

Sandow Birk

ART SY

An Artist's Qur'an for Contemporary America

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For the past nine years, Sandow Birk has been transcribing the Qur'an. Titled American Qur'an (2004-2014), his unique 213-page work is a recreation of the holy Muslim text, geared toward a contemporary American audience. Illuminated with intricate scenes of everyday American life, and realized in a carefully crafted script that mines inspiration from L.A. graffiti culture, the work is not a reflection of American culture, but rather, a gift to it.



Following 9/11 and the war in Iraq, Birk began to delve into Islam's traditions, particularly its texts. Though he identifies as a non-religious person, Birk has explored religion in artistic endeavors before; a past project investigated Catholicism and Dante's Inferno. From the Qur'an, he became interested in illuminations and Medieval manuscripts, and following a chance encounter with historic Qur'an texts during a surfing

trip in Dublin in 2004, the idea for American Qur'an began to solidify. Working with a free-use Qur'an text from the 1800s, and gleaning further understanding through contemporary translations and interpretations, Birk embarked on his project, and put the finishing touches on it earlier this year. This fall the latest installment is on view at Los Angeles gallery Koplin del Rio, and in 2015, the full text will be published in book form—which was Birk's initial hope—and will become a major traveling exhibition, beginning at the Orange County Museum of Art next summer. On the occasion of the Koplin del Rio show, Artsy spoke to Birk to learn about the project and its significance as a means of making the Qur'an more accessible for an American audience.

Artsy: Can you talk us through the process that went into the realization of American Qur'an? What was your day-to-day like over the nine years of creation?

Sadow Birk: Although it was a lot of physical work, the project was also a very contemplative one—I guess much like a monk making an illuminated manuscript. I would work on the project sura by sura (sura or surah means chapter). I would begin by reading the sura, then read commentary about it—mostly by Muhammad Asad and other scholars—then begin the transcribing of the text, which took a couple of days per page. While transcribing, I would often listen to the Qur'an recited (via Youtube, for example) or pause and look up passages to learn more about them. During the course of the transcribing, a series of possible images would come to mind and by the end I'd have an idea of an image to go along with the text. Then the drawing and [gouache] painting of the images would take several more days, along with the finalizing of the border decorations and palmettes (the decorative verse markings)—all of which were drawn from historical Qur'ans.

Artsy: What was the greatest challenge you encountered in realizing this project?

SB: First, the complexity of the text. The Qur'an isn't a narrative like the Bible. I often describe it as more like a collection of sermons, in which stories we might know from the Bible are mentioned in passing, along with other stories and events happening in Muhammad's lifetime. So that to grasp the metaphors, the reading is like opening an onion—each reading leads to another topic to investigate, which in turn helps explain a metaphor being used, which then relates to one's life and relationship to the afterlife. So the sheer amount of investigation and learning and thinking that had to be done was exhausting—like going to college again.

The whole nine-year project became a real test of my own endurance and focus. It was a test of myself and my own commitment and work ethic.

Artsy: Can you tell us about some of the scenes from American life that you have chosen to illustrate in the illuminations, and the inspiration behind them?

SB: Well, there are 213 pages in my layout of the Qur'an, with each page illuminated with scenes of life in the United States (or, occasionally, of American soldiers abroad). Each of the images is related to the text in some way and for some reason. The simplest relationship would be examples where the text discusses Noah and the Ark, and the images I've used are images of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, or other floods across the country. Other images range from the mundane, such as people working in cubicles in an office or going to a supermarket, to scenes of police arresting people in the streets, prisons, a death chamber, tornados and other natural disasters, and Guantanamo Bay. What there is not are scenes depicting Muhammad or events in his time.

Artsy: What do you hope for viewers to glean from experiencing your works? What message would you like them to leave with?

SB: The project is aimed at Americans who are unfamiliar with the Qur'an and who can see themselves and their lives in the images. The idea was to take a text which might be thought of as foreign and unfathomable, and to put it into a context that makes it easier to relate to. If one takes the Qur'an as a message from God to all humanity, then the question is how that message might relate to our daily lives living in the U.S. today. It is not an "Americanized" Qur'an—it's meant as a version of the Qur'an for Americans as an audience.

The Qur'an has an ancient and complex message, but it is not unfamiliar. The most surprising thing to anyone who has never read it is that it is amazingly familiar. It's the story of Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, Moses, Jesus and Mary, Abraham and Isaac, and on and on. It's the same message that we've heard all of our lives, and it's worth being at least slightly familiar with, especially in this day and age.

—Casey Lesser

"Sandow Birk: American Qur'an" is on view at Koplin del Rio, Culver City, through Oct. 17th, 2014.