

Sandow Birk
American Qur'an



American Qur'an/Sura 23

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Genesis of the project:

I spent from 2001 to 2004 studying the complexities of Christianity by dynamically translating Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (with Marcus Sanders) into a contemporary vernacular, such as one hears spoken in the streets of Los Angeles, and updating Gustave Doré's illustrations with contemporary visual references to urban life in America. While I was involved with the Dante project I began to take notice of the growing American preoccupation with Islam. Since the second invasion of Iraq in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks, the discussions of Islam and the Middle East are pervasive in our daily news media. Americans discuss Islamic terrorists and often criticize Muslims or Islamic practices without much knowledge about the religion or the Qur'an itself. Over a four year period I visited as many Islamic countries: Indonesia, Morocco, India, and the southern Philippines. Each of the trips inspired my interest in learning more about Islam, its relationship to world events and to the stereotypes that I was familiar with through my American filter. My travels led to my dismay at the American assumption that Islam is synonymous with Arab, when the three most populous Islamic countries, two of which I visited, are not in the Middle East at all.

In America, the stereotypes about Islam is that it is a religion of extreme and flawed beliefs--beliefs completely foreign and contrary to those valued by Western society. Discussions in the media commonly cite Qur'anic quotations and report on purported Islamic tenets about the role of women in society, retribution, the afterlife, warfare, business, revenge, marriage, and about God himself.

After having spent time studying the Christian view of the afterlife and its harsh judgment of who will go where and how they will be treated by God when they get there, I wondered: How bizarre, different, and incomprehensible could Islam be? How are Islamic ideas of heaven anymore unusual or extreme than the Christian ones with which I am familiar? Can their criminal punishments be more outrageous than our capital punishment? How can their idea of "holy war" against those who believe differently be much different than our nation's war against Communism, our national, unrelenting hatred of Cuba, Venezuela, and other societies with different beliefs and forms of government than our own? Can we criticize their treatment of women while at the same time be guilty of record numbers of reported abuses against women?

Or more simply, how can Americans embrace one book from the Middle East as the very essence of our national culture and identity, while another book from nearly the same region in the Middle East is dismissed as outlandish, threatening, incomprehensible and completely foreign to our very way of life?

Can Islamic beliefs really be so different, so impenetrable to Westerners?

So I began to read about Islam, and that meant reading the Qur'an. Perhaps, I thought, the teachings of the Qur'an might be more similar to those of the Bible than Americans suppose. Perhaps if the concerns in the Qur'an were presented to Americans they might notice the similarities to issues in our Judeo-Christian culture. If I illustrated the Qur'an it might be more comprehensible to Americans. If the content of the Qur'an were presented as relevant to the daily problems and struggles of American life and society, perhaps it might become more accessible, more understood, and possibly even foster reflection about its relationship to Judeo-Christian beliefs.

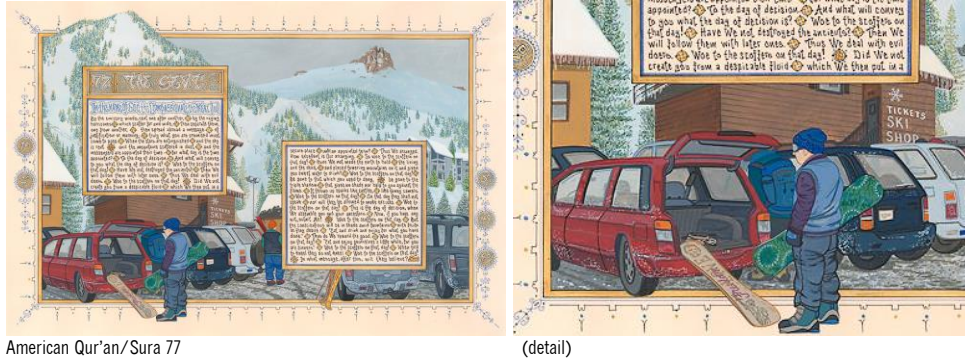
What was needed, perhaps, was an American Qur'an.

Development of an *American Qur'an*.

For the *American Qur'an* project, I produced an authentic version of the Qur'an in contemporary English, illuminated by hand with scenes of American life that to me relate to the text. I hand-wrote and painted every page. The original works on paper, each measuring 16 x 24 inches, illustrate the 114 chapters or *suras* of the Qur'an. Collectively they make up more than 300 pages of verse and image. Many of the earlier chapters are long and are therefore made up of multiple pages. Most of the chapters are as short as one or two pages, however, so the majority of the chapters are presented as single sheets. The resulting collection of 114 *suras* and images is titled *American Qur'an*.

As with traditional versions of the Qur'an, the entire text is written in black ink. The calligraphy style is contemporary American, based on a stylized graffiti that is easily legible. The chapter headings are decorated, as in traditional manuscripts. The format is based on traditional manuscripts, and the pages are illuminated with miniature paintings in full color, using inks, acrylics, gouache, pencil, and metallic paints.

The illustrations are drawn from traditional Persian miniature styles of painting, as well as from the painting styles of Indonesia, India, and Middle Eastern regions. However the images are scenes of contemporary life in America: of Americans working, socializing, celebrating, fighting, dying, and engaged in daily activities that to me relate to the text of the Qur'an.



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(detail)

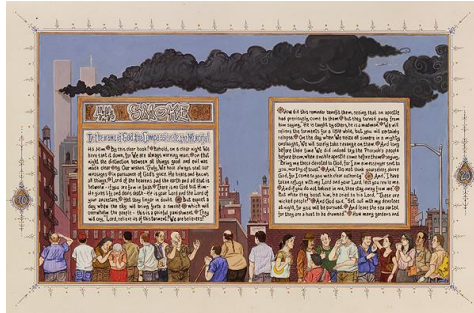
Background/History of the Holy Qur'an:

The Arabic word Qur'an (or Koran) means "Recitation." The Holy Qur'an is a collection of the spoken messages from God as received by the prophet Muhammad in numerous revelations over a twenty-two year period. The revelations occurred to Muhammad frequently from 610 CE until his death in 632 CE, and they were received in the western region of present-day Saudi Arabia near the cities of Mecca and Medina. After receiving them, they were spoken by Muhammad to his followers, who wrote them down, supposedly verbatim, in Arabic. The written verses were gathered together and arranged in the sequence of the present version around 650 CE. The collection of these verses into 114 chapters, or *suras*, constitutes the Holy Qur'an. In the Qur'an, the *suras* are not arranged chronologically, but generally they are arranged from the longest to the shortest, and it has become common to number and label them with the city in which the revelation was received: either Mecca or Medina. The revelations were received by Muhammad in Arabic, and the truest form of the Qur'an is therefore in Arabic. Any other language version of the Qur'an that does not also contain the text in Arabic is not considered a true Qur'an, since it does not contain the text of the revelations in the language in which it was spoken by God. The words of the Qur'an are considered to be the verbatim words of God Himself.

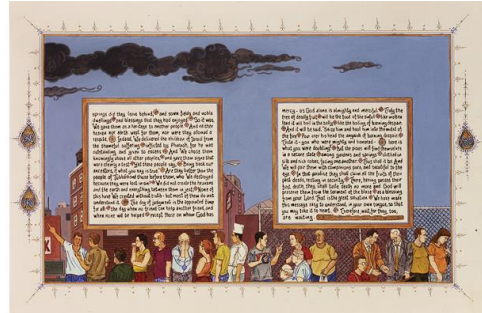
Each of the 114 chapters begins with the words of the first, and shortest *sura*: "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful."

Over many centuries, before the widespread use of the printing press, calligraphers and illuminators produced versions of the Qur'an by hand. There were many basic rules followed in the fabrication of these codices. Basically, the text of the Qur'an was written first in black ink. (Since the older form of Arabic writing used in the time of Muhammad did not include diacritical points--punctuation or accent/pronunciation marks--the interpretation of the possible variations in meaning has been an ongoing debate in Islamic theology.) In later additions, punctuation and accent/pronunciation marks are added in blue and red ink, to note that they are not part of the original text. The pages were then decorated in elaborate illuminations of varying degrees of complexity, often using gold, repeating patterns and symbols. The text of the Qur'an is punctuated with elaborate medallions or devices that signify the ending of each verse, and the margins of the manuscript usually include shields marking the 10th, 20th, 30th, etc. verses. Since it is improper to touch the text, the manuscripts usually have large margins.

Early Qur’ans were expensive to produce, elaborate, and beautiful. Frequently they were displayed on wooden stands to hold them for easier reading, and they were usually bound in leather covers with a flap and a thong to secure them, often with extensive gold stamping and decoration on the covers.



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Publication and Museum Exhibitions:

The first 100 pages of the *American Qur'an* were exhibited in 2011 at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. Since Birk completed the project in 2014, W. W. Norton agreed to publish the entire *American Qur'an*. It will be released as a 400 page book in the fall of 2015. The scale of the publication is commensurate with Birk's original works on paper, and will faithfully reproduce all of the verses and images. Professor Rezal Aslan contributed an introduction to Birk's *American Qur'an*, and professors Iftikhar Dadi and Zareena Grewal wrote essays. Release of the publication will coincide with the traveling solo exhibition of all the panels from Birk's *American Qur'an*, organized by Dan Cameron for the Orange County Museum of Art, in Newport Beach, and opening in the fall of 2015. The exhibit will then travel to the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon in Eugene.