A PAINTING AND ITS STORY · 2026

In the City of the Prophet

An imagined city inspired by Kahlil Gibran, with four companion paintings



Painting and text by Sean Byrne

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THE PAINTING

In the City of the Prophet



80 × 60 cm · 2026 · Acrylic and mixed media on stretched canvas

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THE PAINTING AND THE BOOK

An imagined city

A dark, layered abstract composition in which fragments of green, turquoise and blue move through a dense, almost nocturnal surface.

Brief passages of ochre yellow and gold introduce warmth and luminosity, emerging from the darkness and illuminating the intricate network of lines, fissures and textured forms. The composition invites many possible readings — streets seen from above, roots beneath the ground, waterways, weather systems or traces of something gradually being revealed.

The title draws inspiration from Kahlil Gibran’s The Prophet, in which Almustafa prepares to leave the city of Orphalese and, before departing, reflects with its people on love, work, freedom, sorrow, self-knowledge and the wider experience of being human. The painting does not attempt to illustrate that city. Instead, it imagines a more elusive place: a city made from memory, experience and interconnected lives, where different regions suggest the many dimensions of human existence.

Within the darkness, the brighter passages of turquoise, ochre and gold can be read as pathways or moments of illumination — expressions of love, understanding and spiritual awakening emerging from a much larger and more complicated whole. The painting reflects a central theme of Gibran’s philosophy: that joy and sorrow, darkness and light, and the individual and the wider world are not separate experiences, but interconnected aspects of an unfolding human journey.

The longer reflections that follow consider different regions of the painting alongside themes in Gibran’s book. They are interpretations, offered as ways into the work rather than a fixed map of its meaning.

FURTHER REFLECTIONS

Reading the painting

Inspired by Kahlil Gibran’s celebrated 1923 work, The Prophet, this painting explores the many dimensions of human existence through an abstract landscape of colour, movement and texture. In Gibran’s book, the prophet Almustafa prepares to depart the city of Orphalese. Before leaving, he responds to questions from its inhabitants on the fundamental experiences of life: love, freedom, work, joy and sorrow, self-knowledge, spirituality and death.

The painting takes these reflections as its starting point, presenting an imagined city in which different regions suggest different aspects of the human condition. The dark, richly textured surface provides a common ground from which passages of turquoise, green, ochre yellow and gold emerge. These colours introduce contrasting expressions of movement, connection and illumination, suggesting the complexity of human experience and the possibility of understanding emerging through it.

Freedom and the journey of life

The expansive blue-grey passages towards the upper left evoke openness, freedom and the possibility of departure. They recall Almustafa’s impending journey and Gibran’s exploration of freedom as something that must be discovered within ourselves rather than simply granted by the external world. The delicate networks of colour extending into this region suggest pathways through an uncertain landscape, recalling the choices and experiences through which an individual’s journey unfolds.

Spirituality and the search for beauty

Across the upper reaches of the composition, scattered passages of luminous green and turquoise suggest moments of illumination emerging from darkness. The introduction of warmer colour brings a new dimension to this region, suggesting the possibility of spiritual awakening and the recognition of beauty within an otherwise complex and uncertain world. These forms evoke Gibran’s reflections on prayer, religion and beauty, in which the spiritual dimension of existence is inseparable from the experience of everyday life.

Rather than presenting spirituality as something distant or unattainable, the scattered points of light suggest that moments of understanding may be discovered throughout the ordinary experience of being human.

Self-knowledge and the inner world

The densely layered central region represents a more introspective landscape. Its overlapping forms and intricate textures suggest the complexity of the inner life, where reason and passion, joy and sorrow continually interact. Gibran presents these experiences not as opposing forces to be separated, but as essential elements in the development of human understanding.

The brighter ochre and gold passages emerging through the darker central structures introduce the suggestion of discovery — moments when something previously concealed becomes visible or understood. Within the painting, darkness and illumination coexist, reflecting the idea that personal growth emerges through the full experience of life rather than through the avoidance of its difficulties.

Love and human connection

Towards the centre-right, brighter green passages appear to reach across and connect different parts of the composition. These interwoven forms recall Gibran’s reflections on love, marriage, friendship and children. His understanding of love allows for both intimacy and independence: the individual remains distinct while participating in something greater than themselves.

The introduction of warmer yellow and gold accents adds another dimension to these relationships, suggesting warmth, affection and the transformative possibilities of human connection. The interconnected lines and luminous forms suggest relationships that develop, intersect and transform without losing their individual character.

Work, creativity and the act of giving

In the lower central region, vertical movements of turquoise and green emerge from the darker ground. These forms suggest growth, construction and the creative impulse. They evoke Gibran’s understanding of work as an expression of love and a means through which individuals contribute to the wider community. The layering and physical texture of the painting also reflect the creative process itself, in which separate actions and materials gradually develop into a unified work.

The successive introduction of colour and texture becomes part of this interpretation, suggesting that understanding, like creativity, develops through a continuing process of exploration and discovery.

Society and our shared existence

The intricate network of forms across the lower left suggests the foundations of the imagined city. This region relates to Gibran’s reflections on the structures of human society, justice, responsibility and the relationship between the individual and the community. No single element exists entirely in isolation. Each form participates in a larger network, reflecting the interdependence that runs throughout The Prophet.

The scattered points of illumination suggest that individual experiences and moments of understanding contribute to the character of the wider community.

Time, mortality and renewal

Towards the lower right, passages of pale turquoise emerge from the darker surface before dissolving into the surrounding composition. These forms evoke the passage of time and Gibran’s reflections on death, transformation and renewal. Just as Almustafa’s departure represents both an ending and the beginning of another journey, the movement of light through the painting suggests continuity beyond any single moment or experience.

The recurring interplay between darkness and illumination reinforces the sense that transformation is not confined to any one region of the composition, but is a continuing presence throughout the work.

An interconnected whole

Although individual regions may be associated with different themes, their boundaries remain deliberately fluid. Love intersects with sorrow; freedom emerges through self-knowledge; creativity connects the individual with the community; and mortality remains part of the continuing movement of life. The introduction of ochre yellow and gold adds a further dimension to this interpretation. Emerging intermittently through the darker surface, these warmer passages suggest moments of insight, love and spiritual illumination within the larger complexity of human existence.

The painting is therefore not intended as a literal illustration of The Prophet, but as a visual interpretation of its underlying philosophy. Its imagined city becomes a metaphor for human existence itself — a complex, evolving landscape in which the many dimensions of life remain inseparable from one another, and where moments of illumination emerge through the continuing journey towards understanding.

COMPANION PAINTING

Love



2026 · Acrylic and mixed media

Gibran’s reflections present love as a force that draws people together while allowing each person to remain themselves. In this painting, warm colour threads its way through a dark, richly textured field. The marks seem to reach, cross and separate again, suggesting affection as a living movement rather than a fixed state. Read beside the larger imagined city, this work brings one of its most intimate themes into focus: connection can deepen our lives without diminishing our individuality.

COMPANION PAINTING

Work



2026 · Acrylic and mixed media

In The Prophet, work is closely bound to love: an offering of attention, skill and energy to the world around us. The branching forms and layered surface here suggest effort becoming growth, with individual marks contributing to a larger whole. The painting also carries the trace of making in its own textured surface. It invites a reading of work as more than duty or production—as a way of shaping, giving and taking part in shared life.

COMPANION PAINTING

Freedom



2026 · Acrylic and mixed media

Gibran’s reflections on freedom reach beyond escape from external limits, towards the inner space in which we meet our choices and responsibilities. Blue, green and yellow move across the dark ground in a passage that feels open yet connected to what surrounds it. This companion painting treats freedom as movement through life rather than withdrawal from it: a continuing search for room to grow, to choose and to become more fully oneself.

COMPANION PAINTING

Self-Knowledge



2026 · Acrylic and mixed media

In The Prophet, sorrow can lead us towards a deeper understanding of ourselves. Against the dark surface, fine red, yellow and green passages appear, recede and re-emerge. They do not erase the darkness; they take shape within it. The painting suggests that self-knowledge may grow through difficult experience, as we come to recognise what we carry, what we value and what may yet change.

SEAN BYRNE

About the artist

I am an Irish artist working between Swords in North County Dublin, Aughrim in County Wicklow and Err in the French Pyrenees. I have drawn and painted for more than 50 years. My paintings often begin with a recognisable place or form, then move towards abstraction through colour, light and texture.

In the City of the Prophet brings that interest in layered surfaces and interconnected forms to an imagined human landscape. It is inspired by a work of literature, while leaving space for the viewer’s own reading of the painting.

Explore the painting and contact the artist at chanbhas.com

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