

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY  
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

August 16, 2011

To the American Bahá'í Community

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

We understand and join with the friends in their excitement in these months leading up to the centenary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to North America. As communities plan activities "to mark," in the words of the Universal House of Justice, "through celebration and reflection, the anniversary of specific events of local significance associated with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journey," questions have arisen regarding the appropriate use, reproduction, and distribution of photos and portraits of the Master. The dear friends who have inquired want to ensure that any steps they take out of love for Him will not unintentionally compromise the dignity of His station. Fortunately, this is a subject on which both the beloved Guardian and the Universal House of Justice have provided detailed guidance over the years.

Generally speaking, individuals are welcome to make personal use of photographs of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, such as by displaying them in their homes, and to publish them, as appropriate, in books. However, in recent letters written on its behalf, the House of Justice has expressed caution with respect to individuals engaging in the "widespread commercial distribution of photographs of 'Abdu'l-Bahá," stating that "it is generally not appropriate for individuals to be involved in the marketing of photographs of the Master, a practice that would not be in keeping with the profound respect and dignity that must be accorded to His station." There are, of course, friends working in related fields, such as photography, the graphic arts, or publishing, where selling photos of the Master may naturally form a part of their activities. However, all individuals are asked to limit their efforts in this regard and to avoid practices which would tend to commercialize this sacred image, whether or not financial profit is involved. A spirit of reverence and restraint should be uppermost in the minds of those engaged in any such pursuits.

In addition, it is important to bear in mind the difference between, on the one hand, actual photographs of the Master and, on the other, paintings, drawings or, photographs of paintings of Him. In a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice to our National Assembly dated May 6, 2009, we received the following guidance:

The House of Justice has explained that in keeping with the guidance of Shoghi Effendi the friends are not prohibited from making drawings or paintings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and placing them in their homes. What is not permitted is to widely distribute or circulate copies or photographs of such a painting. On this point the Guardian's secretary wrote on his behalf to an individual believer on 11 July 1942:

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“He was pleased to receive the picture of the Master which your friend made, and though he sees no objection to people having portraits of the Master in their homes, if it gives them pleasure, he prefers that for distribution and for purchase, they should confine themselves to His photographs, as these are, of course, a much more perfect likeness of Him.”

In summary, photographs of the Master may be distributed for purchase. Drawings or paintings are to be distributed in a limited way and may not be sold. Photographs of paintings of the Master may not be distributed or sold.

It may not be easy to tell the difference, in some cases, between a photograph of the Master and a photograph of a high quality painting. In accordance with the guidance above, those engaged in the sale or distribution of images of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá should ensure that they are selling photographs and not photographs of paintings.

Questions have also arisen with respect to the colorization or restoration of photographs of the beloved Master. The House of Justice has advised that there is no objection to the colorization of a photographic depiction of the Master, provided that the quality and extent of the coloring would not affect the dignity of the portrait nor violate the integrity of the original photograph. A faithfully rendered colorized photograph may be distributed and sold. The same principle applies to the process of restoration of a photograph, in that the integrity of the historical photograph must be maintained and any digital manipulation of the image should not result in distortion of any element of the original nor violate its natural quality. Colorized or restored photographs of the Master should be submitted to our Review Office for approval. Those engaged in the sale or distribution of such images should confirm that they have been reviewed so as to ensure that the highest standards of accuracy and quality are maintained.

The community is generally mindful that it is not acceptable to represent ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as a character in a dramatic work, to include His photo in a flyer or on a publicity poster, or to place it on the cover of a book or CD, and will no doubt bear these points in mind while considering ways to celebrate and reflect on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit to these shores. Please refer to our letter dated February 22, 2011—available on the Administrative website—for general guidance to assist with the planning of centenary activities. May the most enduring response to the Master’s strenuous labors be the ever-growing capacity of the American Bahá’í community to carry out the life-giving service to which He has summoned us.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Kenneth E. Bowers  
Secretary