

Crystallizations: 20 Works by Bahá'í Artists

edited by Ross Woodman. Bahá'í Studies Publications, Ottawa, 1996, 291 + xi pages.
Reviewed by Shirin Sabri in *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1999)

Some time ago, when I was working in the Bahá'í World Centre Library and lamenting the lack of good novels in English to be found in Haifa, William Collins, who was then the head librarian, gave me a dark blue, battered, hardcover book.

“Read this,” he recommended. “It’s a short novel by Juliet Thompson, and we’ve just managed to get a copy. I think you’ll enjoy it.” I did, enormously. Ever since, it has been one of those books that are lovingly remembered and reread periodically—only I did not have it to reread, and had for a long time resigned myself to the impossibility of owning my own copy of *I, Mary Magdalen*.

Until now, when the Association for Bahá'í Studies has made the impossible possible with the publication of *Crystallizations*, a collection of twenty works by Bahá'í artists. The book includes the complete text of Thompson’s exquisite novella. To my delight, I found that it was indeed as good as I remembered it, or perhaps even better, having (like Mark Twain’s father, who became cleverer the older his son grew) gained depth while I have been gaining perception. It is at one and the same time an original and insightful portrait of Jesus and his followers, and an account of Juliet Thompson’s relationship with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Unlike her diary, which was, after all, essentially a private document, this novella approaches the ineffable subject of human love for a sacred being with control and restraint. Using Christ and the Master as mirrors, each reflecting and illuminating the other, has enabled the author to place herself at precisely the right distance from her subject. She is not as stiflingly close as she became in her diary, where one sometimes felt that her vision of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was being pushed so close to one’s nose that all the lines blurred and lost meaning. Nor has she withdrawn to a chill distance, as some scholars attempt to do, detached even from their own beliefs. The result is a picture drawn with both passion and precision, an imaginative work channeled by discipline. In addition to this work, the book contains a selection of substantial works by other North American Bahá'í artists, such as Michael Fitzgerald, Margaret Bremner, J. A. McLean, Morgan Sargent, Frederick Ward, Rhonda S. Palmer, and Maijory Morten. Among them, Larry Rowdon’s long poem “Massacre at Tabarsi” revisits the bloodied ground of that betrayed shrine through the eyes of an unnamed martyr.

We watch this anonymous soul, who is shaken by and sometimes sleeps through momentous events even as we might do, arriving at a point where he has been tempered in the furnace of suffering and has become imbued with the courage of all martyrs, even as their “virtuous blood” spatters his clothes:

somehow I am filled with their love their bravery shines through my eyes confusing my executioners to a fury they misunderstand. (36: 11. 517–20)

In his ability to face “a dripping blade / scaling the brightest of air” (36: 11. 522–23) we find our own capacity for courage.

The only problem I have with the poem arises in the fifth and last movement, where Rowdon describes the decision of Quddús to accept the false promises of the opposing army. It seems to me that Quddús’s act of perfect honor in accepting a false promise for the sake of God, and the Qur’án on which it is sworn, needs to be pointed out more strongly here. A reader less well read than Rowdon himself might easily miss the irony of:

Knowing such special gifts can only be sent from God Quddús transmits our trust and the appalling siege is ended. (33: 11. 430–34)

and might impute to Quddús a gullibility that is alien to the man, who sped toward his own horrific martyrdom with the ruthlessness and accuracy of an arrow aimed by God.

There are a number of other highlights in this book, among them Ann Boyles’s appealing depiction of Martha Root, which captures, through the author’s imaginative engagement with her subject, more of a sense of who Martha Root really was than could be gained by reading any quantity of biographies. The humor and sympathy of this piece are no doubt well known to those who have been fortunate enough to see it performed. I only wish I were among them. There is Rowell S. Hoff’s tribute to Charles Dunning, a moving and intensely argued piece, which develops, while thoughtfully circling its apparent subject, a redefinition of nobility. Like all of Hoff’s work, it leaves one with much of a serious nature to think about.

And there is Roger White’s last published work, “Notes Postmarked the Mountain of God,” with the breath of a final pilgrimage still on it. One can only be grateful to the Association for Bahá’í Studies for bringing this farewell gift of White’s to a wider audience.

In addition to all this, the reader will find two thoughtful essays by Otto Donald Rogers and Ross Woodman respectively, and a number of gemlike short poems set in among the whole. Here we can rediscover Horace Holley’s “The Stricken King,” share Ian Kluge’s “Images of Hope,” and muse over B. K. Filson’s enigmatic lyrics. My personal favorite among these shorter poems is Claire Vreeland’s “Vincent’s Elephant,” a sensitive portrayal of the artist’s first bruising encounter with an audience.

If I have any complaint to make about the book, it is that there could have been more of these shorter poems. This is, however, only the quibbling of one who would always prefer to have a few more blueberries in the muffin.

The paintings of Jalalíyyih Quinn and Otto Donald Rogers also deserve mention. The publisher’s generosity in reproducing all these works in color gives one a chance to appreciate them (given the limitations of size) as their creators meant them to be,

instead of making do with a sad black and white approximation as one so often has to do in books of this nature.

Crystallizations is a fine collection of works springing from a variety of disciplines and experiences within the Bahá'í Community. it is a "must have" book for any Bahá'í whose interest lies in the arts, but should not be considered as having an appeal that is limited to people with those specific interests. If you enjoy books and reading, this will be a welcome addition to your library. The only real question on opening it is where to start.