



The Memoirs of an American Painter

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‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ’S JOURNEYS IN America were filled with interesting people. Beyond the rich and famous, there are many who are familiar to us only because they left vivid accounts about him. Juliet Thompson was such an individual. A reputable painter, speaker, and author, Thompson’s personal connection to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá defined her life and work. She displayed her affinity for him in her memoirs, published in 1947 as *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*, which would chronicle their time together in both the east and the west.

Born in Washington, DC, in 1873, Thompson attended the Corcoran School of Art and demonstrated skill in painting from a young age. Her father passed when she was only twelve years old and left the family in poor financial condition, but even then she was able to sell her paintings for profit to help her widowed mother. By her twenties she had established herself as a respected artist and received frequent commissions for work, such as painting a centerpiece for the Cosmos Club’s annual show in 1897. Her reputation would eventually lead her to paint a portrait of the First Lady, Mrs. Grace Coolidge, President Calvin Coolidge’s wife. She learned about Bahá’u’lláh in Washington in 1898, but didn’t become a Bahá’í until 1901, during a trip to Paris.

Thompson first met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá when she was thirty-six, during a spiritual pilgrimage to the shrine of Baha’u’llah in 1909. “That first sight of Carmel,” she wrote in the Diary, “with its Mystery, the Holy Mountain, ‘the Mountain of the Lord,’ broke me down.”

In 1911, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited Europe. Thompson sailed on the Lusitania to meet him in Thonon-les-Bains, France, and then in Vevey on Lake Geneva in Switzerland. He returned to Egypt for the winter before sailing for America on March 25, 1912.

On April 5, 1912, Juliet stood waiting at Pier 59 on the Hudson River as the Cedric, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ship, pulled in at the White Star Line docks. She’d attend many functions he attended or spoke at while in the New York and New Jersey area, and spend much time with him in private conversation as well. She painted his portrait on June 1. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke to an audience at her home at 48 West 10th Street on November 15.

On December 5, the day ‘Abdu’l-Bahá left America, Juliet was there to watch him go. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was bound for Liverpool on board the Celtic. “It was death to leave that ship,” she wrote. “I stood on the pier with May Maxwell, tears blurring my sight. Through them I could see the Master in the midst of the group of Persians waving a patient hand to us. It waved and waved, that beautiful patient hand, till the Figure was lost to sight.”

Juliet Thompson never saw ‘Abdu’l-Bahá again. She would continue to paint professionally and work with Bahá’ís in the United States until the end of her life. She passed away in December 1956 in her home in New York and a memorial service was held for her at the Bahá’í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois. Her many accomplishments of art and faith were remembered at the event and, of course, her heartfelt personal connection with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

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