

## Culture

# Khalil Gibran's writings bring inspiration to London exhibition

Karen Dabrowska

London

More than 500 visitors packed Sotheby's north galleries on the opening of "A Guide for Our Times," an exhibition of the works of 38 artists inspired by the writings – especially "The Prophet" – of Lebanese poet Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883-1931).

"The Prophet" is divided into chapters dealing with topics of life, including love, marriage, children, joy and sorrow, crime and punishment, freedom, passion, friendship, good and evil, religion and death. Each painting was accompanied by a brief biography of the artist, an artist's statement and the quote from Gibran, mostly from "The Prophet," that inspired the work.

Colourful abstract figures and scenes from nature dominated the exhibition. A self-taught artist and a member of the Bahraini royal family Lulwa al-Khalifa exhibited "Blind Faith," an oil-on-canvas painting of a woman looking sceptically into an uncertain future behind 26 braided lines – a reference to the 26 lessons of "The Prophet."

Laudi Abilama, an artist and printmaker based between Lebanon and England, exhibited an acrylic-on-paper portrait of Gibran. In her artist's statement, she referred to accounts of Gibran's life that divulge a series of metaphors of lust, desire, ambition and great suffering in understanding his identity.

Egyptian artist Ahmed Saber fo-

cused on Gibran's saying that all work is empty save when there is love. His drawing "Livelihood" with pencil and ink on paper shows a figure carrying a fish, a symbol of goodness and provisions, while in the background the shrine shows that faith is rewarded.

Egyptian artist and researcher Zeinab Nour said she has always been fascinated by trees, symbols of life in ancient Egypt. "Both from my Egyptian visual heritage and from Gibran's book I received an aesthetic vision about an Orphalese tree as a key of life (ankh) symbolising a person who gives without discriminating between people even if they take from him or her," Nour said in her artist's statement. Orphalese is an island that is the setting for "The Prophet."

**The exhibition presented the works of 38 artists inspired by the writings – especially "The Prophet" – of Lebanese poet Gibran Khalil Gibran.**

The exhibition "Khalil Gibran: A Guide for our Times" builds on nine years of East-West arts initiatives implemented by CARAVAN, an international peace-building arts NGO that originated in Cairo in 2009 with the objective of building bridges through arts between the creeds and cultures of the Middle East and the West. Acclaimed and emerging Middle Eastern contemporary artists were invited to contribute an original work inspired by Gibran's message of universality, peace harmony and love. All the works were on sale with the pro-

ceeds going towards peace-building in the Middle East through art.

Speaking at the opening of the exhibition, Lebanon's Ambassador to the United Kingdom Rami Mor-tada described Gibran as a universalist in his outreach. "To sum up Gibran in one single word I would say he is inspirational – inspirational in his writings, art and even in his romance!"

President of CARAVAN Paul-Gordon Chandler began his speech with a quote from Gibran: "We have forgotten – or have we? – that there is but one universal language and that its voice is art."

He referred to the current challenging times, characterised by "misunderstanding and stereotypes of the 'other,' the rise of populism, nationalism and ethnocentric thinking, the increase in hate crimes and bigotry, anti-immigration sentiments, the development of political authoritarianism, the lack of equality for women, the phobias of those from other faith and traditions and the growing discord between the Middle East and West."

"At times like this we look for guides to provide a way forward and hope and I don't think there could be a better guide than Khalil Gibran whose voice is timeless. He was born into what was then an exclusive, sectarian and intolerant historic [Maronite] religious community but became someone who embraced all in our world and as a result became embraced by all," Chandler said.

"The Prophet" has been translated into 40 languages.

"I love the way Gibran expressed his collective embrace of humanity with the poetic imagery of cloud,"



Unique inspiration. Ahmed Saber's "Livelihood." (Karen Dabrowska)

Chandler said quoting a passage from the work "Sand and Foam": "Should you sit upon a cloud you would not see the boundary between one country and another, nor the boundary stone between a farm and a farm. It is a pity you cannot sit upon a cloud."

"Khalil Gibran: A Guide for our Times" was curated by Janet Rady,

a specialist in contemporary art from the Middle East, with more than 25 years' experience with the international art market, and Marion Fromlet Baecker, the founder of Culture Bridge Egypt, which promotes the country through its art.

Karen Dabrowska is an Arab Weekly contributor in London.

## Young Egyptian writers have a tough time publishing their work

Mahmoud Zaki

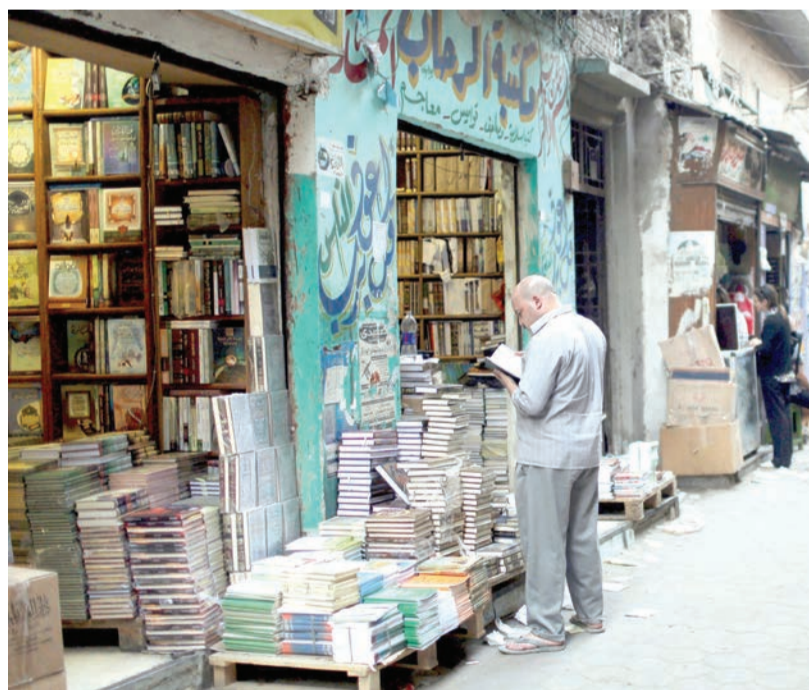
Ahmed Kamal is a 27-year-old writer who has just completed a lifelong dream: writing his first novel. It took him years of writing and rewriting. His dream seemed to sometimes fade as he tinkered with his text but, finally, he had a novel under his name.

All he had to do was have it published but Kamal was in for a big surprise: The publishing world was an unfriendly and obscure world, more like an unsolvable riddle.

Publishing means and opportunities did not seem to be lacking. Public and private publishing houses compete with digital media for new works to publish and their numbers are growing. Yet the process of breaking into this closed world for Kamal and other literary creators seemed daunting.

The Egyptian government has stopped publishing and promoting serious cultural work. It was thanks to government support that 20th-century literary giants such as Ihsan Abdel Quddous, Youssef el-Sebai and Yahia Haqqi had the chance to make their work available to the public. For the new generations of young writers, that opportunity does not exist.

Public publishing agencies are still in the market in Egypt and carry the lustre of their former glory. Deprived of financial resources, however, they are far from able to compete with private publishing houses. When the government withdrew from promoting culture for culture, scores of publishing houses appeared to fill in the void



Troubled times. A man looks at a book outside of a bookshop in Cairo. (Reuters)

but with a profit motive. The lofty purpose of disseminating creativity and science quickly shifted to doing business according to market dynamics.

There are exceptions to the pattern. Some publishers have a genuine interest in revitalising the world of books but the majority of private publishers are interested only in maximising profits; culture is secondary.

Today, a writer faces three choices. The first is to finance the printing and distribution of his or her book. This would be the quickest way to get published even if the work is of low quality. The second

is to split costs with the publishing house.

The third is to have the publishing house shoulder all costs. In this case, a reading committee might take months to evaluate the work submitted and sometimes it simply doesn't bother to answer.

Kamal said that "despite the apparent easy choices, a young writer is, in fact, pressured into either bearing the unexpected cost that most young people cannot afford or fall into the trap of sharing 50-50 the costs and profits." He said that many publishing houses pretend to share the cost and charge the writer the full cost and claim

that that was his share only.

"The crisis of a rising writer is not just to find a publishing house that believes in his experience and is willing to finance the printing and distribution costs of his work but it lies in the fact that the author remains the weak side in any contract with the publishing house, said Ahmed Samir, a young writer who has published three sarcastic novels. "There are really no guarantees for him to know his share in the profits or to have a say in the distribution or even the cover of his book."

Samir said the biggest scandal was that there were no authorities or agencies to consult to determine the true figures for sales or printed copies. Publishing houses have a monopoly on that information.

Experts said the weakest link in the operation for young writers is the absence of legislation protecting their rights and copyrights. Law 82 of 2002 guarantees copyrights but writers lack the means to enforce it.

The weak position of writers is compounded by the absence of a protective structure or trade union. There is a writers' guild in Egypt but joining it is complicated so it is usually ignored.

Private publishing houses opt for works with the most profit potential and that are the least costly to publish. That means they will usually publish works by well-established authors with a solid base of readers or go for books for general readership, such as religious ones, horoscopes, sentimental novels, horror stories and, of course, parodies and sarcasm.

Hani Abdallah, manager of Ri-

wak Publishing House, said publishers are not professional in dealing with authors. Publishing opportunities for young writers are more available now that there are many young publishers in the market. He said many publishing interests have selection and reading committees and are willing to cover the printing and distribution costs of selected works.

He said a good reputation is the most valuable asset for a publisher, so publishing houses are keen on selecting the best content and not swindling writers. Promoting a new generation of excellent writers does work to the advantage of publishers as well.

**Deprived of financial resources, public publishing agencies are far from able to compete with private publishing houses.**

Internet platforms for publishing digital books have become an attractive alternative for young writers in search of an audience. Online platforms such as Our books and My books select works, revise them and publish them for a small fee or sometimes for free.

Online publishing, however, is far from replacing printed copies. For most publishers in Egypt, online sales do not exceed 1% of paper-based sales. Readers still find pleasure in reading printed books. Readers also say online works are of a lesser quality and literary value than printed ones.

Mahmoud Zaki is an Egyptian writer.