



## Season 6, Episode 9: Kahlil Gibran Painting

Tukufu Zuberi: Our last story investigates the connection between a portrait, a poet, and the fall of an empire. In 1923, the Lebanese-born poet Kahlil Gibran publishes *The Prophet*, a collection of poems exploring facets of life and the human condition. Although viewed skeptically by critics, it will become a literary sensation, making Kahlil Gibran one of the world's best selling poets and having a powerful impact on the counter culture of the 1960's, and the new-age movement. But many are unaware that the writer was also a prolific painter, capturing celebrities and famous figures of the twentieth century on canvas. Now, almost eight decades after Gibran's death, Bob Diab from Overland Park, Kansas, has a portrait that he thinks may have been painted by Gibran.

Tukufu: Hello. I am Tukufu.

Bob: I am Bob. Please come in.

Tukufu: Wow. So what is this?

Bob: This is my grandfather, Najib Musa Diab. He was a publisher of an Arabic newspaper in Brooklyn, New York at the turn of the century...

Tukufu: Really?

Bob: Just after he immigrated here from Syria.

Tukufu: And which paper was that?

Bob: It was called "The Mirror of the West."

Tukufu: Bob says his grandfather's newspaper was once an important resource for Arab immigrants – a familiar voice reporting on changing events in their home countries, and on life within Arab immigrant communities in the United States. He published Gibran's poems in his newspaper, giving the poet a prominent voice in the isolated Arab community. What is it about this painting that's so important?

Bob: The story is that it was painted by Kahlil Gibran.

Tukufu: Now I knew of him as a very famous writer. But I didn't know he did paintings.



Bob: Yes.

Tukufu: Especially portraits.

Bob: Yes.

Tukufu: Bob tells me a cousin he hasn't seen in many years once had a drawing signed by the poet. Although the painting of Bob's grandfather is not signed, there are some potential clues. What is this medal here, do you know what that's about?

Bob: I do not know.

Tukufu: And, this here? This is a watch, right?

Bob: Yes.

Tukufu: Bob has a timepiece that has been passed down through his family, which he thinks may be the same watch in the painting.

Bob: This pocket watch was presented to my grandfather when he was president of the United Syrian Society in 1914 and 1915.

Tukufu: Fine timepiece here.

Bob: Thank you.

Tukufu: Bob says that although his grandfather immigrated to the United States, he devoted his life to the cause of independence for Syria and Lebanon. Both were still part of the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled those lands for several hundred years. So what do you want me to find out for you?

Bob: Well, could it have been painted by Kahlil Gibran? And any background about my grandfather.

Tukufu: The portrait is too large to carry with me, so I'm going to take some photos. I read Kahlil Gibran in college, but I don't know much about his artwork. I'm heading into Brooklyn, New York, home to a large and



longstanding Arab-American community, to show Bob's painting to a Kahlil Gibran scholar, Gregory Orfalea. Greg says much of Gibran's writing and painting reflects his identity as an immigrant in a foreign land.

Greg: I think his experience in America was one of alienation; it was a lonely experience, linguistically he didn't know English, he was not in beautiful verdant snowy Mount Lebanon, he was living in the tenements in grimy Boston, south Boston, west Roxbury.

Tukufu: Greg explains that Gibran arrived in Boston in 1895 at the age of 12. His family was part of an enormous influx of mostly poor immigrants who arrived at the turn of the century from Lebanon and Syria to places such as Brooklyn, New York, and south Boston. His first poetry was in Arabic, and often addressed young immigrants like himself, struggling to find their way in the United States.

Greg: He wrote poems to tell young Syrian Americans to be proud of their heritage in the United States and feel that they had something to give of magnitude.

Tukufu: In 1923, he published a collection of 26 English prose poems about a mystical spiritual leader "The Prophet". In it, Gibran explored subjects like love, beauty, and giving... You give but little when you give of your possessions; it is when you give of yourself that you truly give. The unique blend of east and west thinking has sold millions of copies.

Greg: There are some parts of the prophet that are very interesting and some of the aphorisms that are different: work is love made visible; it was a completely different style of writing than was going on right then and there with the Americans.

Tukufu: But Greg believes that, ironically, *The Prophet's* commercial success may have contributed to Gibran's mixed reviews from critics.

Greg: And also you have to say that another reason was that they just simply did not translate his tougher more rebellious principled political work that was published prior to *The Prophet*. We translated a poem of his that he has never seen English [The Sufi]. "Defeat my Defeat" that material shows a more political, more defiant, more socially engaged Gibran. I'll read just a bit of it. "Defeat my defeat, my shining sword and shield / In your eyes I have read / That to be enthroned is to be enslaved... We shall stand in the sun with a will / And we shall be dangerous." Salma Jayyusi, the Palestinian critic, says that he is the most important literary figure in the Arab world in the first half of the 20th century. That's big.

Tukufu: I tell Greg about my investigation. So I am particularly interested in the relationship between Kahlil Gibran and Najib Diab? Can you talk to me a little bit about Diab?



Greg: Well he was a leader of the community, as a journalist, he was a leader of the United Syrian Society for Freedom for Syria from Ottoman Turkey. He is a highly respected man.

Tukufu: Greg confirms both men knew each other and moved in similar circles, each speaking in favor of independence for Syria and Lebanon. Like Gibran, Najib Diab was profoundly influenced by American ideas of political liberty and free speech.

Greg: These people had come to America, they had tasted the fruits of democracy and secularism. Most of them liked what they saw. Like what they tasted... they wanted to see it in their home countries.

Tukufu: But Greg's not sure if Gibran ever painted this.

Greg: It's almost too realistic, there is no pre-Raphaelite light and mistiness about it that you saw in Gibran's paintings.

Tukufu: He says the largest public collection of Gibran paintings in the U.S. is at the Telfair Museum in Savannah, Georgia, so I'm arranging to have Bob's portrait shipped there for comparison. Meanwhile, I'm going to try to track down Bob's cousin, whom he had said once owned artwork signed by Gibran. Eventually I locate Robert Madey on Long Island, near New York City. Robert is also a grandson of the man in Bob's portrait, Najib Diab.

Robert: Welcome. Come in.

Tukufu: Thank you very much. Now, it's my understanding that you actually have a sketch that Kahlil Gibran did and signed. Robert: I do. As a matter of fact.

Tukufu: Robert shows me the sketch of his aunt Selma. The woman is Najib Diab's daughter. He says that although the original has been sold there's no doubt who drew it. Robert (reading): "My love to Selma Diab, from Gibran Gibran."

Tukufu: Wow! Very very interesting.

Robert: Well Gibran and my grandfather were friends.

Tukufu: Robert explains that Kahlil Gibran was close to his entire family, sharing political and artistic interests.



Bob: They were founders of a society called Arrabitah al-qalamiyah [The Pen League], and that organization was formed to promote and perpetuate in the Arabic language and culture and literature in this country. And my father in fact delivered a eulogy to Gibran when he passed away.

Tukufu: I'm doing an investigation to find out if Kahlil Gibran could actually have painted this portrait. Have you ever seen this before?

Robert: I have. I have the original photo from which this portrait was painted.

Tukufu: Oh, this is amazing. The twist in the hair is at the exact same place. The tie is the same, the coat is the same, a number of buttons are the same. Do you know when this photograph was taken?

Robert: No, but I think it was done probably in connection with the conference he attended in Paris in 1913 and may have been done just prior to – or just afterwards.

Tukufu: Robert says his grandfather attended a major conference in Paris, just before World War One, as the head of the United Syrian Society. Delegates from Arab nations and other immigrant groups were debating the best way of ending Turkish rule in Syria and Lebanon. The watch Bob showed me was also from the United Syrian Society, and may well be the same watch in the portrait. Had Gibran painted this image of his friend to commemorate this important moment? Bob's skeptical the painting was done by Gibran – the style is so different from the image of his aunt. But he can't be certain.

Bob: It's conceivable that he could have done you know a copy.

Tukufu: Bob's painting has arrived at the Telfair Museum where I'm meeting curator Tania Sammons. We are trying to find out if this painting was done by Gibran.

Tania: Well, Kahlil Gibran actually was first known for his artwork.

Tukufu: Tania tells me that Gibran's talent won the attention of Boston's art community while he was still a teen. A school headmistress named Mary Haskell became his patron, and eventually his lover. She sent him to study art at the Académie Julian in Paris, and had a profound influence on his life.

Tania: In 1911 she helped him set up a studio in New York City. She really allowed him to take off both in his writing and visual careers. Not only did she encourage him to write in English, but she helped him learn the language, she edited his work as well.



Tukufu: Now does the lack of a signature tell us anything?

Tania: Kahlil Gibran did sign his pieces, but he didn't sign everything. However, I would say the style of painting is not typical for Kahlil Gibran.

Tukufu: Tania shows me a series of paintings by Gibran, and at first glimpse, his works do not resemble the Diab portrait.

Tania: As you can see how he is not really focused on the individual features of a person.

Tukufu: It's very fluid.

Tania: Yeah

Tukufu: Do you have any oil paintings like ours which are a portrait?

Tania: Well I have a good comparison. It's a self-portrait of Kahlil Gibran.

Tukufu: The style of this portrait is also quite different from Bob's.

Tania: In this painting Gibran's brush strokes are very evident they're much freer; you could see individual colors in the painting and his face his it's delineated like the image of Mr. Diab.

Tukufu: I explain that Bob's portrait may have something to do with Najib Diab attending a major conference in Paris in 1913. Tania says that during that period Gibran did a number of paintings and drawings of important artists and thinkers. He called it the "Temple of Art" series.

Tania: Certainly, Mr. Diab would have fit within that series.

Tukufu: And so it wouldn't have been uncalled for, for Diab to request a particular type of portrait from Gibran.

Tania: Yeah, certainly not. I mean it is typical for people who commission portraits to guide the artist on how they would like for the portrait to be painted.

Tukufu: Does Bob have a previously unknown painting from the Temple of Art series? Tania suggests that if Diab had commissioned the work, Gibran may have mentioned it in his correspondence with his lover Mary Haskell. Let me see if I can find anything about the "Temple of Art" here. There are references to many of the



luminaries that Gibran drew or painted, including psycho therapist Carl Jung, Irish poet William Butler Yeats and the legendary actress Sarah Bernhardt. Listen to this: “At last the divine Sarah is caught!” This is a reference to Sarah Bernhardt, “but if I am to go through the same process with other great men and women, I might as well give up art and become a diplomat.” Here is a reference to Diab! I’ve discovered a curious note in the Haskell letters. I think I finally have some answers for Bob.

Bob, this investigation had allowed us to gain some insight of the relationship between your grandfather and Kahlil Gibran. I spoke to an expert on his artwork and she is of the opinion that this painting is not the work of Kahlil Gibran. I explain to Bob that, to make certain, I consulted the letters and diaries of Mary Haskell. And it is that search which lead me to one of my most important discoveries. Okay here is a reference to Diab; it is quite political. And this is referring to the 1913 Paris conference: “Diab and myself were asked to go as representatives. The idea is fine but after talking things over with the committee of Syrians I found that we do not agree on any point. Diab thinks I am mad. Others think so too. It has nothing to say about him doing the sketch or a portrait of Diab. I tell Bob that Gibran had refused to attend the 1913 Paris conference, because he had fundamental differences with other attendees – including Najib Diab. So it seems unlikely that Gibran would paint a portrait in commemoration of the event. The relationship between your grandfather and Kahlil Gibran was not only over issues of writing and art, it went to the heart of their political commitment and was a reflection on the early Arab-American political leadership in this country.

Bob: That’s quite interesting. I never realized that they were even in politics, my grandfather or Kahlil Gibran it’s the only picture that I have of my grandfather, and I’ll still keep it and cherish it at home. I thank you.

Tukufu: In the 1960s, a generation hungry for change was captivated by passages from *The Prophet* like... “love possesses not nor would it be possessed, for love is sufficient unto love”. In their search for a different way of thinking and living, many young, disillusioned Americans turned to the teachings of the east. The ideas expressed in *The Prophet* mirrored their struggle of the spirit against materialism. Kahlil Gibran became a voice for the counterculture movement. But Gibran never lived to see his words inspire that generation of Americans...he died of cirrhosis of the liver from alcoholism in 1931.