

Sandow Birk

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Curiosity and war led artist to the Koran

By Brittany Woolsey

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What is the Koran? Does it stir animosity in the United States? If so, why?

These were questions that artist Sandow Birk raised as he began following in 2003 the news of the war in Iraq, a U.S. action that he opposed.

"I was listening to all the general discourse of Islam and people questioning what Islam was," Birk said. "Is it incompatible with Western civilization? All these ideas were flying around. I've been to Islamic countries in my surfing trips, and the way I'm hearing people talk about Islam is nothing like the experience I had in those countries.

"I think I just got tired of listening to the media tell me what Islam is, and I thought, 'I'm just going to figure it out for myself.'"

Birk, who grew up in Seal Beach and now lives in Long Beach, decided to study the Koran and paint his interpretations of it.

He learned that the book is strikingly similar to the Bible.



Sandow Birk and several pieces that are part of his show American Qur'an at the Orange County Museum of Art. (Scott Smeltzer / Daily Pilot)

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"The first and most unexpected thing, if you know nothing about the Koran, is that it's remarkably familiar," said Birk, who said he does not subscribe to any religion or spiritual belief. "It's the story of Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, Abraham and Isaac, Jesus and Mary. It's all those stories that you've heard from Christianity.

"They're a lot more related than we think. Muslims would say they're the same religion." The artwork project, which took Birk nine years to complete and has been on display, in part, in museums around the country for the last few years, is now being shown in full for the first time — at the Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach.

The show, which opened Saturday and runs through Feb. 28, features more than 200 paintings, which Birk described as "illuminations" rather than illustrations. The artwork, set in the present-day United States, are accompanied by text from the Koran handwritten by Birk in graffiti-like calligraphy.

"An illustration is more straightforward," said Birk, who has also created illuminations of Dante's "Divine Comedy." "If the text says there's an apple, there will be a picture of an apple. An illumination is more metaphorical. The text might say there's an apple, but there's a picture of a watermelon. The images are meant to be more thought-provoking."

A passage that describes kosher meats is symbolized by a painting of a man shooting ducks. The flood and Noah's Ark is represented by a painting of Hurricane Katrina, which made landfall in Louisiana in August 2005 and caused much destruction along the Gulf Coast.

In addition to his gallery work, Birk also has the Koran-based images printed in books, which are available for sale at the museum.

"In my head, it was always a book," he said. "It's so different to see the pages up on the walls. They're meant to be folded in the book, and they're in a sequence. But it's nice to see them in the gallery too."

At each previous stop of the smaller shows, Birk and his wife, Elyse Pignolet, would build small Mihrabs, decorated niches that point toward Mecca, the center of the Islamic world. For the OCMA exhibit, Birk and Pignolet constructed a large Mihrab to look like an ATM. Don't look for deep meaning here, he said, explaining that he simply likes their similar shapes.

Birk said the reception of the smaller exhibits was generally positive, from the Muslim community and others.

"People are always sort of taken aback when they first hear about it, and when they come see it, they're almost always universally enthusiastic," he said.