Gibran of Oil and Paper

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I am painting, or I am learning how to paint. It will take me a long time to paint as I want to, but it is beautiful to feel the growth of one's own vision of things.

Letter from Kahlil Gibran in Paris to Mary Haskell,
2 October 1908

Renovation. Life. Transformation. Order. Tenderness and fragility touched by the Creator. Gibran Kahlil Gibran gave new meaning to literature and carried his philosophy along the paths of painting. With sincerity, the Lebanese poet and artist revealed—in a mystical act—the depths and essences of being.

His writings were composed with deliberation, as if in the passage from Arabic to English he had been blazing a trail never traveled before in the West. Gibran erased, corrected, annotated, rewrote. . . . By contrast, his lively drawing pencil moved over the paper without hesitation, while oil paint was a means of laying bare his heart. By overcoming fragmentations, the master achieved drawings and paintings of the universe, in a space containing eternity and the moment, present and past, the concrete and the abstract. Humankind and the divine are seen as an indivisible unity, harmonious and vital.

In his early childhood, Gibran immortalized the millenary cedars that grew in his *bled*, in the surroundings of his native village in the Wadi Qadisha, the sacred valley, in a wood of columns that held up the cosmos. The sketchbook he drew in at the age of eleven has come down to us. An imperial Napoleon, a shepherd with his flock, now unknown bodies and faces which constituted the identity of a people, treasured by the young artist and carried into exile with him. An exile that looked inward, back to a motherland rather than a fatherland. The sketchbook survived the pilgrimage from the Middle East to Ellis Island in New York Bay, the gateway to the United States. From Manhattan to Boston and Maine, only to return to New York City, where Gibran died on 10 April 1931.

A year before he died, in a letter addressed to his friend Felix Farris, Gibran named three titans as the greatest influences on him: William Blake (1757-1827), Eugène Carrière (1849-1906), and Henri Martin (1860-1943). Blake's mysticism and elongated figures combined with the color and corporal architecture of Carrière. To Martin he owed the traces of melancholy in his painting and the truncated figures. Gibran mixed, synthesized, and added something of his own.

Gibran started out by copying and illustrating. It was thanks to Fred Holland Day that he began to study artistic form and became acquainted with the intellectual and bohemian circles of Boston. In the words of his biographer Alexandre Najjar, "Gibran was subjugated by the mythological and prophetic universe of [Blake], overwhelmed by the diversity of sources that enriched his poetic and visual vocabulary."

Artistic Stages

1893-1907: Use of charcoal and colored pencils. These drawings later illustrated the publications of Copeland and Day. Appearance of nudes.

1908-1914: Most, if not all, of his oils were executed during his stay in Paris (1908-1910). Influence of symbolist painting. Ethereal figures.

1914-1918: Abandons oils and starts using charcoal again. Predominance of portraits and self-portraits. Influence of Leonardo da Vinci. Composes figures based on spiral forms. Illustrates his own literary work.

1923-1931: Final creative stage. Intense colors with a pronounced taste for dark tones. Works of greater dramatic quality.

After a return to his homeland in order to study secondary school, Gibran left Mount Lebanon and returned to Boston, where at the age of twenty-one he held his first exhibition at the Harcourt Studios. There he met Mary Haskell, who would become his muse, benefactress, and friend. She financed Gibran's stay in Paris four years later. It was the Académie Julian that instilled a symbolist vein in the artist. Pierre Marcel-Béronneau, a pupil of the celebrated Gustave Moreau, introduced Gibran to misty atmospheres, evanescent bodies, and paths to strange and unknown worlds.

> If I paint a mountain as a multitude of human forms or paint a waterfall in the shape of falling bodies, that is because I see a multitude of living things in the mountain, and in the waterfall a current of precipitating life.

This is what Gibran portrayed. If Blake influenced Gibran in his drawing, Carrière did so in his painting with oils. One of Gibran's sketches bears a great resemblance to *Woman Leaning on a Table* (1893). Figures that would seem to escape from the canvas. Portraits of masculine and feminine souls. Gibran's pencil also betrays the influence of Leonardo da Vinci. The shaded outlines and excellent draftsmanship reveal Gibran's mastery of technique and a precise rendering of eyes, tranquil or absorbed and full of

desire.

The oil paintings draw mainly on the symbolist tradition. Vivid colors underline the dreamlike quality of the supernatural, while pastel tones recreate nebulous atmospheres in which centaurs disappear into the distance and the earth and sky play at touching one another at a wavering horizon.

The subjective and irrational aspects of Romanticism explored new paths in the work of the symbolists. Gibran did not limit himself to the mere physical appearance of the object; through it, he attained to the supernatural. He disdained the exterior world and used symbols to express his dreams and fantasies. Through signs and archetypes, art is a means of expressing human moods, emotions, and ideas.

There is the desire to create a painting not subject to reality, in which every symbol has its own embodiment. There is no single reading: the work can provoke a variety of analogies. Here more than ever, the work is open, as Umberto Eco has expressed it, and its originality resides not in its technique but in its content.

Feminine presences dominate Gibran's visual universe. From Biblical women, such as Salome offering up the head of John the Baptist, to anonymous faces with nostalgic, evocative gazes. Time is eternalized in *The Ages of Woman* whose whitish tones depict the sleep of Eve. Six suspended, intertwined figures in swirling greens bear witness, like a *vanitas*, rather than a *memento mori*, to the pillar of the firmament: memory. To endure, to reaffirm being in otherness, *in itself and for itself*, in an eternal dialectic.

"I will never be able to complete a painting until I consider it finished for myself," said Gibran. As a result, most of the oils he did in Paris are unfinished. He gave more importance to the appearance of forms than to the forms themselves. The outline of the figures is not clear but fleeting; they almost fade away. Like Rodin, whom Gibran admired, he learned the treatment of surfaces from Michelangelo. They seem barely sketched in, as if they were unfinished. All three artists used the technique of *non finito*, of the unfinished fragment. This properly impressionist technique gives marked effects of chiaroscuro that suggest permanent movement. Light creates and recreates the definitive form on the retina of the spectator.

Philip Khuri Hitti, the renowned scholar of Arab culture, has written:

> Gibran is an artist and poet. His ideal is esthetic, his method is subjective, and his style is mystical, symbolic, and poetic. . . . His writings and his creations have brought light, warmth, and joy to thousands of hearts and thousands of souls. And after all, the discrepancy between the two ideals of beauty and truth is more apparent than real. They are two sides of the same coin.

A sensibility of the outmost refinement, the Lebanese artist has become an

emblematic figure of Middle Eastern wisdom in the West. In the words of this universal bard of life: “We came not into this life by exile, but we came as innocent creatures of God, to learn how to worship the holy and eternal spirit and seek the hidden secrets within ourselves from the beauty of life.”