

# Building Creative Communities: Approaching the Arts as Social and Economic Development

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*This essay is dedicated to the Aboriginal artists of Australia.*

This essay describes GATI<sup>1</sup> (Global Arts Training Institute), a model for building professionalism in the visual and performance arts which can be implemented in Bahá'í communities and incorporated into teaching plans to develop the next generation of arts practitioners and professional managers.<sup>2</sup> As part of the One Year and Five Year Plans, the author is suggesting a comprehensive training model which further develops and expands the Youth Workshop Model as a global model fusing Bahá'í principles, the principles of social and economic development, and a 21<sup>st</sup> Century vision which adapts the best in art, science and technology to training and educational programs. The GATI described below relies on support from the Bahá'í Administration and the private sector as a development partners.

## Time is Short<sup>3</sup>

*Each one is holding in his hand a trumpet, blowing the breath of life over all the regions... These souls are the armies of God and the conquerors of the East and the West. Should one of them turn his face toward some direction and summon the people to the Kingdom of God, all the ideal forces*

1. For information about GATI (Global Arts Training Institute) contact the author by email at CIC370@aol.com or at the Caravan for International Culture website at www.caravan-inc.com, or write to Dr. Robin M. Chandler, Caravan, PO Box 370, Cambridge, MA 02238 USA.
2. The expression 'arts practitioners and professional managers' embraces the three emergent interdisciplinary fields including the cluster of music, dance, theatre, the visual arts, film, literature and writing, oral tradition, and performance ritual; the computer and digital media; and corporate arts management.
3. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith – Messages to America 1947-1957*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995, pp. 85-6.

*and lordly confirmations will rush to his support and reinforcement. He will behold all the doors open and all the strong fortifications and impregnable castles razed to the ground. Singly and alone he will attack the armies of the world, defeat the right and left wings of the hosts of all the countries, break through the lines of all the legions and carry his attack to the very center of the powers of the earth. This is the meaning of the Hosts of God.<sup>4</sup>*

*That which belongs to the spirit of the future can only be realized in feeling, and to this feeling the talent of the artist is the only road.<sup>5</sup>*

Those of us who are career professionals in the arts understand the power of the arts. The calling to art as a vocation is second nature. Others have to be convinced of its significance beyond entertainment, beyond the glamour, beyond escapism, beyond the celebration which lies at its heart. At best the artist perfects him/herself and, ultimately, perfects culture as a whole. Striving to perfect one's craft and oneself reveals divine attributes. In the presentation and performance of art, the artist reveals a transcendent moment, transmuting audiences and reminding them of the possibilities of human perfection, the promise of peace. Yet, as spiritual awakening requires a Divine Teacher, artistic talent requires an initiation process guided, formally or informally, by a teacher, a master, a guru.

In 1986 I was on my second pilgrimage to the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, this time with my daughter, Nuri. I met my Bahá'í brother, Ika Tutualepu, a descendant of the Tongan royal family, who was also on pilgrimage with his mother and family members. He had brought with him several sets of Tongan bark paintings intended as gifts to the members of the Universal House of Justice. In my conversations with him, he strongly identified with comments I was making regarding the growing consciousness and solidarity among people of colour as a precursor to global unity. Suddenly, in that moment of solidarity, I found myself the proud recipient of two exquisite paintings charting his family crest and history. In a long history of international travel, they remain among my most prized possessions: not as artifacts, but as talismans, social indicators of the power of the arts to preserve the stories of life, the visions and hopes of humanity across many millennia.

Artists are educators, narrating the myths of the past in story form and within artistic formats. From this emerges most of what we call a world-embracing global vision of civilisation. As such, the Sistine Chapel tells us no more or less than the Dogon Sigi ritual or Indian raga music. It is through the legacy of multicultural artistic traditions that we frame human life, rationalise our human culture, and build the infrastructure for future civilisation, thus advancing it. Just as the visual narratives of Ika's family histories were entrusted to bark, so will art inscribe our future Bahá'í communities.

4. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969, p. 424.

5. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, New York: Dover Publications, 1977, p. 12.

Every dance ritual ever devised, every song, chant or hymn ever sung, every poem ever recited, every form and shape moulded, cast or painted has had a human creator. Since every culture participates in human evolution, we look to each culture for the guidance, inspiration and vision encoded in their musical compositions, choreography, architecture, wall art and sculpture, praise poems and plays, all now joined by the promised collaborations provided by the computer and digital revolutions. I recall Shoghi Effendi's remarks in *The Individual and Teaching* on encountering diversity: 'We should meet them [indigenous people] as equals, well-wishers, people who admire and respect their ancient descent and who feel that they will be interested, as we are, in a living religion - and not in the dead forms of present-day churches.'<sup>6</sup>

GATI might be a bridge linking old Bahá'í Youth Workshop (BYW) models with more traditional art forms. The challenge to Bahá'í communities, institutions, and individuals, then, is to encourage new career paths in the arts through social programs linked with economic support, both private and institutional. Through such systematic support, the Bahá'í world community validates the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá whereby '[He] acknowledges the indebtedness of the peoples of the world to scientists and craftsmen,' states that 'the possessors of sciences and arts have a great right among the people of the world', and urges that 'the people of Bahá should treat craftsmen with deference.'<sup>7</sup>

### Professionalising the Arts and Training Artists

*Teach them to dedicate their lives to matters of great import, and inspire them to undertake studies that will benefit mankind.*<sup>8</sup>

The arts, as a professional career path, are 'of great import', 'benefit mankind', nurture talent and attract genius. It is often assumed that such Writings relate only to training in those careers which are traditionally thought to be 'professional' - medicine, law, business, and so forth - due to parental and community fears that arts careers are leisure activities, economically unsustainable, and are less valued as worthwhile activities for making a living. Such attitudes represent too narrow an interpretation of the Writings and suggest a disdain for the arts which stifles career development and, thus, teaching. Career counselling by families and educators might benefit from recent statistics regarding the feasibility and sustainability of arts careers which have undergone interdisciplinary diversification.

6. Shoghi Effendi, *The Individual and Teaching*, p. 31. [refer to "Africa Calls", U. S. Office of Pioneering, Wilmette, Ill.]

7. Shoghi Effendi quoting Bahá'u'lláh in *God Passes By*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1965, p. 218; Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í World Faith*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969, p. 189; and Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978, p. 38.

8. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978, p. 129.

Educational reports from international agencies identify four phenomena which enhance education and training. One is that media and technology are indispensable learning tools in job and life preparation.<sup>9</sup> The second is that the rigors of cross and interdisciplinary learning revitalises standard education by showing learners the benefits of critical thinking in many different disciplines. Third, content-focused learning without spiritual (moral, ethical, character) education may produce a superior scientist, accountant, or even artist, but learners so educated will not be able to function in a more global and diversified world. Fourth, and most relevant to this essay, learners who have had significant long-term arts study not only score higher on standardised tests, but display expanded interpersonal skills, self-awareness, and social stability due to the expressive demands of artistic training and production. In other words, the educated child who is arts-literate in interpersonal, intercultural, and interreligious experiences will be more capable of negotiating transactions which acknowledge the demands of globalism.

Bahá'í educational contexts (children's classes, Year-of-Service) ideally prepare learners for the expanding concentric loyalties which will define human communities in the future. Broadly speaking, trained arts practitioners revitalise Bahá'í community life, provide important role models for younger children, and assure administrative cohesiveness as a dynamic counterpoint of service action. Further, through touring and travel teaching, arts institutes seed and cross-fertilise with other sites and spawn new methods, new projects, and more institute experimentation.

What does all this mean for the twenty-first century? All art is a text, whether written, oral, aural, kinaesthetic or visual. As the divine worlds of God are many, we can begin to imagine with new faculties that real and virtual spaces await new forms of art production which address these newly understood realities across the four kinds of time alluded to by Bahá'u'lláh in *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*.<sup>10</sup> There is, for example, a great deal of modern art which benefits from or utilises technology, and yet much of both art and technology is profane, amoral, and fragmented in both medium and message. By virtue of our identity as Bahá'ís, then, deepening in the Bahá'í Writings will not only unlock the spiritual doors of space-time with which both art and science are preoccupied, but will offer emerging Bahá'ís who seek professional arts careers a new imagination. With this new imagination, new forms of art production will be generated, culturally diverse amalgamations of performance practice will evolve, and challenging literacies of knowledge will be sculpted from the rocks of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. It is already happening. What is most critical at this juncture in global transformation, however, are the ways

9. The United Nations University Millennium Project, UNESCO, and numerous departments and ministries of education worldwide have on-going studies and projects which track emerging trends in education, arts, science and technology.

10. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978, p. 25.

in which emerging Bahá'í arts practitioners are able to sustain personal lives which are ethical, spiritually-centred, and which exemplify the radiance that the Bahá'í message is intended to convey. It is an exciting time to be alive, an innovation gateway which may only remain open for a short time.

### GATI and the MATRIX Model

Fundamentally, this is a call for a GATI (Global Arts Training Institute). This endeavour might begin with an assessment of the social and institutional impact of Bahá'í Youth Workshops as they exist at varying stages of development throughout the Bahá'í world. In most communities and countries they exist through community and institutional mandates, but few receive the vigorous support they need to evolve into the twenty-first century at this dawning of the Bahá'í era. For example, the 'twenty-somethings' and 'thirty-somethings' who attended BYW ten years ago constitute a distinct age cohort of 'youth' who are now adults, as compared with current youth who may face a less enthusiastic BYW process now that its novelty has worn off. What do these trends mean for Bahá'í development in the arts and for teaching? Financial support has registered as an on-going challenge. What successes and new funding priorities have affected our rethinking of how to fund Bahá'í projects, not as religious organisations, but as community-based organisations which may be eligible for not-for-profit grants and which greatly contribute to the quality of life in cities, towns, and villages around the world? Is this information being systematised and shared?

After observing the art world for thirty years as a participant observer, artist and sociologist, as well as following the enthusiastic progress of Bahá'í Youth Workshops on several continents, it seems timely, given the admonitions of the Universal House of Justice and the Plans now in place, to provide the intergenerational support needed for the social and economic development of the arts focused on the professionalism of the Bahá'í youth through an international training institute. As I stood in a University of Melbourne audience in September 1999 watching a performance by 'Artworks' (as one of a handful of standing ovators who truly appreciated the potential power of this multimedia form), I realised the principles of 'workshopping' were a key factor in formulating a model for action in the arts.<sup>11</sup> It was at this moment, recalling Ika's Tongan paintings, revisiting my childhood memories of learning to reconcile Tchaikovsky, Ellington, and Gregorian chant, and having observed the endless procession of both western and traditional dance, theatre, film et al

11. Workshopping first appeared outside modern Bahá'í community life. Continents that underwent persistent political repression devised workshopping beyond their national borders, or 'underground', as a means of developing liberation arts as a progressive strategy for training and developing the arts in service to social and political freedom. For further reading see Robin Chandler, 'The Role of Culture in Democracy Movements in the Black Expressive Tradition: Artist Performance Practice in Brazil, South Africa and the United States', in Ran Greenstein (ed.), *Comparative Perspectives on South Africa*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

in my travels, that I finally plopped back into my seat and thought 'now how do we build creative communities?'

The following model would operate at the international level as a training centre, permanent and yet mobile, which would have numerous trainers and satellites around the world. The intention is not to standardise arts practice nor to stultify human creativity, but rather to consolidate and tap into the critical success factors which have made the arts a powerhouse of teaching and a training ground for new ideas and emerging artists. In fact, a new culture is brewing and mature artists might have a hand in shaping a future Bahá'í art world which has yet to emerge, but which is inevitable as a central feature of global society. This can only happen through an effective collaboration between social and economic development praxis now evolving in the international development community, and the theory and methodology embedded in every phrase and fragrance of the Sacred Texts. Courses in arts management and proposal writing, accompanied by studio training and more enhanced deepening methods than exist at present, would contribute to a rigorous institute.

Clearly, management training is encouraged in the Writings: 'Managing art with propriety will become the means of sociability and affinity; and sociability and affinity tends to guide others to the Truth.'<sup>12</sup> Such an institute would provide practical development skills and technical assistance to emerging individuals and organisations who would love to serve the Faith through the arts, but who have limited human resources. In the development community lingo, a GATI institute would be described as partnership-based, job-enhancing, technology-transferring, and enterprise-empowering! Evolving within the framework of Bahá'í principle and Divine Policy, a GATI could spin off an infrastructure mandated by Bahá'í administrative institutions which was theoretically and empirically grounded in the Writings, and people-driven by a cross-cultural team of administrators/teachers and a working advisory board. Professionalism in the arts in Bahá'í communities would employ the MATRIX Model (MATRIX is an acronym) which would focus on four goals: global citizenship, community development, service, and the notion that the soul has a right to be educated.

### MATRIX

'M': mentoring and multi-skilling - Intergenerational knowledge has been passed down from teacher to apprentice, from gurus and master artists in every society for thousands of years. Mentoring works as an indispensable strategy. As knowing God derives from a personal relationship with the Creator, knowing one's craft is best achieved through information-sharing, particularly in 'the information age' of which we are all students.

12. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, op.cit., p. 377.

'A': the art world - understanding how art worlds have functioned in the past in both traditional and modern societies and how they might look in the future influenced by Bahá'í principles. GATI would extract the best educational, training, management and public relations elements of the existing art worlds and redefine them toward the goals of the Faith, the principles of justice, unity, and work as worship. Concepts such as networks of cooperation, collective action, status creation, subsidisation, public and private sector interaction, patronage, and many other aspects of community development would be taught.

'T': training and education - which includes conventional instruction in art modalities (music, dance, theatre, the visual media, etc) linked with spiritual education as an over-arching framework. Training-of-trainers techniques would dispatch highly skilled experts to the Bahá'í world community, particularly areas where mass teaching is either in process or anticipated.

'R': the residency or 'studio' experience - an essential incubation context for conceptualising, rehearsing, and testing both the power and resilience of the art form and the substance of the artist.

'I': Bahá'í identity - the core of artistic conduct and productivity. The development of individual identity as shaped by the Bahá'í Faith is both social and economic. The aim of the artist is to interact and influence society toward social unity and to secure an economic base from which to make a living. The dreams and visions of Generation X'ers are closely linked with the dreams and visions of the three Central Figures of the Faith.

'X': the four points of the letter 'x' as interrelated elements of the model, that is, interdisciplinary, multicultural, technological, and spiritual. The objective is to gradually inculcate the importance of these four aspects of progressive contemporary educational practice. In the arts, they are transferable technologies. Most conventional ways of thinking about educational method are being replaced by these four ideas, prevalent in our global culture, but deeply embedded in Bahá'u'lláh's Divine Plan and in art theory.

#### Interdisciplinary:

*There reside, therefore, in arts which are outwardly different, hidden forces equally different, so that they may all work in one man towards a single result, even though each art may be working in isolation.*<sup>13</sup>

13. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, op.cit., p. 43.

#### Multicultural:

*Let all be set free from the multiple identities that were born of passion and desire, and in the oneness of their love for God find a new way of life.*<sup>14</sup>

#### Technological:

*They shall reveal the mysteries of the Kingdom, and manifest unto everyone the signs of God.*<sup>15</sup>

*Day and night you must strive [to realise] that this world has a creator, a vivifier, a provider, an architect, knowing this through proofs and evidences and not through susceptibilities ... through decisive arguments and real vision ... visualizing it as clearly as the outer eye beholds the sun.*<sup>16</sup>

#### Spiritual:

*The artist must train not only his eye but also his soul.*<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

*Every man who steepes himself in the spiritual possibilities of his art is a valuable helper in the building of a spiritual pyramid which will someday reach to heaven.*<sup>18</sup>

We do not yet know what 'Bahá'í art' is, nor what it means to be a 'Bahá'í artist' in the information age. As Kandinsky said in the beginning of the last century: 'At the present time any attempt to define this new art would be as useless as pulling a small bud open so as to make a fully blown flower.'<sup>19</sup> In the first quarter of the year 2000, we would still be pulling buds to try and define these terms. For the moment we remain 'artists who are Bahá'ís', attempting to distil the inner meaning of the Bahá'í Writings in order to achieve justice and peace on our small planet inside an under-explored universe. We are also deeply influenced, as is the general art world, by the materialism, violence, prejudices, and misery which contaminate the spiritual atmosphere within which we try to operate. However, GATI is designed to focus on preparing emerging artists in studio, technology, and arts management praxis through a

14. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978, p. 76.

15. Ibid., p. 251.

16. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1968, p. 65.

17. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, op.cit., p. 46.

18. Ibid., p. 20.

19. Ibid.

composite of educational technology transfer, distance education, and applied Bahá'í theory and deepening through a one-year, intensive, certified course of study bringing together two generations of Bahá'í arts practitioners for professional development, service, and teaching.

In Australia, the mainstream art world has been critically influenced by the current political focus on reconciliation and the human rights of Indigenous people. Several public events pursued these cross-cultural agendas which were less taken with western-based art production. They included 'Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art', held at Queensland Art Gallery; 'Generations: The Stolen Years of Fighters and Singers' at the University of Western Australia's Centre for Indigenous History and the Arts; Dance North and Woomera Aboriginal Corporation's production of *Luuli*, a cross-cultural collaboration performed at the Lyric Theatre in Brisbane's Performing Arts Centre; and 'Focusing the Blur', a travelling community photography exhibition produced during Refugee Week by the Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma, Australian refugee teenage students from Serbia, the Sudan, Bosnia, Yugoslavia, and the Bahá'í Institute for the Performing Arts (BIPA).

In many other countries the flower buds emerge, including 'Spirit of Africa' in southern Africa, and in those regions and cities in which BYW continues to struggle toward service through the arts in the United States, Asia, South America, and Europe. The small and humble steps taken by individuals to develop arts institutes have left large footprints. They lead forward and must be taken to their next logical stage of development, socially and economically, through support from the upper echelons of the Bahá'í Administration as in any corporate community. Shoghi Effendi's cautionary and penetrating remarks guide GATI's urgent call to action:

*Time is short. Opportunities, though multiplying with every passing hour, will not recur, some for another century, others never again. However severe the challenge, however multiple the tasks, however short the time, however somber the world outlook, however limited the material resources of a hard-pressed adolescent community, the untapped sources of celestial strength from which it can draw are measureless in their potencies, and will unhesitatingly pour forth their energizing influences if the necessary daily effort be made and ... willingly accepted ... Nor should it be forgotten that in the hour of adversity and in the very midst of confusion, peril and uncertainty, some of the most superb exploits, noising abroad the fame of this community have been achieved.<sup>20</sup>*

20. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, op.cit., pp. 85-6.

Elsewhere, I have mentioned that:

*the more successful projects in interdisciplinary study and research occur and go on to spawn anomalies and revolution when one field and its practitioners are willing and enthusiastic about exploring the theoretical, methodological, and practical procedures of another field. This is manifest (1) in contemporary fields such as eco-geology, neurobiology, or computer graphics; (2) in projects such as space exploration, the Human Genome Project, or digitally transmitted photojournalism; and (3) in innovations such as community medicine (socially responsive health practices that thrive on shared strategies between home-bred rural herbalists and western-trained physicians collaborating in disease prevention and control) as well as music technologies which invent new, merger products and/or devices such as digitizers, synthesizers, and novel forms of dance notation using customized computer programming methods ... If more opportunities for gifted scientists and artists are made available to all echelons of these communities (not merely to those with access to scarce and exclusive sources of funding), then more practical but nonetheless revolutionary applications of the science-art matrix will yield spiritual solutions to the economic, social, logistical, and environmental problems of our planet.<sup>21</sup>*

21. Robin Chandler, 'Creative Parallel Spaces in Science and Art: Knowledge in the Information Age,' *Journal of Arts Management, Law and Society*, vol. 29, no. 3 (Fall 1999), pp. 163-176.