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Author(s): Victor Sobhani and Sonjél Vreeland

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# “A DEFINITE RESPONSIBILITY TO SHOULDER”<sup>1</sup> THE PRESERVATION OF HISTORICAL OBJECTS AT THE BAHÁ’Í WORLD CENTRE

VICTOR SOBHANI AND SONJÉL VREELAND

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## ABSTRACT

The unique and extensive collection of historical objects, artifacts and decorative items at the Bahá’í World Centre has profound meaning and value for followers of the Bahá’í Faith. As tangible expressions of the body of doctrine and system of values and beliefs that form the religion, these items are integral to the strong cultural tradition of Bahá’í pilgrimage. Bahá’í conservators who treat these items must balance reversibility, honoring historic integrity, the artist’s intent, a scientific understanding of the object’s make and materials with beauty, aesthetics, reverence and piety.

The Bahá’í Faith is the youngest of the world’s independent religions. Its founders, Bahá’u’lláh (1817-1892) and the Báb (1819-1850), are regarded by Bahá’ís as the most recent in the line of Messengers of God that stretches back beyond recorded time and includes Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, Christ and Muhammad. A large collection of historical objects of various materials, ranging from original sacred manuscripts and texts to household items and personal effects of Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb, members of their families and other historical figures is currently housed at the Bahá’í World Centre in Haifa, Israel. The importance of collecting, documenting and conserving these items, particularly the written works, has been delineated by Bahá’u’lláh himself, and has been reiterated by his successors, as a specific responsibility for His followers. Furthermore, the first exhibitions of these objects were arranged by Shoghi Effendi, the great-grandson of Bahá’u’lláh and appointed interpreter of His writings. In addition, the Bahá’í World Centre’s first administrative building to be erected was the International Archives Building, an exhibit hall designed and constructed under Shoghi Effendi’s guidance. He stated: “now [...] is the time for the friends to exert their utmost in order to preserve as much as they can of the sacred relics and various other precious objects that are associated with the lives of the Founders of the Faith” (Effendi 1973, 4). This prescribed emphasis on preservation for posterity necessitates an awareness among Bahá’í conservators of the latest preservation developments and techniques for both professional and religious reasons and engenders a reverent approach to their work.

This essay, which formed the basis of a presentation at the 2011 annual conference for the American Institute of Conservation, seeks to define the scope of the collection at the Bahá’í World Centre and describe its curatorial aesthetics; to highlight the directives for conservation as stipulated by the religion’s sacred writings and its authoritative interpretations; to provide a material culture study; and to briefly discuss the conservation treatment of one item from among the collection: a Rodgers & Sons pocketknife belonging to the Báb.

## 1. SCOPE OF THE COLLECTION

In order to define the scope of the collection of objects at the World Centre, a historical introduction to the Bahá’í Faith is required. As mentioned previously, the Bahá’í Faith was founded by the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh and is the youngest of the world’s independent religions. The Báb (an Arabic title meaning “the Gate” and whose given name was Siyyid ‘Ali-Muhammad) announced in 1844 the imminent appearance of the *Messenger of God* awaited by all the peoples of the world. [Bahá’u’lláh](#) was a member of one of the great patrician families of Persia. Rejecting a courtly life, Bahá’u’lláh became well known for His generosity and kindness, and His support for the message of the Báb. Engulfed in the waves of violence unleashed upon the followers of the Báb following His execution before a firing squad of 750 soldiers in 1850, Bahá’u’lláh suffered not only the loss of all His worldly endowments but was subjected to imprisonment, torture, and a series of banishments – the first of which was to Baghdad where, in 1863, He announced Himself as the One promised by the Báb. From Baghdad, Bahá’u’lláh was subsequently exiled as a prisoner to Constantinople, Adrianople, and

finally to Acre, in present-day Israel, in 1868. In 1892, He passed away in a mansion in Bahji, north of Acre, and was buried in an adjacent property. This shrine is the focal point for Bahá'ís and is visited annually by thousands of pilgrims who travel from all corners of the earth to pay their respects at His resting place. The significance of this edifice is comparable to the Western Wall in Jerusalem for Jews and the Kaaba in Mecca for Muslims.

Fifty years after His death, the remains of the Báb were brought to Haifa and buried in a simple stone structure on Mount Carmel. This building, under the directives of Shoghi Effendi, the great grand-son of Bahá'u'lláh and appointed interpreter of both the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and His son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was later covered with a majestic superstructure crowned with a golden dome.

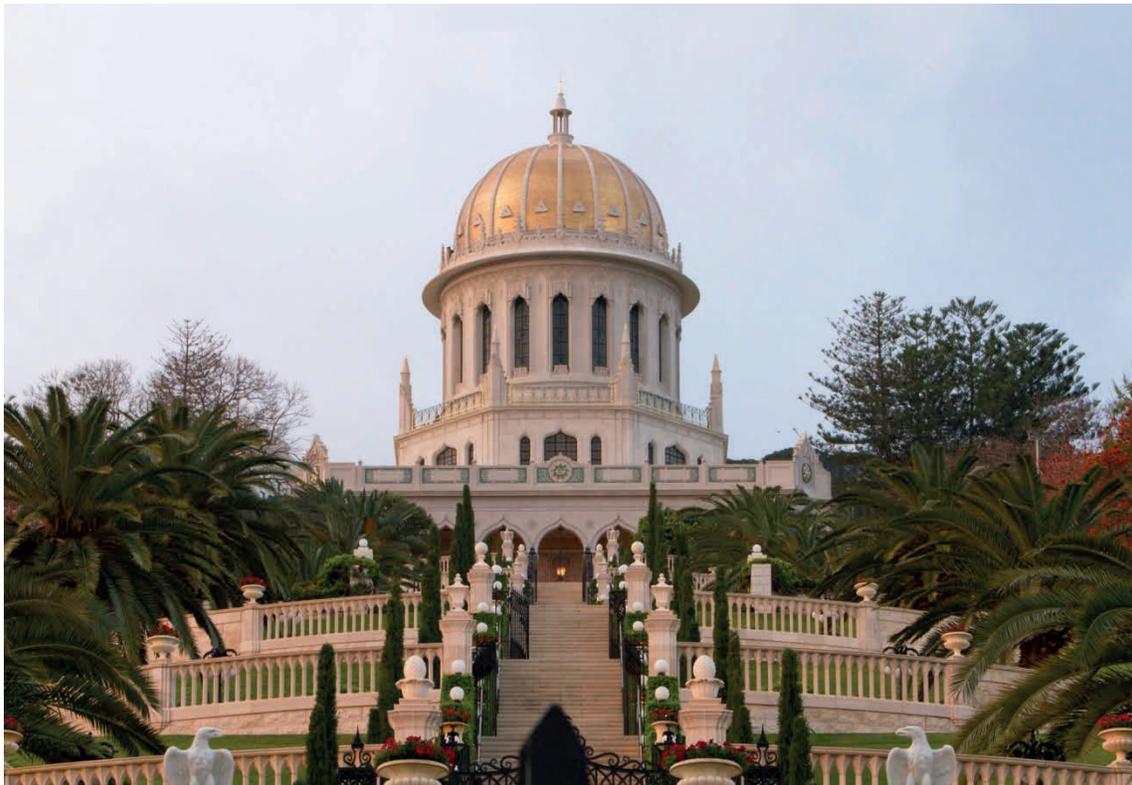


Fig. 1. The Shrine of the Báb (Courtesy of the Bahá'í World News Service)

These two shrines and their surrounding gardens were inscribed in 2008 as UNESCO World Heritage sites. They demonstrate Outstanding Universal Value under two criteria: 1) as tangible places of great meaning for one of the world's religions and 2) because they are visited by thousands of pilgrims each year from around the world, and provide an exceptional testimony to, and are powerful communicators of, the strong cultural tradition of Bahá'í pilgrimage ([www.whp.unesco.org](http://www.whp.unesco.org)).

These two shrines, along with eleven other historical sites associated with the life and imprisonment of Bahá'u'lláh and His family, as well as the administrative buildings of the religion make up the Bahá'í World Centre. These buildings in Haifa and 'Acre and the western Galilee represent both the historical memory and the contemporary heart of the worldwide Bahá'í community.

The collection of objects at the World Centre is therefore comprised primarily of the decorative and historical items placed inside the historic sites (known hereafter as Holy Places), many of which are partially curated as historic homes. The room of Bahá'u'lláh in the Mansion of Bahji, for example, was painstakingly recreated with replica furniture by Shoghi Effendi while the remaining rooms are curated as exhibition spaces for calligraphies, photographs, drawings, newspapers articles, letters and legal documents demonstrating the growth and global nature of the religion. The Shrines are empty spaces for praying and are decorated with elegant Persian carpets and a small number of antique decorative items such as vases and candelabra. Many also house relics, or items of historical significance used by the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, or members of their families.

A number of these relics are displayed in the International Archives Building, a building whose construction was overseen by Shoghi Effendi. He collated the majority of the collection over a period of thirty years. The collection includes letters and sacred texts, calligraphies, photographs, clothing, jewelry, household items, writing instruments, and corporeal relics such as dried blood, locks of hair and nail pairings.

Shoghi Effendi's curatorial work has, among others, two remarkable attributes. First, he emphasized the importance of knowing the provenance of the items in the World Centre's collection and of being assured of their authenticity. In many instances, authenticating documentation was kept next to or inside relics alongside exhibit labels in Shoghi Effendi's handwriting. Regarding relics associated with the 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi stated: "the general principle should be that any object used by Him in person should be preserved for posterity, whether in the local or the national archives. It is the duty and responsibility of the Bahá'í Assemblies to ascertain carefully whether such objects are genuine or not, and to exercise the utmost care and caution in the matter" (The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom 1976, 34). The assured provenance of the items and their documented history are of primary importance as it frees a Bahá'í pilgrim from doubt; they can view the displayed relics and historical objects without hesitation or uncertainty.

Secondly, Shoghi Effendi's curatorial work was remarkable as it was aesthetically pleasing and reverent to Bahá'ís. One powerful example of how beauty and reverence frame and enhance the exhibit of these historical objects in the International Archives Building is their display inside closed decorative cabinets. The act of unveiling the items and subsequently hiding them can convey to a pilgrim that the objects within the cabinets are rare, priceless, mysterious and stately. This gesture can also communicate that the occasion to see these objects is a solemn, slow paced, and meditative experience.

In other words, Shoghi Effendi's care and diligence in collating the collection and ensuring its provenance, and the reverent manner in which he chose to display items set the tone for how these items are viewed, appreciated, and when deemed necessary, treated by a conservator. Reverence and piety, the natural attitudes of a believer working on an object of deep personal significance to them, is further generated by the stipulations of Bahá'u'lláh and Shoghi Effendi that call for the careful preservation and conservation of these precious items.

## 2. PRESERVATION AND THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

Often the most dramatic measure taken to preserve an item prior to its arrival at the World Centre was when Bahá'ís, despite suffering intense persecution and at times unwarranted death,

carefully collected these sacred objects and passed them from one generation to the next, often hiding, protecting, and preserving them from those who wished to confiscate and destroy Bahá'í



Fig. 2. The upstairs level of the House of 'Abbúd, a Holy Place in Acre, Israel  
(Courtesy of the Bahá'í International Community, [www.bahai.org](http://www.bahai.org))

properties and belongings. Now safely and securely stored at the Bahá'í World Centre, the objects are subject to present day best-practice methods of conservation in accordance with Bahá'u'lláh's stipulation, which is here quoted by Shoghi Effendi:

In one of the Tablets, the Pen of the Most High, referring to this foundation, which provides the best and surest, the soundest and most perfect means of collecting, safeguarding and classifying the scattered, but growing body, of Sacred Writings and relics, states: 'It is the concern of the True One [Baha'u'llah] to reveal, and the concern of men to spread what hath been revealed. He will, verily, promulgate His Cause by the hands of His scattering and well-favored angels. Spiritual souls will assuredly emerge from behind the veil of Divine protection who will gather together the tokens and Verses of God and put them into the most excellent order. This is His sure and irrevocable decree.' (Horby 1983, 95)

In relation to the preservation of the sacred texts, Bahá'u'lláh was even more specific. He stated:

The treatment of the Tablets should be such that they remain preserved in their original immaculacy. When being read they should be placed within a second sheet, and thereafter deposited in some special place for safekeeping. (Archives Office 1983)

In other words, the preservation of the texts of the Bahá'í Faith, as well as objects associated with its two Founders is a direct and explicit instruction. Furthermore the need for conservators and museum professionals is clearly delineated. Shoghi Effendi wrote:

Now that the Cause is rapidly passing through so many different phases of its evolution, is the time for the friends to exert their utmost in order to preserve as much as they can of the sacred relics and various other precious objects that are associated with the lives of the Founders of the Faith, and particularly the Tablets They have revealed. Every believer should realize that he has a definite responsibility to shoulder in this matter, and to help, to whatever extent he can, in rendering successful and valuable work which National and local Bahá'í Archives committees are so devotedly accomplishing for the Faith in America. (Effendi 1973, 4)

### 3. POCKET KNIFE OF THE BÁB: MATERIAL CULTURE STUDY

In order to further understand the significance and treatments of objects in the World Centre's collection, let us examine this item, described as follows in the World Centre's database:

Bone covered steel pocket knife. Made of jigged bone, two liners and a two-end spring. There are two blades: the master blade, on the right, is a drop point blade and is 4.5 cm long, with the manufacturer's name visible on the front tang and the star and Maltese cross trademark on the back with inscriptions. The blade on the left is a pen blade and is 1.9 cm long. It has the star and Maltese trademark on the front tang and inscriptions on the back reading:

RODGERS CUTLERS  
HIS MAJESTY  
ENGLAND

NO. 6 NORFOLK STREET.

Both blades have a nail mark. There is one center pin and two nails on the sides made of nickel silver. With its blades sheathed the pocket knife measures 7.6 cm.

From the above mentioned inscriptions it can be inferred that the Báb's pocket knife was manufactured sometime between 1821, the year Rodgers and Sons was granted its Royal Warrant as the official suppliers of knives and cutlery to the British monarchy, and 1850, the year of His execution. The story around the company's designation is as extravagant as the exhibition knives they produced. John Rodgers, the second son alluded to in the company's name, met with the Prince Regent and presented him with a miniature exhibition knife that when folded measured less than an inch long but contained fifty-seven blades and accessories. While handling the knife, the Prince dropped it onto the plush floor carpet where it was buried and difficult to retrieve. Impressed, he ordered several knives for himself and his family and Rodgers and Sons soon became the "Cutlers to the Royal Family", emblazoning their title on their stationary, catalogues, and blades (Domenech 1999, 20–22). They proudly proclaimed themselves as makers of "The Knives of Kings and the Kings of Knives" (Domenech 1999, 23), which reflected not only their warrant as suppliers to several successive British monarchs (King George IV, Queen Caroline, William IV, Queen Victoria, King Edward VII, and George V) but also to the Shah of Persia (Domenech 1999, 36).

Norfolk Street is located in Sheffield, an English city known for its cutlery, and sword and knife makers. Quality aside, what further distinguished Rodgers and Sons from other companies was the success of their sales abroad. By 1870, ten tons of their wares were shipped to the United States of America and they also maintained outfits in London, New York, Toronto, Montreal, Havana, Calcutta, and Bombay (Domenech 1999, 23). The presence of the pocket knife among the Báb's possessions is a testament to the fact that despite the insistence of religious leaders to avoid contact and communication with non-Muslims and to adhere to traditions, the rapidly advancing technological, economic, political, military and cultural institutions of the West nevertheless extended their influence into the Middle East (Saiedi 2008, 5).

From the hustle and bustle of its manufacturer's world, the pocket knife makes its way to Iran. Placed within the context as a calligrapher's tool to sharpen reed pens, the pocket knife takes on an additional level of meaning as it becomes part of the mechanics of writing. Furthermore, as the Báb was known to, at times, reveal scripture in His own hand rather than the hand of a secretary, the pocket knife bears special connotations to Bahá'ís.



Fig. 3. The pocket knife of the Báb (Courtesy of the Bahá'í World Centre)

#### 4. POCKET KNIFE OF THE BÁB: CONSERVATION TREATMENT

Conservation and restoration treatments at the Bahá'í World Centre align themselves with contemporary conservation philosophy that places an emphasis on reversibility, honoring history integrity and the artist's intent, and a scientific understanding of the object's make and materials. Due to the newness of the Bahá'í religion, its relics were spared the effects of early and now outdated conservation practices where, as part of their treatments, items were modified, reworked and significantly altered by artists and craftsmen (Hartin 1990, 31).

Like their display, the treatments of these objects are undertaken in a reverent manner. The reverent nature of the work conducted is demonstrated in the minimal invasiveness of the treatment. In the case of the pocket knife of the Báb, the object was only cleaned with solvent on the surface in those areas where the elements of the air slightly oxidized its metal components. The soiling that was found in between the two jugged bones were left untouched in order for future scientist and historians to be able to analyze it and to possibly determine the time and location the pocket knife was used.

The conservation and restoration of the decorative items in the Shrines – often also historical in provenance -- differ from those closely associated with the religion's historical figures. In order to honor the sacredness of the places in which they are displayed and in order not to distract the praying and meditating visitors who gather from around the globe, these items are rendered as close to their original state as possible through the use of conservation methods; in these cases, Bahá'í conservators must balance every facet of contemporary conservation known to them alongside beauty and aesthetics. For example, a hanging gilded lamp inside the entrance to the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh was suffering not only from serious insect damage, but most of the gilding was worn off. In addition, one of the glass panes was cracked, and some wood details were in danger of falling off. This was treated following restoration procedures rather than conservation procedures: it was completely dismantled, cleaned of dust, replaced the cracked pane with the exact same type of glass, all the insect holes were filled with bees wax, the wooden sections properly repaired and re-gilded in order to have its original beauty restored and its perfection regained.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the philosophy underlying conservation treatments conducted at the Bahá'í World Centre is unique as it is specifically mandated by the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith and treatments are carried out with a sense of reverence and respect. The end result is not only a preservation of the contents of the Shrines and Bahá'í Holy Places, but a preservation of the pilgrim's experience – by caring for the contents of the Holy Places through conservation methods, subsequent generations of Bahá'í pilgrims will be able to visit the holy places and see the same things seen by their parents and grandparents. After first seeing the collection of relics housed at the Bahá'í World Centre in 1937, Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánúm, the wife of Shoghi Effendi, wrote:

If one could have walked into a museum of the authentic relics of the days and life of Christ [...] what would it have meant to the Christian believers? If they had seen His sandals, dusty from the road between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, or the mantle that hung from His shoulders - or the cloth that protected His head from the sun; what atmosphere of assurance, of wonder, even of adoration would have stirred the inheritors of His Faith. If their eyes could have rested on even one fragmentary line penned by His hand... To most of the people of the world the meaning of such things is beyond their imagining; but to Bahá'ís, believers in the newest Revelation of God's Will as yet revealed to unfolding mankind upon this planet, this inestimable privilege has been vouchsafed.

(Rabbani 2000, 63–64)

## NOTES

1. (Effendi 1973, 4)
2. The International Archives Building

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VICTOR SOBHANI has a degree in Conservation of Ceramic and Stone Artifacts, and Archeological Objects from the Istituto per l'Arte e Restauro, Palazzo Spinelli, Florence, Italy. He is currently contract project conservator for the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. Address: 6816 NW 131st St. Oklahoma City, OK, 73142. E-mail: [victor.sobhani@gmail.com](mailto:victor.sobhani@gmail.com)

SONJEL VREELAND has a Masters in Museum Studies from the University of Toronto (2009) and has undertaken interpretive programming work and collections management work at several museums and historic homes in eastern Canada, Toronto, London (UK) and at the Baha'i World Centre. Currently she volunteers with the PEI Museum. Address: 233 Richmond St, Charlottetown PEI, CIA 1J6, Canada. E-mail address: [sonjel@gmail.com](mailto:sonjel@gmail.com)