

Fostering a Climate of Encouragement in the Arts
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Summary of Keynote Presentation
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In this discussion, the term “art” will be used broadly to refer to practices such as painting, poetry, drama, dance, and music, as well as to the design arts such as architecture, industrial design, and fashion design. In addition, art is considered to encompass crafts such as pottery, jewelry, stained glass-setting and rug-weaving. As used here, the term “artists” simply refers to people who practice any of the arts, whatever the immediate purpose to which their work is dedicated, whatever their cultural origin, and whatever their approach to artistic practice. The term embraces both creators and interpreters, amateurs and professionals, those who incline toward innovation and those who extend a tradition.¹

As a summary, the discussion naturally contains many generalizations, for which exceptions can always be found. Some of the generalizations apply more to North America than to Europe. Others apply to nations around the world to the extent they have become industrialized and have come under the influence of materialism. Moreover, the analysis considers the current practice of art in secular society as a whole rather than its practice within specific religious communities. The author believes, however, that the description of trends given below is reliable enough, overall, to provide a valid framework for understanding present conditions in the arts, alongside suggestions as to how the Bahá’í community can find an appropriate response.

I. The Bahá’í Writings offer a vision of Art as a Means to a Higher, Spiritual End

The Bahá’í Writings indicate that the most elevated role to which the arts can aspire is to give praise to the Creator, to foster a spirit of love and unity throughout the world, and to render service to humanity’s individual and collective spiritual growth. In other words, however compelling, attractive and fascinating art may be in its own right, the Writings regard it essentially as a means to a higher, spiritual, and noble end. During periods of history when the spiritual values promoted by religion were uppermost in people’s thoughts and feelings, this view was the norm in civilizations around the world.

However, over the last two centuries the arts, by and large, have drifted away from a religiously-inspired outlook on life.² Currently, the materialistic bias in society’s outlook has little regard for the higher ends of art, and focuses on art as an end in itself. As a result, art is valued for its own sake, primarily as a source of pleasure, whether the pleasure is sensual, emotional, or intellectual.³

II. The Need to Re-orient the Arts to Spiritual Service

To orient the concepts and practice of a profession toward a Bahá'í perspective may present more of a challenge in the case of the arts than in most other callings, because the arts are intimately tied to humanity's inner life. In any society, the way the arts are conceived and practiced reflects the society's outlook, which today has a materialistic bias.⁴ The kind of re-orientation needed in the arts is comparable to the profound shift toward a more spiritual understanding of life, in which the Bahá'í community is currently engaged worldwide. This is being achieved largely through the Institute process, as the community interacts with the Creative Word in a series of courses of the Ruhí Institute.

Since the 1980s, the Universal House of Justice has been encouraging the Bahá'í world to integrate the arts into community life, and the community has been responsive. However, it appears that there is still ample ground to be covered before the community embraces the arts wholeheartedly and universally, and begins to cultivate them systematically.⁵ This is not surprising, considering that our culture, like those in many parts of the world, has taught us to regard most art merely as a commodity and a form of light entertainment (as described below). There will be a built-in resistance to make widespread use of the arts until the Bahá'í community is exposed to a vision of the arts derived from the Bahá'í Writings. Once the community, worldwide, realizes a shift in its outlook on art, moving from concepts and values favored by contemporary society toward those found in the Sacred Writings, we can expect to see the arts welcomed without reservations into the heart of the Bahá'í community and fully utilized. Since the community is absorbing constant waves of new believers, who will want to learn about a spiritual perspective of the arts, the community's exposure to such a spiritually-based vision needs to be systematic and ongoing.

III. What would the Arts and their Practice be like as we Shift to a Spiritual Perspective?

1. As noted, when art is converted into an end in itself, it is valued for its own sake, primarily as a source of pleasure. It is turned into a commodity to be bought, traded, and consumed, like any other item in a consumer market. In society at large, this has produced a cascade of consequences in the way we regard the arts, the way artists behave, what they create, the values manifested by their works, and how their works are marketed. When art is marketed as an item intended for mass consumption, it becomes a form of light entertainment. When it is intended for more sophisticated circles, it becomes an object to be savored for its blend of sensual pleasure and intellectual content. In either case, the accent is on the pleasure it affords rather than on a higher, spiritual plane of reference.

As we shift toward a vision of the arts inspired by Bahá'í values, the fundamental way we conceive of art would change from being an “End in Itself” to being a “Means to a Higher End”. The arts would climb in status from being a mere entertainment to a valuable spiritual service. This change in our fundamental conception of art would produce its own cascade of cause and effect.

2. For the most part, the arts have been divorced from the spiritual life of present-day society, demoted to a pastime and an entertainment, or an intellectual exercise. In government budgets for primary and secondary education, the amounts allocated for the arts clearly indicate their current status as an optional frill. Thus, artists are exiled to the fringes of society, rather than standing at its heart. They and their work become dispensable.

In some cases, artists who abstain from taking part in the mass marketing process become remote observers of society, rather than active participants in community life. Since their calling tends to be viewed as having little or no intrinsic value, society expects them to play the role of the social misfit, who should get a “real job”. Such artists often respond with attitudes, dress, and behavior that reflect this stereotype.

In some other cases, artists whose work is involved in the popular consumption of art, first seek the fame and fortune that successful entertainment can bring, before giving thought to addressing humanity's spiritual needs.

The adoption of a spiritual vision of art would bring about a fundamental change in art's standing in the Bahá'í community: it would shift from being regarded as a dispensable frill to being recognized as one of the primary means for the spiritual education and upliftment of humanity. Artists, in turn, would move inward from the fringes of the community and begin playing a respected and much-appreciated role at its very heart.

3. Artists in today's society see their work turned into a commodity and commercialized. It is commercialized both in the mass market and in the intellectual market. The focal centers of the mass marketplace are entertainment providers such as movie theaters, television, publishers, and increasingly, Internet services such as iTunes. The hubs of the intellectual marketplace are institutions such as universities, museums, galleries, symphony halls, and marketing tools such as high-end auction houses.

As artists in either of these settings compete for a slice of the market pie, they often feel compelled to adopt an attitude of scarcity. This attitude views one person's gain as another's loss. The system pits artists against one another, promoting an attitude of competition rather than a spirit of collaboration. It rewards those who are not only talented, but who are also the most focused, persistent and aggressive in promoting themselves. This channel for placing the artist in contact with the public leaves out the multitude of artists who are equally

talented but less inclined to engage in competitive self-promotion. It places pressure on artists to focus on “Me,” not “We”, and on the glorification of self rather than love of the community.

In a community inspired by a spiritual vision of the arts, the marketing of art to a general mass public, as well as to various constituencies within the public, will probably continue to thrive. There will always be a place and a need both for entertainment and for intellectual challenge in the arts. Art with a spiritual content, however, would not be regarded as a commodity simply to be consumed, but as a spiritual statement to be experienced, explored, pondered, and in the best cases, cherished. The way such art is offered to the public will need to reflect the dignity of its role and station.

Adopting a spiritual vision of the arts would also affect the attitude of artists. We would see a shift from seeking fame and fortune for its own sake, to seeking the spiritual betterment of humanity. (In the latter case, fame and fortune may still come to the artist, but it would be a byproduct of service rather than the goal.) There would be several shifts in attitude, from “Me” to “We”; from Self to Community; from Egotism to Love; from the “Scarcity” of limited market share to the “Abundance” of unlimited human potential; and from Competition to a Spirit of Collaboration.

4. The way art is currently marketed as an item of mass consumption leads to the cult of celebrity. Its marketing in intellectual circles, on the other hand, tends to produce an attitude of rivalry among artists, each of whom strives to cultivate a unique artistic style to differentiate himself or herself from the others. This over-emphasis on individualism and novelty among serious artists results in an abundance of private artistic “languages,” which, for nearly all of the public, are difficult to decipher. It comes at the expense of shared metaphorical languages in the arts, in which both artists and public could more readily participate.

Following the adoption of a vision of the arts based on Bahá’í values, we can expect to see changes in the social phenomena surrounding the arts. The cult of celebrity would be replaced by artists who are modest, unassuming servants of humanity. A highly individual perspective, as well as novelty and uniqueness in artistic style, may continue to be valued; but such traits would no longer be regarded as the exclusive indicators of a creative mind, nor used competitively by artists to establish dominance in their field. More breathing room would become available for the development of artistic styles as common languages which are shared among artists, and shared between artist and public.

V. A Worldwide Renaissance in the Arts is Approaching. What are the Key Factors?

Eventually, a breathtaking, worldwide flowering of the arts will emerge in the Bahá'í community. The following factors can be expected to figure among those that play a major role in bringing it about:

1. Tools are needed that can be used repeatedly and in any location, to raise the consciousness of the Bahá'í community and of society at large regarding the spiritual nature of art's role. To this end, a study circle on the arts, sponsored by the Wings to the Spirit Foundation, and using the approach of the Ruhi Institute, has been developed for use in local communities.
2. Promotion of the use of the arts at the grass roots level is another key. It assures that the ways art is used, and the diverse forms it takes, will constitute an authentic cultural development reflecting communities' varying needs and characteristics.
3. Fear of failure needs to be replaced with confidence and a willingness to experiment. From this vantage point, there are no real failures in artistic endeavors, there are only stepping stones on a path of progress. When seeming failures occur, there should be no stigma attached; they should be regarded simply as points along the rising curve of growth, and a natural part of learning.
4. Among artists, it is crucial to replace rivalry with collaboration, mistrust with love, and envy with goodwill, as this promotes unity and helps build a sense of community.
5. When artists replace guarded innovation with a sense of common language, it also builds a sense of trust and community. Artistic innovations should be freely shared, and their use by others encouraged.
6. Institutions will emerge, dedicated to promoting and supporting the use of the arts for spiritual purposes. For example, funds, endowments and allocations made by local communities, as circumstances permit.
7. The promotion of a "Climate of Encouragement."

VI. What can We do to Promote a Climate of Encouragement in the Arts?

To foster a climate of encouragement in the arts, we should start by emulating ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Not only did they have a sin-covering eye; they went beyond this and praised our humble efforts to serve the Cause. Look at *Memorials of the Faithful* and the Guardian’s correspondence with individuals. Much of their writing is pure encouragement! ⁶

In the same way, we should find joy in praising one another’s efforts.

The following are just a few suggestions for ways we can foster a climate of encouragement:

Artists and art appreciators can encourage use of the arts in the community:

- by offering their services to enhance the spiritual experience of study groups, devotional programs, children’s classes, and youth activities;
- by becoming tutors in the Ruhi Institute process and ensuring that the arts are included in the courses they facilitate; and
- by offering to tutor the new study circle on the arts, in order to help raise the community’s consciousness of the arts’ spiritual role and many uses.

Institutions and communities can encourage the use of the arts:

- by calling for the services of artists in community activities;
- by providing for the creation of community choirs;
- by encouraging Bahá’í parents to provide for a basic education in one or more art forms for their children, if necessary by contracting tutors;
- by pooling economic resources for specific artistic projects that the community would like to sponsor, and eventually by establishing ongoing funds for such projects.

And artists can encourage one another:

- by moving from our present condition as a band of individuals working separately, toward becoming a true community of artists;
- by taking sincere delight in one another’s achievements, and saying so;
- by promoting and publicly praising one another’s work where recognition of merit is appropriate;
- by forming a mentoring society in which artists mentor one another in both the creative and the practical aspects of their calling;
- by giving some of our time to guide children and youth into a spiritual understanding of the arts (children’s classes on this subject, based on the Bahá’í Writings, need to be developed);
- and above all, by recognizing and encouraging the development of artistic talent in children.

Notes:

¹ Tuman, *Mirror of the Divine: Art in the Bahá'í World Community*, p. 6. The Introduction to *Mirror of the Divine* discusses basic concepts and definitions regarding art and artists in the context of the Bahá'í community. Following a distinction drawn by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the vocations of artists generally can be divided into two major groups, seraffic and seraffo-donníc. The distinction lies in whether the arts in question affect primarily the spiritual life of humanity, or are addressed simultaneously to its spiritual life and its needs on a worldly or material plane. See *Mirror*, p. 27-43, 260-262, 271-272.

² In describing the spiritual and moral decline that has gripped humanity, and the destructive force of the chaos that has ensued in every department of life, the Universal House of Justice made the following strongly-worded statement about the arts:

Even music, art, and literature, which are to represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations and should be a source of comfort and tranquility for troubled souls, have strayed from the straight path and are now the mirrors of the soiled hearts of this confused, unprincipled, and disordered age.

(From a circular letter, dated 10 February 1980, in *Bahá'í World*, Vol. XVIII, p. 358.)

³ In the West, there are several aesthetic theories reflecting the idea that beauty in art – or that which is attractive about art – is an end in itself, that it has no purpose outside the giving of some form of pleasure.

The kind of pleasure emphasized may be sensual (as in hedonistic theory). The pleasure may be derived from the intellectual appreciation of design and pattern (as in naturalistic theory). It may arise from the recognition of artistic patterns corresponding to instinctive mental patterns (as in Gestalt theory); from an intuitive appreciation of qualitative vividness (as in contextualistic theory); from an appreciation of the work of art as an integrated organic whole (as in organistic theory); and from the recognition and appreciation of ideal forms (as in formistic theory). It may also involve satisfaction which the artist derives from the expression of emotion and the public from emotional arousal (as in expressionism). Each theory stresses a different facet of the experience of beauty [in art], but what they have in common is the basic notion that beauty's essential characteristic is to give sensual, intellectual, or emotional pleasure without higher purpose.

(Tuman, "The Spiritual Role of Art," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4, December 1991 to March 1992, p. 72)

A major exception to the prevailing tendency described above is found in postmodern theories of art that have emerged from the 1970s to the present. In such theories, art is at least treated as a means to a further end. But that end is not necessarily a spiritual one in the sense used in our discussion. Art is used, rather, as a means to critique social and political conditions, question what it means to know anything, point out the fluidity of time and place, draw attention to the relativity of cultures and their values, and embody the inconsistencies and contradictions of contemporary life.

From a Bahá'í viewpoint, the educational effect that such an approach can have is commendable, inasmuch as its recognition of our multi-cultural world, its emphasis on the rights of women and minorities, and its deconstruction of worldviews that led to cultural hegemonies, are all based, in the final analysis, on a desire for justice and equality. However, the views that this approach offers of the world, of culture, of society and the individual, are infinitely disjointed and fragmented. The postmodern approach thus has difficulty seeing human beings as universally and fundamentally the same: as a soul endowed with the potential to manifest a wide range of spiritual qualities, and created for the purpose of knowing and loving our Creator. As an approach, its fragmented, relativistic views of truth and reality prevent it from committing to a system of belief emanating from a single, all-transcending Center. How much less, then, could it concur that the primary, most elevated purpose of the arts is to ennoble humanity's individual and collective life by helping to develop the spiritual attributes which that transcendent Being has invested in each of us.

⁴ In "One Common Faith," a statement prepared under the supervision of the Universal House of Justice, we find the following account of materialism:

Early in the twentieth century, a materialistic interpretation of reality had consolidated itself so completely as to become the dominant world faith insofar as the direction of society was concerned. (page 3)

Consumer culture, today's inheritor by default of materialism's gospel of human betterment, is unembarrassed by the ephemeral nature of the goals that inspire it. (page 8)

⁵ One of the earliest instances of a statement in which the Universal House of Justice recommended the widespread use of the arts to the Bahá'ís of the world was in the Six Year Plan, launched in 1986. The House of Justice recommended that all National Spiritual Assemblies consider, among the measures to be consulted upon in the formulation of national plans, "the use of drama and singing in the teaching and deepening work and in Bahá'í gatherings, where advisable." (published in *Bahá'í News* magazine, July 1986, p. 1)

⁶ For the complete text of *Memorials of the Faithful*, see <http://bahai-library.org/writings/abdulbaha/mf/>

In *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 203, we find this golden standard of how to relate to and encourage one another:

...Man can receive no greater gift than this, that he rejoice another's heart. I beg of God that ye will be bringers of joy, even as are the angels in Heaven.

Many samples of the Guardian's correspondence with individuals can be found in "Ocean," a reference base of Bahá'í literature that can be downloaded without charge. Consider this example of encouragement in *Letters from the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand*, p. 6:

Dearly beloved co-worker:

My constant prayers for the extension of the activities in which you and your dear fellow-labourers are so strenuously engaged will be offered on your behalf that the splendid era which you have inaugurated may redound to the glory and honour of the Most Great Name. I am truly proud of the manner in which my loved friends in Australia and New-Zealand have arisen to discharge their sacred and pressing responsibilities. Great triumphs, I feel convinced, are in store for them if they persevere in their mighty task. May the Almighty bless their high endeavours and enable them to achieve His purpose.

Your true brother,
Shoghi