

Kahlil Gibran: In Brief

KAHLIL (KHALIL) GIBRAN was born in 1883, in the lush, mountainous village of B'sharri, Lebanon (an Ottoman/Syrian province at the time), to his Maronite Christian mother, Kamila Rahmeh. He joined an older brother Butros (Peter) from Kamila's previous marriage, and when his mother married yet a third time, the family grew still larger with the addition of sisters Mariana and Sultana.

At age 5, Kahlil entered B'sharri's one-room public school, while also being tutored by Maronite priests in keeping with that sect's tradition. From the two sources he learned the rudiments of Arabic and Syriac language, along with Bible stories from both the Old and New Testaments.

Unfortunately, as a result of his stepfather's gambling debts and accusations of tax evasion, the family's property was confiscated by Ottoman authorities, leaving them all homeless. With her husband now in jail, mother Kamila made the bold decision to emigrate with her children to the United States in 1895. Ellis Island officials recorded the family name as "Jubran" – the way it sounds when spoken – though his own name would later be anglicized to Kahlil Gibran.

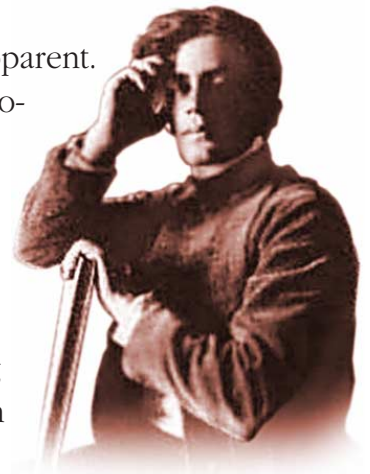
In Boston, young Kahlil's budding artistic talent quickly became apparent. He was soon taken under the wing of noted American avant-garde photographer and publisher, Fred Holland Day. By 1898 Kahlil had begun to make a name for himself, especially after several of his illustrations were adapted as bookcover designs.

Perhaps fearing he was becoming "too Americanized," Kamila sent Kahlil back to Beirut, Lebanon, to complete his Arab language education. There, he also studied religion and ethics, while continuing to develop his artistic talents. He was soon obliged to return to Boston in 1902, however, upon the death of his sister Sultana. Brother Butros was lost to tuberculosis the following year, along with his mother to cancer.

Despite these tragedies, Gibran's growing collection of illustrations began to be publicly exhibited two years later, at which time he was also introduced to a local girls' school headmistress, Mary Haskell. A philanthropist ten years his senior, Mary would mentor the artist's creativity and supplement his income over the next two decades.

A pair of Gibran's essays on the subject of music were published in 1905, along with

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prose poems that later evolved into his books, *A Tear and a Smile* and *Storms*. In 1906, Gibran's *Spirit Brides*, published in Arabic, took on such controversial subjects as women's rights and religious hypocrisy, drawing the attention of expatriate Arab intellectuals. In 1908, a second book of short stories, *Spirits Rebellious*, also in Arabic, drew still more acclaim with its anti-feudal and anti-clerical overtones.

Mary Haskell subsequently funded a two-year sojourn in Paris, where the 25-year-old studied painting and refined the Symbolist style for which he would eventually become famous. After returning once again to Boston, Gibran's relationship with Mary Haskell deepened, but she resisted further intimacy – and his suggestion that they marry – because of what she called “the race barrier.”

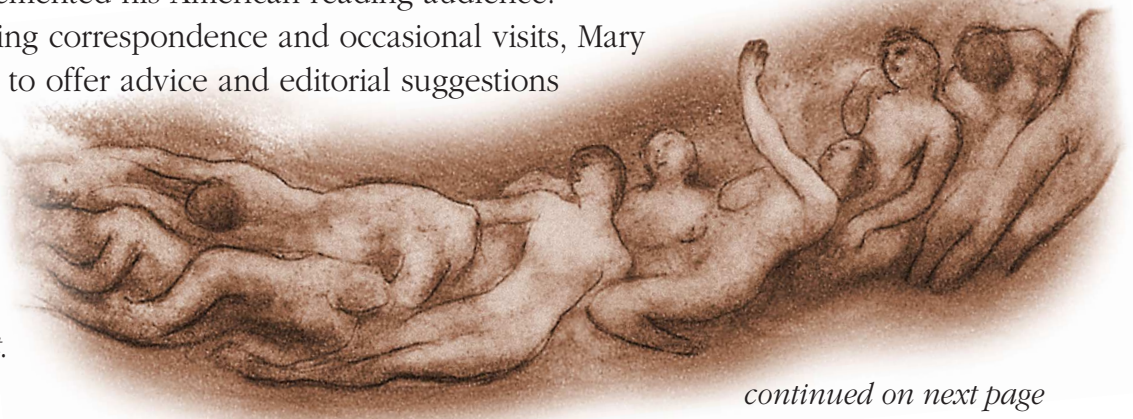
Having become an official member of the “Golden Links Society” of Arab-American intellectuals, Gibran began work on his first English-language book, *The Madman*. Not coincidentally, *Broken Wings*, his only true-to-form novel, was published in 1912 and featured a theme of love thwarted both by social conventions and male chauvinism.

With Mary's financial help, Gibran moved to New York to establish his own artist studio and live in the heart of America's art-and-publishing world. Soon he met (and drew a famous portrait of) the leader of the Baha'i faith, Abdul-Baha, and, a year later, psychologist Carl Jung. Both of these acclaimed thinkers clearly influenced his subsequent writing.

Gibran enjoyed literary success with publication of his anthology of prose poems, *A Tear and a Smile*, as well as a rare artistic triumph with an exhibition of his paintings at New York's Montross Gallery. Other galleries had previously refused to display his works because of what art critics deemed “excessive nudity and modernism.”

The appearance of Gibran's poems in “Seven Arts” – a new journal which also featured the works of Eugene O'Neill, D.H. Lawrence and H.L. Mencken – finally brought him recognition from the wider American literary community. Publication of *The Madman* further confirmed that acclaim. As a result, Gibran's literary career began to overshadow his ongoing career as a fine artist; this, despite Alfred A. Knopf's well-received publication of his *Twenty Drawings*. In 1920, Gibran's influence within the Arab modernist community grew with his induction into their “Pen League,” even as his latest collection of parables and sayings in *The Forerunner* cemented his American reading audience.

Through ongoing correspondence and occasional visits, Mary Haskell continued to offer advice and editorial suggestions on a growing collection of topical counsels Gibran had begun weaving into his new book, *The Prophet*.



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Knopf published the finished work in 1923. The book's lyricism and "...universal wisdom free of metaphysics" soon made *The Prophet* a considerable success. Ironically, its fictional hero, Almustafa, would frequently be quoted alongside history's most respected sages and spiritual teachers.

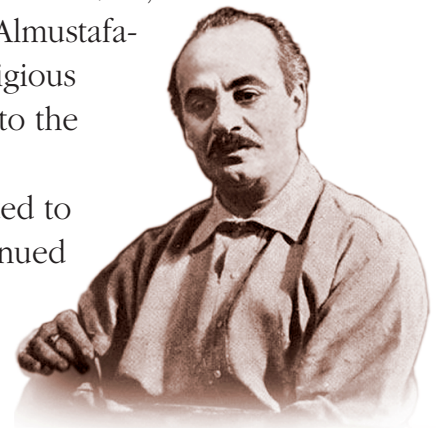
With Gibran's literary and financial success now secure, Mary Haskell moved to Savanna, Georgia, where she eventually married Colonel Jacob Minis. The departure of his closest friend and apparent end to his longest-running relationship left Gibran deeply saddened, though he continued to publish new collections of aphorisms and articles both in Cairo, Egypt, and New York's "New Orient" magazine. He also began a relationship with another admirer, Barbara Young, an aspiring poet herself who would go on to write the first major biography of the artist/author. Meanwhile, flush with his first self-generated fortune, Gibran invested in an ill-advised New York real estate scheme. It soon went bad, sapping his creative energies for a full year.

His book *Sand and Foam* was published in 1926, from which, decades later, Beatles songwriter John Lennon would adapt the line, "Half of what I say is meaningless, but I say it so that the other half may reach you." *Jesus, The Son of Man*, followed in 1928, wherein Gibran pictured Christianity's central figure as more of an Almustafa-like sage who was essentially compatible with all of the world's religious traditions. Though a moderate success, the book never came close to the ever-growing popularity of *The Prophet*.

Despite the new Prohibition laws in the U.S., Gibran was reported to be a heavy drinker, even while – or more likely *because* – he continued to suffer from ill health, mental anguish and self-doubt. To close friends, Gibran admitted feeling "unworthy" of the literary character with whom he was now inevitably associated, and his health continued to deteriorate.

Gibran's *The Earth Gods* was published in March, 1931, in which a conversation between three divinities provided a metaphor for humankind's own religious perspectives. That same year, on April 10, Kahlil Gibran died in a New York hospital from complications of cirrhosis and incipient tuberculosis in one lung. An obituary in *The Times* began with the headline: "A Prophet is Dead."

In accordance with his wishes, Gibran's body was transported back to Lebanon, by then an independent nation, where a large procession welcomed their "native son" and followed his coffin the seventy miles from Beirut to his hometown of B'sharri. Later, a simple memorial was established at the convent of Mar Sarkis, purchased specifically for that purpose by Mary Haskell and Gibran's sister Mariana. Over the years, tens of thousands of visitors would tread the narrow path leading to his gravesite near Lebanon's "Holy Valley," and *The Prophet* would continue to be a recurring best-seller, at times second only to *The Holy Bible* in annual sales.



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For decades thereafter, proceeds from *The Prophet* poured into B'Sharri, to which Gibran had bequeathed his book royalties. Feuding among relatives and tribal factions forced creation of what eventually became The Gibran National Committee, tasked with resolving any disputes and administering funds.

Today, as successive generations still seek out *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran has earned the ranking of “third most widely-read poet in history” – behind Shakespeare (for his collected works) and ancient China’s sage Lao-Tzu (for his *Tao Te Ching*). His most acclaimed masterwork has now passed into the literary world’s public domain, *and* into much of the world’s spiritual consciousness.

Deservedly so.

PHOTOS & ARTWORK:

PAGE 1: *One of the earliest-known photographs of Gibran, probably around age 20.*

PAGE 2: *A vignette adapted from the dozen Symbolist-style drawings that grace the pages of THE PROPHET, this one from a much larger illustration near the end of “The Farewell.”*

PAGE 3: *A portrait of Gibran the writer at the peak of his literary success.*

BOOKS BY MARK HASKETT

