

A Greater Beauty: The Drawings of Kahlil Gibran

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Free Admission
Wednesday-Sunday: 12 –6pm

The first exhibition of its kind in the United States, *A Greater Beauty: The Drawings of Kahlil Gibran* features over one hundred drawings by the prolific Lebanese-American artist, poet and essayist, and coincides with the 100th anniversary of Gibran’s world-renowned publication, *The Prophet*. Though best known for his poetry and prose, Gibran viewed himself equally as a visual artist, producing paintings, watercolors, sketches, illustrations, book covers, and other material as a complement to his written work. *A Greater Beauty* will present an overview of Gibran’s drawings and sketches alongside manuscript pages, notebooks, correspondence, magazine illustrations and essays, and first editions, providing a glimpse into the artist’s production in the context of his work as a whole.

In his writing, Gibran broke with the rigid conventions of traditional Arabic poetry and literary prose, and his non-sectarian approach, which combined elements of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Jungian psychology, was a revelation to Arabic-speaking and immigrant communities in the United States. Gibran took a similar approach in his subject matter, practicing an idiosyncratic fusion of symbolist pantheism and spiritual mysticism to create a uniquely egalitarian, universalist aesthetic that appealed to a broad, international audience. Although Gibran’s English-language writing is poetic in tone and, in contrast to his earlier writing in Arabic, not overtly political, his philosophy was guided by a deep opposition to Ottoman rule and his support of a Syrian brother and sister-hood beyond national borders. He called for freedom of spirit as the basis for political and material freedom and, along with his Arab Romantic cohort in New York, mobilized his own diasporic identity as a kind of rebellion.

Gibran’s drawing corpus can be divided into several distinct bodies of work that together present a portrait of a complex individual trying to navigate the various worlds—geographic, ethnic, cultural, and political—that comprised his identity. There are the finished watercolors with which he illustrated many of his books, and which present a hybrid spiritual vision with hazy figures and landscapes both evocative of Gibran’s native country while at the same time existing outside of time and place. Entirely different from these compositions are the drawings he did for the Arab American and English language publications to which he was a frequent contributor, as well as the ink-and-pencil portraits he made of individuals in the different communities where he traveled, and of his artistic, literary, and spiritual heroes. Among those Gibran portrayed are fellow Lebanese American writer Ameen Rihani, for whom Gibran also drew book illustrations; Abdu’l-Bahá, the leader of the Baha’i faith whom Gibran met upon the former’s visit to the United States; and the American artist Albert Pinkham Ryder with whom Gibran became friendly in New York. Finally, there are Gibran’s watercolor and ink sketches whose translucent passages, looping lines, and emergent, quasi-abstract forms reveal an open, questing sensibility that is striking in its contemporaneity. In all the works on view in *A Greater Beauty* though, Gibran strives to transcend his specific context while responding to the demands of his time.

A Greater Beauty: The Drawings of Kahlil Gibran is organized by Claire Gilman, Chief Curator, with Isabella Kapur, Curatorial Associate, and Anneka Lenssen, Associate Professor of Global Modern Art, University of California, Berkeley.

Artist Biography

Kahlil Gibran was born Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān in Ottoman-ruled Bsharri in 1883 to a Maronite Christian family. In 1895, Gibran's mother moved him, his half-brother, and two younger sisters to Boston, leaving Gibran's father in Lebanon. Displaying an aptitude for the arts at an early age, Kahlil Gibran was supported in his endeavors by key mentors throughout his life. As a teenager, Gibran met photographer, publisher, and philanthropist Frederick Holland Day and poet Josephine Preston Peabody, both of whom provided Gibran with an entree into Boston's creative community. Day hosted the first solo exhibition of Gibran's drawings in 1904 in his Boston photo studio shortly after Gibran returned from Beirut, where he attended college. At that event, Gibran met Mary Haskell, who would become a lifelong friend and benefactor to Gibran, paying for him to attend the Academie Julian art school in Paris from 1908 to 1910. While in Paris, Gibran became involved with Syrian political dissidents, whose activities he continued to support upon his return to the United States. Gibran's artwork was shown in 1914 at Montross Gallery and in 1917 at the galleries of M. Knoedler & Co, both in New York. In 1923, Gibran published his best-known written work *The Prophet*, an anthology of poems that captured the attention of the world and eventually made Gibran the best-selling American poet of the twentieth century. On April 10, 1931, at the age of forty-eight, Gibran died of liver disease in his home on West 10th Street in New York City. He was buried in Bsharri on the grounds of what is now the Gibran Museum.

Publication

A Greater Beauty: The Drawings of Kahlil Gibran is accompanied by a robust publication, that features over 100 images as well as new scholarship by The Drawing Center's Chief Curator Claire Gilman; Anneka Lenssen, Associate Professor of Global Modern Art at the University of California Berkeley; and Wa'il S. Hassan, Director of the Center for South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies and Professor of Comparative Literature and English at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Written contributions by three contemporary artists—Ali Cherri (b. Beirut, lives in Paris), Jordan Nassar (b. New York, lives in New York), and Mounira Al Solh (b. born Beirut, lives in Beirut and the Netherlands)—as well as Joseph Geagea, Director of the Gibran Museum, will reflect on Gibran's sustained influence.

Credits

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Images

Kahlil Gibran, *The Heavenly Mother*, 1920. Pencil on wove paper, 22 1/4 × 14 1/2 in (56.5 × 36.8 cm). Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia, Gift of Mary Haskell Minis. Photography by Daniel L. Grantham, Jr., Graphic Communication

Kahlil Gibran, *Untitled*, 1921. Watercolor and pencil on paper, 5 × 6 in (12.7 × 15.2 cm). Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia, Gift of Mary Haskell Minis. Photography by Daniel L. Grantham, Jr., Graphic Communication