

The Image of the Mystic Flower

Exploring the Lotus Symbolism in the Bahá'í House of Worship

Julie Badiee*

Abstract

The most recently constructed Bahá'í House of Worship, situated in Bahapur, India, was dedicated in December 1985. The attractive and compelling design of this building creates the visual effect of a large, white lotus blossom appearing to emerge from the pools of water circled around it. The lotus flower, identified by the psychiatrist Carl Jung as an archetypal symbol, carries with it many meanings. This article will explore these meanings both in the traditions of the Indian subcontinent and in other cultures and other eras. In addition, the article will show that the flower imagery relates also to symbols employed in the Bahá'í Writings and, while reiterating the meanings of the past, also functions as a powerful image announcing the appearance of Bahá'u'lláh, the Manifestation of God for this day.

Résumé

La maison d'adoration bahá'íe la plus récente, située à Bahapur en Inde, a été dédiée en décembre 1985. Par sa conception attrayante et puissante, l'édifice semble émerger, telle une immense fleur de lotus blanche, des étangs qui l'entourent. La fleur de lotus, désignée comme symbole archétype par le psychiatre Carl Jung, porte en elle beaucoup de significations. Le présent article explore ses significations dans les traditions du sous-continent indien aussi bien que dans d'autres cultures et à d'autres époques. De plus, l'article montre que l'image de la fleur se retrouve également dans le langage symbolique employé dans les écrits bahá'ís. Tout en étant porteuse des significations du passé, elle constitue aussi une métaphore puissante annonçant la venue de Bahá'u'lláh, la Manifestation de Dieu pour notre époque.

Resumen

La Casa de Adoración bahá'í última en construirse está localizada en Bahapur, India, y fue inaugurada en diciembre de 1985. El diseño atractivo y llamativo de esta obra produce el efecto visual de una gran flor de loto blanca que aparenta surgir de las rebalsas de agua que la rodean. La flor del loto,

* I wish to thank Landegg Academy in Wienacht, Switzerland, for the opportunity to spend part of my sabbatical on campus and for the support that made this article possible.

identificada como símbolo arquetípico por el psiquiatra Carl Jung, aporta en sí muchos significados. Este artículo explorará estos significados tanto de las tradiciones del subcontinente indio, como las de otras culturas y otras épocas. Además, el artículo demostrará que la imaginería floral se relaciona también a los símbolos empleados en los escritos bahá'ís que, reiterando los sentidos del pasado, sirve a la vez como imagen poderosa que anuncia la aparición de Bahá'u'lláh, la Manifestación de Dios para este día.

On 26 December 1986, eight thousand Bahá'ís from 114 countries came to the New Delhi suburb of Bahapur in India to celebrate the opening of the latest in a series of Bahá'í Houses of Worship offered as a gift by Bahá'ís to the peoples of the world. With the dedication of this structure, each of the world's inhabited continents was now home to a Bahá'í House of Worship, "Mother Temples" which would ultimately be the inspiration for thousands of future Houses of Worship. The spectacular "Lotus Temple of Bahapur" joined its sister temples in North America (Wilmette, Illinois), South America (Panama City, Panama), Europe (Frankfurt, Germany), Africa (Kampala, Uganda), Australia (Sydney, Australia), and Oceania (Apia, Western Samoa) to add yet another link to the garland of Houses of Worship that now encircles the globe.¹

The great Lotus Temple of Bahapur emerges from a small ridge south of the modern city of New Delhi and, like its namesake flower, appears to float upon shallow pools of water with its white petals opening outward to the light of the sun (see figure 1). The structure, fashioned from wooden armatures strengthened by poured concrete and clad in white marble panels, rests upon a raised red sandstone foundation. The plan presents no formal entrance; rather, the central area of worship opens out to nine portals, each of which is crowned on the exterior by a pointed canopy of marble suggesting to the viewer the image of the unfolding leaves of a lotus flower. The nine circular pools of water surrounding the central structure carry forward the lotus allusion, as the overall site configuration suggests that the great marble flower emerges upward from a nourishing pond of water to reach toward the light.

The image of the lotus was deliberately chosen for the shape of the temple by its architect, Fariburz Sahba, and his design team as an effective symbol carrying deep meaning to the many peoples of the Indian subcontinent. In the lotus, Mr. Sahba found a form already familiar to the millions of visitors to the temple, yet also symbolizing a new chapter in the progressive encounter of humanity with its Creator. This article will explore the meanings of the image of the lotus blossom on the Indian subcontinent and also suggest that the imagery associated with the lotus resonates within other cultures and other traditions as well. The deeper meaning of the lotus symbolism can be

1. The first Bahá'í House of Worship was built in 'Ishqábád (Ashkhabad), Turkestan, in 1903. The building was damaged in an earthquake in 1948 and subsequently razed in 1963.



Figure 1. The Lotus Temple of Bahapur, the Bahá'í House of Worship in New Delhi, India. Photograph by Charles Nolley.

understood not only as linking it to the religions of the past but also as a profound expression of the renewal of the central truths of the world's religions as they are embodied in the message of Bahá'u'lláh.

The form of the lotus finds its roots in the most ancient traditions of India, and the love and respect for this flower is deeply ingrained in the Indian psyche. Indeed, after a year of searching and study, Mr. Sahba received inspiration for his plan for a Bahá'í Temple from two Indian Bahá'ís who pointed out to him the evocative form of the lotus flower and its multiple meanings. It was the time spent with these two Bahá'ís that impressed upon the architect the deep significance of this flower to all the peoples of India (Rai and White 17).

Before embarking on a discussion of the symbolism of the lotus flower in both religion and art, it is necessary to point out that several different plants are known by the name *lotus*, including a fruit-bearing bush (*Ziziphus lotus*) and a small tree (*Celtis australis*).² The lotus associated most directly with the Bahá'í Temple in New Delhi is the ancient sacred lotus of India (*Nelumbo nucifera*), a

2. The *Ziziphus lotus* is familiar to readers of the Bahá'í Writings as the "Lote-Tree." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term *Lote-Tree* may also be identified with the jujube tree (*Z. jujuba*) that bears the mythical lote-fruit. This is the Sadratu'l-Muntahá or "the Lote-Tree of the extremity" marking the boundary of Paradise. The Lote-Tree is symbolically associated with the Tree of Life. The Lote-Tree as the Tree of Life is replete with symbolic imagery far beyond the scope of this article.

large white aquatic flower opening its petals daily to the light of the sun. The smaller Egyptian floating aquatic lotus, also known as the water lily, is from the *Nymphaea* family (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "lotus").

The Significance of the Lotus in the Hindu Tradition

The lotus flower already had great prominence in the earliest known cultures of the Indian subcontinent in the period before the coming of the Aryan migrations in the Indus Valley region (before 1500 B.C.). In this early time, the lotus was associated with the Mother Goddess, the female deity who represented the power of the divine force of creation. In numerous early societies around the world, the generative forces of life were closely connected with both the female body of the Goddess and with the earth itself from which those powers sprang. As the beautiful Indian lotus flower was rooted in the deep and rich mud of the earth and grew to blossom out from it, the symbol of this flower was associated with those very powers and their personification in the form of the Mother Goddess. Even after the Aryan migrations introduced a different pantheon of male gods, the ancient symbol of the lotus continued to be associated with a female deity called Lakshmi. This deity was described as "lotus-born" and "abounding in lotuses." Her other title was Padma, the "lotus-bearer." She was often shown standing or seated on a lotus and continued to appear on monuments well into the later Buddhist period (Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols* 96).

In the ensuing development of classic Hinduism as reflected in the Rig Veda, the lotus played an important part in the story of the creation of the universe. Heinrich Zimmer, a pioneering scholar of Indian history and art, recounts the ancient story of the Highest Being, who, in the form of water, produced the entire cosmos. This figure was Atman, or He of the unlimited consciousness and existence, who was both "the Lord, the all-containing cosmic giant and the Self, the imperishable, divine life-center in man" (Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols* 50).³

Zimmer goes on to recount:

It is the nature of the Supreme Being to take delight in himself in the cosmic ocean. Presently, out of his cosmic body, he puts forth a single lotus with a thousand petals of pure gold, stainless, radiant as the sun. And together with this lotus he puts forth the God-Creator of the Universe, Brahma, who is seated in the center of the golden lotus, which expands and is radiant with the glowing energy of creation. (*Myths and Symbols* 51)

This account of creation is repeated in the Indian epic the *Mahabharata*, wherein is described how the Creator, here associated with the god Vishnu, sleeps upon the coils of the snake Ananta, who floats upon the cosmic sea.

3. Others identify this figure with Purusa.

Vishnu is accompanied by the goddess Lakshmi, his consort, and the two together represent complementary male and female principles of generation and creation. As Vishnu sleeps, a lotus appears from his navel, and within it is the four-headed Brahma, the one who brings our world into being. He shines within the center of the lotus, and in one of his hands is a lustral spoon while the other carries the sacred books of the Rig Veda (Campbell 140).

The image of the lotus as the field for the bringing forth of revelation can also appear as a meaningful symbol within the individual reality of each human being. Indeed, in the Hindu spiritual discipline of yoga, the link between the highest being and the divine self within each person is suggested by the form of the lotus as a diagram for the soul. In traditional yogic diagrams, within the flower mandala of the soul there are nine petals surrounding the central point of energy. Three of the petals represent knowledge, three love, and three sacrifice. Such diagrams are commonly used to describe the centers of energy in the body (Tansley 89). Thus, the macrocosm of the lotus of the Creator is mirrored in the microcosm of the lotus (divine essence) within the heart of each human being. According to the Upanishads, it is this Supreme One who dwells within the lotus of the heart (Campbell 228).

The Significance of the Lotus in the Buddhist Tradition

By the second century A.D., the rich meanings of the lotus symbol in Hinduism had been absorbed into the message of Buddhism, and the lotus became associated with the appearance of the Buddha as the Enlightened One. Finely sculpted stone reliefs from the region of Gandhara (in present-day Pakistan) and dating from the second or third century A.D. depicted the Buddha seated upon a lotus throne.

Zimmer explains why the lotus throne of Brahma was a fitting symbol for the multiple appearances of the Buddhas throughout the history of the cosmos:

Precisely as the transcendent substance of Vishnu, the primeval water, brings forth the phenomenal dynamic form of Brahma . . . so likewise, the transcendent adamantean essence of enlightenment, the sheer “suchness” which underlies the universe, gives forth the saviors. That is why the Buddhas, the first born of that reality, are entitled no less than Brahma to the lotus throne. (*Art of Indian Asia* 175)

This Indian idea that an indefinable and ultimately transcendent Supreme Power would manifest individuals in human form who were, in their essence, beyond human understanding but who brought to humanity Sacred Scriptures and a path of teachings to follow can apply to both Hinduism and Buddhism. It also appears to be in its essence in harmony with the Bahá'í teachings concerning progressive revelation and the Manifestations of God who have appeared throughout history.

In countless depictions of the Buddha, His lotus throne becomes, as explained

by Titus Burckhardt, a symbol of “the universe in its passive aspect, as a throne or receptacle of the divine Manifestation” (122). For the Buddhist, the Enlightened One is, in the words of the most beloved of Buddhist invocations, *om mani padme hum*, the “jewel in the lotus.” In early Buddhist art, when the image of the Buddha was not shown, He was often indicated symbolically in the form of the lotus blossom.

In the forms of Mahayana Buddhism that spread throughout the Far East in the ensuing centuries, the belief developed that the Buddha appeared on earth many times in history. In fact, there have been thousands of Buddhas who have manifested or will manifest themselves both in the past and in the future. The historical Buddha (the prince Siddhartha who brought the message of enlightenment to India and lived between the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.) was but one of a long line of Buddhas, including the Prabhutaratna Buddha (the Buddha of the Past) and the Maitreya Buddha (The Buddha Yet to Come).

Perhaps the most popular Buddha of the Mahayana tradition is the Amitabha Buddha, whose message of universal salvation made him particularly beloved among the common people who found it difficult to understand or follow the path of renunciation as followed by disciplined Buddhist monks and nuns. According to Buddhist tradition, the Amitabha Buddha had himself once been a sincere monk who lived eons before our recorded history. He had listened to the teachings of the Buddha of that time and vowed to become a Bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas are extraordinary beings who are capable of attaining enlightenment but, because of their great compassion for the suffering of their fellow creatures upon the earth, agree to stay in this realm of existence so that they can help others attain a deeper understanding of the meaning of their life.

The Amitabha Buddha was so spiritually developed that he vowed to refuse individual enlightenment for himself unless by that enlightenment he could gain the power to help every creature in the entire cosmos attain salvation from suffering. This liberation would come simply to those who would utter the name of this Bodhisattva's enlightened self as the Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha of infinite and immeasurable (*amita*) and enlightening splendor (*abha*). Among all the creatures of the universe, whosoever remembered Amitabha and repeated his name, particularly in the hour of death, would be transported into the realm of the Western Paradise. There each soul would appear in a vast cosmic lake and be reborn as a lotus bud emerging from the water. In the Paradise of Amitabha, all are entitled to the lotus throne. The compassionate message of the Amitabha Buddha is that all created things are potentially Buddhas even should they be ignorant of their true nature. To quote Zimmer: “All are capable of the highest wisdom, all are entitled to the lotus throne; and the way to this absolute fulfillment is devotion. This, then, is the gospel—the boundless light—of Amitabha” (*Art of Indian Asia* 205–6).

In the Buddhist tradition, as in the Hindu, the lotus can be a throne, a flower

support for the divine power manifested into the earthly plane, but it can also represent every human soul born from the dark mud of the earth and struggling to expand upward toward the bright illumination of enlightenment.

The companion of the Amitabha Buddha in the Western Paradise is Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Infinite Compassion. Some of the most beautiful depictions in Asian art are of this personage, who stands upon a lotus pedestal and often delicately holds a beautiful, fully opened lotus flower. In China, the Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva is called Kuan Yin. In female form, she is one of the most beloved figures to the followers of Buddhism. In Japanese art, the Amitabha Buddha (Japanese: Amida) and two Bodhisattvas including Avalokiteshvara (Japanese: Kwannon) are often either sculpted or painted seated upon lotus thrones emerging from a stylized pool of water. In these depictions, just behind the head of the Amitabha Buddha a lotus often appears in full bloom. Its shape is reminiscent of the sun in its greatest radiance. Such evocative works testify to the potency of the symbol of the lotus throughout Eastern Asia.

The Significance of the Lotus in Ancient Egypt

The image of the lotus, so central to the iconographical systems of Asia, also appears as a sacred flower in the oldest mythologies of Egypt. As with its counterparts in the East, the lotus was strongly associated with stories of creation.

In the beginning, according to Egyptian legend, “The earth was filled with watery emptiness, without shape. From these waters, called Nun, there emerged a mound of land and upon this mound, all that exists came into being” (Hobson 128). In several versions of the story, it is told how a lotus plant grew from the mound and blossomed, and, as its petals opened, the lotus gave birth to the sun. This event, according to Egyptian tradition, was called the First Occurrence and was the earliest tangible manifestation of divine power.

In Egypt, too, the lotus flower came to be understood as a symbol of the life force. In an interesting parallel to Hindu mythology, Egyptian tradition held that “the highest god appeared, self-begotten, emerging from a lotus” (Moon 380). An inscription at the Temple of Horus at Edfu identifies the First One, who “caused the Earth to be when he came into existence” (Moon 380), as the Great Lotus.

The primal lotus flower is also associated in Egyptian legend with the building of the very first temple, laid down by the gods themselves. The earliest temple was a simple outer enclosure wall with a reed-mat shelter over the lotus plant to shield it and set it aside as a sacred space (Hobson 128). Each of the later temples was modeled after this original temple with its protected inner nucleus imitating the shelter over the primal lotus, “the lotus which came into being in the beginning” (Lurker 77).

As in Asia, the lotus blossom is symbolically linked with the sun, for the Egyptians also observed that the lotus blossoms shut their petals at nightfall and at daybreak orient themselves eastward and open up to the light. The lotus

emerging from the water became the symbol of the sun, reborn each day after its journey through the darkness of the night. This suggestion of continual life emerging from the darkness, as personified in the rising of the sun each day and the reawakening of the lotus flower, laid the basis for the Egyptian image of the sun-god of light born each day from the lotus flower.

Some of the most delightful depictions in Egyptian art consist of carved reliefs of the sun-child, Horus, emerging from the lotus. These reliefs, which decorated the Horus Temple at Edfu, were placed in a special type of temple called a *mamessi*, or birthing house, dedicated to the emergence of the divine child (Moon 231). This image is a celebratory one of the child as a newborn sun dancing upon the lotus blossom rising from the dark waters. One Egyptian text records, "I am the pure lotus that rises in the glorious light to the peculiar delight of Re [a name for the Sun God]" (Clark 239).

The traditional linking of the lotus with light and with the life force accounts for the numerous references to it in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. In this collection of invocations for eternal life, the deceased pronounces the desire to be transformed into a sacred lotus (Lurker 79). In countless illustrations of the Book of the Dead, lotuses appear as offerings and as sacred ritual flowers embodying the power of the light of life and the divine force to conquer the forces of darkness and death. A study of the imagery associated with the burials of the pharaohs shows that each wished to be reborn as the sun-god on the cosmic lake so that he could be identified for eternity with the forces of light. Thus, one of the most famous images from the tomb of the Pharaoh Tutankhamen shows him as a wide-eyed newly born child, emerging from the center of a delicately painted lotus blossom.

The Significance of the Lotus in Mughal India

The image of the lotus in India is not confined to the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, for it also was a central and important decorative element in the architectural traditions of the Mughal rulers, who came into India from Central Asia in the sixteenth century and by the seventeenth century ruled over most of the Indian subcontinent. The Mughals were of both Turkish and Mongol descent, yet were Muslim in their religious beliefs. One of their greatest rulers, Akbar, departed from the general policy of intolerance followed by earlier Islamic dynasties in India and introduced new ideas about toleration toward the Hindu religion and respect for the culture of the indigenous peoples of India. The architecture of his reign evolved into a fascinating amalgamation of both Hindu and Islamic art. Indeed, the subsequent marriage of these two expressions under the architectural patronage of the son and grandson of Akbar produced some of the most beautiful buildings in the history of architecture, including the Taj Mahal.

Interestingly, one of the favorite motifs in Mughal architecture was the lotus. However, it may not be that the predilection for the lotus in Mughal architecture came only from contact with Indian decorative forms. The Mughal rulers were

also heir to the ancient traditions of Iranian architecture dating back to the pre-Islamic period and, indeed, were great lovers of the ancient form of Persian architecture known as the *pairi-daeza*, or the paradise garden. Thoroughly Persian in their culture and in their language, the Mughals were deeply imbued with the ancient imagery of the paradise garden as expressed both in the pre-Islamic and the Islamic traditions of Iran.

The concept of the paradise garden was already present during the early Achaemenian period in Iran (c. 600 B.C.) in the *pairi-daeza* of Cyrus the Great. We have evidence of such a garden taking the form of the *chahar bagh* motif, divided into four quarters by four streams of water forming a cross (Moynihan 2). The Mughal rulers' well-known love of flowers and the importance of such as decoration in Mughal architecture can also be traced back to ancient Persian traditions. Fine examples of floral decoration appear in the great complex of the Achaemenian kings outside the city of Shiraz in southern Iran and known to us today by the Greek name of Persepolis, or "city of the Persians." This huge ceremonial center and palace was built in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. and was a showcase for the power of the Achaemenian kings.

Lotuses appear at Persepolis, where they are carefully carved as base supports of the great stone columns once holding up the roof of the audience hall. The Persians borrowed quite freely from other architectural traditions of the Near Eastern and Mediterranean regions, so it is likely this lotus form was originally inspired by the use of the lotus in Egyptian temples. In the sacred buildings on the Nile, it was very common to carve the capitals of columns in the shape of a lotus blossom. These Egyptian capitals, some of which still retain the original paint indicating the petals of the lotus, were created as references to the creation story of the First Occurrence (described above); the distinctive lotus capitals also were reminders of that first temple built to shelter the primal lotus. Lotus flowers not only appear on the bases of the columns at Persepolis but also constitute the main decoration on the sculpted reliefs of the exterior of the staircase leading up to the great *apadana*, or audience hall of the Persian kings. Here, the lotuses emerge from their stalks and begin to open their petals to the light. In another bas-relief at Persepolis, a dignitary holds a lotus flower to his nose as he partakes of its life-affirming powers (Khansari 30–32).

But what might the lotuses have meant at Persepolis? If we think back to the symbolism of the lotus associated with the power of the sun and of light, then it is possible to make a conjecture that the lotus motifs appearing at Persepolis represent a similar symbolism alluding to the triumph of light over darkness.⁴ In addition, the floral imagery throughout Persepolis turns the whole complex into

4. This theme is also expressed at Persepolis, where a famous relief sculpture of the lion and bull in combat appears on the stairway leading to the great audience hall. Studies have shown that this motif has links to astrological symbolism in which the lion represents light and the defeated bull, darkness (Hartner 1–16).

an image of the *páiri-daeza*. Indeed, one scholar called the site a kind of “petrified grove” in which “a Persian paradise is turned to stone” (Wheeler 36).

Given the presence of the lotus image in both of the older traditions that had a great impact on Mughal architecture (Persian and Hindu), it is not surprising that the lotus played such an important role in its development. One of the earliest examples we have of this image in Mughal architecture appears in the lotus garden of the first Mughal emperor, Babur (Moynihan 103–6). In the carefully laid out configuration of this garden, the shape of the pools was carved into foliate forms imitating the petals of the open lotus blossom. The lotus-shaped pools of this garden were built near a mosque founded by Babur and surely carried with them both the ancient concept of the triumph of light over darkness as well as the Persian *páiri-daeza* imagery. Thus, the lotus form so eloquent in Hinduism, Buddhism, Egyptian religion, and ancient Persian traditions could also carry deep meaning within the religion of Islam as it was transported to India.

Indeed, Babur’s lotus garden is not unusual in its use of this kind of floral imagery, for lotuses abound in the buildings created by Babur’s descendants. One of the finest examples can be found in the Red Fort in Delhi in the section of the palace built by Akbar’s grandson, Shah Jahan. Here, the lotus is not associated with a mosque, a tomb, or a garden, but instead appears in the harem. Attempting to create a rather more physical kind of paradise on earth, Shah Jahan had a large, open lotus flower cut from a single block of white marble to adorn the center of the room. The beautifully carved flower, with its delicate leaves, forms the focus of the *chahar bagh* plan of this section of the Red Fort and is situated where two streams of water cross, dividing the room into four sections. Therefore, the four streams were directed through the room not only to afford cooling breezes to those inside but also to symbolize on earth the delights of the garden paradise promised to the devout Muslim believer (Tillotson 62).

The Lotus and the Rose

In the religions that developed in the Mediterranean region and in Europe, the lotus flower as symbol of revelation and of divine light was replaced by another flower, the rose. Scholars of religious iconography agree, however, that both the lotus and the rose carry the same symbolic meanings.⁵

The rose of Christian and Islamic imagery, then, parallels the lotus in Asia and ancient Egypt as the flower representing the Manifestation of God and as the seat of revelation.⁶ Like the lotus in the East, the rose was also associated

5. See Seward 10, Cirlot 141, Cooper 193, and Jung 81.

6. See Seward, and Schimmel 111.

with the divine light and the miracle of birth, the triumph of light over darkness, and the manifestation of divine attributes into the earthly plane.⁷

To recount the rich tradition of the symbol of the imagery of the rose in Christianity and Islam would be beyond the scope of this article. However, it is difficult to mention this symbol without describing one of the most powerful images of the *rosa mystica* that appears in the climax of Dante's great vision of Paradise in his *Divine Comedy*, written in the early fourteenth century in Italy. At the end of Dante's journey into the levels of heaven, he sees the great white rose—"So did the host of Angels now descend / Amid the Flower of the countless leaves / Now rise to where their love dwells without end" (31:7-13) (qtd. in Luke 151). The vision of the white rose is the mediator carrying the poet's mind and heart upward until it is filled with the realization of the very essence of God. The choice of this image indicates the strong parallels in the meanings of both rose and lotus symbolism, for the poet has chosen the image of a great multi-petaled white flower as a metaphor for the journey toward purity that brings us ever closer to God.

The Theme of the Lotus in the Modern West

Given the strong predominance of the imagery of the rose in the poetic and mystical traditions of Europe, it is interesting to observe that the latter half of the nineteenth century marked a new fascination, in the West, with exploring the meanings of the symbolism of the lotus. This was a time when a number of seeking people, feeling that the traditional religions of the West were too narrow or no longer sustained them spiritually, turned for inspiration to the imagery of the East. Several artists of the fin de siècle period in Europe (c.1885-1910) became interested in incorporating the imagery of Eastern religions into their works.

The lotus began to appear in art works inspired by these ideas. Artists influenced by the ideas of Theosophy incorporated lotus themes into their works, and a group of like-minded artists who gathered together in Brittany formed a group called the Nabis (from the Hebrew word for prophet); images of the lotus appeared in their works too (Ellridge). Many of these artists were looking for points of unity within the world's religions, and the lotus may have attracted them as a symbol of the coming together of the religions of the East and West. An interesting example of this merging can be seen in a painting by one of the artists of the Nabi group, Paul Ranson. In his *Christ and Buddha* (c. 1890), there is a depiction of a crucifix combined with an image of the Buddha with lotus flowers. In another work by Ranson entitled *Nabi* (1890), a frieze of stylized lotus leaves appears at the bottom of the painting (Mauner, fig. 64).

7. The image of the rose is also commonly used in the Bahá'í Sacred Writings, where this noble and ancient symbolism has been both beautifully revived and amplified by Bahá'u'lláh.

This period also witnessed the contributions of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, who pioneered the concept of the “collective unconscious.” Jung postulated that there exists within each of us a repository of images and symbols making up the deepest level of our unconscious and forming our common human heritage. Such images and symbols appear globally in dreams, art, poetry, and religious experiences, transcending boundaries of time and space. Jung pointed out that these powerful images can be understood as symbols embodying primal elements and realities of life and of the cosmos as a whole. Such symbols point the way toward understanding higher truths that cannot be expressed in more prosaic forms of communication; they far transcend the limitations of the conscious mind.⁸

One of these “archetypal” images is the lotus. Jung saw it first as an essentially feminine image, in that, at one level, its shape recalls the womb. The vessel of the lotus-flower suggests a protective environment, one that “cherishes and sustains” (Jung 82) and also fosters growth and ultimately emergence. The vessel shape of the flower can also be linked to other feminine archetypes like that of the Holy Grail.

On another level, the qualities associated with the lotus also include “the wisdom and spiritual exultation that transcend reason” (Jung 81–82). According to Jung, the lotus is also a place to facilitate natural transformation, and, as a type of mandala, the circular pattern of its leaves can represent a pathway and a journey to the healing center. In its mandala shape, the lotus can also represent wholeness and completeness, a symbol for the understanding of the primal unity of the cosmos (Jung 80–83).

The essential meanings Jung found in the symbol of the lotus help to explain the power of this archetypal image and its appeal to so many people. Indeed, it is interesting that in the modern West, the art works eliciting some of the most emotional and reverential responses by gallery-goers are those from the series of *Waterlilies* painted by the French artist Claude Monet in the last decades of his life. In this series of works, Monet became so enthralled with the theme of the flowers floating on the ever-changing surface of the water that he created his own ponds and employed full-time gardeners to care for them. Each morning before sunrise Monet would arise, go to his floating studio, and paint the flowers on the water through all the changes of the passing hours of the day. These paintings, characterized by their loose and free brushwork and Monet’s

8. The founders of the great religions of the world understood this truth and used this same method to teach their powerful message. The teachings of Jesus are filled with parables and symbols, many of them taken directly from elements in nature (i.e. the lilies, the fig tree, the mustard seed, etc.) In referring to a similar usage of symbolism in the Bahá'í Writings, Bahá'u'lláh speaks of “this symbolic language, more eloquent than any speech” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 79). Indeed, for Bahá'u'lláh, the openness to understanding this symbolic language was the sign of one’s level of spiritual discernment. For a discussion of the importance of symbolic images and metaphors in the Bahá'í Writings, see Buck 92–101.

revelatory understanding of color and light, became meditations on the transcendent and mysterious qualities in Nature and a kind of painted invocation celebrating the rhythms of creation itself. The images of the flowers themselves are critical to the overall theme of the painting. However, the essential meaning of this subject will not be fully understood by the viewer until it is recalled that the French title Monet gave to these works was *Nymphéas*, revealing that the flowers in Monet's paintings are indeed lotuses in the same water lily form as appears in Indian, Egyptian, and Persian art. The enormous appeal of Monet's canvases may rest, then, not only in Monet's handling of paint and his observation of light but also in the viewer's unconscious response to the archetypal power of the imagery of the flowers within them. Although ostensibly secular or even scientific in their subject matter, Monet's *Nymphéas* paintings seem instead to herald the revival of ancient and powerful imagery that speaks to deep and spiritual longings within the soul of the modern viewer.

The Meanings of the Lotus

This brief survey of the theme of the lotus flower in religion and art presents it as a form replete with meanings. Yet, as Jung has pointed out, certain similar themes associated with this image appear to cross geographical boundaries and to escape the confines of space and time.

One of the key concepts associated with the lotus is light. The flower lends itself to this observation as it opens its petals to the sunlight and closes them to the darkness. In nearly all religious traditions, this connection with light evokes not only divine power but also higher levels of the illumination of the human mind. The connection with light also relates it to the concept of purity, and the paradox that the flower of such radiant whiteness grows out of the muddy pond and the dirty water is seen as a powerful metaphor for human transformation from the world of the physical to that of the spirit. This journey from darkness to light is the journey of each of us, and, as Jung suggests in equating the lotus with the mandala form, it is also the journey back to oneness.

Another interesting theme of the lotus flower is its association with the feminine power. It is seen as a kind of womb, first linked with the darkness but then exalted as the place from which illumination and beauty come forth. From this transforming environment comes wisdom, and it is also the miraculous place from which the divine power can manifest itself into the world.

The lotus can also be seen as part of a paradise garden containing the golden blossom of great power, the mystic flower whose beauty is intoxicating because it is a reflection of the divine beauty. The lotus, too, is associated with the throne, the seat of Revelation upon which the Manifestation of divine attributes appears in regal human form. Finally, as is the case with the lotus in Buddhism and the rose in Christianity and Islam, the mystic flower itself can stand as a metaphor for the very person of the Manifestation of God.

The Mystic Flower and the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh

This exploration of the image of the lotus in a number of traditions and also an understanding of the meanings of Jungian archetypal images springing from our common human heritage can help us to understand why the Lotus Temple of Bahapur resonates so strongly with those who see it. Indeed, the image of the Bahá'í Lotus Temple can be seen to reiterate the ancient feminine and birth imagery of that flower, for it is called the “Mother Temple” of all of India. As it emerges from its pools of water, it is also a metaphor for the journey from the physical to the spiritual; as well, in its carefully tended gardens and the beauty of its grounds, it creates a vision of Paradise on earth. The purity of the white exterior by day and its floodlit form by night ally the Lotus Temple with the power of light and all of its transcendent symbolism.

While the aquatic form of the lotus flower is not a symbol specifically used in the Bahá'í Sacred Writings, Bahá'u'lláh does employ the strong imagery of a mystic flower in a number of important passages in His Writings.

In the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Bahá'u'lláh writes that “the fragrance of the mystic Flower can be inhaled only in the ideal Garden, and the lilies of ancient wisdom can blossom nowhere except in the city of a stainless heart” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 191). The content of the passage suggests that only those with purity of motive will attain the goal of the journey toward recognition and understanding. The experience of inhaling the “fragrance of the mystic flower” as the goal of this journey is an effective symbolic image of the spiritual state attained by those who recognize the Manifestation of God for this day.

Similar imagery is employed in another passage:

Hear Me, ye mortal birds! In the Rose Garden of changeless splendor a Flower hath begun to bloom, compared to which every other flower is but a thorn, and before the brightness of Whose glory the very essence of beauty must pale and wither. Arise, therefore, and, with the whole enthusiasm of your hearts, with all the eagerness of your souls, the full fervor of your will, and the concentrated efforts of your entire being, strive to attain the paradise of His presence, and endeavor to inhale the fragrance of the incorruptible Flower, to breathe the sweet savors of holiness, and to obtain a portion of this perfume of celestial glory. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 320–21)

Here, again, Bahá'u'lláh uses the mystic flower as a metaphor for Himself and invites the reader to experience the beauty of His advent into the world. “A Flower has begun to bloom,” He writes, and it is a blossom of brightness, splendor, and beauty.

In yet another passage, Bahá'u'lláh continues with the image of the flower as representing both His own personage and His Revelation:

The Flower, thus far hidden from the sight of men, is unveiled to your eyes. In the open radiance of His glory He standeth before you. His voice summoneth all the holy

and sanctified beings to come and be united with Him. Happy is he that turneth thereunto; well is it with him that hath attained, and gazed on the light of so wondrous a countenance. (*Gleanings* 322)

With the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, the myriad meanings of the mystic flower—as the seat of divine power, as the place of transformation and the facilitator of the journey from darkness to light, as the bringer forth of life and wisdom, and also as the crucible of spiritual birth and transformation, come together and, through the transforming power of the divine Word, do indeed become the symbol of the Manifestation of God for this age.

By building the Bahá'í House of Worship in New Delhi in the form of the mystic flower, Mr. Sahba and his design team have found a most effective image for reiterating the great truths of the religions of the past, but they also have evoked the presence of a new Flower, the one that has “begun to bloom” in the personage of Bahá'u'lláh.

Works Cited

- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*. Comp. Howard MacNutt. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982.
- Bahá'u'lláh. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. 2d ed. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976.
- . *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. 2d ed. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1950.
- Buck, Christopher. *Symbol and Secret: Qur'an Commentary in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Íqán*. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1995.
- Burckhardt, Titus. *Sacred Art in East and West: Principles and Methods*. Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1967.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Mythic Image*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.
- Clark, T. R. *Myth and Symbolism in Ancient Egypt*. London: n. p., 1959.
- Cirlot, J. E. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1983.
- Cooper, J. C. *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1978.
- Ellridge, Arthur. *Gauguin and the Nabis: Prophets of Modernism*. Paris: Terrail, 1995.
- Hartner, Willy. “The Earliest History of the Constellations in the Near East and the Motif of the Lion-Bull Combat.” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 24 (1965): 1–16.
- Hobson, Christine. *The World of the Pharaohs: A Complete Guide to Ancient Egypt*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1990.
- Jung, C. G. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*. Vol. 9. Bollingen Series 20. New York: Bollingen, 1959.

- Khanasari, Mehdi, Reza Moghtader, and Minouch Yavari. *The Persian Garden: Echoes of Paradise*. Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 1998.
- Luke, Helen M. *Dark Wood to White Rose: Journey and Transformation in Dante's Divine Comedy*. New York: Parabola Books, 1989.
- Lurker, Manfred. *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1980.
- Mauner, George. *The Nabis: Their History and their Art, 1886–1896*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1978.
- Moon, Beverly Ann, ed. *An Encyclopedia of Archetypal Symbolism*. Boston: Shambhala, 1991.
- Moynihan, Elizabeth. *Paradise as a Garden in Persia and Mughal India*. New York: George Braziller, 1979.
- The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The Micropedia. Vol. 7. 15th ed. Chicago: 1991.
- Rai, Raghu, and Roger White. *Forever in Bloom: The Lotus of Bahapur*. New Delhi: Time Books International, 1992.
- Sahba, Fariburz. "The Jewel in the Lotus." In *The Dawning Place of the Remembrance of God: Mother Temple of the Indian Sub-Continent*. Pune, India: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, 1986.
- Schimmel, Annemarie. *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.
- Seward, Barbara. *The Symbolic Rose*. New York: Columbia Press, 1960.
- Tansley, David V. *Subtle Body: Essence and Shadow*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1977.
- Tillotson, G. H. R. *Mughal India*. London: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Wheeler, Mortimer. *Flames over Persepolis, Turning-point in History*. New York: Reynal, 1968.
- Zimmer, Heinrich. *The Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythology and Transformations*. New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1955.
- . *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*. New York: Harper and Row, 1946.