

the arts

Art and the interconnectedness of all things

*In Oxford, the bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb
was celebrated at a special event with exhibition held
at Wolfson College on 3 November 2019*

THE GATHERING featured presentations by a number of Bahá'ís who shared insights from their various creative practices. By way of an introduction and welcome to the event, Canadian scholar Todd Lawson sent some introductory thoughts on the Báb as “artist”:

“To isolate the spiritual from art is a bit like trying to isolate the wet from water. The essentially metaphorical processes of art—whether plastic, graphic, literary, architectural, or musical—isolates and privileges the spiritual quality of all artistic expression and practice. More than anything, what we call today “art” circumscribes an activity that seeks somehow to capture and even analyze a feeling or response to the world that would remain otherwise ineffable or unmarked. Art speaks a truth that cannot be spoken another way. In art there is a great reverence for the luminous interconnectedness of “deep down things” that mirrors, illumines and echoes the most profound mystical experiences of the prophets, messengers, teachers and gurus of what we call “religion”.

The works presented here today are stunningly beautiful examples of both the work of the individual artists and the vibrant, ceaselessly-changing and generative connectedness among the arts, art and the artists. This is symbolic of the occasion: to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of One whom Bahá'ís believe will one day be recognized by the world as having wrought profound change in the spiritual life of the planet.

‘Alí-Muhammad Shirází, known to history as the Báb—

an Arabic word meaning gate or door—spoke a new music to His society in mid-19th century Iran. So startling was His rendition of the familiar sources of Islamic religion, the Qur’án and the sacred words of Islam’s holy teachers, that He was eventually put to death by firing squad at the young age of 32 in 1850. He had insisted that the world was now at a point in which the deepest spiritual teachings of Islám cried out to burst beyond their typically circumscribed and, in the context of the burgeoning globalization of the time, frankly parochial cultural home to enrich the life of humanity as a whole. Through rewriting the Qur’án, a bold and audacious artistic gesture, the Báb attracted the admiration and devotion of thousands of His fellow Iranians who likewise felt the same inevitable transformations stirring in their souls. It has been said: “When the mode of the music changes, the walls of the city shake.” Nothing could be truer of the response of Iran to the new call of the Báb, Whose insistence upon the non-negotiable unity of humanity, of the interconnectedness of cosmic processes with the life of the soul, and the oneness of the divine source of imagination, creation and being was both His greatest message and His death warrant.

The Báb was, in His role as prophet, a highly accomplished artist, though He may not have used such a term to identify Himself. The calligraphic flaming star exquisitely demonstrates His mastery of His materials, His powerful creative imagination and His unremitting desire to demonstrate the quite sacred interconnectedness of all things. Simultaneously cool and hot, near and far, this star is symbolic of the human being through whom the forces of life

and art combine to create consciousness. It is one of several similar calligraphic works produced by the Báb during His short life. It is constituted largely of quotations from the Qur'án extolling the power of God and the imminence of a new cycle of life for the world. It promises hope for the future in a voice that Islam had not previously heard and may be thought to mark the beginning of a specifically Iranian modernism in addition to its unmistakably universal song of hope.

We are all deeply honored to be able to join together here on this occasion to celebrate through our own art His unquenchable luminosity and His veneration of the artistic vocation as a mode of truth-telling and revelation.

Rhythm, harmony, melody, form and space are experienced in a heightened way through what we call "art".



Colour, story and above all, time and, its offspring history, become tamed through artistic expression, whether musical, literary, sculptural, pictorial or graphic.

Out of the apparent chaos — or at least bafflement — of being in the world the artist perceives and experiences harmony, unity, resolution, meaning and hope. The artist communicates this perception, this feeling, to the world, and the world is

enriched, emboldened, heartened, given life. The strange and undeniable experience of sensing music in art, art in literature and literature in all artistic expression, as if art itself creates and speaks its own language, maintains our attraction to and, in fact, dependence upon art. There is a kinship that flows through it all and the kinship is essentially spiritual." TL

*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...*

— Bahá'u'lláh

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Handwritten text in a dense, cursive script, likely a religious or historical document, spanning the entire page.