

The Source of Art

:

Compilation on the Arts

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Acquiring an Art

Compiled by The Research Department of the Universal House of Justice.

Published in

Compilation on the Arts

Part One

Extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

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Extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

Arts, crafts and sciences uplift the world of being, and are conducive to its exaltation. Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone. The knowledge of such sciences, however, should be acquired as can profit the peoples of the earth, and not those which begin with words and end with words...

In truth, knowledge is a veritable treasure for man, and a source of glory, of bounty, of joy, of exaltation, of cheer and gladness unto him. Happy the man that cleaveth unto it, and woe betide the heedless.

Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988),

pp.

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[1]

O My Servants!

Ye are the trees of my garden; ye must give forth goodly and wondrous fruits, that ye yourselves and others may profit therefrom. Thus it is incumbent on everyone to engage in crafts and professions, for therein lies the secret of wealth, O men of understanding! For results depend upon means, and the grace of God shall be all-sufficient unto you. Trees that yield no fruit have been and will ever be for the fire.

The Hidden Words (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), p.

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[2]

The fifth Taráz concerneth the protection and preservation of the stations of God's servants. One should not ignore the truth of any matter, rather should one give expression to that which is right and true. The people of Bahá'í should not deny any soul the reward due to him, should treat craftsmen with deference, and unlike the people aforesaid, should not defile their tongues with abuse.

In this Day the sun of craftsmanship shineth above the horizon of the occident and the river of arts is flowing out of the sea of that region. One must speak with fairness and appreciate such bounty...

Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1988) pp.

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[3]

At the outset of every endeavor, it is incumbent to look to the end of it. Of all the arts and sciences, set the children to studying those which will result in advantage to man, will ensure his progress and elevate his rank. Thus the noisome odours of lawlessness will be dispelled, and thus through the high endeavours of the nation's leaders, all will live cradled, secure and in peace.

The Great Being saith: The learned of the day must direct the people to acquire those branches of knowledge which are of use, that both the learned themselves and the generality of mankind may derive benefits therefrom...

Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, pp.

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[4]

The purpose of learning should be the promotion of the welfare of the people, and this can be achieved through crafts. It hath been revealed and is now repeated that the true worth of artists and craftsmen should be appreciated, for they advance the affairs of mankind. Just as the foundations of religion are made firm through the Law of God, the means of livelihood depend upon those who are engaged in arts and crafts. True learning is that which is conducive to the well-being of the world, not to pride and self-conceit, or to tyranny, violence and pillage.

From a Tablet - translated from the Persian [5]

Blessed are those who have fixed their gaze on the realm of glory and have followed the commandments of the Lord of Names. Blessed is he who in the days of God will engage in handicrafts.

This is a bounty from God, for in this Most Great Dispensation it is acceptable in the sight of God for man to occupy himself in a trade which relieveth him of depending upon charity. The craft of every craftsman is regarded as worship.

From a Tablet - translated from the Persian [6]

One of the names of God is the Fashioner. He loveth craftsmanship. Therefore any of His servants who manifesteth this attribute is acceptable in the sight of this Wronged One. Craftsmanship is a book among the books of divine sciences, and a treasure among the treasures of His heavenly wisdom. This is a knowledge with meaning, for some of the sciences are brought forth by words and come to an end with words.

From a Tablet - translated from the Persian [7]

God grant that thou wilt exert thine utmost to acquire perfections, as well as proficiency in a craft.

From a Tablet - translated from the Persian [8]

The one true God, exalted be He, loveth to witness handiworks of high craftsmanship produced by His loved ones. Blessed art thou, for what thy skill hath produced hath reached the presence of thy Lord, the Exiled, the Wronged. Please God every one of His friends may be enabled to acquire one of the crafts, and be confirmed in adhering to what hath been ordained in the Book of God, the All-Glorious, the All-Wise.

From a Tablet - translated from the Persian and Arabic [9]

As for what the Supreme Pen hath previously set down, the reason is that in every art and skill, God loveth the highest perfection.

From a Tablet - translated from the Persian [10]

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Extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

The Sun of Truth is the Word of God upon which dependeth the education of those who are endowed with the power of understanding and of utterance. It is the true spirit and the heavenly water, through whose aid and gracious providence all things have been and will be quickened. Its appearance in every mirror is conditioned by the colour of that mirror. For instance, when its light is cast upon the mirrors of the hearts of the wise, it bringeth forth wisdom. In like manner, when it manifesteth itself in the mirrors of the hearts of craftsmen, it unfoldeth new and unique arts, and when reflected in the hearts of those that apprehend the truth it revealeth wondrous tokens of true knowledge and discloseth the verities of God's utterance.

From a Tablet - translated from the Persian [31]

Knowledge is one of the wondrous gifts of God. It is incumbent upon everyone to acquire it. Such arts and material means as are now manifest have been achieved by virtue of His knowledge and wisdom which have been revealed in Epistles and Tablets through His Most Exalted Pen--a Pen out of whose treasury pearls of wisdom and utterance and the arts and crafts of the world are brought to light.

Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas p.

[32]

The soul that hath remained faithful to the Cause of God, and stood unwaveringly firm in His Path shall, after his ascension, be possessed of such power that all the worlds which the Almighty hath created can benefit through him. Such a soul provideth, at the bidding of the Ideal King and Divine Educator, the pure leaven that leaveneth the world of being, and furnisheth the power through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest...

Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983) p.

[33]

Extracts from the Writings and Utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises

come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible.

Some Answered Questions (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984) pp.

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[34]

Know thou that the reality of man embraces the realities of things, and discovers the verities, properties and secrets of things. So all these arts, wonders, sciences and knowledge have been discovered by the human reality. At one time these sciences, knowledge, wonders and arts were hidden and concealed secrets; then gradually the human reality discovered them and brought them from the realm of the invisible to the plane of the visible.

Some Answered Questions, p.

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[35]

If we are true Bahá'ís speech is not needed. Our actions will help on the world, will spread civilization, will help the progress of science, and cause the arts to develop. Without action nothing in the material world can be accomplished, neither can words unaided advance a man in the spiritual Kingdom. It is not through lip-service only that the elect of God have attained to holiness, but by patient lives of active service they have brought light into the world.

Paris Talks: Addressed Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911-1912, (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979) pp.

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[36]

By the power of the Holy Spirit, working through his soul, man is able to perceive the Divine Reality of things. All great works of art and science are witnesses to this power of the Spirit.

Paris Talks, p.

85

[37]

Meditation is the key for opening the doors of mysteries. In that state man abstracts himself; in that state man withdraws himself from all outside objects; in that subjective mood he is immersed in the ocean of spiritual life and can unfold the secrets of things-in-themselves. To illustrate this, think of man as endowed with two kinds of sight; when the power of insight is being used the outward power of vision does not see.

This faculty of meditation frees man from the animal nature, discerns the reality of things, puts man in touch with God.

This faculty brings forth from the invisible plane the sciences and arts. Through the meditative faculty inventions are made possible, colossal undertakings are carried out; through it governments can run smoothly. Through this faculty man enters into the very kingdom of God.

Paris Talks, p.
175
[38]

Extract from a Reported Utterance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

All Art is a gift of the Holy Spirit. When this light shines through the mind of a musician, it manifests itself in beautiful harmonies. Again, shining through the mind of a poet, it is seen in fine poetry and poetic prose. When the light of the Sun of Truth inspires the mind of a painter, he produces marvellous pictures. These gifts are fulfilling their highest purpose when showing forth the praise of God.

(Lady Blomfield, *The Chosen Highway*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust,)
1954) p.
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[39]

Extract from a Cable by Shoghi Effendi

FEEL IMPELLED APPEAL ENTIRE BODY AMERICAN BELIEVERS HENCEFORTH REGARD NABIL'S SOUL-STIRRING NARRATIVE AS ESSENTIAL ADJUNCT TO RECONSTRUCTED TEACHING PROGRAMME, AS UNCHALLENGEABLE TEXTBOOK IN THEIR SUMMER SCHOOLS, AS SOURCE OF INSPIRATION IN ALL LITERARY ARTISTIC PURSUITS, AS AN INVALUABLE COMPANION IN TIMES OF LEISURE, AS INDISPENSABLE PRELIMINARY TO FUTURE PILGRIMAGE BAHÁ'ULLÁH'S NATIVE LAND AND AS UNFAILING INSTRUMENT TO ALLAY DISTRESS AND RESIST ATTACKS OF CRITICAL DISILLUSIONED HUMANITY.

(20 June 1932, published in *Messages to America: Selected Letters and Cablegrams Addressed to the Bahá'ís of North America, 1932-1946* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Committee), p.
1
[40]

Post-script in the Handwriting of Shoghi Effendi to a Letter Written on his Behalf to an Individual Believer

I wish to express in person my deep and heartfelt appreciation of the manifold services you are increasingly rendering to our beloved Faith. The field in which you labour [stage presentation] is a new and attractive one and is rich with immense and far-reaching possibilities. May Nabil's moving and historic narrative enrich your labours, heighten the quality of your work, and extend its scope and deepen its influence.

(20 July 1933) [41]

The Future Development of the Arts

Compiled by The Research Department of the Universal House of Justice.

Published in

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...the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkár of the west...[marks] the first attempt, however rudimentary, to express the beauty which Bahá'í art will, in its plenitude, unfold to the eyes of the world.

1 March 1951, appended to a letter written on his behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, published in Messages to Canada (n.p.: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, 1965), pp.

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[42]

Extracts from letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

He sincerely hopes that as the Cause grows and talented persons come under its banner, they will begin to produce in art the divine spirit that animates their soul. Every religion has brought with it some form of art--let us see what wonders this cause is going to bring along. Such a glorious spirit should also give vent to a glorious art. The Temple with all its beauty is only the first ray of an early dawn; even more wondrous things are to be achieved in the future.

11 December 1931 [43]

It is certain that with the spread of the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh a new era will dawn in art and literature. Whereas before the form was perfect but the spirit was lacking, now there will be a glorious spirit embodied in a form immeasurably improved by the quickened genius of the world.

3 April 1932 [44]

Shoghi Effendi was very much interested to learn of the success of the "Pageant of Nations" you produced. He sincerely hopes that all those who attended it were inspired by the same spirit that animated you while arranging it.

It is through such presentations that we can arouse the interest of the greatest number of people in the spirit of the Cause. The day will come when the Cause will spread like wildfire when its spirit and teachings will be presented on the stage or in art and literature as a whole. Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people.

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 some 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 have to give it time. The material this spirit has to mould 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.

10 October 1932 [45]

The Guardian was also pleased to know of your deep interest in music, and of your desire to serve the Faith along this line. Although now is only the very beginning of Bahá'í art, yet the friends who feel they are gifted in such matters should endeavour to develop and cultivate their gifts and through their works to reflect, however inadequately, the Divine Spirit which Bahá'u'lláh has breathed into the world.

4 November 1937 [46]

Also, you raise the question of what will be the source of inspiration to Bahá'í musicians and composers: the music of the past or the Word? We cannot possibly foresee, standing as we do on the threshold of Bahá'í culture, what forms and characteristics the arts of the future, inspired by this Mighty New Revelation, will have. All we can be sure of is that they will be wonderful; as every Faith has given rise to a culture which flowered in different forms so too our beloved Faith may be expected to do the same thing. It is premature to try and grasp what they will be at present.

23 December 1942 [47]

Music, as one of the arts, is a natural cultural development, and the Guardian does not feel that there should be any cultivation of "Bahá'í Music" any more than we are trying to develop a Bahá'í school of painting or writing. The believers are free to paint, write, and compose as their talents guide them. If music is written, incorporating the sacred writings, the friends are free to make use of it, but it should never be considered a requirement at Bahá'í meetings to have such music. The further away the friends keep from any set forms, the better, for they must realize that the Cause is absolutely universal, and what might seem a beautiful addition to their mode of celebrating a Feast, etc., would perhaps fall on the ears of people of another country as unpleasant sounds--and vice versa. As long as they have music for its own sake it is all right, but they should not consider it Bahá'í music.

20 July 1946 to a National Spiritual Assembly [48]

The Guardian feels very strongly that, regardless of what the opinion of the latest school of architecture may be on the subject, the styles represented at present all over the world in architecture are not only very ugly, but completely lack the dignity and grace which must be at least partially present in a Bahá'í House of Worship. One must always bear in mind that the vast majority of human beings are neither very modern nor very extreme in their tastes, and that what the advanced school may think is marvellous is often very distasteful indeed to just plain, simple people.

11 July 1956 to a National Spiritual Assembly [49]

As regards producing a book of Bahá'í songs, your understanding that there is no cultural expression which could be called Bahá'í at this time (distinctive music, literature, art, architecture, etc., being the flower of the civilization and not coming at the beginning of a new Revelation), is correct. However, that does not mean that we haven't Bahá'í songs, in other words,

songs written by Bahá'ís on Bahá'í subjects.

11 July 1956 to a National Spiritual Assembly [50]

Extracts from Communications Written by the Universal House of Justice

There are many references to music in the Bahá'í Writings and it is given a very high place in education. No doubt as the Faith progresses new and wonderful compositions will appear and their spiritual effect upon mankind will certainly not be less than has been that of the great compositions of the past. Your desire and ability to serve the Faith through music is therefore acceptable and we hope you will find ample opportunity to your talents in this way.

19 April 1973 letter to an individual believer [51]

...there is no objection to using musical instruments to accompany Bahá'í prayers, except of course in the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, and provided that proper reverence is observed. There is also no objection to singing prayers by large groups in unison, but the friends are advised not to permit this to become a regular practice.

18 April 1984 memorandum to International Teaching Centre [52]

The beloved Guardian made it clear that the flowering of the arts which is the result of a divine revelation comes only after a number of centuries. The Bahá'í Faith offers the world the complete rebuilding of human society--a rebuilding of such far-reaching effect that it has been looked forward to in all the revelations of the past and has been called the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. The new architecture to which this revelation will give birth will blossom many generations hence. We are now merely at the beginning of this great process.

The present time is a period of turmoil and change. Architecture, like all arts and sciences, is undergoing very rapid development; one has only to consider the changes that have taken place in the course of the last few decades to have some idea of what is likely to happen during the years immediately ahead. Some modern buildings have, no doubt, qualities of greatness and will endure, but very much of what is being constructed now may be outgrown and may appear ugly but a few generate hence. Modern architecture, in other words may be considered a new development in its primitive stage. Classical Greek architecture, however, is an example of a mature art style. It is very beautiful now, just as it has been beautiful for some two thousand years or more.

The edifice we are now about to build is intended to serve for hundreds of years and is part of a complex of buildings around the arc on Mount Carmel which are to be harmonious in style. This is why we have chosen a style that is proven and has long endured, rather than a modern style which may well be ephemeral.

18 July 1974 letter to an individual believer [53]

Excerpts from letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

As a concert pianist you are uniquely endowed for service to God and mankind, for the Master states that "the musician's art is among those arts worthy of the highest praise, and it moveth the hearts of all who grieve." (Note: Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p.

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Further, the pursuit of excellence in your art both fulfills Bahá'í admonitions and is worship manifested in your profession.

13 May 1980 [54]

In response to your request for guidance on the best ways to approach artists in teaching the Faith, it can be said that in addition to those methods which attract people generally, artists will be responsive to art. When the sublime teachings of the Faith are reflected in artistic work, the hearts of people, including artists, will be touched. A quotation from the Sacred Writings or description of the art piece as it relates to the Writings may provide the viewer with an understanding of the source of this spiritual attraction and lead him to further study of the Faith.

21 July 1982 [55]

With the evolution of Bahá'í society which is composed of people of many cultural origins and diverse tastes, each with his conception of what is aesthetically acceptable and pleasing, those Bahá'ís who are gifted in music, drama and the visual arts are free to exercise their talents in ways which will serve the Faith of God. They should not feel disturbed at the lack of appreciation by sundry believers. Rather, in knowledge of the cogent writings of the Faith on music and dramatic expression...they should continue their artistic endeavours in prayerful recognition that the arts are powerful instruments to serve the Cause, arts which in time will have their Bahá'í fruition.

9 August 1983 [56]

The House of Justice wishes to encourage you in the writing of your book but reminds you that the Guardian clearly stated that at this early stage of the Dispensation there is no such thing as Bahá'í art, music, architecture or culture. These will doubtless emerge in the future as a natural outgrowth of a Bahá'í civilization. The Guardian's own predilections in such matters should never be regarded as laying the foundation for such developments...You should, therefore, take care not to indicate or make it possible to infer that the Guardian laid down the early beginnings of Bahá'í art forms. He made beautiful gardens and buildings utilizing what was available and, as in the case of the superstructure of the Shrine of the Báb, engaged experts who could produce befitting designs under his guidance.

23 June 1985 [57]

With reference to music and fine arts, you are, of course, free to include them as curricular subjects in Bahá'í schools. Many of your fellow National Assemblies, keenly aware of the Bahá'í Writings concerning music and the arts, incorporate such instruction and materials as they find possible at this stage of Bahá'í community development. Much work by devoted and talented teachers needs to be done to stimulate, collect and publish the useful music now emerging in the Bahá'í world, and to utilize it systematically in the schools... In accordance with our teachings, music and the arts are to be encouraged, and they add immeasurably to the vitality and spirit of the community...

20 August 1985 to a National Spiritual Assembly [58]

The House of Justice is pleased to learn of your planned thesis on "The Dawn of Bahá'í Art." Scholarly studies such as this play a very useful role through exploring the implications of the Bahá'í teachings, conveying new insights into the applications of these teachings to contemporary issues, and demonstrating to non-Bahá'ís the far-reaching consequences of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

14 November 1989 [59]

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Extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

We have made it lawful for you to listen to music and singing. Take heed, however, lest listening thereto should cause you to overstep the bounds of propriety and dignity. Let your joy be the joy born of My Most Great Name, a Name that bringeth rapture to the heart, and filleth with ecstasy the minds of all who have drawn nigh unto God. We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not, therefore, as wings to self and passion. Truly, We are loath to see you numbered with the foolish.

Kitáb-i-Aqdas, B6

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[60]

Extract from the Writings of Shoghi Effendi

Such a chaste and holy life, with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness, involves no less than the exercise

of moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocation...It calls for the abandonment of a frivolous conduct, with its excessive attachment to trivial and often misdirected pleasures...It condemns the prostitution of art and of literature...It can tolerate no compromise with the theories, the standards, the habits, and the excesses of a decadent age.

The Advent of Divine Justice (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990) p. 30
[61]

Extracts from Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

In the teachings there is nothing against dancing, but the friends should remember that the standard of Bahá'u'lláh is modesty and chastity. The atmosphere of modern dance halls, where so much smoking and drinking and promiscuity goes on, is very bad, but decent dances are not harmful in themselves. There is certainly no harm in taking part in dramas. Likewise in cinema acting. The harmful thing, nowadays, is not the art itself but the unfortunate corruption which often surrounds these arts. As Bahá'ís we need avoid none of the arts, but acts and the atmosphere that sometimes go with these professions we should avoid.

30 June 1952 to a National Spiritual Assembly [62]

With reference to your question whether the figures of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh should be made to appear as characters in dramatic works written by the believers, Shoghi Effendi's opinion is that such an attempt to dramatize the Manifestations would be highly disrespectful, and hence should be avoided by the friends, even in the case of the Master. Besides, it would be practically impossible to carry out such a plan faithfully, and in a dignified and befitting manner.

27 January 1935 to a National Spiritual Assembly [63]

As to your question concerning the advisability of dramatizing Bahá'í historic episodes: the Guardian would certainly approve, and even encourage that the friends should engage in such literary pursuits which, no doubt, can be of immense teaching value. What he wishes the believers to avoid is to dramatize the personages of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh or the Master--only Their Words can be used, but no figure must represent Them; great dignity must be the keynote.

19 August 1951 [64]

Extracts from communications written by the Universal House of Justice

We have found nothing in the texts forbidding the use of the Greatest Name, the Names of the Manifestations of God or the names of the Central Figures of our Faith in the lyrics of music. However, we feel that when they are used they should be used with reverence and respect, both in the manner in which they are incorporated in the lyrics and in the manner of presentation.

14 March 1968 to a National Spiritual Assembly [66]

Inasmuch as the spirit of our gathering is so much affected by the tone and quality of our worship, of our feeling and appreciation of the Word of God for this day, we would hope that you would encourage the most beautiful possible expression of the human spirits in your communities, through music among other modes of feeling.

22 February 1971 to a National Spiritual Assembly [67]

We see no objection to the use of natural phenomena as symbols to illustrate the significance of the three Central Figures, Bahá'í Laws, and Bahá'í Administration, and we also appreciate the suitability of using visual symbols to express abstract concepts.

29 July 1971 [68]

Your understanding that the portrayal of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh in works of art is forbidden is correct. The Guardian made it clear that this prohibition refers to all the Manifestations of God; photographs or reproductions of portraits of the Master may be used in books, but no attempt should be made to portray Him in dramatic or other works where He would be one of the "dramatis personae." However, there can be no objection to symbolic representation of such Holy Figures, provided it does not become a ritual and that the symbol used is not irreverent.

3 December 1972 [69]

...an examination of the letters of the beloved Guardian makes it absolutely clear that it is not permissible to portray on the stage the figure of the Manifestation of God, nor even of the Master... The Universal House of Justice considers it inappropriate to represent the Guardian of the Faith as a character in a play. The use of light, either of great intensity or in different colours, needs your careful consideration. If the use of light in any way at all suggests a personification of the Manifestation of God it should not be used, but if it can be done without in any way giving the impression that the Prophet is being represented or personified then there is no objection to its use. As to the portrayal of living persons, there are occasions when this may be done, such as spontaneous or local presentations for the purpose of teaching or describing events, but generally it is unwise to do so.

12 August 1975 [70]

With reference to the question concerning the clapping of hands in songs where the Greatest Name is used, the House of Justice does not want to draw hard and fast rules. Clearly such matters are secondary and subject to cultural considerations, customs, and the social conventions prevailing in a given society. In some cultures, for example, clapping, as part of religious expression, is considered offensive; in other cultures, clapping is a means of keeping the rhythm of the hymn, especially in the absence of a musical instrument, and is integral to religious experience; among other peoples,

clapping may constitute a demonstration of religious fervor. Further, within any given country there may well be regional cultural differences.

Therefore, it is left to the National Spiritual Assembly to weigh each case with care and sensitivity in light of the prevailing cultural milieu and, if necessary, provide guidance to the friends.

1 October 1986 memorandum to the International Teaching Centre [71]

Extracts from letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

The Universal House of Justice has received your letter of 25 March 1976 in which you ask if it would be permissible for you to include drawings of the Manifestation of God in some study material for children that you are preparing, and has instructed us to say that this would not be permissible.

16 May 1976 to a National Spiritual Assembly [72]

The prohibition on representing the Manifestation of God in paintings and drawings or in dramatic presentations applies to all the Manifestations of God. There are, of course, great and wonderful works of art of past Dispensations, many of which portrayed the Manifestation of God in a spirit of reverence and love. In this Dispensation, however, the greater maturity of mankind and the greater awareness of the relationship between the Supreme Manifestation and His servants enable us to realize the impossibility of representing, in any human form, whether pictorially, in sculpture or in dramatic representation, the Person of God's Manifestation. In stating the Bahá'í prohibition, the Guardian pointed out this impossibility.

9 March 1977 [73]

As you are no doubt aware, it is not permissible to portray the Manifestations of God in dramatic works and it can be understood that great skill will be needed to produce an effective film about the history of the Faith in which neither the Báb nor Bahá'u'lláh could actually appear. Because of the overwhelming significance of the Bahá'í message and the Bahá'í Revelation, any such film produced under the aegis of the Bahá'í community would have to be of the very highest quality in all respects.

24 September 1978 to a National Spiritual Assembly [74]

...it would not be proper for an actor to speak the part of one of the three Central Figures of the Faith in a radio play.

3 April 1979 to a National Spiritual Assembly [75]

As to your request for guidance from the House of Justice regarding the play you are writing, we are asked to say that the friends are free to write whatever they are moved to create. If, however, such works are about the Faith and are for publication, they must be reviewed and approved by the National Spiritual Assembly of the country in which they are first published.

5 March 1981 [76]

Literary work, whether a play or otherwise, has to be reviewed by the National Spiritual Assembly of the country in which it is published. As to the performance of a play in any country, this is a matter for decision by the National Assembly who may rule that, for safety's sake, a certain drama (Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í) should not be performed by Bahá'ís within its jurisdiction. That, however, is a different question, and has nothing to do with review.

22 February 1982 [77]

We are to call to your attention the beloved Guardian's instruction that while no personal representation of the Holy Ones should be made on stage or in pictorial form, there is no objection to Their words and utterances being reported.

15 March 1983 to a National Spiritual Assembly [78]

There is no objection to Bahá'ís writing novels portraying historical events and figures of the nature described in your letter. However, in view of the impossibility of ever portraying adequately the Manifestation of God as a character in a novel, and of the disrespect implicit in such an attempt, no such portrayal involving any of the Central Figures of the Faith should be attempted.

10 June 1986 [79]

While the House of Justice realizes that biographies of the Greatest Holy Leaf will be written, it feels that it would not be befitting to portray her in any dramatic or fictional form.

22 September 1986 [80]

You sometimes provide detailed written descriptions of the symbols you use in your paintings; as a practice this could introduce an aspect which could be unduly interpretive of Bahá'í concepts, ultimately detracting from rather than enhancing your artistic efforts. Symbolism is the stuff of art, but artists rarely interpret the symbols they use, leaving it to the observers of their works to draw their own conclusions, sometimes with no more than hints from the titles given such works.

The titling of a piece of art is the artist's prerogative; the only objection would be to the use of an irreverent title for a piece intended to represent a Bahá'í subject.

As to your question about an artist's executing a "painting which is a contemporary illumination of a passage of the Holy Writings," the House of Justice feels artists should not be inhibited by Bahá'í institutions from creating a variety of calligraphic renderings of the Holy Writings or of the Greatest Name. However, such efforts should be in good taste and not assume forms that lend themselves to ridicule. Regarding the commonly used symbol of the Greatest Name, the House of Justice advises that great care be given to the accurate representation of the Persian calligraphy, since any deviation from an

accepted representation can be distressing to Iranian believers.

23 February 1987 [81]

The policy formulated by the House of Justice to discourage the reproduction of photographs of paintings of the Master for distribution does not imply any judgement of the quality of a painting. There is a wide variation in the quality of the artistry with which paintings of the Master are carried out. The House of Justice does not wish to show preference to one painting over another; it chooses rather to adopt this general policy as a means of ensuring that appropriate respect is accorded to representations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and that there is no distribution of photographic reproductions of those paintings which are of poor quality...

More generally, the House of Justice feels that one of the great challenges facing Bahá'ís everywhere is that of restoring to the peoples of the world an awareness of spiritual reality. Our view of the world is markedly different from that of the mass of mankind, in that we perceive creation to encompass spiritual as well as physical entities, and we regard the purpose of the world in which we now find ourselves to be a vehicle for our spiritual progress.

This view has important implications for the behaviour of Bahá'ís and gives rise to practices which are quite contrary to prevailing conduct of the wider society. One of the distinctive virtues given emphasis in the Bahá'í Writings is respect for that which is sacred. Such behaviour has no meaning for those whose perspective on the world is entirely materialistic, while many followers of the established religions have debased it into a set of rituals devoid of true spiritual feeling.

In some instances, the Bahá'í Writings contain precise guidance on how the reverence for sacred objects or places should be expressed, e.g., restrictions on the use of the Greatest Name on objects or indiscriminate use of the record of the voice of the Master. In other instances, the believers are called upon to strive to obtain a deeper understanding of the concept of sacredness in the Bahá'í teachings, from which they can determine their own forms of conduct by which reverence and respect are to be expressed.

The importance of such behaviour derives from the principles expressed in the Bahá'í Writings, that the outward has an influence on the inward. Referring to "the people of God" Bahá'u'lláh states: "Their outward conduct is but a reflection of their inward life, and their inward life a mirror of their outward conduct."

It is within this framework that the Universal House of Justice wishes you to view the concerns which have been expressed over the past several years. Bahá'ís endowed with artistic talent are in a unique position to use their abilities, when treating Bahá'í themes, in such a way as to disclose to mankind evidence of the spiritual renewal the Bahá'í Faith has brought to humanity through its revitalization of the concept of reverence.

Questions of artistic freedom are not germane to the issues raised here.

Bahá'í artists are free to apply their talents to whatever subject is of interest to them. However, it is hoped that they will exercise a leadership role in restoring to a materialistic society an appreciation of reverence as a vital element in the achievement of true liberty and abiding happiness.

24 September 1987 [82]

In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 25, Shoghi Effendi states that the Faith "condemns the prostitution of art" and "the practices of nudism" and instead calls for the "exercise of moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations." However, the House of Justice does not know of any passages in the teachings prohibiting the delineation of the human body in works of art. It is the practice of nudism that the Guardian condemns in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, not nudity. There are many variables in the question of the portrayal of the nude form in art, including that of local mores and attitudes. The intention of the artist is a very important factor. Normally that is a matter left to the conscience and good taste of the individual artist unless the Spiritual Assembly decides that the Cause is actually being harmed in a particular case.

25 February 1988 to a National Spiritual Assembly [83]

The House of Justice is pleased to learn of the success you are achieving in your profession. It advises you to view this professional activity within the context of service to the Faith and the promotion of the proclamation and teaching work. Your musical achievements will enable you to reach a wide range of people and ultimately to proclaim the Message of Bahá'u'lláh to them through the expression of its values in your music. You can also make valuable friendships for the Faith among the influential people you will meet as your business continues to develop...Bahá'í artists who achieve eminence and renown in their chosen field, and who remain dedicated to the promotion of the Faith, can be of unique assistance to the Cause at the present time when public curiosity about the Bahá'í teachings is gradually being aroused.

30 June 1988 [84]

In response to your letter...in which you ask whether verses from prayers or selections from *The Hidden Words* may be repeated when they are sung in a choir or by individuals, especially in the House of Worship, we have been directed by the Universal House of Justice to say that there is no objection to the repetition of these verses in songs in order to conform with musical requirements.

30 March 1989 to a National Spiritual Assembly [85]

With reference to your question regarding any limitations to the setting of Bahá'í Writings to music, we are to state that it is permissible to use selections from the Holy Writings as lyrics to be accompanied by musical compositions, and to repeat verses or words. A composer is free to determine the musical style, bearing in mind the spiritual obligation to treat the Sacred Texts with propriety, dignity and reverence.

28 November 1990 [86]

...traditional dances associated with the expression of a culture are permissible in Bahá'í Centres. However, it should be borne in mind that such traditional dances generally have an underlying theme or a story being represented. Care must be exercised that the themes of such dances are in harmony with the high ethical standards of the Cause and are not portrayals that would arouse base instincts and unworthy passions...

As for choreographed dances whose purpose is to reinforce and proclaim Bahá'í principles, if they can be performed in a manner which portrays the nobility of such principles and invokes appropriate attitudes of respect or reverence, there is no objection to dances which are meant to interpret passages from the Writings; however, it is preferable that the motions of a dance not be accompanied by the reading of the words.

The principles which must guide the friends in their consideration of these questions is the observance of "moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations."

20 June 1991 to a National Spiritual Assembly [87]

There is no objection, of course, to the use of the phrase "Bahá'í artist," but at this point in time in the Bahá'í Dispensation we should not use the term "Bahá'í art," "Bahá'í music," or "Bahá'í architecture."

12 March 1992 [88]

Regarding your question as to the appropriateness of the friends singing in unison Bahá'í prayers which have been set to music, this is entirely permissible. However, the music should appropriately reflect the sacred nature of the Writings, and the friends are advised not to make a ritual out of the practice. The beloved Master encourages us in this regard: "Therefore...set to music the verses and the divine words so that they may be sung with soul-stirring melody in the Assemblies and gatherings, and that the hearts of the listeners may become tumultuous and rise towards the Kingdom of Abhá in supplication and prayer." (Note: Bahá'í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976) p. 378

20 April 1992 to a National Spiritual Assembly [89]

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