

Painting 'Abdu'l-Bahá

On the night before 'Abdu'l-Bahá arrived in New York in 1912, he wrote, "On My arrival in America Miss Juliet Thompson shall paint a wonderful portrait of Me."

Juliet was an accomplished painter, but she felt "surprise and dismay, fear, joy and gratitude all mixed together."

'Abdu'l-Bahá asked, "Can you paint Me in a half hour?"

She was concerned, since she'd never finished a portrait in less than two weeks.

He said, "Well, I will give you three half hours."

For her paintings, Juliet used pastels—powdered colors shaped into sticks. 'Abdu'l-Bahá sat in a cramped, dark basement. Juliet liked to stand, but there was only room to sit.

He said, "I want you to paint My *Servitude* to God."

She cried, "Only the Holy Spirit could paint *Your* Servitude to God. No human hand could do it. Pray for me, or I am lost."

"I will pray," he answered, "and . . . you will be inspired."

Juliet said, "All fear fell away from me and it was as though Someone Else saw through my eyes, worked through my hand. All the points, all the planes in that matchless Face were so clear to me that my hand couldn't put them down quickly enough . . ."

This continued each time she worked. She wrote, "Oh, these sittings: so wonderful, yet so humanly difficult! We move from room to room, from one kind of light to another . . . Nothing makes any difference. The minute I begin to work the same rapture takes possession of me. Someone Else looks through my eyes and sees clearly; Someone Else works through my hand . . ."



'Abdu'l-Bahá

Painting by Juliet Thompson in 1912

'Abdu'l-Bahá posed six times, but Juliet completed the portrait in 90 minutes, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá requested. At the fourth sitting, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said he was sleepy, and she tried to paint while he napped. "But," she said, "I found that I could not. What I saw then was . . . too formidable. He sat still as a statue, His eyes closed, infinite peace on that chiseled face . . ."

At the fifth sitting, another artist brought in her own drawing, and he changed his pose.

The sixth time 'Abdu'l-Bahá posed, Juliet wrote, "I didn't put on a single stroke . . . He suddenly rose from His chair and said: 'It is finished.'"

Juliet sold photographs of the portrait, and she planned to give the money to help fund the Bahá'í Temple in the U.S. But 'Abdu'l-Bahá took her hand and said, "I know your circumstances, Juliet . . . You have debts . . . I want you to keep the money for yourself . . . This is best."

On his last day in the U.S., 'Abdu'l-Bahá told Juliet, "Remember, I am with you always. Bahá'u'lláh will be with you always."

A pastel painting's delicate surface must be carefully preserved to avoid smudging and damage from light, humidity, and other elements. A friend of Juliet's wrote that the portrait was "time-damaged, it had to be restored, and Juliet felt the original was gone forever."

