual nature of this closeness as we read her diary. Juliet, in describing the sessions of painting 'Abdu'l-Bahá, alluded to the power which seemed to take over her senses at those times:

Oh, those sittings: so wonderful, yet so humanly difficult! We move from room to room, from one kind of light to another. The Master has given me three half hours, each time in a different room, and each time people come in and watch me. But the miraculous thing is that nothing makes any difference. The minute I begin to work the same rapture takes possession of me. Someone Else looks through my eyes and sees clearly; Someone Else works through my hand with a sort of furious precision.¹⁴

Marzieh Gail, writing the preface to the diary, stated that 'Abdu'l-Bahá greatly encouraged Juliet's overall involvement in art, telling her it was the same as worship, but toward the end she no longer wanted to go on with it . . . and all she wanted to do was teach the Faith.¹⁵

Conclusion. On these pages we have touched on diverse time periods and artistic viewpoints, both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í, in an attempt to discover the connection between the creative act and the spirit. Such an objective probably can never be achieved in an absolute sense, but we have gathered a harvest of hints. Michelangelo spoke of the "grace of God" and the "immortality of art," certainly spiritual terms. Alberti supported this by referring to painting as a "divine power." Van Gogh described his crying need for religion, which he seemed able to satisfy by the act of painting. Mark Tobey gave us a "spirit of oneness," while Bernard Leach offered "intuition awakened by God." Juliet Thompson described a "rapture taking possession," borrowing her eyes and hands.

Time itself will bring us more complete answers. Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, had this to say when questioned by an individual believer concerning future Bahá'í artists:

We have to wait only a few years to see how the spirit breathed by Bahá'u'lláh will find expression in the work of the artists. What . . . you and other Bahá'ís are attempting are only faint rays that precede the effulgent light of a glorious morn. We cannot yet value the part the Cause is destined to play in the life of society. We will have to give it time. The material this spirit has to mold is too crude and unworthy, but it will at last give way and the cause of Bahá'u'lláh will reveal itself in its full splendour.¹⁶

The end of this essay brings us back to where we started, for I have not yet shared with you the message Mike Chisenhall wrote with such fervor long ago in my art class. (Forgive