

Sandow Birk



Artist in Newport Beach exhibit seeks to connect Islam to contemporary America  
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By ANTONIE BOESSENKOOL / STAFF WRITER

Even for non-Muslims, Islam has been a part of daily life in recent years. The United States has fought wars in the Muslim countries of Iraq and Afghanistan. The news contains stories of attacks by Islamic extremists. Muslims here and elsewhere have faced backlash and misunderstanding.

Yet the contents of the book at the center of Islam, the Quran, are perhaps not so familiar. That's just one reason Long Beach artist Sandow Birk spent nine years painstakingly transcribing an English translation of the book and illustrating it with more than 200 scenes in gouache and ink. These aren't ancient landscapes. Rather, they're images from our modern lives: an operating room, a crime scene, Guantanamo Bay, American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, an airport, a subway station.

The effect is like a graphic novel, with the Quran as its text. The finished illustrations and text are on display at the Orange County Museum of Art in "Sandow Birk: American Qur'an" through Feb. 28.

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Birk, who grew up in Seal Beach, isn't a Muslim, nor is he particularly religious. When he began forming the idea for the project, the U.S. was at war in Iraq and Afghanistan. The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, were in the recent past. Islam and its significance in the U.S. were suddenly part of national dialogue. The reaction was often fear, Birk said.

"(There was) this whole discussion about 'Is Islam fundamentally at odds with Western civilization? Is this a war of cultures?'"

As a surfer, Birk had traveled to several Muslim countries, like Indonesia and Morocco.

“I’m listening to this discourse about Islam, and I’m realizing that it’s nothing like the experiences I had in these countries,” he said. “I had fantastic experiences and met great people. ... And America had this sort of fear of Islam.”

The Bible and Quran are linked, with some of the same figures appearing in both, such as Jesus, Abraham, Moses and Noah. Why then, Birk wondered, was there such a divide?

“It seemed like the discussion was saying ... that there’s this one ancient book from the Middle East that’s like at the heart and soul of what it means to be an American. And that’s called the Bible,” he said. “But there’s this other ancient book from the Middle East and that’s a crazy book, and the two can’t get along.

“That just doesn’t make any sense to me. How could two books from the same place be so radically different?”



## MODERN APPLICATION

The messages in the Quran are meant to be universal. The purpose of the contemporary scenes is to show how the Quran might relate to contemporary life, Birk said.

Verses from the Quran are often written in intricate calligraphy. Birk chose graffiti-style script to mimic that.

“I thought, well, who in the United States is extremely concerned with calligraphy? And I just immediately thought of graffiti writers. They spent all day long practicing their name and inventing new letters. Their whole fascination is with calligraphy, so the two melded perfectly.”

The illustrations are drawn from places in Birk’s life and from current events. Birk paired the 114 suras, or chapters, in the Quran with scenes that are metaphors for the text.

Images from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 are paired with the story of Noah and the Great Flood. References to giving alms to the poor are surrounded by images of homeless people in Los Angeles. Rules about marriage and divorce are set against a modern-day wedding party. Mention of Jesus' mother, Mary, appears in an illustration of a pregnant woman having an ultrasound in a doctor's office.

Besides the illustrations, a mihrab is part of the exhibit. A mihrab, found in mosques, homes and even hotels, marks the direction of Mecca so Muslims know which way to face when they pray. With his wife, artist Elyse Pignolet, he created a mihrab in the shape of an ATM. He plans to include a mihrab in each show of "American Qur'an," he said.

"We started to think, OK, what sort of niches are Americans familiar with, or deal with every day. And I immediately thought of the ATM machine is what Americans walk up to and face," he said, laughing. "(It's) also sort of that obvious joke of Americans are over-obsessed with money."

"American Qur'an" has been shown elsewhere about a dozen times, but the Orange County show is the most extensive yet. With a few exceptions, the entire book is on the walls at the museum.

The reaction to "American Qur'an" has varied, including vocal opposition from "right-wing Christian groups," Birk said.

The most enthusiastic response has come from Muslim Americans, especially those from younger generations.

"They say, 'Oh, I felt like an outsider my whole life,'" he said. "'And suddenly you're putting my religion and my life together into this project.'"

