

A Fire that Consumes Ink and Paper

Kahlil Gibran

(1883-1931)

Katharine Gordon

The art of Gibran is symbolic in the deepest meaning of the word because its roots spring from those basic truths which are fundamental for all ages and all experiences – Alice Raphael, 1919



Self-portrait of young Gibran, Oil on canvas, Soumaya Museum

Kahlil Gibran is perhaps the most widely read and translated writer of the twentieth century. Too often overlooked, his work in the visual arts preceded and was inextricably linked to his literary career. Described as ‘mystical’, ‘ethereal’, or ‘spiritual’, Gibran’s artworks give form to the universal ideas and fundamental truths deeply embedded in his parables and poems, or in other words, his writing fed his drawing as much as his drawings illustrate his texts. His work varies from portraiture to mystical compositions, but themes of humanity, spirituality, and the divine pervade his entire oeuvre.

East West Question

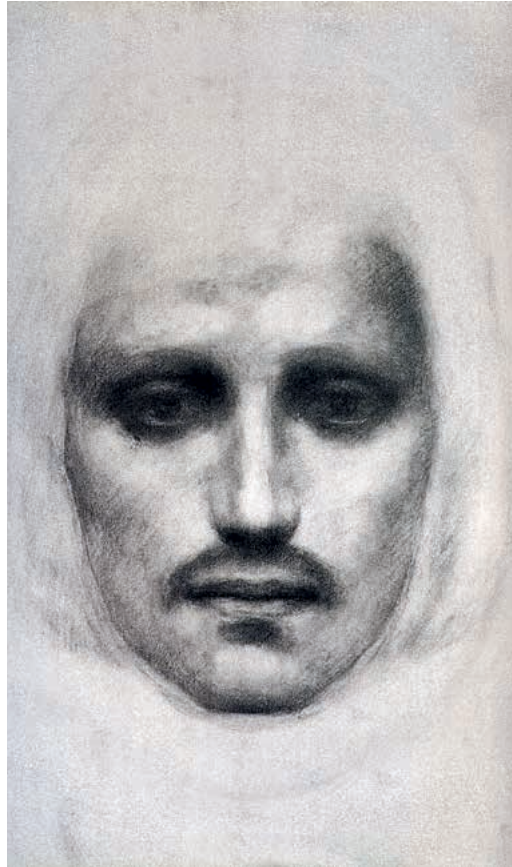
Historians position Gibran between ‘East’ and ‘West’. As an Arab man who spent most his life in the United States, Gibran, born Gibran Kahlil Gibran in Bcharré in 1883, maintained a deep emotional connection to his place of birth. In their 1998 book ‘Man and Poet’, biographers Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins describe him as “an oriental who wrote his most celebrated work in the major language of the Western world... His constant inspiration was his own heritage, which colored his English and exercised an inescapable hold over his mind.” At the time, in the cultural sphere, ‘East’ represented the mystical and spiritual, while ‘West’ was synonymous with illustrative and literal. Although these distinctions are problematic today, it is true that Gibran’s work stands between these two realms. His work is rooted

in multiple religions and traditions, the distinctions of which he attempted to transcend, seeking instead to represent universal themes of love, forgiveness, and morality, that can be found across the boundaries between 'East' and 'West'.

Aestheticism and Symbolism

What sets Gibran's oeuvre apart is the use of Classical forms to represent spiritual and mystical concepts. Two major themes shape his body of work. The first, Symbolism, stems from Gibran's lifelong desire to give form to dreams, visions, stories, and parables. His works also exhibit Aestheticism, in that they exist for their beauty and symbolic meaning, with no didactic purpose. Countering rampant industrialism, Gibran strove for art that extended beyond the limitations of mere imitation of the external world. As he wrote: "Some people think the business of art to be a mere imitation of nature. But Nature is far too sublime and too subtle to be successfully imitated. No artist can ever reproduce even the least of Nature's creations and miracles....The purpose of art is rather to understand Nature and to reveal her meaning...the mission of art is to bring out the unfamiliar from the most familiar, from nature to the infinite."

His earliest influence was Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), introduced to him as a child. While studying in Paris at the private Académie Julian between 1908 and 1910, he spent countless hours with his friend, and well-known Lebanese artist, Youssef Howayek (1883-1962), observing da Vinci's works. References to Michelangelo's (1475-1564) Sistine Chapel also appear in Gibran's later compositions. However, his most prominent influence, and a kindred spirit, was William Blake (1757-1827). Both poets and painters in equal measure, Blake's mysticism and symbolism led Gibran to write: "Blake is the god-man." The French Symbolists Odilon Redon

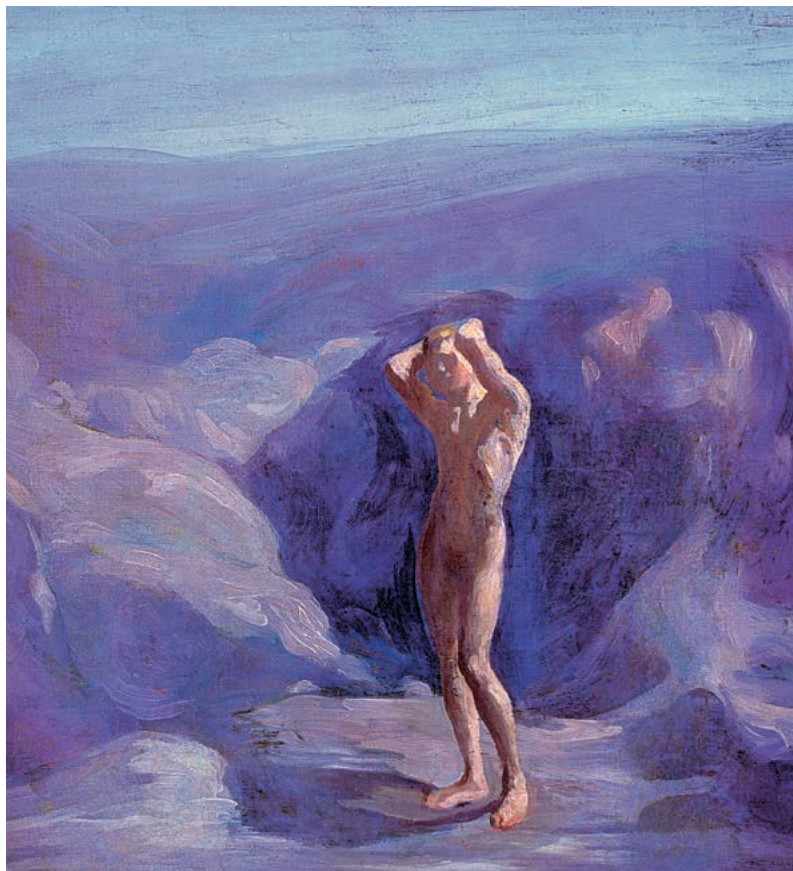


Portrait of Al-Mustafa frontispiece of *The Prophet*, Charcoal, 1923

(1840-1916), Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824-1898) and Eugene Carrière (1849-1906) were important to the young artist, who drew upon their visual language and technique.

He was present in Boston, a very cosmopolitan and cultural city at that time, and later Paris and New York during the peak of cultural production in the twentieth century. However, he was not permeable to the artistic movements around him. "He was a Symbolist in a moment where there was Surrealism and Cubism. His art had roots much more in the nineteenth century than in the twentieth. He was totally out of Modernism. I believe that as a philosopher, Symbolism was important for him because all his books are full of metaphor and symbolism. He didn't find himself

RETROSPECTIVE



■ The Beholder, Oil on canvas, 54.5x65, 1912



Gibran By Alexandre Najjar

Published by L'Orient des Livres

237 pages

French and Arabic

\$100

One of the most comprehensive volumes on the life and work of Kahlil Gibran, this volume combines an accessible biographical text with high quality images and archival material. The text, drawn from a 2002 biography written by Najjar, is updated to allow readers to grasp the full extent of Gibran's oeuvre that was, in equal measure, comprised of literary and visual art. Najjar drew upon the three largest collections of Gibran's artworks, the Telfair Museums in Savannah (Georgia, USA), Soumaya Museum in Mexico, and the Gibran Museum in Bcharré. He also accessed resources from Harvard University in order to portray the poet and painter's life. Some of these works, particularly those from the Soumaya Museum, were published for the first time, an exciting contribution to the conversation on Gibran. In Najjar's words: "It's a comprehensive approach of Gibran but in a simpler way. I went straight to the point to make people discover his writing, his painting, and even his philosophy." The text looks at Gibran's life chronologically, highlighting the people and moments in which he was most influenced. It is not only a must-read for those interested in Gibran, but also a well composed, approachable story that everyone can appreciate.

in these new tendencies, and in all his paintings, you will not find one where he is very Modern," says Alexandre Najjar, lawyer and author of several biographies of Gibran.

Academic Works

For the earliest parts of his life, Gibran was an autodidact. When his family immigrated to Boston in 1895, Gibran was exposed to his first academic training under the guidance of photographer Fred Holland Day (1864-1933). His talent was nurtured and refined, as were his sensibilities towards appreciating other artists. Unfortunately, not many works survive from this time due to a fire in Day's studio that destroyed Gibran's entire portfolio. However, it is possible to see how Gibran's training had a significant impact on his work. His academic drawings and sketches, which he continued to produce his entire life, emphasize portraiture and the human body. There is a clear foundation of anatomical correctness that is then manipulated to capture emotional or internal qualities within the confines of the materials.

Temple of Art

One of Gibran's earliest and most lasting projects was an ongoing series of portraits of accomplished artists, writers, political figures, and intellectuals. It began in Paris in 1909 with a portrait of sculptor Paul Wayland Bartlett (1865-1925), whose bronze nudes show similarities in form to Gibran's renderings of the human body. Gibran sat with many influential figures to capture their likeness and distinct personalities. He developed an aptitude for seeing into the souls of his subjects and translating their personality into visual language. The likes of Claude Debussy (1862-1918), Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), and Edmond Rostand (1868-1918) sat for the young Lebanese artist. Later he would add Thomas Edison (1847-1931), philosopher Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844-



Four members of La Plume in New York
Nassib Arida, Kahlil Gibran, Abdel-Massih
Haddad, and Mikhael Naimeh

**Countering the
rampant industrialism
of the United States in
the twentieth century,
Gibran strove for art
that extended beyond
the limitations of
mere imitation of the
external world**

1923), William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) and General Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882) in New York City. His friend Ameen Rihani (1876-1940), a fellow Arab, and author of *The Book of Khalid*, was likewise the subject of several portraits.

Lovers, Friends, and Family

Gibran's life was shaped in part by the relationships he formed with women. The most significant was Mary Haskell (1869-1953), who Gibran encountered at his second exhibition in 1904, organized by Holland Day in Boston. The young Lebanese artist was taken with Haskell, at first sight. Their subsequent relationship was emotional, financial, educational, and, at the beginning, romantic in nature. Gibran's portraits of her over the years reveal a deep understanding of her spirit. Classically beautiful and refined, Haskell's portraits are serene, almost angelic. She is consistently portrayed with a soft smile on her face, eyes often closed. She is even featured in one of Gibran's self-portraits from 1911, a peaceful presence that counters his more serious, half-concealed face, a tribute to the trust and devotion Gibran felt for her throughout his life.



Gibran in his studio in New York,
Telfair Museums

Through Haskell, Gibran was introduced to Charlotte Teller (1876-1953), a journalist and author, and Emilie Michel, known as 'Micheline', a French teacher. Unlike portraits of Haskell, Micheline is almost always in a state of contemplation, her hand often supporting her head as she looks at a point outside the canvas. Even though they had a romantic and understanding relationship, in the few works that are more confrontational, she appears suspicious, with no sign of the serene smile with which Gibran depicted Haskell. Teller is a different story. She would remain an inspiration and friend to Gibran for many years, and sat for him often. Her portraits are often layered, with a shadow of another figure over her shoulder. Her long neck and full hair is the object of many sketches and paintings, including several nudes. Hints of Teller's face can be seen in later portrayals of mythological figures. In his home life, Gibran was closest with his sister Marianna. His two other siblings and mother had died within their first years in Boston from disease. So much loss at a young age brought the two even closer and Gibran's portraits of her are intimate and tender. One painting, circa 1908, shows her portrait emerging

from the darkness, her body fading into the murky background. Parallel to her face is the echo of another portrait. This play on foreground and background light, as well as shadowy nature of the subject's features is a reoccurring trope in Gibran's work.

Universal Mother

The most indirectly present female figure in Gibran's life was his mother, who, despite her untimely death, would later influence his concept of universal motherhood. Kamileh was the strongest figure in Gibran's youth and even in her last days she was a source of fortitude for her whole family. One of the artist's most important first works was a 'memory portrait' of his mother. When Haskell saw it, she was struck by the faces of the whole family staring out at her. Gibran called it "a portrait of my mother's soul-done without tricks, without artistry. I have done what I wanted to. The soul is there, the simple majesty." In a later portrait of his mother, there is an inclination towards reincarnation, a concept Gibran discussed often with Teller, Haskell and Mikhail Naimeh (1889-1988), another Arab literary figure. In this particular portrait, his mother, dressed in white, leans back, her eyes closed in relief. Behind her, embossed in the wall, is a white tiger roaring. Here the tiger represents the soul of his mother, and her forthcoming rebirth.

Kamileh was a catalyst for a life-long fascination with the 'universal mother' a concept that appears in many religious and cultural traditions. Later works suggest a more mystical comprehension of the universal mother as Mother Nature or Mother Earth. She is often depicted surrounded by nude bodies grasping at her hands.

Joseph A. Fenianos, President of the Gibran National Committee, the active body that oversees the Gibran Museum



Four faces portrait of Leonora Speyer, Charcoal, 1925, Gibran Museum

in Bcharré and cares for a collection of over 400 artworks and other artifacts, recalls another work that reveals Gibran's sentiment towards motherhood: "The Family, which is actually Gibran's own family and himself embraced by his mother's hands as a baby. In particular, this painting reflects Gibran's longing to be a new born again, free of the world anxiety and troubles. It reveals Gibran's longing to live in peace, in a united family where the mother is the world itself and life protector."

Twenty Drawings

The earliest publication dedicated exclusively to Gibran's visual art is a collection of drawings published in 1919 entitled 'Twenty Drawings'. Alice Raphael's accompanying essay is the first contextualization of Gibran's visual artwork: "Kahlil Gibran is one of the artists who are engaged in the struggle between the old and new or, as in other times the conflict was termed,

Gibran's life was shaped in part by the relationships he formed with women



Portrait of the Artist's Mother,
Oil on canvas, 59.7x73



Alive

By Joumana Bou Fakhreddine

Published by Dar Al Moualef

2 volumes, 1,200 pages

\$220

This thoroughly researched two volume tome is a tribute to the author's dedication to uncovering the richness of the life and art of Kahlil Gibran. In partnership with Dar Moualef and the Gibran National Committee, Fakhreddine's 19 chapter book follows the artistic journey of Gibran through high quality images and documents, tracing the creation of each artwork from sketch to masterpiece, as well as highlighting key moments in the poet-painter's life. Almost encyclopedic in nature, there are hundreds of never-before-seen paintings, letters, and archival documents. A three year project, the book is a labor of love and committed research that was duly bestowed multiple awards in Lebanon and abroad.

the oscillation between the classic and the romantic tendencies in art. Gibran is also caught in the struggle which is the besetting problem of the world today, the reconstruction of an era which will adjust the imperishable legacy of the ancient world, the classic traditions, with the ever evolving, fluctuating tendencies in art which constitute the essence of true Romanticism."

In these drawings, figures representing various allegorical and symbolic concepts float in a non-space, the composition of their bodies and the combinations of figures taking precedent over any narrative aspects. There is a lyricism and flow to the bodies, their features and sexes often concealed or blurred. As symbolic figures, it is the interaction and pose of the bodies which precedes their individual characteristics. Gibran draws less from a tradition of academic nudes, which focused primarily on the sensual and anatomical aspects of the body, but was instead cognizant of what the body could symbolize if rendered in a specific configuration. These bodies were the ultimate reflection of his philosophical beliefs about Nature, and the relationship between man and God. "He explained that it's the mirror of God, the mirror of beauty. He was very sensitive to Nature...you know it's a Romantic theme, in Rousseau, but also because you can find God in the Nature...it's not only a Romantic tendency but also a philosophic tendency," says Najjar.

We can see the evolution of his work in two sketches, one from 'Twenty Drawings', and the other from a year after the book's publication. Both entitled 'The Greater Self', these works reveal changes in Gibran's mentality. The first, a watercolor and graphite piece from 1916, features two nude figures, one large figure holding the other, the face of the smaller figure hidden in the



Mary Haskell, Charcoal on laid paper,
45x30.5, 1908

shoulder of the larger. The second is a similar composition, but the embrace is more intimate, the 'larger self' enveloping the 'smaller self' in a more protective embrace. These two drawings mark a shift in Gibran's understanding of the relationship between the layers of the Self in relation to the spirit. This evolution also reflects the close relationship between Gibran's intellectual pursuits and his visual artworks. Of his work, Gibran wrote to Mary saying "When I paint a picture, I try to give the picture a presence. It is the coming together of certain elements in a certain way, as if they made a sort of path along which God can come through to our consciousness."

Illustrations

One of Gibran's major accomplishments lies in having illustrated the majority of his own books. He did not literally illustrate, but rather transposed the universal themes and mystical concepts in his

writing into a visual language informed by Classical forms and Aestheticism. He develops a porous relationship between the foreground and background, while manipulating the proportions of the body to represent conceptual themes. Of the themes in these works, Najjar comments: “In the background you always have Lebanon, you have the landscape of the Qadisha, the valley and the rocks... and you have centaurs, this is like the double nature of man. He’s a beast and also a man. And the Winged Self, people have wings because he believed that man should rise to reach to be a god. He said that man must elevate to become a god and unite with Him. This is also from Sufism, this idea of unity.”

In his these works, pale, nude figures intertwine on backgrounds of cool and earthy colors. Watercolor lends a rather subtle, yet poignant quality that is soft and dreamlike. Larger figures clutch smaller ones in embraces, or hold them aloft. According to Italian literary critic, Francesco Medici, although Gibran most often painted nude bodies, his “intention was not to give scandal: there is no trace of sensuality or eroticism in his subjects. He himself gives us an explanation: ‘Life is naked. A nude body is the truest and the noblest symbol of life.’”

Figures representing joy might be gendered as female and sadness as male, but there is an androgyny that pervades the entire collection. Introspection and solitude are represented by bodies folded in on themselves, their limbs in fetal positions or wrapped around their torsos, while another entitled ‘The Dance’ (c.1920) features a bold woman, her hands outspread above her as she moves forward, a bright pink garment extending from her hand behind her back. In each work there is only the figures and what they represent, with no external symbols or objects to distract.

The pinnacle of Gibran’s career was the publishing of *The Prophet* in 1923, one of the most successful books ever published. The drawings that illustrated Gibran’s seminal text include the ever recognizable frontispiece entitled ‘The Face’ (1923). Of the 12 drawings in *The Prophet*, only the ‘The Face’ and another drawing entitled ‘Creative Hand’ are black and white, the others are more vibrant wash drawings. These drawings have often been considered some of Gibran’s most important artworks. According to Medici, it was “[Mikhail] Naimeh, who once, commenting on Gibran’s twelve drawings that illustrate *The Prophet*, wrote that they ‘are either interpretive of some thoughts, or represent new thoughts not expressed in words.’” In other words, “If words are not enough, art can help, and vice versa.”

Mystical and Mythological Paintings

Although he drew with pencil, charcoal, and painted often with watercolors, Gibran only used oil paint intensively over a period of about six years. He executed



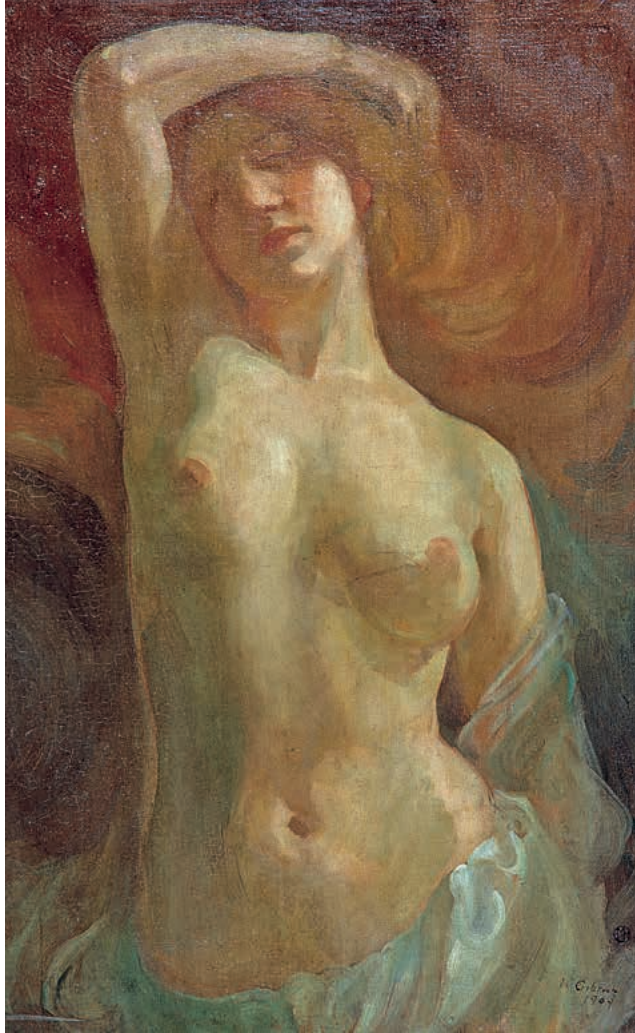
The Greater Self from Twenty Drawings, Watercolor and graphite on paper, 46x36.5, 1916



The Dance, Illustration from *The Prophet*, Watercolor, 1923, Gibran Museum



Interpretation of Joy and Sadness, Watercolor, 28x21.5, c.1920, Gibran Museum



‘The Autumn, Oil on canvas, 81.5x54.5, 1909

portraits of Teller, Micheline and Haskell in oil, but in a more impressionist style. It was not a medium he felt completely comfortable manipulating, perhaps lending to this more experimental quality. One of his earliest successes was a painting entitled ‘Autumn’(1909) featured in the Salon de Printemps, held by the Société Nationale de Beaux-Arts in Paris. It features a nude bust of a woman, her hair encircling her serene face in a torrent of fiery oranges and reds. With one arm lifted and folded across her head she appears in a state of repose, with only the background indicating turbulence. The palette and swift brushstrokes indicates a new found interest in the nature of color. It was during his time in Paris that Gibran expressed this new found passion: “Each colour seems to have a ‘spiritual’ nature by itself, and it also seems that no artist can teach the other how to find or understand that spiritual nature.”



Rose Sleeves, Oil on canvas, 64.4x45.7, 1911

Other paintings produced in oil are stunning tributes to his technical skill and sensitivity for human expression. Two paintings exhibit Gibran’s fascination with Greek mythology and Biblical stories. Both are curiously related by subject matter, if indirectly. ‘Rose Sleeves’ from 1911 and ‘The Head of Orpheus Floating Down the River Hebrus to the Sea’ circa 1908-1914 were intended to be the same subject: the mythological poet Orpheus. However, circumstances prevented Gibran from finding a male model for ‘Rose Sleeves’, resulting in a painting that depicts the female counterpart, Sappho. This painting, according to curator at the Telfair Museums Tania June Sammons, was inspired by the work of J.M.W. Turner “whose work he [Gibran] returned to again and again at the Tate Gallery on a visit to London in 1910.”

The painting of Orpheus’s decapitated head is more akin to Gibran’s typical style. The work is rougher with a focus on



The artist in his studio at the end of his life

the facial expression of the head, rather than the background. Three white doves flying above Orpheus’s severed head recall Gibran’s interest in reincarnation; these doves likely represented the soul of the deceased poet.

Final Years

Kahlil Gibran died in 1931 in a hospital in New York. His paintings and drawings, which come to an amassed collection of over 700 works, reflect his lifelong interrogation into universal themes and the representation of dreams, visions, and concepts through physical figures and forms. According to Medici: “Gibran’s artistic production is nothing but a gift for others, a means of spiritual elevation and evolution for those who are not blind-hearted, or better, unable to see, realize and understand the divine truth.”





| The Burden



| Guardian Angel, Graphite, 34.5x24.5, 1903, Gibran Museum



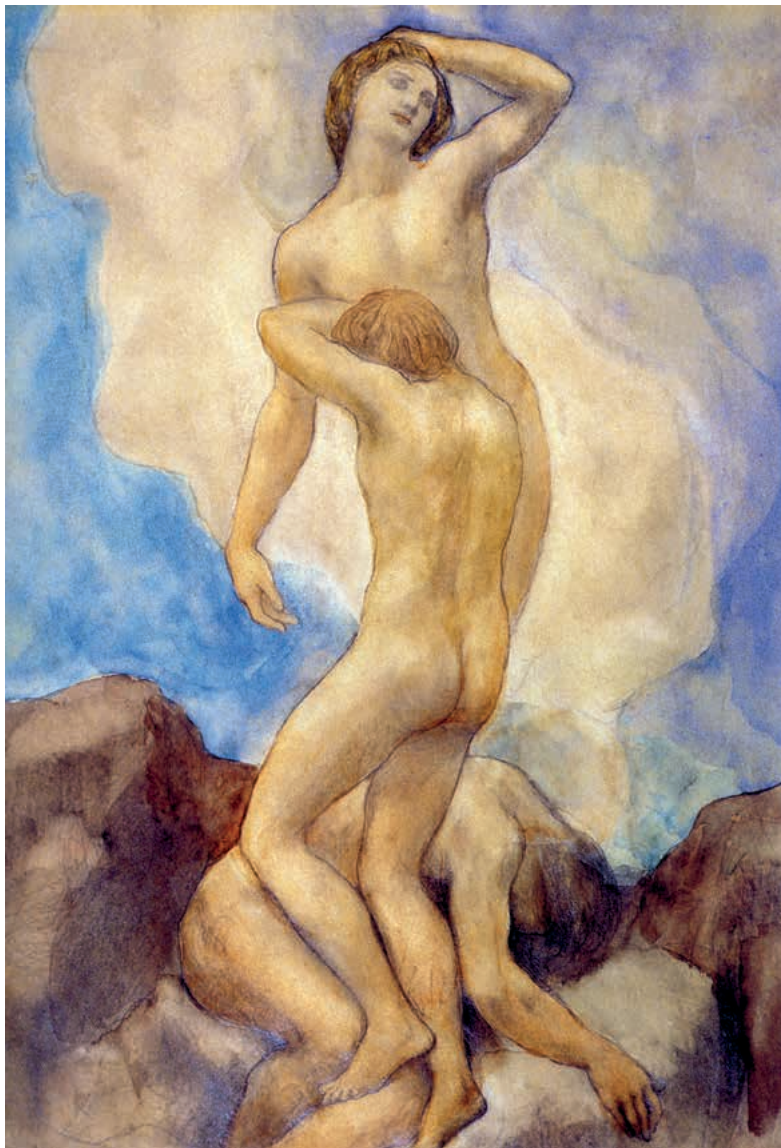
| Jesus Son of Man from Jesus, Son of Man, Graphite on paper, 120x45.7, 1928



| Head of a Woman, Charcoal, Gibran Museum



| Veiled Face



| The Three Levels of Humanity, Watercolor, 1923, illustration from The Prophet, Gibran Museum



| Watercolor and pencil on paper, 21.5x14, 1916



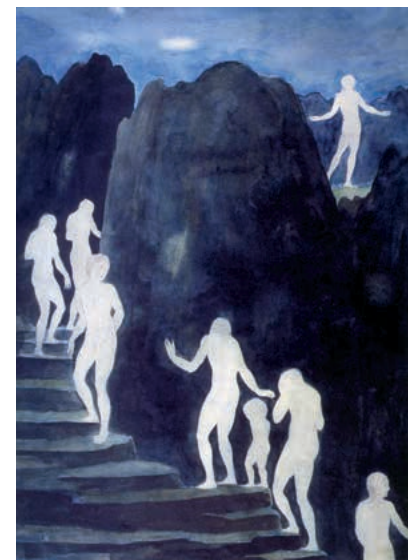
| Rhythmical Dance on the Summit, Watercolor, 28x21.5, c.1922



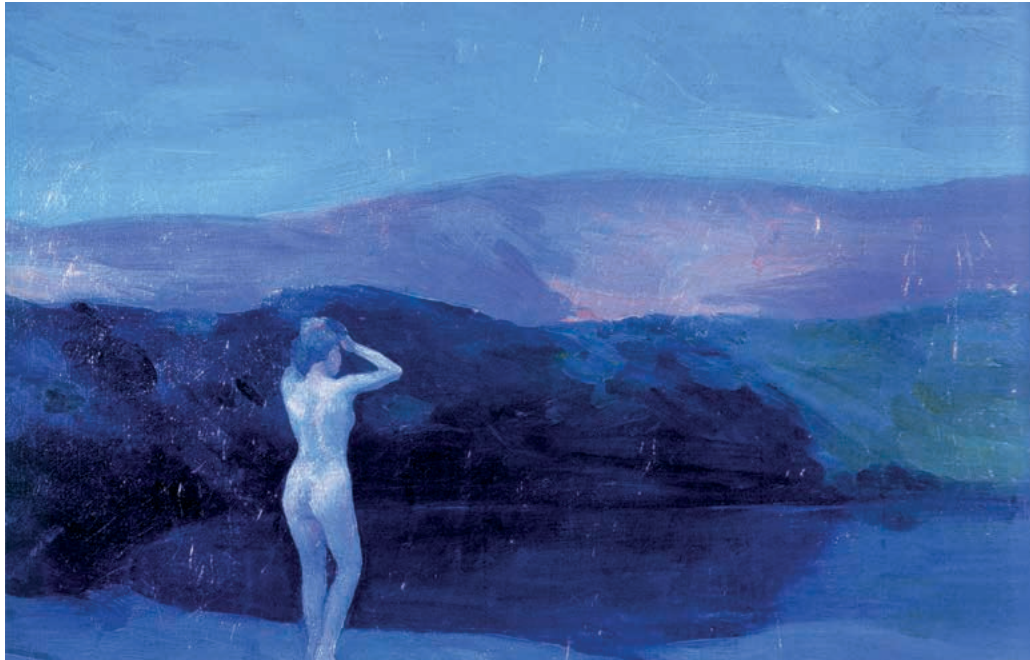
| The Summit from Sand and Foam, Watercolor and graphite on paper, 27.9x21.6, 1925



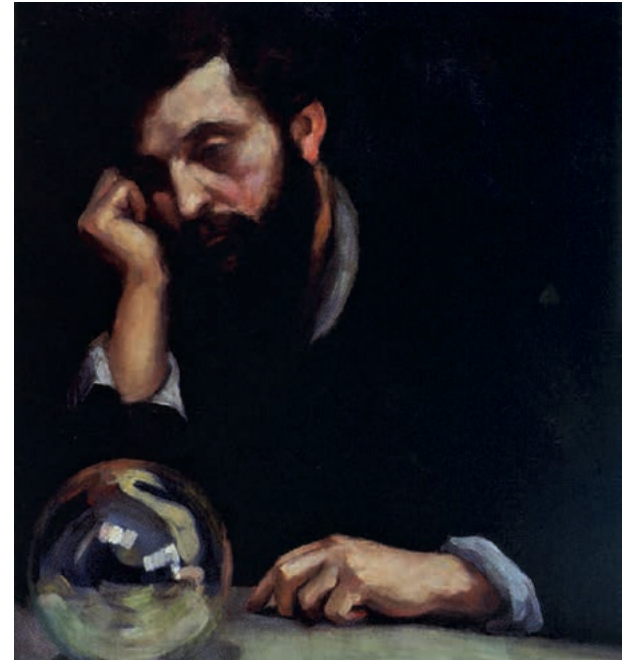
| The Archer, Illustration from The Prophet, 28x21.5, 1922, Gibran Museum



| Humanity Purified Rising Towards Infinity, Watercolor, 35.5x25.5, c.1923, Gibran Museum



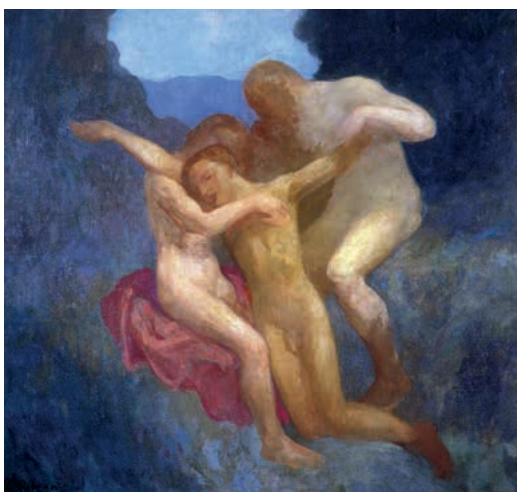
Woman Discovering Nature, Oil on canvas, 46.2x65.2, 1912, Gibran Museum



Thinker, Oil on canvas, Telfair Museum



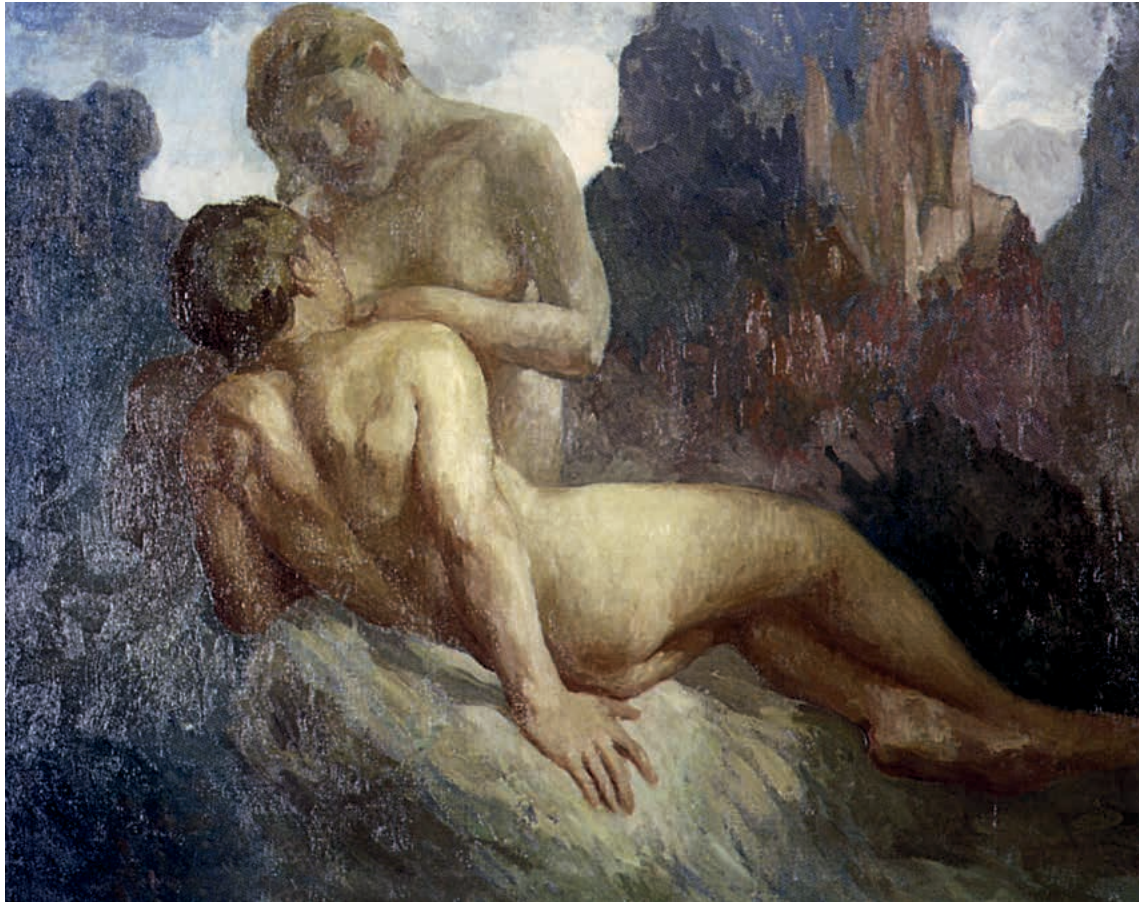
Centaur, Oil on canvas, 1913, Gibran Museum



Yesterday and Today, Oil on canvas, 68.5x81.3, 1914, Gibran Museum



Let Us rise Together, Oil on canvas, 74x56, 1912



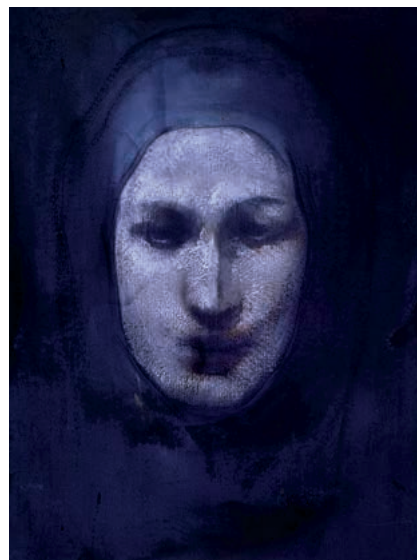
| Mother Nature, Oil on canvas, Gibran Museum



| Portrait of Kamileh offer by Gibran to poet Witter Bynner, Charcoal, 1920, Archives of Witter Bynner, Houghton Library, Harvard University



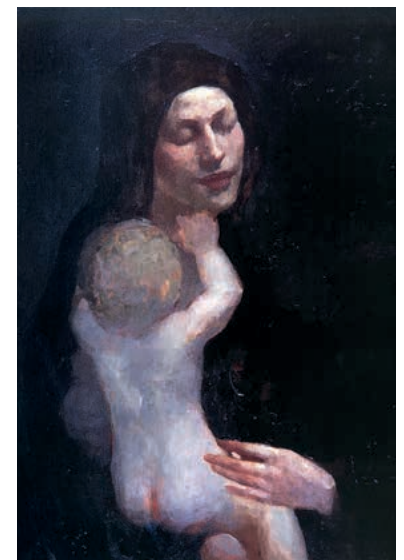
| Mother Earth from The Earth Gods, Watercolor and graphite on paper, 28x21.6, 1931



| Kamileh Rahmeh, Mother of Gibran, Gouache, 35x25, 1916



| The Comforting Motherly Spirit, Oil on canvas, 65.5x45.7, c.1914



| Mother and Child, Oil on canvas, 1914, Gibran Museum



Portrait of Mary Haskell, Soumaya Museum, 1910



Portrait of Micheline (Emilie Michel), Oil on canvas, Soumaya Museum



Probably Micheline, Graphite on paper, 42.5x28.9, 1908



Mary Haskell, Graphite on wove paper, 55.9x47, 1910



Portrait of Charlotte Teller (The Essence of Her Body), Oil on canvas, 66x50, c. 1908-1910



Charlotte Teller, Graphite on paper, 30x45.7, 1908



| The Family of the Artist, Oil on canvas, 65.5x91.5



| Portrait of the Artist's Sister Marianna Gibran, Oil on academy board, 44.8x37.1, c. 1908-1914



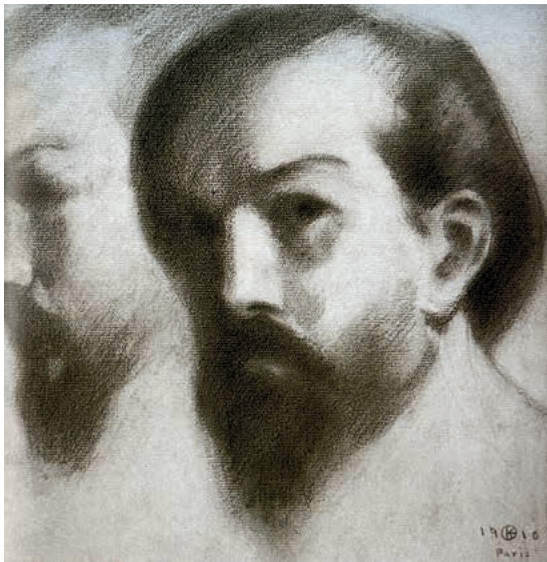
| Kamileh and her two daughters in Boston, photographed by Fred Holland Day, 1901



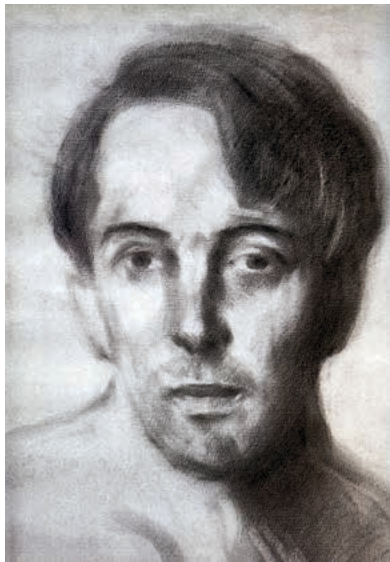
| Sultana, sister of Gibran, Oil on canvas, 73.2x51, 1910, Gibran Museum



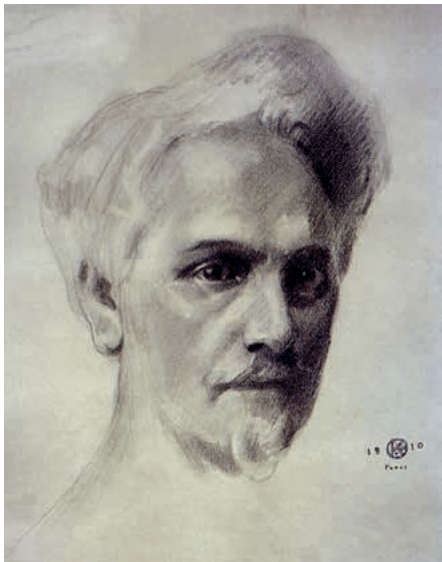
Giuseppe Garibaldi



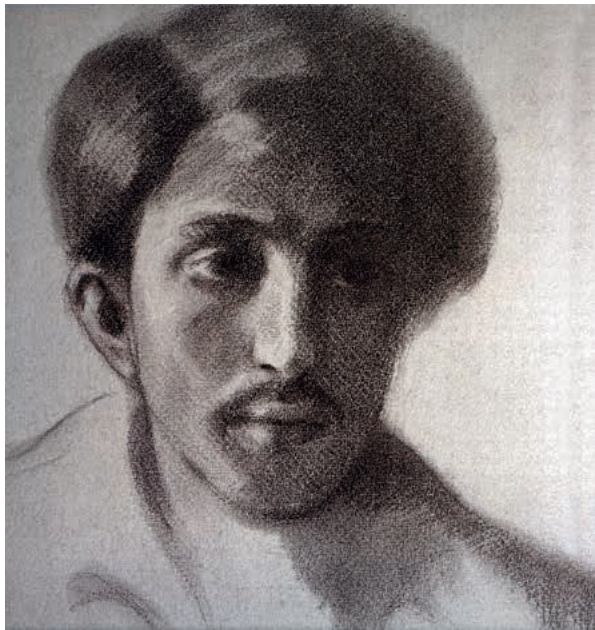
Claude Debussy



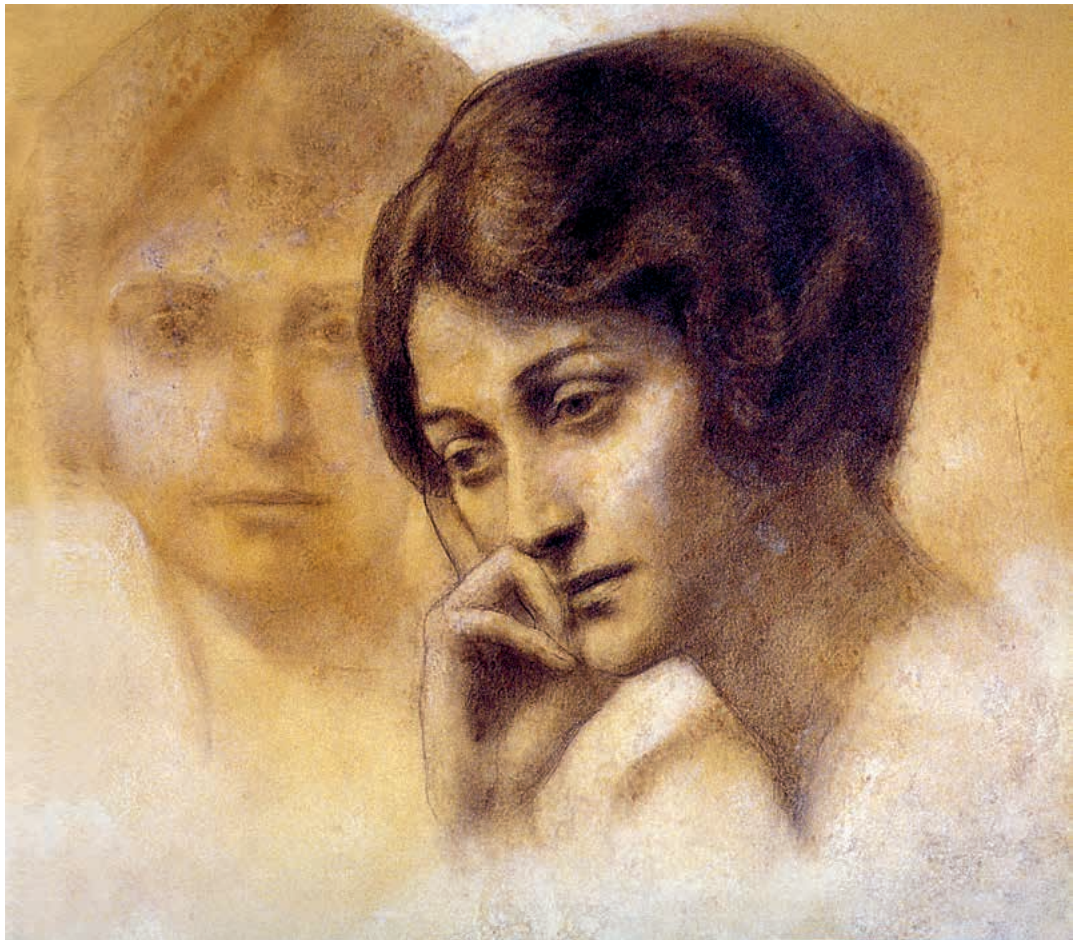
William Butler Yeats



Henri Rochefort



Ameen Rihani



Elinor Wylie



Lilla Cabot Perry, Portrait of Kahlil Gibran, Oil on canvas, c.1898, Telfair Museums



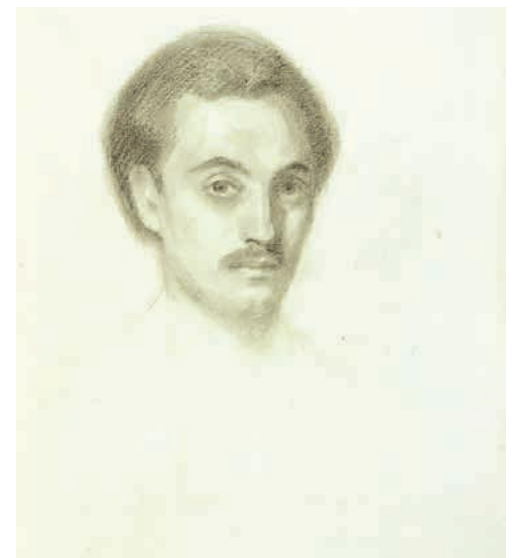
Fred Holland Day, Photo of Gibran as an adolescent, 1897



Self portrait, Oil on masonite, 44.4x36.8, 1911



Self Portrait, Charcoal, 1908, Gibran Museum



Self Portrait, Graphite on wove paper, 55.8x47, 1910