

# Encouragement of the Arts During the Ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: The Services of Master Calligrapher Mishkín-Qalam

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## *Abstract*

This article examines how 'Abdu'l-Bahá promoted the arts during His ministry, through His encouragement and support of a prominent artist in the early Bahá'í community. Mishkín-Qalam was the first and most celebrated Bahá'í visual artist

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1 This article is based on a paper presented in 2021 at the 45<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies.

I would like to express my gratitude especially to the editor of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* Dr. Michael Sabet, the internal review panel, as well as to Dr. Kim MacQueen for being part of the first collaborative external review conducted by the journal. Their knowledge, insights and the profound questions they have asked, greatly enhanced the quality of this paper. I also would like to thank the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre for responding to my queries and providing me with information. Additionally, I would like to thank Shahin Anayati and Omid Afnan for assistance with reading Persian texts and Adib Afnan for translating Mandarin text.

from the East. Best known for his calligraphic design of the Greatest Name, his life exemplified the “twofold moral purpose”: through his art, he was able to develop his own inherent spiritual potential as well as make lasting contributions to society. 'Abdu'l-Bahá employed his artistic skill in service to some of the most important achievements of His ministry: the interment of the remains of the Báb, the construction of the first Bahá'í House of Worship, and the transcription of Bahá'í literature. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's encouragement might serve as an emerging model for individuals, communities, and institutions of how to engage with artists and the arts, while Mishkín-Qalam's response stands as an example to artists of how the pursuit of spiritual virtue and excellence in one's craft can intertwine.

## *Résumé*

Dans le présent article, l'auteure examine comment 'Abdu'l-Bahá a fait la promotion des arts durant son ministère par son encouragement et son soutien à un artiste éminent de la jeune communauté bahá'ie. Mishkín-Qalam a été le premier et le plus célèbre artiste visuel bahá'í de l'Orient. Surtout connu pour sa calligraphie du Plus Grand Nom, il a incarné de par sa vie le « double objectif moral » : grâce à son art, il a développé son potentiel spirituel et apporté une contribution durable à la société. 'Abdu'l-Bahá a mis les talents de l'artiste au service de quelques-unes des réalisations les plus importantes de son ministère : l'inhumation des restes du Báb, la construction de la première Maison d'adoration bahá'ie et la transcription d'écrits bahá'ís. L'encouragement prodigué par 'Abdu'l-Bahá peut servir de modèle aux individus, aux communautés et aux institutions quant à la façon de

faire appel aux artistes et aux arts, tandis que, pour les artistes, la réponse de Mishkín-Qalam illustre comment peuvent se conjuguer la quête de spiritualité et l'excellence dans la pratique de son art.

### *Resumen*

Este artículo examina como 'Abdu'l-Bahá promovió las artes durante su ministerio, por medio de su motivación y apoyo a un prominente artista en la temprana comunidad Bahá'í. Mishkín-Qalam fue el primero y el más célebre artista visual Bahá'í del Este. Major conocido por su diseño caligráfico del Más Grande Nombre, su vida ejemplificó el “doble propósito moral” por medio de su arte, pudo desarrollar su inherente potencial espiritual así como hacer una contribución duradera a la sociedad. 'Abdu'l-Bahá utilizó su habilidad artística como un servicio a algunos de los logros más importantes de Su ministerio: la sepultura de los restos del Báb, la construcción de la primera Casa de Adoración, y la transcripción de la literatura Baha'í. El ánimo dado por 'Abdu'l-Bahá podría servir como un modelo emergente para individuos, comunidades, e instituciones de como involucrar a los artistas y las artes, mientras que la respuesta de Mishkín-Qalam se destaca como un ejemplo para los artistas de como la búsqueda de la virtud y excelencia espiritual en el arte de uno pueden entretenerse.

Bahá'ís reflecting on the role of art in their communities are faced with an interesting tension. On the one hand, art is accorded great importance, not only in the Writings of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith, but in the ongoing plans of the community for its own development and growing impact on society. On the other hand, there cannot yet be said to be a distinctly “Bahá'í” form of any art—visual, musical, architectural—at this early stage in the Faith's development. Therefore, what may merit particular attention at this point in time are questions about art that focus on *processes* as much, or more, than on the substance of art itself. What ends should art serve? How should the artist relate to her art, to the community, and to her faith? And how should the community and its institutions relate to the artist (a question of importance even for those who do not currently see themselves as artists)?

As a contribution to exploring some of these questions, this paper examines the life, character, and work of a prominent early Bahá'í artist, the calligrapher Mishkín-Qalam. His career provides a useful lens through which we can consider the insights of several later Bahá'í artists and scholars into what it might mean for Bahá'ís to make art. The themes these artists highlight—such as the perfection of art as worship, the importance of fostering spiritual growth, the relationship between art and service, and the purpose of beauty, love and excellence—all resonate with the life and work of Mishkín-Qalam.

After briefly reviewing Mishkín-Qalam’s life and career, this paper will explore some of the existing literature on Bahá’í art, to see how that life and career reflect its insights. Then, the specific services of this “leading calligrapher of Persia,” who “was besides, for human virtues, a bright star” (*Memorials* 38:1) will be examined—both in terms of the nature of their tangible artistic contribution, and the process by which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encouraged and guided their development. Indeed, Mishkín-Qalam’s relationship with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes his story particularly instructive. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s encouragement not only resulted in the remarkable artistic works that will be reviewed in the paper, but provides a model for individuals, communities, and institutions on how to encourage the arts. In turn, Mishkín-Qalam’s response to his own artistic impulse and the encouragement of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá provides an example to artists of the importance of spiritual virtue and the pursuit of excellence.

#### MISHKÍN-QALAM: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

##### MISHKÍN-QALAM’S ARTISTIC MILIEU

Born Mírzá Husayn-í-Isfahání in Shíráz, Persia, Mishkín-Qalam (ca 1826-1912) grew up and was trained in an Islamic cultural milieu in which calligraphy was considered the highest art form (Hattstein and Delius 574; Oeming Badiee and Badiee 3). A brief discussion of why this was so will help

contextualize the prominence and reputation that Mishkín-Qalam attained by excelling at this art.

One of the distinctive characteristics of traditional Islamic religious art is its scarcity of icons or images. Termed *aniconism* by scholars, this practice “removes the possibility of the concretization of the Divine Presence,” and reflects the idea of God’s omnipresence in Islamic thought (Nasr 187). Given this constraint, writing and calligraphy became highly developed (Grabar 6,74), with the written word replacing icons as “the visible embodiment of the Divine Word” (Burckhardt 5). In Islam, calligraphy is thus considered “the most noble of the arts, because it gives visible form to the revealed word of the Koran” (Burckhardt 52). Calligraphy is referred to as “heavenly” or “divine” (*ásimání*) art (Motamed 128) as it is associated with holy scripture, namely the Qur’án, and is generally considered “the most characteristic feature of the visible aspect of Islamic civilization” (Nasr 19). Arabic, the language of the Qur’án, is considered to be the language of God, and given the importance of the Arabic script and its religious meaning it is not surprising that Arabic words and letters are the basic “subject matter” of Islamic art, and can be found not only on paper but on ceramics, textiles, and glass, as well as incorporated into architectural decoration on mosques (Oeming Badiee and Badiee 3).

From a purely formal point of view, the “elasticity” of Arabic script—the way letters can be elongated or

shortened—lends itself well to creative application in art. Arguably only Chinese calligraphy rose to artistic heights comparable to those of Islamic calligraphy. However, the two traditions have notable differences. Where the Chinese calligrapher uses a soft brush, the Arabic calligrapher employs “the calamus—a reed trimmed to a double point—with which he traces out precise and frequently interlacing lines” (Burckhardt 52); it is this instrument whose “shrill” sound as it moves across paper is often mentioned in the Bahá'í Writings.<sup>2</sup> Where in Chinese calligraphy each logogram retains its individual or distinct character, “the Arab . . . has no inclination to isolate the signs but prefers to integrate them in a continuous rhythm . . .; in fact the whole charm of Arabic calligraphy lies in the way it can combine the distinctive shape of the characters with the fluidity of the whole” (Burckhardt 52).

#### MISHKÍN-QALAM'S FAITH AND CAREER

Those familiar with Mishkín-Qalam's well-known calligraphic design of the Greatest Name—let alone his more intricate works, such as those in the shape of birds (shown later)—can readily see how his work reflects the harmony between “the distinctive shape of the characters” and “the fluidity of the

whole.” Long before he created these works inspired by the Bahá'í Faith, he was already renowned for his skill, and came to be highly regarded in royal circles. Indeed, he was employed as a tutor to the crown prince by Naṣiri'd-Dīn Sháh himself, who gave him the title *Mishkín-Qalam*, meaning musk-scented or jet-black pen. However, upon learning about the message and person of Bahá'u'lláh, *Mishkín-Qalam* left his enviable court position, wealth, and fame, and hurried to attain His presence in Adrianople. From then on, his life and art were dedicated to the service of his newfound Faith (Nakhjavání, *Four* 22).



Fig. 1. *Mishkín-Qalam*.  
The Greatest Name.

Image ©British Library Board  
(shelfmark, Or 11098 f. 19 digitized image 7)

From the time he embraced the Bahá'í Faith, *Mishkín-Qalam* was deeply influenced by its Writings, which visibly left their mark on his artistic output. Many of his works not only use Bahá'í holy texts or concepts as their subject matter, but

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, ¶ 41: “Say: O concourse of divines! Hear ye not the shrill voice of My Most Exalted Pen?”

also manifest the great love he had for the three Central figures by invoking their names and titles. At the behest of Bahá’u’lláh, he went to Constantinople, where “the leading Persians and Turks received him with every honor at first, and . . . were captivated by his jet black, calligraphic art” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Memorials* 38:3). However, the Persian ambassador, knowing that Mishkín-Qalam was a Bahá’í, slandered the artist as a mischief maker to the Ottoman authorities (*Memorials* 38:3; Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá’ís* 272). As a result, he was eventually jailed and sent to Gallipoli where Bahá’u’lláh and His company were also temporarily being held (*Memorials* 38:3; Balyuzi, *King of Glory* 260). In 1868 Mishkín-Qalam and a few others were exiled to the citadel of Famagusta in Cyprus, whereas Bahá’u’lláh and most of His companions were sent to the prison city of ‘Akká. Mishkín-Qalam was confined in Cyprus for about eighteen years.<sup>3</sup> When in 1886 he was finally released, he immediately set out for ‘Akká to be near Bahá’u’lláh once again (*Memorials* 38:6; *Eminent Bahá’ís* 272; Momen, *Bábí and Bahá’í Religions* 306, 311). After Bahá’u’lláh’s passing in 1892,

Mishkín-Qalam continued to serve ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, both in ‘Akká and further afield. Toward the end of his life, he undertook more trips, including to India. Upon hearing that Mishkín-Qalam was getting weak, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asked him to return to ‘Akká where he died on 6 December 1912 (Rafati). Shoghi Effendi designated nineteen outstanding early believers as “Apostles of Bahá’u’lláh”; Mishkín-Qalam was one of them (*The Bahá’í World*, vol. III 80-81). Today his masterful calligraphies can be found at the Bahá’í World Centre, in private collections, and in museums worldwide, including the British Museum and the Harvard University Museum. His beautiful calligraphic art has stood the test of time and continues to be appreciated today. One of his calligraphic birds was featured in the design of two stamps issued by the postal service of the Netherlands on the occasion of the Twin Bicentenaries in 2017 and 2019 (see fig. 2a and 2b).



Fig. 2a and 2b. Mishkín-Qalam’s bird features prominently in stamps issued in commemoration of the bicentenaries of the births of Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb.

<sup>3</sup> In *Memorials of the Faithful*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gives the dates of the calligrapher’s time in the citadel and city of Famagusta, from “85 till 94” AH [1868-1878c]; while he was released from confinement with the start of British rule in 1878, his petition to leave the island was only accepted in 1886.

‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ ON MISHKÍN-QALAM  
IN *MEMORIALS OF THE FAITHFUL*, AND  
OTHER TRIBUTES<sup>4</sup>

In *Memorials of the Faithful*,<sup>5</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers an account of Mishkín-Qalam and lavishes much praise on both his artistic attainments and his spiritual qualities. His description of the calligrapher displays His encouragement of excellence in both the arts and in moral virtue, a theme we will return to later. In one passage He states,

Among the exiles, neighbors, and prisoners there was also a second Mír ‘Imád, the eminent calligrapher, Mishkín-Qalam. He wielded a musk-black pen, and his brows shone with faith. He was among the most noted of mystics, and had a witty and subtle mind. The fame of this spiritual wayfarer reached out to every land. He was the leading calligrapher of Persia and well known to all the great; he enjoyed a special position among the court ministers of Tīhrán, and with them he was solidly established. He was famed throughout Asia Minor; his pen was the wonder of all calligraphers, for he was adept at every

calligraphic style. He was besides, for human virtues, a bright star. (38:1)

In the above passage ‘Abdu’l-Bahá compares Mishkín-Qalam to one of the most celebrated Persian calligraphers, Mír ‘Imád Hassani Seifī Qazvíní (1554-1615), who lived during the Safavid period and excelled in the *nasta‘liq* style (“Preface” Persian Letters). Islamic calligraphy developed into a number of recognizable styles. *Nasta‘liq* is admired for its “beauty and grace”, its “regularity [and] firmness” (Yúsofi section II); other styles include the early *kufic*, the flowing *thulth*, the *nashki*, and the later *shikastih* scripts (Kvernen). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá notes that Mishkín-Qalam “was adept at every calligraphic style,” and later reiterates: “Wherever he went, his many calligraphic styles were a substantial capital, and his great accomplishment brought him attention and respect from rich and poor alike” (38:9).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá is not alone in praising Mishkín-Qalam’s calligraphy. In his book *Peydáyish-i Khat va Khattátán* (Calligraphy and Calligraphers), Abdu’l-Muhammad Irani makes this remark about Mishkín-Qalam, “In mastery of the seven styles<sup>6</sup> he was

4 All references from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in this section are from *Memorials of the Faithful* unless otherwise indicated.

5 For the complete text see chapter 38. In this collection of talks by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, we find short yet insightful biographical essays on the lives and spiritual qualities of over seventy early followers of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh.

6 Mishkín-Qalam was also a master of nail script (*nákhúní* or *khatt-i-nákhún*) where an image is created by pressing down with one’s fingernails, which are cut in a particular shape, on a piece of paper. This technique creates a very soft, relief- or indent-like script or motif, almost like chiseled marble. For a detailed treatment

indeed peerless among his contemporaries and must be counted among the geniuses of his age. His work which is of unparalleled beauty is now displayed in libraries in Syria and Egypt” (qtd. in Persian Letters and Arts Society, “Preface”). Another expert who praised Mishkín-Qalam’s calligraphy is Mehdi Bayani, author of the three-volume work *Ahvál va Áthár-i Khushnivísán-i Nasta’līq Nivísán* (Life and Work of Calligraphers in Nasta’līq). Bayani singles out Mishkín-Qalam’s mastery of *nasta’līq*, *shikastih ta’līq*, and *shikastih nasta’līq* calligraphy. Professor Schimmel of Harvard University calls him “one of the finest calligraphers at the turn of the century.” “His rounded letters in *nasta’līq* are of flawless beauty.... Remarkable is also his elegant way of writing the heart-shaped medial *h* which occurs so frequently in the worlds bahá and abhá.”

Mishkín-Qalam created calligraphies of great beauty and elegance by employing the various scripts from the Islamic calligraphic tradition. However, for the most part he used as his textual material the holy writings of the Bahá’í Faith, which in their original were revealed in Arabic and Persian. His most outstanding contributions are his calligraphic compositions, in which he uses invocations made up of Arabic letters, often from the Bahá’í Writings,

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of this art form see, for example, Mihan, “Fingernail Art (I): Three-Dimensional.” This was the technique that initially gained him notice in royal circles and secured him a position at the court of the Sháh (Nakhjavání 21).

to form objects such as faces, trees, and birds.<sup>7</sup> The birds he portrays most often are roosters, which are associated with the dawn of a new day—an allusion to the new day of God.<sup>8</sup> He demonstrated an attitude of learning, and adopted new calligraphic ideas during his travels, such as the mirror script<sup>9</sup> popular during that time in the Ottoman empire, which he worked into innovative designs such as his heavenly double-roosters, a reference to the Twin Manifestations of God who usher in a new day for humanity (see fig. 3). A recent scholarly study discusses the rich symbolism in Mishkín-Qalam’s works and draws a connection between

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7 For example, in several of his works both the bodies of the twin-birds and the central cypress tree are made up of the invocation *Bismiláhil-Bahí’ul-Abhá* in different scripts.

8 There are numerous instances where Bahá’u’lláh likens Himself to a bird. For example, “the immortal Bird of Heaven, warbling upon the Sadrih [lote-tree] of Bahá” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 78); “the Nightingale of Paradise” which “singeth upon the twigs of the Tree of Eternity” (“Tablet of Ahmad”, Arabic); “the Mystic Dove raised its call upon the branches and boughs of heaven” (*Days of Remembrance* 44:4). For in-depth discussions of Mishkín-Qalam’s use of cockerels and their symbolism see Schimmel; Oeming Badiee & Badiee 10–11; Motamed 135; and Stermotich-Cappellari 144–48.

9 According to Motamed, his mirror script (*tughra-nigári* or *aynih-namá’i*) calligraphies have been executed with such precision that if one were to fold the paper along its central axis, the two sides of the image would align perfectly (135).

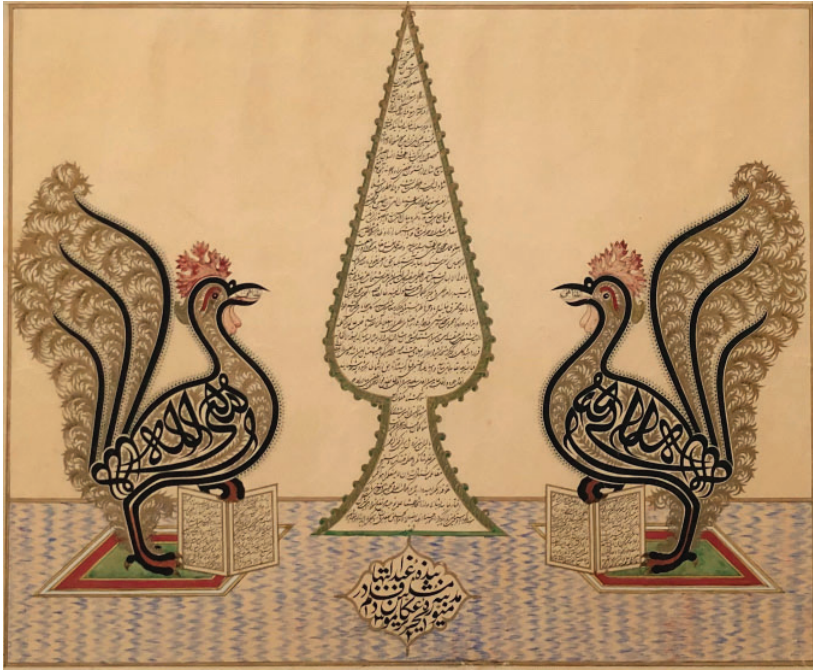


Fig. 3. Mishkin-Qalam. Double rooster with central cypress tree. Signed and dated “Servant of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Mishkin-Qalam, ‘Akká, 1321” (c.1903)

Image ©Private collection

the divine roosters, mirrored around a tree, and the concept of the eternal Covenant (Stermotich-Cappellari 151).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá not only lauds the matchless artistic achievements of Mishkin-Qalam but also praises his spiritual qualities: “He was a compendium of perfections: believing, confident, serene, detached from the world . . . his character like a garden in full bloom. . . . For sincerity and loyalty he had no match, nor for patience and inner calm. He was selflessness itself” (38:8).

There is a widely held belief in the Islamic tradition of calligraphy that the inner character of the calligrapher determines the outer expression in their art. If the character of the artist

is excellent, if the mind is tranquil and the heart pure, so will the resulting calligraphy be harmonious and beautiful. The curators of an exhibition on calligraphy<sup>10</sup> explain that Islamic calligraphy “is understood to leave a trace (*athar*) of the writer’s moral fiber, and the quality of writing is believed to reveal the writer’s character and piety” (Asia Society). Oeming Badiee and Badiee concur: “No educated Muslim

<sup>10</sup> The exhibition “Traces of the Calligrapher: Islamic Calligraphy in Practice, c. 1600–1900” was curated by Mary McWilliams and David J. Roxburgh and showcased at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2007 and the Asia Society Museum 2008/2009.



would neglect the skills of calligraphy, for in Muslim lands the connection between moral rectitude and calligraphic excellence was often made” (3).<sup>11</sup>

As we will see, Mishkín-Qalam worked on perfecting both his character and his art. In offering his masterful calligraphic skills to the service of the Bahá'í Faith he provided an example of fulfilling one's “twofold moral purpose . . . to develop [one's] inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society” (Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2010). Before exploring his specific contributions in this regard, however, it will be helpful to reflect on the nature of artistic contributions in the Bahá'í Faith.

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11 This is a concept also commonly accepted in the Chinese calligraphic tradition; calligraphy was seen as a way of expressing one's character, and it was believed that if someone had a bad character, it was impossible for them to create beautiful things such as art and poetry. The earliest record in ancient China (sixth century BCE) where a relationship is drawn between writing poetry and the spiritual condition of the writer is found in *Shang Shu Shun Dian* (“The Book of History—Document of Yu Shun”). This concept has become widely accepted by the public and it has been adapted to various literary and artistic undertakings, including calligraphy. There is a well-known saying today that “words are the sound of the heart; calligraphy and writing are the paintings of the heart.” (I thank my friend Hou Changheng, curator of Chinese ink art and chief editor of *Ink* magazine, for providing this information.)

#### A BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF THE ARTS

The important role of the arts is firmly established in the sacred Writings of the Bahá'í Faith. Art is notably connected to the cyclical, quickening power of the Manifestations of God: ‘Abdu'l-Bahá states for instance that through Them “the arts and sciences are revived in each age” (qtd. in Khan 87). Each religious cycle has its mature expression as a civilization and culture, and this is reflected in the arts. However, as Shoghi Effendi pointed out in a 1957 letter to a National Spiritual Assembly, given that the Bahá'í Faith is still in its early stages of development “there is no cultural expression which could be called Bahá'í at this time” (qtd. in compilation *Music* no. 24). How then, at this early stage, can we develop the arts, and encourage artists, along lines that can increasingly be inspired by and reflect the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith?

Fortunately, the Bahá'í community has the benefit of a number of methodologies for thinking about such questions. One, of course, is the cycle of action, reflection, consultation and study that has been developed under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice in the context of community building, and which can lend itself to other areas of endeavor. But the methodology that this paper will focus on in contributing to thought around this question is that of looking at the Perfect Exemplar of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá. By examining how

He encouraged one of the foremost artists of His time in *Mishkín-Qalam*, we can glean insights that can guide individuals, institutions, and communities today as to the attitudes and actions needed to effectively assist in the development of art and artists in the Bahá'í community. In order to contextualize 'Abdu'l-Bahá's encouragement and try to understand its significance, we can first consider the role of the arts as gleaned in the Bahá'í writings.

#### ART AND THE TWOFOLD MORAL PURPOSE

To say that there is not yet something we can call "Bahá'í art" in no way diminishes the importance of the work of Bahá'í artists. Quite the opposite: it is through the work of artists like *Mishkín-Qalam* and all those who have come after him that mature artistic expressions reflective of the Bahá'í Revelation may increasingly emerge in the future.

But the artistic expression of Bahá'í artists is not only important because of its role in advancing and enriching human civilization. Like all facets of a Bahá'í life, it has implications for the twofold moral purpose of the human being "to develop their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society" (Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván* 2010).

In terms of civilizational advance, a brief review of passages from the Bahá'í writings demonstrates the prominent role the arts and artists are given in society. For example, in one

of His Writings, Bahá'u'lláh states that "[a]rts, crafts and sciences uplift the world of being, and are conducive to its exaltation" (*Epistle* 26). In another passage He exhorts us: "the true worth of artists and craftsmen should be appreciated, for they advance the affairs of mankind" (*Compilation* no. 10). One way in which artists advance the affairs of mankind is by their ability to express ideas, and shed light on topics, that are difficult to grasp or explain.<sup>12</sup> They can unravel truths and deepen knowledge. They can also impart joy and beauty, and provide powerful examples of the human capacity to perfect things; all these are cause of spiritual development as will be discussed further. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá praised and encouraged artists on numerous occasions, highlighting the quality of their work.<sup>13</sup>

As for the role of artistic expression in the artist's own spiritual journey, according to the Bahá'í Writings, any work that is performed in a spirit of service and with an attempt at achieving excellence is deemed equal to worship ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 55:1). This also holds true for the work of artists. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "in accordance with the divine teachings

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12 "Common to art and Revelation is a concern with meaning, and a reliance on metaphor as a means of expressing the inexpressible" (Filson 37).

13 For example, Bahá'u'lláh praised the poetry of an early believer and called it "highly impressive" (*Tablets* 176); see discussion of the *Lawh-i-Maqsúd* later in this paper.

the acquisition of sciences and the perfection of arts are considered acts of worship” (*Selections* 126:1). To the American portrait painter Juliet Thompson (1873-1956), one of the early Bahá’ís of the West, He wrote, “I rejoice to hear that thou takest pains with thine art, for in this wonderful new age, art is worship. The more thou strivest to perfect it, the closer wilt thou come to God. What bestowal could be greater than this, that one’s art should be even as the act of worshipping the Lord? That is to say, when thy fingers grasp the paintbrush, it is as if thou wert at prayer in the Temple” (*Additional Tablets*). The idea that art-making is worship, and can bring the artist closer to the divine, is surely a source of great inspiration and encouragement to any Bahá’í artist, including Mishkín-Qalam.

Over the course of his life, Mishkín-Qalam honed and developed both his spiritual qualities as well as his calligraphic skills and offered them to the service of his community and the wider society. Mishkín-Qalam’s life can thus be seen as an example of the pursuit of the human being’s twofold moral purpose through the arts.

#### ART, BEAUTY, AND SPIRITUALITY

In ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s writing, we find a number of guidelines that might help Bahá’í artists in the execution of their work. In one passage addressed to “the craftsmen of the world,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá urges them “to exert their highest endeavour and diligently pursue

their professions so that their efforts may produce that which will manifest the greatest beauty and perfection” (*Selections* 127:2). In a Tablet written about Mishkín-Qalam, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá praises his persistent efforts and diligence: “night and day he was occupied with transcribing and arranging the Holy Writings and touching-up specimens of the Greatest Name” (qtd. in *Ishráq-Khávári* 63, provisional translation). These qualities—persistence, diligence, and hard work—were likely indispensable to Mishkín-Qalam’s development as an artist, as well as the reason he was able to leave behind such a rich body of beautiful calligraphies.

In addition to these qualities pertaining to effort, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers further guidance to artists by encouraging “symmetry, harmony, and perfection.” He highlights the fact that this artistic guidance applies to a broad range of endeavors—there is art in “a beautiful house, a well designed garden, a symmetrical line, a graceful motion, a well written book, pleasing garments.” He concludes that “all things that have in themselves grace or beauty are pleasing to the heart and spirit” (qtd. in compilation *Music* no. 15).

In his discussion of the role of beauty in art, and in particular art by Bahá’ís, composer and pianist Ludwig Tuman makes a connection between spiritual development and the service that can be rendered by an artist:

In the Bahá’í writings, beauty is associated not merely with sensual and intellectual pleasure but with

divinely revealed truth, with the spiritual principles and teachings that constitute truth insofar as we can know it, and ultimately with the attributes of God. . . . Thus viewed, beauty is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Its purpose in the world of creation is to draw the human soul into a spiral of spiritual growth, carried upward on the wings of love toward the kingdom of the most great Beauty. Its purpose in the realm of human creativity is the same. Art attracts the soul, through beauty, to a work in which the knowledge of things divine is imparted, by which attitudes to life are spiritualized, morality is strengthened, and service is rendered to the cause of spiritual growth. Acting as an agent of spiritual attraction, beauty thus plays an essential role in the process whereby art seeks to help ennoble the human soul. (79)

In a passage specifically addressing the art of music, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá highlights this capacity of art to attract and uplift the soul in terms that are applicable to the arts more broadly. He explains that blending melodies with the holy writings can “impart solace” and “everlastingly stimulate spiritual feelings” (qtd. in *Importance of Arts* no. 10).

Art, from a Bahá’í perspective, is thus a powerful phenomenon. Its power may be particularly effective when joined with the power inherent in the Word of God. An exploration of the concept of the power of the Word of

God is beyond the scope of this paper, but the great unifying power of the Word of God, emphasized by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, may be particularly worth noting in this context: “Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth the realities of all things, is capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas, and convictions of the children of men. Verily, it is the penetrating power in all things, the mover of souls and the binder and regulator in the world of humanity” (*Selections* 225). This power may hold particular insight into the calligraphic art, which can incorporate sacred texts into artistic designs. Mishkín-Qalam’s art in particular “reflected his meditation on and expression of the power of the Word of God” (Nakhjavání, *Four* 49).

While the above passage suggests that the Word of God has a unique power to unify at a universal level, art too can strengthen unity and enrich the life of a community as a whole, as highlighted in a recent message of the Universal House of Justice:

Indeed the arts as a whole, so integral a part of the development of a community from the start, stand out in such settings as an important means of generating joy, *strengthening the bonds of unity*, disseminating knowledge, and consolidating understanding, as well as of acquainting those in the wider society with the principles of the Cause. (30 December 2021 ¶ 12, emphasis added)

As we will see, Mishkín-Qalam's artistic contributions are not only beautiful, educational, and uplifting for the individual who views them, but they can also nurture the spirit of community life and fulfill the qualities identified by the Universal House of Justice in this passage. His calligraphic rendition of the Greatest Name is a particularly good example of art that is able to strengthen bonds of unity. It is a symbol ubiquitous in Bahá'í homes and centres, as well as many of the Houses of Worship. It is a common visual reference point recognized by all; it helps instill a sense of unity and belonging, and bridges any barriers, be they of language or culture.

#### FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE EMERGENCE OF NEW FORMS

Another Bahá'í teaching that has profound implications for the encouragement of Bahá'í artists is the principle of freedom of expression. Shoghi Effendi states, for example, that the "believers are free to paint, write, and compose as their talents guide them" (qtd. in compilation *Music* no. 22). The Universal House of Justice states that "freedom of expression, [is] a fundamental principle of the Cause. . . . Bahá'u'lláh has extended the scope and deepened the meaning of self-expression. In His elevation of art and of work performed in the service of humanity to acts of worship can be discerned enormous prospects for a new birth of expression in the civilization anticipated by His World Order" (Letter dated 29 Dec.

1988). One consequence of this concept is that artists need not feel bound by traditional forms of artistic expression.

What considerations might guide artists' work, either within existing traditions or in the development of new forms? Even though these are the relatively early stages of the development of the Bahá'í community, artists and writers have begun to reflect on questions revolving around the essential characteristics of Bahá'í art and its appreciation. For example, writer and author Bahíyyih Nakhjavání in her prescient 1982 article "Artist, Seeker and Seer" sets out "to use selected imagery and metaphor from the Bahá'í Writings in order to discover therein the guidelines for both the appreciation and the creation of art by Bahá'ís" (3). Although the focus of her paper is poetry and literature, some of the concepts she explores can equally apply to the visual arts, including the artistic output of Mishkín-Qalam. Nakhjavání speaks of the use of "image and sign, symbol and metaphor" as some of the most significant characteristics of this Revelation (6).

Bahá'í abstract artist Otto Donald Rogers also stresses the importance of metaphor in allowing the audience to easily understand complex themes (6, 8). He references the words of a leading art critic who suggests that what distinguishes a great work of art "is a set of deeply felt relationships" (6). Rogers suggests that for art created by Bahá'ís, "a fundamental relationship occurs as a result of the juxtaposition of an artistic discipline, or combination of disciplines, with the Creative Word of God

itself" (6). Of course, this relationship with the Creative Word is particularly evident in the calligrapher's work, which directly represents it. As we will later see, *Mishkín-Qalam* also drew upon the rich metaphors and symbolism found in the Bahá'í Writings and used them as the foundational material for his calligraphies. He combined calligraphic writing of sacred texts with calligraphic compositions of invocations, often in the form of birds, to convey such themes as the Covenant, or the Twin Manifestations as harbingers of a new day.

Returning to *Nakhjavání's* essay, she proposes that "the true believer or artist . . . must strive to obtain a glimpse of the first streaks of the promised dawn. And dawn in the field of aesthetic response to the Bahá'í Faith, is any form that both contains the promise and the proof of beauty still unborn" (*Artist* 6). It thus behoves a Bahá'í artist "to strive, to seek no rest, to search perpetually forward" (*Four* 6). This is what we perceive in the works of the celebrated calligrapher—even though living in the earliest days of the Revelation, he produced art of the highest calibre and continually sought to invent, adopt, and incorporate new ideas while conveying the truths of the new Revelation.

Await the break of His sovereign  
morn,  
These are but effects of its early  
dawn!<sup>14</sup>

Art historian Julie Oeming Badiee suggests that many twentieth-century artists, whether Bahá'í or not, were sensitive to the new age they lived in, which called for new expressions in art and a break with tradition (5). This sensitivity to the dawn of a new age prompted them to turn from material to non-material, from objective to non-objective modes of expression, and hence abstract art became more dominant. Oeming Badiee proposes that,

a study of twentieth-century art can show that amidst the destruction and despair there is . . . this quiet but persistent theme of birth and new beginnings. . . . Even if they were unaware of the magnitude of the coming of the Bahá'í Revelation, there were artists who were sensitive not only to the death of the old order but also to the birth of something unprecedented from the ruins of an old way of life. Indeed, this theme of a new beginning runs quietly through twentieth-century art, persistent and unmistakable. (4)

*Mishkín-Qalam* was of course aware of the new Revelation, which deeply informed his art. His most imaginative and celebrated calligraphic compositions—those depicting the twin cockerels, representing the Twin Manifestations of God—unmistakably announce a new day for humanity.

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14 Anvarí (1126-1189) quoted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Light of the World* 203.

RECURRING THEMES IN ART INSPIRED  
BY THE BAHÁ'Í REVELATION:  
REUNION AND SEPARATION,  
AND LOVE OF GOD

Nakhjavání directs our attention towards the “Lawḥ-i-Maqsúd,” proposing that in it “Bahá'u'lláh offers . . . some of the most significant guidelines concerning the standards of true art and the techniques of appreciation . . . as a result of His Revelation” (10). In this Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh praises the recipient's poetry and states that it “proved highly impressive, for it was indicative of both the light of reunion and the fire of separation.” Nakhjavání suggests that “the concept of reunion and separation . . . is one of the central aesthetic principles for any work that presumes to reflect the spirit of the Bahá'í Revelation” (11). “Reunion and separation” are themes amply demonstrated in the works of Mishkín-Qalam. Indeed, they take on an additional poignancy in some of his art, which seems to have been created not only as an expression of the spiritual separation from God that, from a mystical perspective, is common to all human beings, but also as a response to his physical separation from Bahá'u'lláh. In these cases, His art can be viewed as a way of attaining a kind of spiritual reunion. One highly stylized work, consisting entirely of Bahá'u'lláh's given names, ‘Husayn and ‘Alí’, bears an inscription revealing that it was made “during the 9<sup>th</sup> year of his imprisonment in the citadel of Maghúsih

[Famagusta, Cyprus].”<sup>15</sup> The calligraphy is written in mirror script, simultaneously adding a sense of urgency to his supplication by doubling the text while also making it hard to decipher. One of the ways the exiled calligrapher, far away from his Beloved, could overcome the sorrow caused by physical distance was by employing his art to “praise Him, and call Him continually to mind” (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 150:3). Through writing out invocations, and the names and titles of his Beloved One, with his calligraphic pen, he sought spiritual proximity with Him. In doing so, Mishkín-Qalam, who prior to joining the Bahá'í Faith was a Sufi of the Ni'matu'lláhi order (Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'is* 270), is enacting a form of *dhikr 'u'lláh*, remembrance of God. This practice, while typically associated with the recitation of the names of God, is also a central theme in Islamic art, especially among some Sufis, for whom “mediation upon the calligraphic form of the Name is used as a spiritual method for realizing the Named” (Nasr 38; “Dhikr” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*).

Mishkín-Qalam's later work during the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá continues to reflect the theme of reunion and separation. When, for instance, he was

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15 See plate 20 in *Mishkín-Qalam XIX Century Artist and Calligrapher*. This inscription is found in the right cartouche; the left cartouche reads: “Imprisoned for the love of God engaged in creating this work Mishkín-Qalam 1294” (ca CE 1877). It is one of the earliest works we know of in which the artist employs mirror script.

sent to Bombay for the express purpose of transcribing Bahá'í texts for printing, and again found himself far removed from the centre of his Faith, he wrote out in calligraphic form an invocation of the name of the Master, *Yá 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. This work, dated 1325 AH (ca CE 1907), features cartouches in smaller script displaying the invocations *Yá-Bahá'ul-Abhá* (top left) and *Yá 'Alíyyu'l-'Alá* (top right), and one at the bottom stating that the work was “executed in the port of Bombay, [by] servant of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá *Mishkín-Qalam*.”<sup>16</sup> This work, while not neglecting the mention of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, shows the artist's love and devotion to ‘Abdu'l-Bahá. In this period of separation, he sought spiritual proximity both through rendering service to Him by transcribing holy texts and by invoking His name in his art.<sup>17</sup>

The theme of reunion and separation is, of course, informed by the more general theme of love of God that pervades religious art of all kinds. Indeed, the theme of love expressed in art is mentioned by Bahá'u'lláh in the “*Lawḥ-i-Maqsúd*”: “Every word of thy poetry is indeed like unto a mirror in which the evidences of the devotion

and love thou cherishest for God and His chosen ones are reflected” (*Tablets* 11:42). ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that “[a]ll things are beneficial if joined with the love of God” similarly highlights the value of art that is infused with this love (*Selections* 154).<sup>18</sup> Love of God and “His chosen ones” was perhaps the defining theme of *Mishkín-Qalam*'s life as a whole, and strongly informed his art. The artist had a deep love for God and the three Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith that manifested itself in the choices he made in his spiritual life, which in turn impacted his actions in the physical world and his artistic output. In *Memorials of the Faithful*, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá mentions that *Mishkín-Qalam* was “ashine with the love of God,” that he had “intense love,” that he was “love embodied;” He also refers to the artist's love for “the Blessed Beauty” (100–101). There is ample proof in *Mishkín-Qalam*'s works that his “artistic spirit drove him to find expression for his love in designs of ecstatic praise” (*Nakhjavání Four* 94). As is evident from the descriptions of his work throughout this paper, *Mishkín-Qalam*'s love and devotion were manifest throughout his oeuvre.

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16 Plate 64 in Persian Letters and Arts Society, *Mishkín-Qalam, XIX Century Artist and Calligrapher*.

17 In another calligraphy dated 1316 AH (1898/99) the artist has written out in beautiful *nasta'liq* script many of the titles of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá. See plate 63 in *Mishkín-Qalam, XIX Century Artist and Calligrapher*.

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18 It is interesting to note that this principle applies to not only the creator of art, but to its audience: “For example, a melody, sweet to the ear, bringeth the very spirit of life to a heart in love with God, yet staineth with lust a soul engrossed in sensual desires” (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 154:3).



ARTISTIC EXPRESSION AS A  
COHERENT PART OF A SPIRITUAL LIFE

Tuman, in his discussion of the relationship between art and spirituality, argues that “the common, the most general and fundamental aim of the arts and sciences, indeed of all human endeavors, however material or mundane they may seem, is to foster spiritual growth” (62). He identifies three facets of life that, in the Bahá’í teachings, are “inseparably woven together in the golden brocade of spiritual growth;” these are “the worship of God, the gaining of divine knowledge, and purehearted service to humanity” (62).

All three are reflected in the life, and artistic efforts, of Mishkín-Qalam. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá attests that Mishkín-Qalam “spent his days and nights supplicating and communing with God” (*Memorials* 101), and that he was “among the most noted mystics” who “reached the heights of faith and assurance . . . and drank the wine of certitude” (98). As to “purehearted service to humanity,” this was expressed by Mishkín-Qalam chiefly through his pen. “For this calligrapher, the words embodied deeds; the dance of his pen expressed his very life” (*Nakhjavání Four* 49). His calligraphic works—from unique contributions such as the design of the inscriptions on the sarcophagus of the Báb and the first House of Worship, to written mementos for pilgrims and transcription of holy texts for the purposes of printing—resonated with significance for Bahá’ís the world

over. His famous calligraphic design of the Greatest Name in particular continues to serve as a tangible point of focus for individuals and communities around the world in their efforts to increasingly reflect the spiritual teachings brought by the One it alludes to. We can conclude that Mishkín-Qalam’s art fulfilled the aim that Tuman highlights for them: “to foster spiritual growth.” His art was not only conducive to his personal spiritual growth, but also to that of his audience.

‘Abdu'l-Bahá also praises other services rendered by Mishkín-Qalam. While in Constantinople, where he was falsely accused of being an “agitator” and eventually imprisoned and exiled, he had in fact been “of service to strangers and was helping to educate the native people. He was a refuge to the hapless and a horn of plenty to the poor. He invited all comers to the oneness of humankind” (*Memorials* 38:4).<sup>19</sup> He also taught calligraphy

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19 Although Mishkín-Qalam seems to have spent a considerable amount of his time working on Bahá’í-related calligraphies and giving of his talent and skill to the Bahá’í community, it is quite certain that it was not his sole occupation. For example, while in Constantinople he is said to have “executed some illuminations” for Sultán Abdu'l-Azíz (quoted in *Momen Accounts* 311). His calligraphic works have also been documented in mosques in Cairo (*Meshgin* 4) and Akká (*Blomfield* 241). Again ‘Abdu'l-Bahá verifies that Mishkín-Qalam produced “his marvelous calligraphs and sen[t] them about” (*Memorials* 38:6).

and penmanship to the children in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's household in 'Akká (Afroukhteh 160).



Having reflected on some ways of understanding art from a Bahá'í perspective, and briefly considered how they are reflected in Mishkín-Qalam's life, we now turn to a more thorough—though still necessarily cursory—examination of some of the artist's outstanding works and services. The intent here is not merely to celebrate the accomplishments of one artist, but to specifically illuminate the dynamic of encouragement that enabled and sustained his efforts.

Indeed, a theme running through the stories behind each of the artistic works highlighted below is that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá strongly reciprocated Mishkín-Qalam's love, and that this was perhaps the greatest source of encouragement for the artist. For example, in Adrianople, Bahá'u'lláh encouraged and supported his artmaking—a “house was rented for Mishkín-Qalam so that he could practise his art unhindered” (Balyuzi, *King of Glory* 243). And when the artist made a rendition of the Greatest Name and “rearranged it into the beautifully organised order in which we have it today. . . . Bahá'u'lláh . . . pleased with this exquisite design [...], although living in great austerity, honoured him with a gift of 50 pias (lira) and approved his penmanship” (Meshgin 7).

'Abdu'l-Bahá regularly corresponded

with the artist, especially when the latter was an exile in Cyprus, conveying His encouragement and love.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the greatest manifestation of that love was that 'Abdu'l-Bahá regularly commissioned calligraphic works from the artist, knowing that practicing his art was an essential part of his life. Mishkín-Qalam's absolute need to practice his art is attested by one of his fellow prisoners in Constantinople, who noted that the artist was greatly distressed when no writing materials were available to him (Salmání 63). This caused him great agony: unable to exercise his craft, he felt that he was “denied the means to justify the purpose of his life” (Nakhjavání, *Four* 49). We may well suppose that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's frequent commissioning of work from Mishkín-Qalam reflected not only the needs of the community, but His understanding of the artist's need to create art in service to God and humanity.

#### MISHKÍN-QALAM'S SERVICES DURING THE MINISTRY OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

##### THE GREATEST NAME

Mishkín-Qalam is perhaps best known for his calligraphic representation of the invocation “O Glory of the All-Glorious” (*Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá*), commonly referred to as the “Greatest

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20 In one such letter, He acknowledges Mishkín-Qalam's suffering and commends him for “enduring separation, affliction and captivity” “in the path of the Heavenly Beauty” ('Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in Nakhjavání 51).

Name” (figure 1). The Greatest Name consists of the letters *bá* and *há* which make up the Arabic term *Bahá*, a reference to Bahá’u’lláh (qtd. in Hornby 271). Derivatives of the word *Bahá*—including the invocation *Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá* and the greeting *Alláh’u’Abhá* (God, the All-Glorious)—are also considered forms of the Greatest Name (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* Note 33; Faizi 12-13). The Greatest Name has profound spiritual as well as symbolic significance; as stated in a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, it “is a distinctive mark of the Cause and a symbol of our Faith” (qtd. in Hornby 267).

until the advent of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, “[l]ike a brilliant sun wrapped in clouds, the Greatest Name remained hidden and unknown” (3). It was acknowledged “that the new Name of the Great One to come” was associated with “light,” “splendour,” and “glory”—words which all culminate in the word *Bahá* (4). Schimmel explains that “the hope of discovering the Greatest Name of God has inspired many a Sufi who dreamed of reaching the highest bliss in this world and the next by means of this blessed name” (qtd. in Oeming Badiee and Badiee 17). It is not surprising that Mishkín-Qalam, who was well-versed in the



Fig. 4a & 4b. Calligraphic designs of the Greatest Name by Mishkín-Qalam (left) and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (right); the latter is commonly known as the Bahá’í ringstone symbol.

©Bahá’í International Community

Allusions to the Greatest Name of God can be found in many faith traditions and mystical writings.<sup>21</sup> Abu’l-Qásim Faizi explains that

21 For in-depth explanations and references to other Faith traditions see Lambden, “The Word *Bahá*’: The Quintessence of the Greatest Name of God,” and Faizi, *Explanation of the Symbol of the Greatest Name*.

Sufi traditions, should, upon discovering the Greatest Name, have repeatedly written it out over the course of his life and in a variety of arrangements and scripts.

Mishkín-Qalam started to render the invocation of the Greatest Name in calligraphic form, once he joined

Bahá'u'lláh in Adrianople.<sup>22</sup> Printed copies of Mishkín-Qalam's design of the Greatest Name can be found today in many Bahá'í homes, and early pilgrims to the Holy Land considered original renditions by the artist a most treasured keepsake (see fig. 5a) (Hogenson 171). The calligrapher's skillful design of the Greatest Name has become one of the symbols of the Bahá'í community, which is often referred to as "the community of the Greatest Name."<sup>23</sup> While the design featured in figure 1 is by far the most well known, 'Abdu'l-Bahá highlights the creativity of Mishkín-Qalam in arriving at multiple calligraphic versions: "he would write out the Most Great Name . . . with marvelous skill, in many different forms, and would send them everywhere" (*Memorials* 38:2).

Mishkín-Qalam's masterful renditions of the Greatest Name exemplify art that "attracts the soul, through beauty, to a work in which the knowledge of things divine is imparted" (Tuman 79). It is also an example of "fostering spiritual growth

in all of our activities" (Tuman 62): for Mishkín-Qalam, writing out the Greatest Name over and over again must have been an act of worship, and of meditation on the exalted station of his Beloved. The artist's creative act was conducive to his own spiritual growth and the development of his art, while at the same time offering a service to Bahá'ís, both as individuals and communities, as his beautiful calligraphy of the Greatest Name was highly sought after and was proudly hung in Bahá'í centers and homes alike.

Mishkín-Qalam's calligraphy of the Greatest Name, which as a "symbol of our Faith" represents in visual form a potentially infinite depth of meaning, exemplifies the centrality of "image and sign, symbol and metaphor" highlighted by Nakhjavání as important characteristics of art inspired by the Bahá'í Revelation (6). Further, as a highly recognizable symbol that all Bahá'ís identify with, Mishkín-Qalam's design powerfully demonstrates the role of the arts, highlighted by the Universal House of Justice, in "strengthening the bonds of unity" (Letter dated 30 December 2021). And as his designs of the Greatest Name manifest "symmetry, harmony, and perfection" they "are pleasing to the heart and spirit" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in compilation *Music* no. 15) and hence "an important means of generating joy" (Universal House of Justice, Letter dated 30 December 2021).

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22 It may be that Mishkín-Qalam was inspired to begin rendering the invocation *Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá* by the new currency of another form of the Greatest Name: it was at this time that the common Islamic salutation *Alláh-u-Akbar* was superseded by the Bahá'í greeting *Alláh-u-Abhá* among the early believers (Shoghi Effendi 176).

23 In 1934 the calligraphic rendering of the Greatest Name was registered as a trademark with the U.S. patent office (*Bahá'í World* vol. VI 350).



Fig. 5a. Early Western Bahá'ís holding a copy of the Greatest Name, Paris c. 1901 (It is not clear who the calligrapher is.)

©Bahá'í International Community

The inherent symbolism and significance of the Greatest Name, combined with the matchless form given to it by the pen of Mishkín-Qalam, have meant that his design continues to be adopted by contemporary Bahá'í artists from different cultural backgrounds and incorporated into their own creations.<sup>24</sup> African American Bahá'í

24 Bahá'ís everywhere identify the symbol of the Greatest Name with their faith, and have strong attachment to both the design of Mishkín-Qalam and the so called “ringstone symbol” designed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Faizi 11). The latter has been incorporated into the art works of contemporary Bahá'í artists and architects as well, including Bunch Washington as well as New Zealand senior artist Robin White, who is partly of Maori descent. The ring symbol



Fig. 5b. McCleary Bunch Washington, *My Love is My Stronghold* (ca 1990), oil on board, 8<sup>1/8</sup> x 11.

Image courtesy of the Bunch Washington Foundation

artist McCleary “Bunch” Washington (1937-2008) is one of them. In a brochure written for one of Washington’s exhibitions, the well-known visual artist Romare Bearden mentions the use of “symbols” in Washington’s art. Bearden explains that these symbols “relate to his study of Persian Arts and his dedication to the Bahá'í Faith” (de Souza 44). Indeed, Bearden is here referring to Washington’s repeated use of the Greatest Name in his artistic output—in works such as *Holding the Greatest Name* (ca 1980s), a self-portrait of the artist executed in his self-devised “transparent collage” technique that uses resin to mimic the appearance

also adorns the dome of the New Delhi Bahá'í House of Worship.

of stained glass,<sup>25</sup> and *My Love is My Stronghold* (ca 1990; see fig. 5b), an oil painting showing a woman of African descent with her child at her side, holding the Greatest Name up high. These works convey how Washington has made the symbol of the Greatest Name his own. It is not a foreign symbol in an illegible script; it is the symbol of *his* Faith, and his subjects always display it with pride. As Bahá'í architect Fariborz Sahba explains, “[a]rt is the indigenous offspring of a society: that is to say, it originates from within that society, rather than being something that comes to it from outside” (53). It is a testament to the power of *Mishkín-Qalam*'s design that, although it was the work of a Persian calligrapher living during the time of Bahá'u'lláh, a century later an artist on the other side of the world with very different life experiences “views it as something essential to his being” (de Souza, personal correspondence).<sup>26</sup> The calligraphic Greatest Name connects Washington with the Founders of his Faith, and with others across the globe who share its world-changing vision. Washington is able to incorporate the Greatest Name into his own art in a way wholly his own, an “indigenous offspring.”

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25 For a colour reproduction of this work see Elizabeth de Souza, “Views from a Black Artist in the Century of Light” in *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 30, no. 3.

26 According to the artist's daughter and co-founder of the Bunch Washington Foundation, Elizabeth de Souza, her father dearly loved both the Greatest Name and the artist *Mishkín-Qalam* (Personal correspondence).

#### MISHKÍN-QALAM'S SERVICES DURING THE MINISTRY OF 'ABDU'L-BAHÁ

There were “three principal objectives” which ‘Abdu'l-Bahá labored towards and accomplished during His ministry from 1892-1921: the establishment of His Father's Faith in North America; the internment of the Báb's remains in their final resting-place on Mount Carmel; and lastly, the construction of the first House of Worship in the Bahá'í world (Shoghi Effendi 273). ‘Abdu'l-Bahá engaged *Mishkín-Qalam*'s artistic talent in the last two of these principal objectives of His ministry, and also employed his talents in the production of the Bahá'í Faith's first printed literature.

#### CALLIGRAPHIC DESIGNS FOR THE MARBLE SARCOPHAGUS OF THE BÁB

Towards the end of His life, on a visit to Mount Carmel in Haifa, Bahá'u'lláh pointed out to His eldest son the location where the remains of the Báb, the Herald of His Faith, should be buried. The designated land was later purchased by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, and a special sepulchre was erected by Him, with much toil and hardship, during the most difficult period of His incarceration. It took sixty years from the time of the Báb's martyrdom for His remains to finally be interred in that spot.<sup>27</sup>

Around 1894/5, as part of the

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27 For a detailed account of the early history of the Shrine of the Báb see Michael V. Day, *Journey to a Mountain*.

preparations for the interment on Mount Carmel, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sent “[s]pecial instructions” as well as “a design” to Rangoon, Burma, “for a sarcophagus to be made of the marble of that region” to hold the sacred remains of the Báb. The Bahá’ís of Rangoon were given the challenging task of carving this sarcophagus “from a single piece of stone.” In addition, “a casket made of the finest Indian wood” was ordered, to fit inside the sarcophagus (*Light of the World* 28).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá instructed that the marble sarcophagus be adorned on its top and sides with gilded calligraphic renderings of the Greatest Name, as well as the invocation commonly associated with the Báb, *Yá ‘Alíyyu’l-‘A’lá* (O Exalted of the Most Exalted One). The task of designing the calligraphic inscriptions for the marble sarcophagus was given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Mishkín-Qalam (Afnán 416; Day 38).

In a photograph taken in Burma (figure 6), a large group of people is seen gathered around the completed marble sarcophagus. The banner above the sarcophagus is dated 22 May 1898 (1316 AH). Mishkín-Qalam’s rendering of the Greatest Name can be seen, repeated three times, on the front of the sarcophagus. The invocation *Yá ‘Alíyyu’l-‘A’lá* is not visible in this image, and may have been engraved on the top or the back-side of the sarcophagus which are not visible. Háji Mírzá Haydar-‘Alí, one of the artist’s friends and contemporaries, confirms in his memoirs that “[t]he designs were prepared in exquisite penmanship by the calligrapher, Mishkín-Qalam” (149–50).

In one account, we read that Mishkín-Qalam asked ‘Abdu’l-Bahá whether he had permission to sign his name in an obscure corner of the marble sarcophagus. He was known to sign most of his



Fig. 6. The Bahá’ís of Burma gathered around the sarcophagus made for the sacred remains of the Báb. Mishkín-Qalam’s rendering of the Greatest Name can be seen along its side.

works executed during the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh with “Servant at the Gate of Bahá Mishkín-Qalam,”<sup>28</sup> thus simultaneously referencing the Báb (the Gate) and Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>29</sup> By contrast, most of his calligraphies made during the ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá bore the signature “Servant of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Mishkín-Qalam.”<sup>30</sup> The account goes on to say that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá consented to him adding his signature, under the condition that he change it to “Servant at the Gate of Bahá” instead of dedicating it to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (Mooghen 147). The mention of the Gate seems particularly fitting given Whose remains the sarcophagus was to receive.

The Bahá'í community of Rangoon gifted the finished marble sarcophagus to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, a gesture Shoghi Effendi termed “an offering of love” (275). It was brought by several friends from Burma and arrived in Haifa in 1899 (Butt). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had also sent instructions

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28 In the original it reads, “Bandiy-i-báb-i-Bahá, Mishkín-Qalam.” For the origin of this signature see Rafati 9.

29 Cambridge Orientalist Edward Granville Browne suggests that, were it not for his profession of faith in his signatures, Mishkín-Qalam could have sold even more of his calligraphies (Nakhjavání, *Four* 22). He in fact would sometimes sign his works with a pseudonym such as Mirzá Muhammad Husayn, or not sign them at all. (Motamed 136). According to Christie’s website, “The calligraphic specimens signed by Mirza Husayn are mostly dated to the last decade of his life which was spent in India.”

30 In the original it reads “Bandiy-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Mishkín-Qalam.”

to transport the remains of the Báb from Persia, where they had been carefully concealed and guarded for the past fifty years, to the Holy Land. The casket containing the remains arrived in Haifa on 31 January 1899 (Shoghi Effendi 274). It would be another ten years before the remains would be interred on Mount Carmel, in a ceremony described by Shoghi Effendi:

[on] the . . . day of the first Naw-Rúz (1909), which He celebrated after His release from His confinement, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had the marble sarcophagus transported with great labor to the vault prepared for it, and in the evening, by the light of a single lamp, He laid within it, with His own hands—in the presence of believers from the East and from the West and in circumstances at once solemn and moving—the wooden casket containing the sacred remains of the Báb and His companion. (276)

It is possible, though sources available at the time of writing do not confirm it, that Mishkín-Qalam was present to see the sarcophagus that bore his calligraphy receive its sacred contents. In *Memorials of the Faithful*, after noting Mishkín-Qalam’s time spent in India, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “When I learned that he was getting helpless, I sent for him at once and he came back to this Most Great Prison, to the joy of the believers, who felt blessed to have him here again” (101). The latest calligraphy that has been identified from



Mishkín-Qalam’s time in Bombay is signed and dated 1326,<sup>31</sup> which makes it possible that he had returned to the Holy Land by March 1909.<sup>32</sup> In that event, he would have surely been part of this stirring and historical event.

Shoghi Effendi describes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s transference and internment of the remains of the Báb as “one of the most signal acts of His ministry” and “one of the outstanding events in the first Bahá’í century” (273). It also signified the fulfillment of prophecies found in the Holy Books of other Faith traditions about the future greatness of Mount Carmel.

It is worth reflecting on the meticulous care ‘Abdu’l-Bahá took with every detail of this project: the sarcophagus had to be shaped from a single piece of precious stone; the casket that was crafted to fit inside the sarcophagus had to be made of “the finest Indian wood”; calligraphies by the eminent calligrapher were ordered to adorn the stone; and finally the remains were laid to rest in a most sacred and moving ceremony, in the Shrine that had been constructed in the face of many obstacles and difficulties. We seem to glimpse here some profound relationship between the arts and the sacred act of interring the body of the Manifestation. Once placed in its vault, the specially designed and purpose-built sarcophagus, with its exquisite calligraphies, would never be

seen again by visitors or pilgrims. Here the calligraphies do not serve a didactic purpose, nor do they delight the eyes of the onlooker. They seem to hold some much deeper, spiritual significance. We can only speculate as to what this may be, but perhaps the inscriptions represent humanity’s invocation and supplication of the One Whose mortal remains were placed within. Did Mishkín-Qalam, under the direction of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “utter” through his calligraphy an invocation of the names of the Twin Manifestations on behalf of all of humanity—a humanity that, at the time, had not recognized the Báb befittingly? Does this sarcophagus, as an act of grace on behalf of a heedless people, eternally voice an invocation in praise of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh?

For Mishkín-Qalam’s own part, the calligraphic work he rendered for the sarcophagus meant that now he had been enabled to serve, through his artistic endeavours, all three Central Figures of the Faith.

#### CALLIGRAPHIC DESIGNS FOR THE FIRST BAHÁ’Í HOUSE OF WORSHIP

The first major construction project that the young Bahá’í community embarked upon took place in the city of ‘Ishqábád in Russian Turkistan. The construction of the first House of Worship provided another opportunity for the inclusion of the arts, and for Mishkín-Qalam’s calligraphies to again serve in one of the most important initiatives of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry (see fig. 7).

31 1326 AH, corresponding to 4 February 1908 to 22 January 1909.

32 See plate 73 in *Persian Letters and Arts Society, Mishkín-Qalam, XIX Century Artist and Calligrapher*.

During Bahá'u'lláh's lifetime, a Bahá'í community was founded in 'Ishqábád, consisting mostly of believers from Persia who had fled religious persecution in their native land. There they created "a pattern of life that . . . reflect[ed] the exalted spiritual and social principles enshrined in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh" (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 1 August 2014). During His lifetime and with His consent, "facilities were built for communal well-being—a meeting hall, schools for children, a hostel for visitors, and a small clinic, among others." In 1902 the community was ready to build a House of Worship as part of this Mashriq'u'l-Adhkár complex. The term Mashriq'u'l-Adhkár, meaning "dawning place of the remembrance of God," refers to a House of Worship and its surrounding educational, humanitarian, social and scientific institutions. The institution of the Mashriq'u'l-Adhkár allows the interconnected elements of worship and service at the core of religion to reinforce and act upon one another.<sup>33</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá initiated the House of Worship project and closely monitored its development. He instructed a cousin of the Báb, Hájí Mírzá Muḥammad-Taqí, the Vakílu'd-Dawlih,<sup>34</sup> to personally

33 "The Mashriq'u'l-Adhkár, described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as 'one of the most vital institutions in the world', weds two essential, inseparable aspects of Bahá'í life: worship and service" (Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2012).

34 Which means "agent of the state." However 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave him the title Vakílu'l-Haqq (agent of God).

supervise it. The construction, including the external decorative work, was completed in 1919 (Momen, "Bahá'í Community of Ashkhabad" 285). Once built, it was "the most prominent edifice in the area" and became the centre of activity of the community, whose members would gather there every morning for devotions, and then go out to engage in their chosen professions and service to the community (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 1 August 2014). 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the Mashriq'u'l-Adhkár in 'Ishqábád "possesses superlative importance, because it was the first Mashriq'u'l-Adhkár built" (*Promulgation* 30).

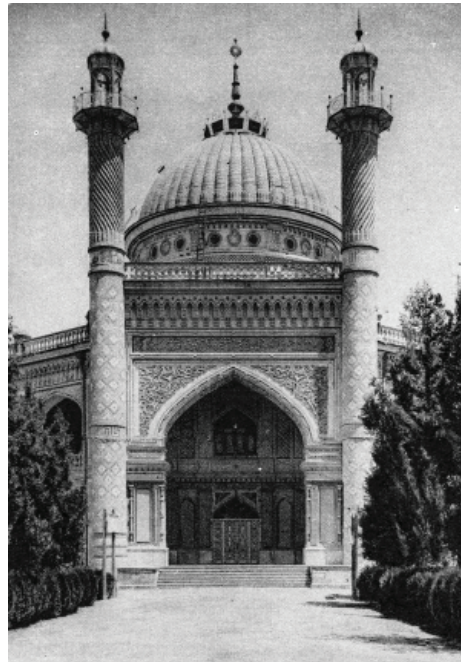


Fig. 7. The first Bahá'í House of Worship, 'Ishqábád, Turkistan.

©Bahá'í International Community

Unfortunately, this first House of Worship has not survived. Political changes in the area resulted in its

expropriation by the government in 1928. In 1938, members of the local Bahá’í community were either sent back to Persia or into exile and labour camps. The Temple was converted into an art gallery. A severe earthquake in 1948 devastated the city and caused damage to the House of Worship. With poor maintenance contributing to the weakening of its foundations, the building had to be demolished in 1963 (Momen “Bahá’í community of Ashkhabad” 291–94).

As the *Ishqábád* Temple was inspired by Islamic architecture, and in particular the Mughal architecture of the Taj Mahal in India (Shoghi Effendi 301), it is not surprising that calligraphy is extensively woven into the design of the building.<sup>35</sup> Subsequent Bahá’í Houses of Worship typically only have a single rendering of the Greatest Name, usually placed at the apex of the interior of the dome. An article published in 1909 by the French Bahá’í Hippolyte Dreyfus, who was one of the earliest Westerners to visit the still-incomplete House of Worship in June 1906 (Ballanger 65–66), attests that the interior decoration included calligraphic inscriptions in plaster relief executed by “the artistic pen of the celebrated *Mishkín-Qalam*” (*Bahá’í World* VIII 528).

While the House of Worship no longer stands, there still exist drawings used by *Mishkín-Qalam* as part of

his work on the Temple’s calligraphy, which have been passed down in the family of the *Vakílu’d-Dawlih*. These are in the form of two unusually large calligraphies, measuring around 95 x 65 cm, each bearing the signature and date “Servant of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá *Mishkín-Qalam* 1321” (ca 1903) (Carter and Afnan 50). Both the signature and the date match the circumstance: they were executed during the ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and fit the start of the construction period of the Temple. What suggests that these are working drawings rather than final works of art is their lack of any ornamentation, illumination or use of marbled paper—techniques commonly employed by *Mishkín-Qalam* to enhance his calligraphies. The calligraphic invocations on these maquettes match calligraphy that can be seen in photographs of the interior and, in one case, the exterior of the Temple. They are likely made to scale and are characterized by bold letters in *nasta‘liq* script.<sup>36</sup>

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36 Yúsofi describes the process by which working drawings such as this would be used in the creation of inscriptions on building surfaces: “Inscriptions . . . are first written by the calligrapher on paper in large, clearly drawn letters and then transferred to the slab of stone or the tiles. They are placed on façades, walls, and portals of mosques, shrines, and important secular buildings.” Schimmel comments on the calligrapher’s facility with the large calligraphy required to produce an inscription in this way, stating that “*Mishkín-Qalam*’s firm hand makes the observer feel that he was well versed in large inscriptions for he

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35 Throughout the Taj Mahal, one finds passages from the Qur’an executed mainly in florid thuluth script, such as around the tomb entrance.

As already mentioned, while *Mishkín-Qalam* was known for the well-balanced design of the Greatest Name that is easily recognizable by Bahá'ís today, he evinced great creativity in creating a wide range of forms for the Greatest Name. One of the two maquettes for the Temple is, in fact, an unconventional calligraphic rendering of the Greatest Name (figure 8 a). In *Mishkín-Qalam*'s standard design of the Greatest Name (figure 1), two single dots for the two *b* and a double-dot for the *ye* in “*Yá*” are all placed at the bottom half of the composition. Here, the design is different—perhaps because the artist was inspired to come up with a fresh concept for this new House of Worship, or perhaps as a simple matter of scale, with gaps that naturally appear due to enlarging and elongating letters needing to be filled. Whatever the reason, the artist chose to add a set of diacritical double-dots for the second *ye*, which usually would not have dots, to fill the large empty space. Additionally, he included the *maddah* diacritic (l) on top of the *alif* and moved the dot for the second *b* closer to where it would be found in normal script. All these measures ensure the overall balance and harmony of the piece, reflecting the importance of composition to the calligrapher. As Yúsofi explains, composition is “the most important factor in calligraphy. It is the arrangement of letters and words . . . sentences, and lines . . . to

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forms his letters (e.g. the wide initial *kh*) in the style used in architectural inscriptions.”

produce a beautiful layout.<sup>37</sup> This is a particularly demanding task in the case of inscriptions, where the space is limited.” We know that *Mishkín-Qalam* made careful preparations before executing his calligraphies, taking accurate measurements to make sure that the selected text would perfectly fit on the prepared paper (Faizi, qtd. in Aidun).<sup>38</sup> This same care is reflected in the innovations he made to this larger, inscribed design of the Greatest Name.

The new rendition of the Greatest Name was found in the interior and exterior of the temple. Inside the building,

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37 Composition in this sense is, for Yúsofi, the most important of the “four basic principles” at the core of calligraphic excellence, which he describes as follows:

1. “Respect for the elements” means giving all the letters of the alphabet proper degrees of “boldness” (*qúwa/qowwa*) or “faintness” (*ža'f*) and proper shape.
2. “Proportion” (*nesba* or *tamásob*) means that identically or similarly shaped letters, whether detached or joined, should be of the same size in all contexts.
3. Composition (*tarkib*) is the most important factor in calligraphy. It is the arrangement of letters and words (*tarkib-e joz'i*), sentences, and lines (*tarkib-e kollí*) to produce a beautiful layout. . . .
4. “Seating” (*korsí*) refers to the placement of the letters and words of a line or hemistich in relation to each other and to the “horizon” of the line, or *kaṭṭ-e korsí*. . . (“Scripts”)

38 This care was also reflected in the fact that *Mishkín-Qalam* made his own ink (Faizi qtd. in Aidun).

“[o]n the third story of the rotunda” are “a series of nine blank arches filled with fretwork, between which are escutcheons bear[ing] the Greatest Name” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi 301). This design was repeated several times around the rotunda, and according to Dreyfus was made of plaster relief (see fig. 8b).<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the far-right dot has been moved to fit into its surrounding frame, so it no longer strictly adheres to the original design as reflected in the working drawing. We find this composition of the Greatest Name, but perhaps in a smaller size, also flanking the exterior of the main entrance doors. On the right and left of each, there is additional sacred text visible.



Fig. 8a. Mishkín-Qalam. An alternative arrangement of the Greatest Name. Signed and dated 1321 (ca 1903).

©Private collection



Fig. 8b. Epigraph of the Greatest Name in the interior of the Bahá’í House of Worship in Ishqábád.

©Bahá’í International Community

The second working drawing in the handwriting of Mishkín-Qalam features a design of the invocation *Yá ‘Alíyyu’l-‘Alá* which, as mentioned earlier, references the Báb (see fig. 9a). Mishkín-Qalam has presented it in a bold, well-balanced and legible design. A photograph of the first floor of the rotunda, just above the arches, reveals two epigraphs with this invocation in plaster relief (see fig. 9b). This design arrangement was possibly repeated over several of the arches. Placed in between them is a seal of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s which is also executed in *nasta‘liq* style.<sup>40</sup>

39 Due to the curved walls, the Greatest Name executed in plaster relief looks somewhat skewed. It is possible that the artist designed the calligraphy without knowing that it would be used on a curved wall.

40 The seal reads, “O my two fellow prisoners! ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ‘A.” It is a verse from the Súrih of Joseph in the Qur’án that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had inscribed on His seal. ‘A. represents the first letter of His name ‘Abbás (Ghaemmaghami)



Fig. 9a. Mishkín-Qalam. *Yá 'Alíyyu'l-'Alá*. Signed and dated 1321 (ca 1903).

©Private collection

Another inscription for which we have some evidence to attribute it to Mishkín-Qalam is a different rendition of the Greatest Name, found on the exterior, that covers perhaps eight or nine large panels positioned around the dome of the Temple (see fig. 10a). The material they were fashioned of is unknown. This version features the two sets of double-dots found in the working drawing discussed above, in addition to two single dots placed at the far corners of *bahá* as in the standard design (fig. 1). A very large<sup>41</sup> calligraphy by Mishkín-Qalam, larger than the ones discussed above, measuring 203 x 135 cm, was auctioned (figure 10 b) several years ago and has the same design outline as the Greatest Name found on the

41 Meshgin explains the special arrangements and technique required when Mishkín-Qalam decided to create a very large-sized Greatest Name: “He made long and tedious preparations of special paper and ink, ordered a peculiar pen, approximately 10 centimetres in diameter, from India and cut the top to resemble a reed pen. It was so difficult to wield that he used both hands to hold it while transcribing the Greatest Name” (7).



Fig. 9b. Epigraph of *Yá 'Alíyyu'l-'Alá* in the interior of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Ishqábád.

©Bahá'í International Community

Temple dome. However, it was executed in 1889/90 (1307 AH), several years before the Temple project was begun.<sup>42</sup>

While we only know of the above-mentioned working designs in Mishkín-Qalam's own hand, it is very likely that he executed all or most of the calligraphic work for this first Bahá'í House of Worship. In a Tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions that Mishkín-Qalam's calligraphies were found in many parts of the world including Iran, Transoxiana (*Túrán*), Europe, America, Asia and Africa (*Ishráq-Khávarí* 63). *Ishqábád* in Turkmenistan would very likely have been considered part of Transoxiana. It is plausible that the artist could have designed all the calligraphies to be used in the House of Worship before his death in 'Akká in 1912, and that these were in fact implemented when the external decorative work for the building was

42 Ustád 'Alí-Akbar Banná conceived of the plan for the Temple while on pilgrimage in 1311 AH (1893-4) (*Taherzadeh* 122).

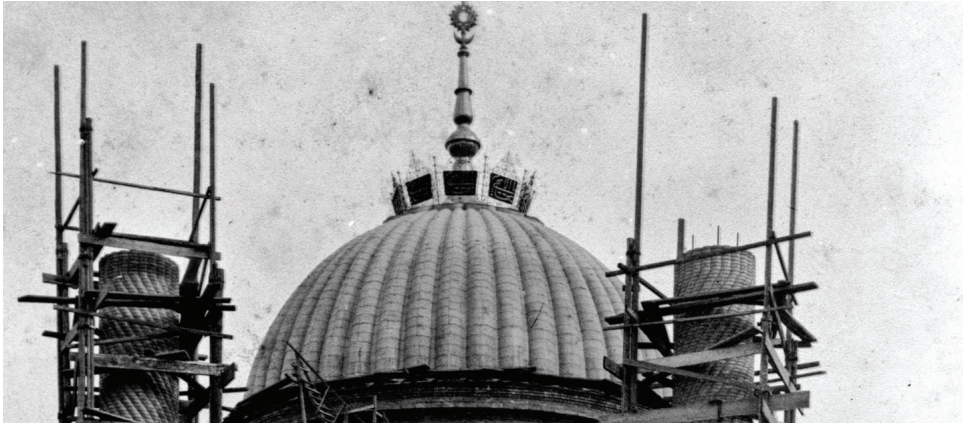


Fig. 10a. Panels of the Greatest Name surrounding the top of the dome of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Ishqábád.

©Bahá'í International Community



Figure 10 b. Mishkín-Qalam. The Greatest Name. This calligraphic rendering resembles the design found around the roof of the House of Worship in Ishqábád, signed and dated 1889-90.

Image ©Christie's

carried out.<sup>43</sup> However, pending further research, this is merely conjectural. For now, while historical photographs document the epigraphs on the building, no further

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43 For example, the beautiful epigraph in *nasta'liq* style, found above the main entrance's high arched portico, might be in Mishkín-Qalam's handwriting. It is a passage from Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (The Most Holy Book): "Blessed is he who, at the hour of dawn, centering his thoughts on God, occupied with His remembrance and supplicating His forgiveness, directeth his steps to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár and, entering therein, seateth himself in silence to listen to the verses of God, the Sovereign, the Mighty, the All-Praised" (¶ 115). I thank Dr. Elham Afnan for helping identify this passage in April 2019.

documentation or calligraphic blueprints have been found to establish a clear link to the artist.

As the Bahá'í community embarks on the construction of more Houses of Worship at local and national levels, what are the lessons we can learn from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's incorporation of the arts in the design of the 'Ishqábád Temple? Recalling Tuman's explanation about the spiritual role of the arts and beauty, the calligraphic designs of the invocations in the House of Worship seem intended to "attract[] the soul, through beauty, to a work in which the knowledge of things divine is imparted" (79). The House of Justice confirms that the arts are, among other things, "an important means of . . . strengthening the bonds of unity, disseminating knowledge, and consolidating understanding" (Letter dated 30 December 2021). Given the particular power of "the juxtaposition of an artistic discipline . . . with the Creative Word of God itself" (Rogers 6), the elegantly rendered quotations from the sacred Writings at the entrance of the Temple doubtless helped spiritualize the believers' attitudes to life as they entered for dawn prayers. If we agree with Tuman that all human activity, including art, is to foster spiritual growth and that the three ingredients necessary for that growth are "the worship of God, the gaining of divine knowledge, and pure-hearted service to humanity" (62), then we might see the inscriptions as serving a liminal role in the interplay between worship and service that is the essence of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*. They invite the believer in to worship; they impart

knowledge by conveying the Word in artistic form; and then the believers passes back out under them as they go out into the world to serve humanity.

Although the Temple in *Ishqábád* has not survived, it is considered "one of the most brilliant and enduring achievements in the history of the first Bahá'í century" (Shoghi Effendi 300). The construction of this Temple provided *Mishkín-Qalam* the opportunity to both contribute his services to this unique endeavour, and to exercise and develop his own art even further, and must once again have been a source of great joy and encouragement to him.

#### TRANSCRIPTION OF HOLY TEXTS FOR PUBLICATION



Fig. 11. Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh in the handwriting of *Mishkín-Qalam*, signed and dated 1310 (1892/93).



like “the erection of the first Mashriq’l-Adhkár of the Bahá’í world,” “the expansion of Bahá’í literature” is also designated by the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith as one of “the outstanding achievements that have embellished the brilliant record of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s unique ministry” (Shoghi Effendi 296). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s efforts to advance the printing of the Bahá’í Holy Writings were of great importance in ensuring their wide dissemination among the Bahá’í community, which had previously relied on the immeasurably lengthier process of transcription by hand. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sent Mishkín-Qalam to Bombay for the express purpose of transcribing the holy texts in his beautiful handwriting, to ready them to be lithographed (Balyuzi, *King of Glory* 388; *Eminent Bahá’ís* 121) (figure 11).

Both in “Iran and India—calligraphers and scribes were key figures ensuring the production of aesthetically pleasing manuscripts” (Vejdani 504). Lithography—a printing technique in which an original copy is drawn on stone rather than assembled using moveable type—was favoured by readers in India and Persia, because it was produced by hand and hence retained the beauty of calligraphy (Vejdani 504, 506).

According to historian Hasan M. Balyuzi, “the first Bahá’í books ever to be printed were. . . in the handwriting of Mishkín-Qalam;” among them are Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh in volumes such as *Kitáb-i-Iqtidárát* and *Kitáb-i-Mubín*

(*King of Glory* 388).<sup>44</sup> In *Memorials of the Faithful* ‘Abdu’l-Bahá mentions that after the ascension of Bahá’u’lláh, the master calligrapher took a trip to India (101). It must have been during this trip that the first dated lithographed copy of the *The Kitáb-i-Iqán* (May-June 1893) in Mishkín-Qalam’s masterful *nasta’liq* script was published in Bombay (Buck “Kitab-i-Iqan”). The holdings of the British Library contain a volume with various Bahá’í sacred texts, including Bahá’u’lláh’s “Tablet to Queen Victoria” in the handwriting of Mishkín-Qalam. According to the library’s records, it was probably lithographed in Bombay in 1893 (“Baha’u’llah’s letter”). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s own *Treatise on Politics*, which Mishkín-Qalam had transcribed in 1893, was also published in Bombay in the same year (Rafati 9). Mishkín-Qalam was sent at least one more time to Bombay for the purpose of transcribing holy texts, this time at the end of 1904, in the evening of his life.

Once again, we see the example of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá engaging the services of an artist in one of the most significant endeavours of his ministry—the transcription and publication of Bahá’í literature. Mishkín-Qalam, in turn, agreed to be far away from his Beloved in order to devote himself to the transcription of the sacred writings for printing. His artistic contribution allowed holy

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44 There may be a couple of exceptions to Balyuzi’s statement; the first edition of the *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, lithographed in Bombay in the early 1880s, was not in the handwriting of Mishkín-Qalam (Buck).

texts to be widely disseminated at a far faster pace than handwritten copies ever could be, while retaining the beauty and grace of calligraphy. It also allowed Mishkín-Qalam to hone his artistic skills while immersing himself in the sacred writings. As with his other artistic projects, Mishkín-Qalam's contribution in this area allowed him to advance the dual moral purpose that animates the existence of a human being.

#### CONCLUSION

As the horizons stretching before the Bahá'í community grow ever broader, and its activities increase in both range and complexity, it remains our great blessing to be able to return, again and again, to the example set by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The crucial role of the arts in the unfolding of His Father's vision for humanity was evidenced in each of the epochal achievements that defined 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry, just as it continues to be reflected in the successive plans guiding the community today. The Perfect Exemplar of the Bahá'í Teachings understood the essential place of the arts in the spiritual life of the individual and community, but in no way reduced them to an instrumental role, for He equally understood the urge of the artist to create. In Mishkín-Qalam—who as attested by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself excelled both in spiritual virtue and artistic skill—He seems to have found a capable soul eager to discover what art can become when elevated, as service, to worship. Theirs was a relationship of love, expressed

as devotion on the part of the artist, and boundless encouragement on the part of the Perfect Exemplar. It is my hope that, as we reflect on this relationship and the efflorescence of art that it nurtured, all of us—whether we think of ourselves as artists or not—may be inspired to learn through action how to encourage the artists amongst us, and how art may become an ever more effective means to advance the “twofold moral purpose . . . to develop [one's] inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010).

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