

Interview with American Sufi Artist Michael Green

Interviewed by M. Shobhana Xavier

Michael Green is an American Sufi artist based in Pennsylvania. He is best known for his illustrations in *The Illuminated Rumi* (1997).

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Xavier interviewed Green in winter 2016. The views and opinions expressed in this interview are Green's own and are not necessarily representative of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship as a whole.

For more about Michael Green's Rumi illustrations, see M. Shobhana Xavier, "From Illuminated Rumi to the Green Barn: The Art of Sufism in America"

For more about the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen mazar, see M. Shobhana Xavier, "An American Sufi Shrine, Bawa's Mazar in Coatesville, Pennsylvania"

Michael Green: In the early 70's I was living a renunciant life in a tipi in the Catskills outside of Woodstock. This is back in another age, and I had friends who were building a communal free school nearby and one weekend I was helping them put up a geodesic dome in a big collective barn raising. A guy named Jonathan Granoff had come up to help too and we instantly spotted each other as fellow travelers on the path and quickly learned that we were both looking for a teacher, a true teacher. I remember saying that I felt I had dirt on the back of my neck and that I needed a really good mirror to see what that dirt was. We both knew about funhouse-mirror teachers and we wanted the real deal. So we made a pact that if either of us met the real deal we would call the other. And a couple of months later I got a call, it's Jonathan and he says, "Found him." "Where?" "Philadelphia." "Philadelphia?" "What's his name?" "He's called Guru Bawa." So I hitchhiked down a day or two later. Another bit of nostalgia—people don't hitchhike anymore do they?

Shobhana Xavier: No, they don't.

Michael Green: Everybody hitchhiked then. So I hitchhiked from Woodstock to Philadelphia. It was a magic trip—I'd get a ride, hop out, stick out my thumb, and practically the next car that came would pick me up. And again and again, I was zoomed right down. Bawa in those days lived in a little row house on 46th Street near the University of Pennsylvania. So I get there and was shown up the stairs to the second floor . . . and he's right there coming down a hallway toward me. It was instant recognition. I had already met some of the other big gurus of the day, but as soon as you saw Bawa it was like meeting the center of the galaxy. He just glowed! Anyway he

went to a front bedroom and sat on a bed there and I joined the others sitting on the floor. There wasn't that many people around him then, so I could stay. I slept on the rug downstairs. Every day we'd all crowd into his little room. Sometimes he would talk and then he'd answer questions. I kept waiting for a bell to ring for meditation or the chanting to start—the routine. Nothing, there was absolutely no formal schedule, no rhythm to the day. Only something floating in the background called *zikr*.¹ It had to do with the words “La ilaha illa allah,” but it was unclear exactly what it was or when we did it, so finally I asked what the routine was. It was the light bulb moment: “This *zikr*,” he said, “is to die to yourself with every breath. If it's something you do at a particular time in the morning or evening and then go back to life, it's only a hobby.”

Which means—if I am following his instructions—I should be doing it right now, in this interview. A good reality check for me is when I'm driving. A perfect time to do *zikr*. Instead you discover you've been pursuing 10,000 pointless thoughts or listening to Public Radio. If you're not dying to yourself with every breath, it's all a hobby.

But the full history of this path has some interesting turns. The next chapter starts when we moved into the big house at 5820 Overbrook Ave. At some point he looks at us and says, “I can see it would really help if we came together and did a silent morning *zikr*,” and got it going. So we all gathered at four AM in the meeting room, Bawa came down, talked a little about *zikr*, and then we would sit. Unfortunately we didn't have enough *zazen*² discipline: half the group would be nodding off to sleep. So after a while he said, “I can see this is not what I'd hoped, so we'll do it out loud now.” So he started leading us chanting, not just the *zikr* but the 99 names of God as well. It was just as it came to him, so every day it was a little different.

Shobhana Xavier: Right.

Michael Green: The literal translation of the *kalimah*³—the “La ilaha illa allah” of silent *zikr*—“not infinite if not God,” didn't really carry the day for me. But Arabic has a lot of mystical undertones, so one day I asked Bawa if there was any other version. The rendering that Bawa gave, “the I is an illusion; God alone is real,” lifted everything to a whole other level. I made flyers of the words and posted them around the Fellowship house. A little later he called me to his room one day and told me he wanted me to make a large picture showing the flow of the *zikr* through the body. It has some nice refinements but essentially “the I is an illusion” accompanies the out-breath and is experienced as an exhalation of the ego: the “I” from every cell in the body, while “God alone is real” accompanies the in-breath, and should be experienced as drawing into the heart the radiant light of God. Darkness out, light in.

The final *zikr* question I had for Bawa was, would it be better when all is said and done, to do *zikr* in Arabic or in English? “Either is fine,” he said, “but real *zikr* is neither.”

Shobhana Xavier: You are talking about meeting Bawa and these experiences—how does the work that you are doing in terms of drawing relate? Was there a connection then, a relationship with this artistic side that's developing with your relationship to

Bawa?

Michael Green: Well it was very interesting because when I met Bawa I was some kind of New Age sadhu⁴ renunciant celibate living in the woods in a tent and I eventually moved down to Philadelphia. One of the central parts of his [Bawa's] teaching was that there are "sixty-four arts" in life, which essentially are the ways we interact with the external world, i.e., with Maya [illusion]. Which is everything from cooking to sex to whatever. So from the highest perspective the sixty-four arts were all potentially seductive roads to illusion. Anyway, after making that perfectly clear, Bawa bestowed on me the title "Arts Master." It was something of a mixed blessing.

Shobhana Xavier: Yes, so how did that work?

Michael Green: Good question. I never studied art.

Shobhana Xavier: So you weren't trained in it?



Fig. 1 Michael Green, Illustration from *De Historia Et Veritate Unicornis/On the History and Truth of the Unicorn*, 1983



Fig. 2 Michael Green, Illustration from *A Hobbit's Travels*

Michael Green: I was never trained in it, but I can pretty much do anything. It's in my neurons. It came with the package. When I needed pictures for the Unicornis book that had to look like the renderings of an early Renaissance artist, I just did them (Fig. 1).⁵ Then I went around a corner and created *Zen & the Art of the Macintosh*, the first graphic book ever done on a personal computer.⁶

Shobhana Xavier: Right so you just started, you realized this talent that you have, that you were capable?

Michael Green: Well, when I lived in the Woodstock and needed the occasional buck, the easiest way was to paint a sign. Then I did an illustrated column for *The Woodstock Times*. But it didn't get serious until I came to Philadelphia.

Shobhana Xavier: What happened?



Fig. 3 Michael Green, Illustration from *The Velveteen Rabbit*

Michael Green: Well. I arrived at Bawa’s doorstep as a wandering monk, but it was not fated to be. Bawa had a somewhat scary habit of pointing at two people in the room and saying, “You two should be married, come up.” And marrying them! So one day when I walked in and he says with a smile, “Here comes Green Michael, he’s as handsome as a bridegroom,” I knew that my days of wandering monkhood were numbered if I was going to continue to play the game. He let me do the picking, so before long I got married to Sally. Then I realized, well now I am no longer a sadhu, I’m a householder, a *grihastha* as the Vedas put it.⁷ And householders have to have occupations and earn money. So I sat down and started listing the things I could do and decided my best shot at officially earning a living was probably as an artist and probably the most practical way to do that would be in the publishing business. So I started asking friends if they knew anyone in publishing. And now comes a good example of the grace-magic that sometimes slips in on the path. The second person I asked said, “Oh, I’ve know a couple of brothers in Philadelphia and I think they’re starting a publishing company. Give them a call.” So I call and introduce myself as an artist.” So what kind of work do you do?” They ask. I’ve got to come up with something quick, so, since I’m drawn toward the mythic, I say, “Sort of Tolkien-ish.” “Well, come down,” they say, “We’re doing a book called *The Tolkien Scrapbook*.”⁸ And so my career begineth (Fig. 2).

I wound up doing a whole series of illustrated Tolkien books with them. And then I came up with the Unicornis book—and since it needed authority I brought it to them as a recently discovered fifteenth-century manuscript on Unicorns. And [I also brought them] my version of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, which sold two and a quarter million copies.



Fig. 4 Michael Green, Glyph

And then the Zen book which won a couple of awards. But the real blessing was that with all of these projects I was able to always honor my internal compass, which is to always use the mysterious power of art in a sacred context. Tolkien is about myth as a doorway to the sacred, as was the Unicornis book. Even the Velveteen Rabbit is actually a tale about life after death disguised as a children's story.

Shobhana Xavier: So is the work about yourself in some way?

Michael Green: About myself?

Shobhana Xavier: Art is usually about the artist in some way.

Michael Green: Well I tried to avoid taking credit for a long time, so none of my early stuff is signed. Then one day I did a picture for a Bawa storybook for children and I showed it to him and he said, "Very nice . . . but where's your signature?" I gave a good Sufi reply like, "I am nobody," or something, but he said, "Sign your work!" So from then on I had to sign my work. I eventually came up with a glyph inspired by Albrecht Dürer (Fig. 3). Zen masters say art is like finger pointing at moon. So I like to think I create pointing fingers. Which is also probably why I'm not vastly rich, because if you do



Fig. 5 Michael Green, La Illaha Mandala from *The Illuminated Rumi*

something you think is in some way connected to the sacred, then it seems rather cheesy to ask a lot of money for it.

Shobhana Xavier: How did you get engaged with Rumi?

Michael Green: Well, sitting in Bawa's room one-day, there's this guy talking to Bawa with a bit of a southern accent and I get to know him and his name is Coleman Barks and he's an easy-going guy, an English professor from some university in South Carolina [Georgia].⁹ I hear that he's done English versions of some mystical poems by a Persian poet named Rumi and self-published them in a little book. Self-publish the work of an obscure Persian poet and you sell twenty copies. Six months later I learn he has sold five thousand copies and was working on a new book, this time with a publisher. Which did even better. So the next time he came to see Bawa I said, "Why don't you and I collaborate on a Rumi book? I'll 'illuminate' your translations." Coleman said sure. So I played around with pictures and text for a while until I just suddenly realized that my model was, indeed, the illuminated manuscripts of old, both Persian and Christian, which you know, had the text here and the picture there. And it wasn't a matter of prettiness. It was that the words facilitate left-brain communication and the pictures are right-brain communication, and together they make a whole (Fig. 4).

Shobhana Xavier: So that began your relationship with Rumi?

Michael Green: That began my long relationship with Rumi. We cut a deal with a big publisher, I did *The Illuminated Rumi* and it became a bestseller.¹⁰ Then I did *The Illuminated Prayer* with Rumi again and it was a Book of the Month Club selection.¹¹ But then came 9/11, and everything began shifting. Now I believe Rumi has acquired a whole new geopolitical dimension. While Muslims started becoming the “Other,” Rumi become the most-read poet in America. He’s perceived as a kind of universal, loving mystic, but in fact he is also a card-carrying Muslim. That all this comes together in one package has a lot of potential for good now, of expanding the rather dire public perception of Islam. So a great deal of my focus these days has been imagining a traveling Rumi exhibit. And I’m finishing another Illuminated Rumi book called *Something Big is Coming*. The title comes from a poem:

Something big is coming.
it’s still secret, but arriving everywhere.
The pilgrims and the mystery—lovers know.
they’re gathering now,
Shy, heart-shaped, pink-cheeked, wandering in from the Garden.
See how those who have sipped the milk of generosity are
so alive to where it’s coming from next.
The atmosphere is charged with longing and searching.
Then the sound of prayer drifts across the dawn.
It’s Muslim, Jew, and Christian
all mingled...

Shobhana Xavier: Your work on Rumi and illumination with Coleman Barks is influential and important. You now have this studio space called the Green Barn, here in Pennsylvania (Fig. 5).

Michael Green: There’s a really interesting story to the Green Barn—it’s where Buffalo Bill used to stay when he toured hereabouts. Back then it was supposed to have been the biggest barn in Pennsylvania. It’s a lot smaller now (Fig. 6).

Shobhana Xavier: What year did you get it?

Michael Green: Five years ago [2011]. It started out as just a kind of cool space to have. Then it became a really interesting workplace, inviting me to leave my book-art and move up to a whole other scale. Art as powerful object. Then it became a place to show the pieces that I was starting to make. What was really nice is that people got it and started taking off their shoes when they came in, which is what you do instinctively when you enter sacred space. And then the Illumination Band was born and it became a performance spot.

Shobhana Xavier: The Illumination Band?

Michael Green: When *The Illuminated Rumi* was taking off, we decided to do a special Coleman-reading-Rumi concert in Philadelphia. We got a big hall at the



Fig. 6 Michael Green, Green Barn Ashram

University of Pennsylvania. Coleman always reads with music, so I got a group of musician friends together, including my son Kabir to work up the kind of background noodling that he likes. We had a rehearsal, got the noodling part, and took a break. And one of the guys, David Mowry, starts just messing around with his own work, which is kind of American gospel/bluegrass. And I heard in it this deep longing quality, which connected with that deep longing quality in Rumi. So I opened *The Illuminated Rumi* at random, put in front of him, and asked if he could sing it too. And the two longings just completely meshed. Completely meshed. We all heard it. Rumi meets good old American gospel bluegrass. So I took a bunch of the poems and made them rhyme again, and we all got together every week and turned them into songs, which we folded into Coleman's concert. And got such good revues we took it on the road, and finally back to the Green Barn.

Shobhana Xavier: So the Rumi Illumination Band plays in the Green barn?

Michael Green: I seem to function best in a pretty organic way where things just grow

according to their own laws. The Green Barn became a performance space. We started having concerts there. And if Allah wills, we will hear their music in a west-Texas tavern some day with a good-old-boy saying, “Well what do you know . . . a Muslim wrote that song!”

Shobhana Xavier: Yes, that’s brilliant. So how do we move from the barn to the *mazar* (shrine) of Bawa’s? Were you part of the group that helped design it? I’m interested in this wider picture that you’re part of. There’s the Green Barn and this relationship with Rumi, and then the figure of Bawa. I’m trying to understand that.

Michael Green: Well, Bawa died. Or his body died. I remember people saying, “Please don’t go,” and he said, “Where is there for me to go?” But the body died. By then the Fellowship had purchased a small farm and had set aside an area for a cemetery, so we had a place to bring him. We picked the little highest spot and dug the grave and put him in. But most of us felt there should be a structure, a shrine over it. And so we began a series of meetings, which were a bit difficult because they were open to everyone. So right when we were beginning to agree on something, a new person would show up with a totally new idea and we would have to begin all over. So finally I drew up this design (Fig. 7) based on fairly classical designs, except that I made it completely symmetrical with four doors facing the four directions. Bawa often talked about four archetypal religions and how they all led to the same transcendent mystery. The idea of the shrine was that the four doors faced the four religions, and opened to the place inside where they meet and transcend all differences. The design was all based on sacred geometry and the relationship of the Golden Mean (Fig 8), which is found everywhere from the design of a leaf or a seashell to the pyramids to the Parthenon to Chartres cathedral. It’s considered one of the basic proportions of the universe, like pi. And this proportion is all throughout the mazar. All throughout the mazar. And there is a little taste of the Taj Mahal as well.

Shobhana Xavier: You are one of the designers of one of the premier shrine Sufi spaces in North America, what does that mean for you now? It’s fascinating because I’m seeing you engaging with these different spaces right? This relationship with Rumi, the Green Barn, now the mazar. For me at least, the mazar is significant in North America. And so what do you think it says in terms of Sufism, Islam, Michael Green, Rumi, Bawa, you know, in North America?

Michael Green: One should really feel like a Christian could walk in this door and a Muslim walk in this door and a Hindu walk in another but inside they’re all together in one space. And this is where Bawa is buried. What is curious is that I don’t think Bawa ever used the word mazar. It was our understanding that he was an incarnation of what in Sufism is called the Qutb.¹² The Qutb is a unique station not unlike an Avatar or a Prophet. I should add Bawa himself never claimed this and I don’t believe he ever said anything about the “after” period of his passing either.

Shobhana Xavier: Right, like how to bury him?



Fig. 7 Mazar of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, Chester County, PA

Michael Green: Like how to bury him, what kind of building, that it would be a mazar, anything about it. We were just burying our beloved teacher. No, no sense whatsoever of all of this stuff.

Shobhana Xavier: So what do you think of all of this stuff that's happening now?

Michael Green: You know so much of the Fellowship now in some funny way could be interpreted through Bawa's detachment with a Bawa grin: "So you think this is all so important?" Because if you accept the deepest truth of non-duality—what Bawa called Divine Luminous Wisdom—then everything that happened around the guru, the sheikh, the wonderful event that he was . . . all this was, is, just "It" happening, the One without a Second. Ultimately what made Bawa a marvel was that finally, if you looked very carefully, there was nobody home. Bawa was not the doer. The "I" is an illusion, only God is real. Do you follow what I'm saying? Do you understand the metaphysics of it?

Shobhana Xavier: Yes.

Michael Green: But for the sake of ordinary consciousness, let us say what a great teacher and subtle destroyer of people's egos Bawa was.

Shobhana Xavier: So how would you describe who you are and your work?

Michael Green: One of the hard things with the spiritual path is that you get on a spiritual path because you want to become a Buddha. You don't want to just become a "spiritual person," do you? I mean, you're going for the golden ring. On the other hand, that's a very dangerous, potentially egotistical perspective. It may well be better just to want to love God than saying I want to become fully enlightened like the Buddha or like

Bawa or whoever.

So then why am I even having this discussion with you about, you know, the wonderful things that Michael Green has done? Michael Green? Hold on! The “I” is an illusion; God alone is real. I remember this little conversation I once had with Bawa. He was saying, “You should always grow food there [at the farm by the mazar],” and I said “That’s great.” Then at a certain point he turns to me and he says, “You know, the only right occupation for an *insan kamil* (a true human being) is as a farmer and one who builds his own home. Everything else he does is for grace.”

So maybe I should think about a new business card: Michael Green, Farmer (also not a bad artist.)

Citation Guide

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Notes

1. The practice of *zikr/dhikr* is the remembrance of Allah through the recitation of Allah’s 99 Names (*asma’ul husna*). It is an effort to achieve ultimate union with God, but dependent on the annihilation of one’s ego which is accomplished through the constant remembrance of God. This is one of the seminal meditative practices of the Sufis and the litanies of names that are recited vary across different Sufi groups, based on the teachings of the *sheikh*. Bawa’s explanation of the Names of Allah is found in the *Asma’ul Husna: the 99 Beautiful Names of Allah* (Fellowship Press, 1979).

2. Associated with Buddhist traditions, this is “seated meditation.”

3. *Kalimah* (plural *kalimat*, and *kalim*) means a word, a command, while in reference to the Prophet Muhammad it may also mean revelation. In ritual contexts, *kalimah* usually signifies specific sayings or affirmations repeated by a Muslim. For instance, the attesting that “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger” is referred to as the *Kalimah Tayyibah* or the attestation of faith.

4. Sanskrit term for religious person or holy man.

5. Green is referring here to his 1983 publication *De Historia Et Veritate Unicornis/on the History and Truth of the Unicorn* (Olympic Marketing Corp), republished in 2008

by Amber Lotus.

6. Published 1986 by Running Press.

7. In Hindu traditions, *ashramas* refer to the four stages of life of male Brahmins (or priestly caste). These include *brahmacharya* (student), *grihastha* (householder), *vanaprastha* (forest dweller), and *sannyasi* (mendicant).

8. Published 1978 by Grosset & Dunlap.

9. According to his website, Barks has taught poetry and creative writing at the University of Georgia for thirty years. <http://www.colemanbarks.com/> As PBS explains, Bark does not speak Persian but relied on his skill as a poet and the translations of others in writing his versions of Rumi. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/poetryeverywhere/barks.html>

10. First edition 1997, Broadway Books.

11. First edition 2000, Ballantine Books.

12. Qutb is the title given to a saint in Sufism who has the most elevated status. The Qutb is understood as the “axial pole” around whom the world turns. For more in reference to Bawa as the qutb, see Shobhana Xavier, “The *Insan Kamil* of Bawa: Metaphysics of a Tamil Sufi Sheikh,” *The Sri Lanka Journal of Humanities* 39 (2013): 51-66.