

Khalil Gibran a Painterly writer

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INTRODUCTION

The Lebanese poet and philosopher Gibran Khalil Gibran, best known as the author of *The Prophet*, is widely regarded as a man of the East who brought a much needed element of spirituality to the West. Many titles have been given to Gibran, and they are probably all correct, for he was a versatile man: poet, artist, philosopher, peacemaker, visionary, revolutionary, madman, brother, friend etc. I used the term "painterly writer" deliberately because this term describes him better than any other term.

A LIFE PORTRAIT

Gibran was born on January 6, 1883, to the Maronite family of Gibran in Bsharri, a mountainous area in Northern Lebanon. Lebanon was a Turkish province part of Greater Syria (Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine) and subjugated to Ottoman dominion, which granted the Mount Lebanon area autonomous rule. The people of Mount Lebanon had struggled for several years to gain independence from the Ottoman rule, a cause Gibran was later to adopt and become an active member in. The Mount Lebanon area was a troubled region, due to the various outside and foreign interferences that fostered religious hatred between the Christian, especially the Maronite sect, and Moslem populations. Later in his life, Gibran was to seek and unite the various religious sects, in a bid to abolish the religious arrogance and atrocities witnessed at his time.

His father was an agent of a local warlord. His mother Kamila Rahmeh was from a family of priests. When he was twelve, his mother left his father and immigrated with her children to America. The family settled in the slums of Boston. Gibran's artistic talents and unique behavior had captured earlier the interest of the Bostonian society, which welcomed this foreign talent into their artistic circles.

In 1896 he was sent home to attend high school. He spent six years in Lebanon and returned with the fundamentals of an Arabic literary education. Once back in Boston he seriously pursued his art and

also began publishing poems and stories in the Arabic newspapers of New York and Boston. In 1908 Mary Haskell, the headmistress of a girls' school and the most important of his several patronesses, sent him to a Paris art school for two years. Shortly after returning to America, he moved to New York. He spent the rest of his life in New York. His ethereal paintings, though unquestionably beautiful and moving, were completely outside the mainstream of art in his time. He was a great spiritual thinker and is well known for his profound philosophical writings. His masterpiece "The prophet" represents the pinnacle of his glorious thoughts; it has been rendered in to most of the languages of the world.

He was a man outside of time and place who lived much of his life in Boston and New York City, yet always longed to return to his native Lebanon. Only after his death on April 10, 1931, was his body returned to his beloved homeland, Bsherri, Lebanon, where he had been born 48 years earlier.

THE NATURE OF GIBRAN'S WRITINGS

Though in Gibran's own mind he was primarily a painter, he wrote like he painted. It was his writing that made his reputation. His simple and vivid short stories and "prose poems" were immensely influential in Arabic literature. Gibran's stories and prose poems seem to have touched his readers in a way that the classical Arabic literature could not. He used simple, colloquial language and avoided the complex language and metres of traditional Arabic poetry. His themes of exile, oppression, and separation from beauty and love touched his peasant readers, even though many aspects of his style derive from the European literature of the 1880s and 90s. The simplicity of his style gave it a timelessness and universality that have allowed his works to survive and exercise their appeal even in translation.

By about 1916 he was experimenting with writing in English. The resulting pieces were carefully edited by Mary Haskell. The first work, *The Wanderer*, appeared

in 1919. His most famous work, *The Prophet*, appeared in 1923 and became immensely popular. It was followed by several other English works.

We do not get philosophy in the usual sense. Gibran did know some philosophy - he had read a lot of Nietzsche, for example - but his literary method does not allow for discursive analysis. We get a vivid image with enough description and narrative explanation to allow us to grasp it. An emotional strobe light momentarily illuminates an aspect of our experience, leaving us with a picture burned onto our emotional retinas. Thereafter, we see that aspect of our experience with different eyes. Like a painting, a Gibran's prose poem uses a vivid but essentially static image to tell us how we should feel about some aspect of our experience. It does not tell us how we ought to understand this link of emotion and experience. We should not then expect reasoned ethics from Gibran, nor rational theology, nor prescriptions for reordering society. His literary tools are too simple and too far from the rational level of consciousness to serve such purposes. What we do get is the extraordinary force of Gibran's moral seriousness turned on various aspects of life. When 'Almustafa' answers the astronomer:

"You would adjust your conduct and even direct the course of your spirit according to hours and seasons, Yet the timeless in you is aware of life's timelessness,"

It may not be obvious to us how such a saying is to be translated into action but we do have a sense that some significant aspect of our attitude towards time has been challenged. Gibran does not tell us what we ought to do but rather questions the statements on which we have based the habitual actions of our life. His paintings can only move us in an unclear way, since the narrative element is still obscure. His writings can challenge us directly because their images are complex, the narrative meaning is made clear for us, and the whole is driven home by Gibran's relentless and utterly earnest sincerity and sense of the importance of what he has to say.

Perhaps Gibran's greatest gift as a writer was the use of metaphor. In *The Garden of the Prophet*, 'Almustafa' is preparing for his departure and speaks to his close followers:

"My comrades and my road-fellows, we must need part this day. Long have we sailed on the perilous seas, and we have climbed the steepest mountains and we have wrestled with the storms. We have known hunger, but we have also sat at wedding feasts, Oftentimes have we been naked, but we have also worn kingly raiment. We have indeed traveled far, but now we part. Together you shall go your way, and alone must I go mine."

His metaphor for the journey of life was gentle, yet strong. Just before Almustafa leaves the garden he says:

"And remember this of me: I teach you not giving, but receiving; not denial, but fulfillment; and not yielding, but understanding, with the smile upon the lips. I teach you not silence, but rather a song not over-loud. I teach you your larger self, which contains all men."

Parable and metaphor are not experience themselves; rather, they provide a connection between a new concept and something one has previously experienced. Learning comes in discovering how something new relates to something people already comprehend. Gibran, like Jesus whom he loved so fully, was a master of the use of parable to broaden humanity's vision, helping make known the unknown. The greatest truths are most easily conveyed in the simplest stories.

ART OF GIBRAN

Gibran was primarily a painter. Painting was not a secondary interest or a hobby supplementing his literary career, rather, he established a complementary relationship between his literary vision and artistic representations.

Gibran held his first art exhibition of his drawings in 1904 in Boston. During this exhibition, Gibran met Mary Elizabeth Haskell. The two formed an important friendship that lasted the rest of Gibran's life. Haskell influenced not only Gibran's personal life, but also his career and she encouraged him to become the artist that he aspired to be. With the financial assistance of Mary Gibran went to study art with Auguste Rodin in Paris for two years.

Gibran kept drawing the same thing or drawing from the same vision, approaching paintings with the same method, without significant changes over the years. This repetition becomes especially clear when examining the differences between the drawings, paintings, and watercolors. Gibran used pencil in drawing both ideas and human faces, an approach marked by deliberate planning, craft, and meticulousness. One observes this in a series of drawings, including Gibran's own face, the face of Amin al-Rihani, and others, all of which appear absorbed and contemplative as in his photographic pictures. These drawings are somewhat time-bound, as Gibran has drawn a face at a particular moment, appearing in a traditional position consistent with photographic pictures in the early decades of the last century. Yet his drawings somehow breach time and prevail over it, despite adhering to a visible stereotype.

Gibran's artistic focus changes significantly when it comes to painting and watercolors. His paintings are a creative record of their subjects and all links to time are totally detached. Gibran obtains the subjects of his oil and watercolor paintings from his overall visions rather than his own vision, from his perceptions of the world and man instead of his own life experiences. Thus he paints all bodies completely naked, a symbolic nudity. With few exceptions, Gibran's works do not include furniture or other accessories of the man-made world, but all unfold in a neutral space lacking materiality or worldliness, appearing to the viewer as a gradual color backdrop dominated by quiet darkness.



Paintings by Gibran

Even the naked figures in the paintings possess a transcendent quality, and some of them are of a "perplexing" gender, exhibiting no distinguishing qualities—even the long hair could belong to both man and woman. Man appears without sexual identity; Gibran documents mankind's state pre-and post-sex, before and after humans are limited by form! The naked, regardless of sex, appear young and vigorous. He rarely portrayed an elderly body, nor wrinkled, bruised, or injured ones. Instead, they are absorbed in agitations beyond the physical realm, showing only invisible worries, with closed eyes devoted to their internal lives.

Gibran's vision portrayed in his art transcends the works themselves, and this is what makes him modernist. He did remain separate from the artistic scene, both in Paris where he studied painting and in New York where he practiced his art and painting.

CONCLUSION

The love in Gibran's soul for humanity was great. He demonstrated this through his writings, his art and even more clearly through his daily life. For many years his studio was a Mecca for seeking people to come and share, to ask and learn. In *The Garden of The Prophet*, Gibran reminds us of the greatest spiritual teachings: that all people everywhere are connected and are linked in slight but real ways, reminding us that *"the saint and*

the sinner are twin brothers." and that within each person is the potential for wrong as well as for good.

Science and religion admit to be the answers for humanity - but Gibran spoke with annoyance against the unspeakable stupidities committed in the name of science and religion:

"There is neither religion nor science beyond beauty."

When asked about religion, he said,

"Religion? What is it? I know of only life. The church is within you. I lay down no rules of conduct. Do whatsoever you will, so long as you do it beautifully."

Gibran was primarily a painter. Painting was not a secondary interest or a hobby supplementing his literary career, rather, he established a complementary relationship between his literary vision and artistic representations. He was a writer with optical perceptions. We may characterize him as a 'painterly writer'. There is so much to share of this amazing Builder for a Better World, Kahlil Gibran.

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