



Can You Paint Me in a Half Hour?

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“YOU KNOW CHRIST DIDN’T look like a woman, the way all the pictures of Him look.” That was Juliet Thompson, talking to God, when she was just ten years old. “Please let me paint Him when I grow up as the King of Men.” She held onto this wish for the next twenty-six years.

Juliet lived, and wrote, with her heart on her sleeve. Her diary is filled with Biblical metaphors, capitalized pronouns, and a highly personal, poetic language which, while heartwarming, can also be off-putting if you don’t like that kind of thing. It is a diary, after all, not a newspaper, and it offers a unique insight into the kinds of close personal relationships ‘Abdu’l-Bahá formed with a handful of Americans — in this case an effusive, rising portrait artist from Greenwich Village.

Juliet traveled to ‘Akká to meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1909. But her first meeting with him dashed her hopes of ever painting the Christ. When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá walked into a room, she wrote, “His effulgence struck me blind.” “Could the sun with the whole universe full of its radiations, or endless flashes of lightning be captured in paint?” Besides, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was adamant that he *wasn’t* Christ.

Then, the night before the SS *Cedric* docked in New York, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá cabled a message: “On My arrival in America Miss Juliet Thompson shall paint a wonderful portrait of Me.” (Those would be Juliet’s pronouns.) She described her “surprise and dismay, fear, joy and gratitude all mixed together” at hearing the news.

On Monday, June 5, 1912, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sat down with Juliet at 309 West 78th Street. “Can you paint Me in a half hour?” he asked. Juliet was appalled. It usually took her at least two weeks to paint a head. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá conceded: “Well, I will give you three half hours. You mustn’t waste My time, Juliet.”

The conditions were far from perfect. Juliet jammed herself into a small space in the basement for the portrait. She sat, but was used to standing. It was dim, but she usually painted in clear daylight. This was a woman, who, when she went on to paint Grace Coolidge, the First Lady, told the President to leave the room because she couldn’t stand the sound of him chewing an apple.

As she sat in front of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, something amazing happened. “All fear fell away from me,” she wrote, “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, couldn’t keep pace with the clarity of my vision.”

Four years later, in a *Washington Times* article about her painting, she described the experience: “there was something there, unrepressed, evident, unmistakable.”

During their final sitting, Juliet held an empty brush and searched her portrait for a missing stroke. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá then abruptly rose from his chair.

“It is finished,” he said.

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